

Narratology and character functions of Sohni Mahiwal: An actantial analysis

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Received: December 15, 2021

Accepted: March 27, 2022

Published: April 21, 2022

Abstract

The study analyses Sohni Mahiwal, the renowned Punjabi folktale, by applying Greimas Actantial model for structural analysis. The purpose of this study is to explore the narrative structure and discover the character functions based on the model. Folktales are considered the simplest and oldest form of stories embedded in the local cultures. They broadly refer to orally transmitted, traditional narratives that carry cultural information. The findings show that all the major actantial categories proposed by Greimas such as subject, object, sender, receiver, helper, and opponent have been depicted in the selected folktale. The analysis revealed that many characters were found involved in several actant classes simultaneously. Structural analysis of the folktale uncovered two parallel acts/episodes. The parallelism in the contents of two acts of the tale serves a didactic function at the socio-cultural level besides entertaining the readers/listeners proving the strength of true love. As far as the function is concerned, the tale successfully validates the culturally imparted message that the individuals who transgress the social norms are destined to perish.

Keywords: