

## A KOREAN FOLKTALE, *KONGJEE-PATJEE*: AN ANALYSIS OF THE CONCEPT OF BINARY OPPOSITION

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### ABSTRACT

This article presents an analysis of a Korean folktale, *Kongjee-Patjee*. The theory used in this paper to analyze the folktale is the concept of Binary Opposition. In addition, Vladimir Propp's approach toward folk tales is also used to analyze the meaning of symbols and the roles of characters in the story, and the position of this folk tale in Korean society. The differences and similarities of the *Kongjee-Patjee* story from other folk tales are discussed. Attempts are also made to analyze the meanings of the symbols in the story by analyzing the animal characters and their roles within Korean society and examine these animal symbols in understanding the culture of the Koreans. The contradiction between the protagonist and the antagonist also attracts our attention to look at the construction of the story and the messages in the story.

*Keywords: Korean folklore, binary opposition, characters, symbolic meanings, Korean society.*

### ABSTRAK

Artikel ini menghadirkan analisis tentang cerita rakyat Korea, *Kongjee-Patjee*. Teori yang digunakan dalam artikel ini untuk menganalisis cerita rakyat adalah konsep Oposisi Biner. Sementara itu, pendekatan Vladimir Propp pada cerita rakyat juga digunakan untuk menganalisis makna simbol dan peran karakter dalam cerita, dan posisi cerita rakyat yang dibahas. Dalam artikel ini, juga dilakukan upaya untuk menganalisis makna simbol dalam cerita dengan menganalisis karakter binatang dan perannya dalam masyarakat Korea dan menguji simbol binatang ini untuk memahami kebudayaan Korea. Kontradiksi antara protagonis dan antagonis juga menarik perhatian untuk melihat konstruksi cerita dan pesan dalam cerita.

Kata Kunci: folklore Korea, oposisi biner, karakter, makna simbol, masyarakat Korea.

### INTRODUCTION

Literary works represent society's life based on its social ideology. While literary works discover various issues of life they are known as the society's milieu. Most folktales, like literary works, are anonymous, which means their authors and

exact date of writing are not known. From the cultural point of view, folktales are direct and spontaneous, spoken from the hearts of common people who are at the bottom of the social level (Sastrowardoyo, 1983:3). Folktales are owned by illiterate society, children, men and women,

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grandfathers and grandmothers. Thus, folktales are stories that live among the people. They are told by mothers to their children during bedtime. Also they are told by story tellers to people who cannot read nor write. They are inherited from generation to generation orally. In this situation, they change easily even though their basic form and formulas are stable.

Kongjee-Patjee is one of many Korean folktales. It was recently performed several times in the form of a drama and movie in Korea. The author and the date of writing of this folktale, like those of many other stories, are not known. It consists of the world views of the Korean people based on Korean culture.

In Kongjee-Patjee we can see the conflict between the protagonist and the antagonist. The conflict appears verbally as other stories do. The protagonist represents a "good and well-being" character, who in most cases earns more readers' sympathy. On the other hand, the antagonist represents an "evil and bad-being" character. In its function, the protagonist always wins the conflict and becomes an ideal character (Noh, 2009:167).

Function analysis of characters and theme, which is implemented in this paper, is explored by Vladimir Propp in his study of the functions of Russian legends and folktales (Propp, 1989:xi). Propp offers 31 functions in his study of Russian folktales (Propp, 1989:28). The functions that Propp has suggested are getting more popular throughout Europe. Discussions of these functions are still held continuously until now in the world. Literary critics also explore these functions, characteristics, binary oppositions, and functions as resources for analyzing folktales.

Research on elements, characters and functions of Kongjee-Patjee as a folktale is significant in an effort to understand old traditional work within contemporary society. It is important to say that Kongjee-Patjee as a folktale is interesting to be analyzed for some reasons. Firstly, Kongjee-Patjee exists fertile as a Korean folktale. It can be a token of evidence that the society sees Kongjee-Patjee both passively and actively. The appreciation of the society toward

the folktale is very positive. That is why it would benefit us to study Kongjee-Patjee.

Secondly, according to its functions, Kongjee-Patjee has various meanings and functions on various occasions. These functions support the long existence of Kongjee-Patjee. Thirdly, there is no reference about Kongjee-Patjee so far especially in the theme of its functions. Because of this lack of reference, this paper aims at fulfilling this gap.

## **PROBLEMS AND QUESTIONS OF THE STUDY**

In order to analyze Kongjee-Patjee, I will try to discuss aesthetic elements, the binary opposition concept and the functional theory based on Propp's explanation. First, aesthetic elements such as the main symbol in the form of extraordinary animals and the story have a certain structure. The animals in the story are a black crow, a giant frog, bird, etc. The question of this naming of animals is, "what is the purpose of the use of these symbols?"

Second, why do folktales consist of opposition between a protagonist and an antagonist which is clearly mentioned in the concept of binary opposition? How is the relation between one character and the others? In such a story, why is the prominent character of the step mother a bad character and the step child a good character, and does it create a stereotype in the story? Third, by comparing Kongjee-Patjee with other Korean folktales and the theory of Concept by Propp, I want to show the functions that exist in Kongjee-Patjee.

## **CHARACTERISTICS OF FOLKLORE**

Folklore is different from written work because it has the following characteristics (Danandjaja, 1984:3-4): (1) the distribution and inheritance is usually in the form of an oral story, from one generation to the next; (2) it has a traditional character, which is inherited in a relatively stable form or in a standard form; (3) it has various versions and variants; (4) it is anonymous, unknown authors; (5) it usually has a specific

formula or format; (6) it plays an important role in society as a medium of education, entertainment, social control, or the projection of the future; (7) the story is pre-logic, which means it has its own logic which on the other hand is not suitable with common logic; (8) it belongs to a certain community, as the result of its anonymous author so people in society claim the story; and (9) it is commonly verbal and natural, so it seems to be abrupt and spontaneous. This can be understood as some folk tales are a projection of human's emotions in its most truthful manifestation.

### ANIMAL CHARACTERS AS SYMBOLS

Animal stories are one type of popular folklore. Almost every country has animal stories, including Korea. Most stories have familiarities and differences. For example, *kancil* (lesser mouse deer) stories are a symbol of a clever being in Indonesia (Danandjaja, 1984:23), but in Korea the rabbit is the clever one. In Central Kalimantan, the eagle is a symbol of a signal sender for humans, but in Korea the similar sender is owned by the ka-chi bird. The differences are the animals, not the roles played by the animals. According to Hooykaas (Fang, 1982:3), some parts of the animal's story came from India, and then distributed to Asia and Europe.

In Kongjee-Patjee the main characters are 3 animals and an angel. The cow has had a significant value in Korean farming culture since many years ago. The cow has had significant economic value in helping farmers, transportation, and many other things. The black cow told in the story differs from the common cow. There is no black cow in Korea. The black cow is an alien animal, which in the story could be regarded as human.

Accidentally, a black cow appears and in her surprise of Kongjee the cow says:

"my little girl, why do you cry?"

"Firstly, you have to stop crying and wash your face in the river," says the black cow. (Hwang, 2007:60)

Human in his reincarnation might become animal and animal in its reincarnation might

become human as well. This is idealized by the writer and symbolized in the story of Kongjee-Patjee.

In Korea, generally there is an opinion that the cow is a symbol of a hard working man. In the story Kongjee is symbolized as a black cow. This symbol, as mentioned above, comes from the conventional farming culture and others say that this symbol comes from primitive society.

Another animal is a frog. This animal is not beautiful but has a good heart and kindness. The symbol of the frog is correlated with rain. If the frog cries, then rain will come. This symbol also comes from the farming culture in Korea. Most of the stories give messages that a good deed will be rewarded and the bad deed will get punishment.

"My girl, your good deed and patience have been noted in heaven and you will be rewarded," says the cow again.

"I have been living for hundreds of years! Your kindness for your family deserves my help." (Hwang, 2007:111-115)

Animals that can talk as humans give a symbol and secret story to readers. However, the effect of symbolization for readers is quite great, that is why animals are pictured as having the ability to talk and make jokes. These humorous elements can be found in such stories everywhere. Indeed, these elements are far from human life, but people accept it without exception because they consider that it is just a symbol. For example, this illustration gives us another picture:

"With its extruded red eyes, the frog is hardly laughing, and then shouts, "you are very funny!" don't you know how powerful I am? I have been living for hundreds of years!" (Hwang, 2007:69-70)

The quotation symbolized the power and the long period of living experienced by the frog. The period of living is actually relative, and for the frog it is symbolized by the size of its body.

The frog is proud of its body, the long period of life and the intention to be followed by others. We may sense that it is little bit arrogant, but the

purpose of the frog is that other parties can catch the message sent through its humor. There is a pragmatic message behind the symbol of this frog.

In addition, there is another animal, the little bird, symbolizing something. Little birds eating rice, with little sharp beaks and pilling seeds are also told in the story. The beaks have symbolic meaning as to be discussed below.

Generally, birds eat seeds of rice. Farmers usually setup a dummy in paddy fields and gardens to drive away the birds. But in this story, instead of the birds eating paddy seeds they just hit its beaks into the paddy seeds in order to pill them. This is ironic.

The irony is reflected from the indirect meaning of the bird hitting and pilling the rice, while its feed is actually the rice itself. This illustrates the contradictive attitude of the step mother who only hurts and hits Kongjee as her enemy. She is not killing or eating Kongjee, but rather torturing Kongjee. There is a sad image of this symbol.

This symbol is often and accidentally practiced in human culture, especially the image of the step mother who abuses her step children in many folk stories around the world. If the audience carefully understands the symbols, they will later get a deeper and wider meaning of the story. That is why these animals are symbolized by the author to send the function of both *dulce* (entertainment) and *utile* (education) of the story. And also, the angels are used by the author as a symbol. This symbol appeared many centuries ago. Angel stories can be found in many countries with its variations. The angel represents good humans because they are beautiful. If there are good girls, they will be called as angels. Angels are also symbolized as the king in heaven and the ocean. This can be seen in the following sentence:

“These are the costumes you have to wear for your party,” the girl says with her smile. “I am

a weaver from the galaxy and I am sent to help you.” (Hwang, 2007:77)

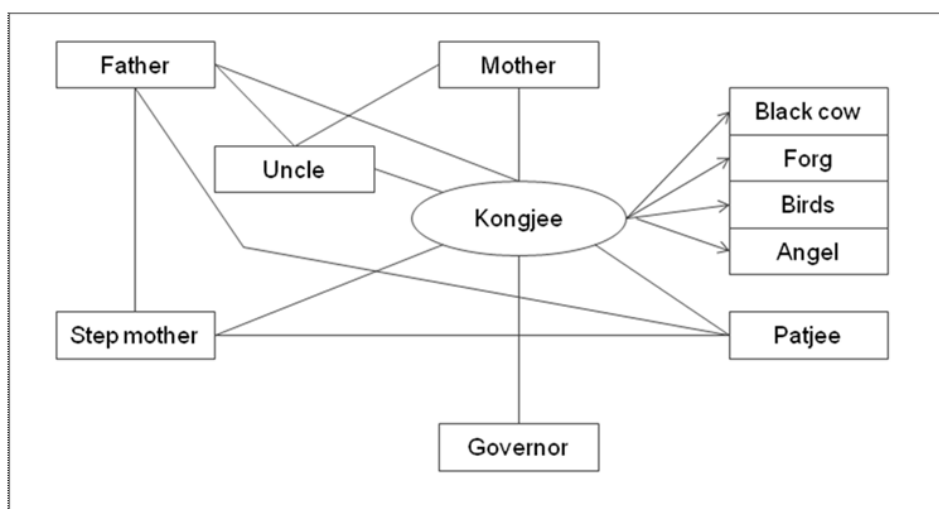
Therefore in animal stories there is always an animal that holds the main and important role. Animals such as frogs, turtles, and birds, are always pictured as little and weak animals. But they use their intelligence to defeat other animals. Animals as wisdom symbols can prepare humans with wisdom for their life.

### PROTAGONIST AND ANTAGONIST IN THE CONCEPT OF BINARY OPPOSITION

The definition of binary opposition in this paper is; two contradictive elements, which know that there is dualistic opposition, that give the understanding of dynamic process in literary works (Junus, 1988:7). For this purpose, I will give some terms related to this discussion; the principals of opposition, contradiction, dual anti-thesis, dichotomy, dual system, etc. The concept of binary opposition is covered by two elements; the protagonist and the antagonist; in the story they are Kongjee (protagonist) and the step mother and Patjee (antagonist).

Based on the function of characters in the story, we may differ between main characters and supporting characters. A character that holds the leadership role is called the main character or protagonist (Sudjiman, 1988:61). Protagonist always becomes the limelight in the story. In Kongjee-Patjee, the main character, and thus the protagonist, is Kongjee. She is illustrated as doing a good deed. From the beginning, the involvements of supporting characters in the events that construct the story are focused on Kongjee. Kongjee has correlation with all other characters; in the meantime the other characters are standing by themselves and have no correlation with each other. The correlation between Kongjee as protagonist and the others can be illustrated in the diagram below.

Diagram 1. The correlation of characters



If we look at the number of correlation, we may find these:  
 Kongjee has correlation with 10 supporting characters,  
 Paeshi (step mother) has correlation with 3 supporting characters,  
 Patjee has correlation with 3 supporting characters,  
 Father has correlation with 5 supporting characters.

As we see from the above diagram, Kongjee is the character who holds the most important role in the story. Kongjee as the protagonist is always having positive thinking, does good deeds and has the power of survival throughout countless suffering. Kongjee is also thinking of other characters besides herself.

Kongjee can finish her jobs in the field with her new hoe, and runs for her home bringing fruits to be shared with her family.

“Oh, no!”  
 Shouts Kongjee,  
 “I’d rather cut my back bones than hurt you.”  
 (Hwang, 2007:61)

With her deeds, Kongjee always attracts supporting character’s sympathy, then gains their favor. Kongjee does not ask help from others and does not recline other characters. But in contrast, other characters have mercy to help Kongjee from being a suffered protagonist. Kongjee’s good nature can be known from this quotation:

“My girl, your honorable deeds have been noted in heaven and you will be rewarded,” says the cow again. “Your good deeds to your family deserve to get my help.” (Hwang, 2007:60)

From the above explanation, we may see that the protagonist is always in a good position, opposite the bad elements. The concept of binary opposition is clearly stated. One side is the winner because of her goodness while the other is the looser because of her badness.

The antagonist is representing the evil or the wrong parties. Paeshi as the step mother in the Kongjee-Patjee story is an evil character, who has a bad personality. The image of step mother is always illustrated as unkind in all folk stories. Paeshi and her daughter Patjee are feeling under-complex toward the beauty of Kongjee. That is why, they are jealous of Kongjee’s face.

From the beginning, the step mother and Patjee have put their burdens on Kongjee, it seems that they are jealous of Kongjee’s beauty and the intelligence. Paeshi who is always fiendish with Kongjee as her step daughter has contrary behavior from her real daughter, Patjee. In this case, Paeshi has two contradictive behaviors at the same time. We may see them from the following conversation:

By giving Kongjee a wooden hoe, she says that



“You have to work in the field over there, to mow the wild grass”, the field is the most barren and full of rocks. In the meantime, Patjee is given a steel hoe, and asked to work nearby in the kitchen. “Do not forget to go home for lunch.” (Hwang, 2007:58)

The personality of Paeshi is not changing from the beginning till the end. In this story, there are no supporting characters that help Paeshi as antagonist. This is because of her bad deeds. This picture implicitly states that it is not necessary for bad characters in the negative position to not need binary opposition.

In the folk tale Kongjee-Patjee, the protagonist is Kongjee and the antagonists are Paeshi and Patjee. It is stated in the story that the protagonist is always contradictory to the antagonists, both in behavior and the way of thinking. The contradiction is sharply shown, so we may conclude that as white and black. There is a clear gap between the two parties.

‘White’ symbolizing the clean, good, positive character, while ‘black’ symbolizing evil, bad, dirty and negative characters. The radical contradiction of these two is called ‘binary oppositional’. The contradiction is the meaning of binary opposition (Propp, 1989:xi).

In the Kongjee-Patjee, as other folktales, the contradiction of protagonist and antagonist is clearly shown. The good character is representing the goodness which attracts readers or audiences, as we have seen from the previous quotations.

In general, the protagonist and antagonist are variously correlated. Now, I will describe each way of thinking of both the protagonist and antagonist.

Kongjee as protagonist believes and follows her step mother without doubt. In the meantime, the step mother as antagonist does not believe Kongjee. This creates conflict between them. This is what we call internal conflict.

Internal conflict is continuously suffered by Kongjee. She is not explicitly fighting her step mother, even though she is always mis-treated by her. Mental distress of Kongjee finally brings her to victory. That symbolizes that who is patient and has good deeds will win in the end; she is Kongjee, the protagonist who is the center of the story.

Paeshi, the uninvited step mother, seems angry for knowing that Kongjee has finished her job before her coming. She abruptly shouts in Kongjee’s ears,

“Did you finish looming and cleaning the rice?  
And where did you steal the cloth from?”  
(Hwang, 2007:79)

Kongjee tells her step mother that the loom angel has helped her and gave her the cloth, but the jealous step mother’s face turns ghostly in disbelief.

### THE ANALYSIS OF KONGJEE-PATJEE BASED ON PROPP’S THEORY

Through some transformation, Propp’s theory spreads into many countries with various characters and events, but still defending same functional structure (Propp, 1989:28-76). Based on the above analyses, I try to analyze the function of Korean folktale Kongjee-Patjee. To analyze, I present the table below.

Comparison of Propp’s theory and Kongjee-Patjee

SEQUENCES/KOREA		PROPP’S THEORY	
I	A couple went to temple to pray	1	Someone leaves home/place
II	The couple had a child	2	A prohibition is spoken by character
III	The mother died	3	The prohibition is broken
IV	The child is helped by a neighbor	4	An evildoer pries
V	Kongjee grows to be healthy and beautiful	5	The evildoer receives information on his target
VI	The worry of her future life	6	Evildoer dupes and is unfair

SEQUENCES/KOREA		PROPP'S THEORY	
VII	Father married a widow	7	Evildoer dupes and unconsciously helps the victim
VIII	Step mother has a girl, Patjee	8	Difficult to find what he wants
IX	Kongjee has to work	9	Always fails
X	Kongjee has no food	10	Agrees to fight back
XI	Kongjee has to refill the kitchen rain barrel	11	The hero leaves his home
XII	Kongjee has to loom 40 yards of cotton and clean the rice	12	The hero fights and attacks
XIII	Step mother spies on her	13	The hero receives help of the savior
IV	Black cow	14	The hero gets something from the forecaster
V	Big frog	15	The hero is moved
VI	Birds	16	Evildoer and hero join to attack
VII	Angels	17	Evildoer is given a mark
VIII	Get an invitation to marriage	18	Evildoer is defeated
IXX	Meets the governor in the street	19	Evildoer is overcome
XX	Lost one of her shoes	20	The hero goes back
XXI	Step mother dupes the shoes	21	The hero is caught by the enemy
XXII	Step mother is punished	22	The hero is saved
XXIII	The maid looks for the shoes	23	The hero is unknown
XXIV	The governor likes the beauty of Kongjee's light-heart	24	The hero sues
XXV	Kongjee marries the governor	25	A job is offered to the hero
XXVI	Happy ending	26	Job is completed
		27	The hero is known
		28	The fake hero is announced
		29	Masked hero is given a new face
		30	The evildoer is punished
		31	The hero is married

From the function provided above, we may see that the number of functions for Kongjee-Patjee is less than the maximum while it is 31 according to Propp's functions. The problem of the function is so complex that it cannot be proven whether it is true or not. It is common that sometimes other scholars give different analysis from the same stories or sources, which may differ from Propp's analysis.

In this case, the number of functions of Kongjee-Patjee could be different from the number of functions of Propp, or it could be similar based on other researchers. I prefer to choose 26 functions of Kongjee-Patjee based on the characterization and events. Here we can see that there are 14 suitable functions out of 26 of Propp's functions

SEQUENCES/KOREA	PROPP'S THEORY
VIII	2, 3
XIII	4
XXI	6
XI	7
IX, XI, XII	8
IX, XI, XII	10
XIV, XV, XVI, XVII	8
XIV	14
IX, X, XI, XII	25
XXIV	27
XX	30
XXII	31

From this analysis we may conclude that there are some functions of Kongjee-Patjee which correlate with 1 function of Propp's, and on the other hand, there are some functions of Propp's which correlate with 1 function of Kongjee-Patjee. These functions are continuously unsuitable between numbers 1 to 26 of Korean folklore and from 1 to 31 of Propp's theory. They are not correlated at all, even though in the end they can be correlated where they are finally married.

Propp has shown the permanent elements and changing elements in the legend or folktale. In order to give more illustration based on the understanding of meaning of parts and motives in the whole Kongjee-Patjee story, the best solution is simplifying the basic motives into some simple sentences. According to the logical understanding of using the terms X, Y, Z is as follows:

- X is a girl
- Y is a retired man
- Y is a father
- Z is evildoer
- Z is the step mother of X

The above units are called narrative sentences. It is clearly stated that those sentences are consisted of two constituents in which each is called extant (X, Y, Z) and predicate (becoming, is, and so on).

Extant is an element with double functions. On one hand, extant provides a possibility to find unstable elements in a stable place and time. From the above example, in the last sentence, Z

is the subject and X is the additional subject. This is the function of extant syntaxes, which seems not too different from syntaxes' functions that exist in the language.

According to Propp's research, the main extant is active and passive actors. In the story of Kongjee-Patjee, Kongjee's step mother is always active, while Kongjee is always passive.

## CONCLUSION

Kongjee-Patjee as a Korean folktale has been living in oral culture. In its development, the story has been written and printed. From this analysis of Kongjee-Patjee, here are some conclusions of my analysis.

Some animals which are a black cow, a frog, birds and angels are used as symbols in order to support the work's meaning. Symbols are playing an important role in Kongjee-Patjee, because we may catch the pragmatic meaning from the symbols. Some symbols indicate negative meanings, and others indicate positive meanings. Both meanings are positioned in binary opposition that supports the characters. These symbols purposely using animals and angels have an indirect meaning and the story becomes varieties. In short, the meaning of story becomes more attractive and highly valued by using symbols (Todorov, 1983:17). In addition, those oppositional symbols illustrating characters' positions are contradictive to each other. The concept of binary opposition is implemented to the protagonist and antagonist as well as the supporting characters.



The protagonist, Kongjee, is positioned on a positive side, has good behavior and wins the conflict; while the antagonists are positioned on a negative side, evildoers, Paeshi and Patjee. These two contradictive elements are positioned as 'black and white' with the meaning of goodness and badness. It seems monotonous because it is the opposition that makes the folk tale more accepted by people. This interesting oppositional relation among characters places Kongjee as the central character. This central character becomes a cynosure from many angles, which are symbols of animals, angels, antagonists and supporting characters. That makes her name as the title of the story, Kongjee-Patjee.

The result of the analysis of Propp's theory via Kongjee-Patjee shows that there are some functions of Propp's analysis model that clearly operate in Kongjee-Patjee. These functions more and more support the position of Kongjee-Patjee as a format of folktales in general. There are 26 functions in Kongjee-Patjee that can be explored from the model of Propp's analysis. Therefore it can be clearly said that in general, folk tales all around the world are similar and universal. In fact, Kongjee-Patjee still has many other interesting elements to be analyzed. Various approaches and themes can be implemented with this popular Korean story.

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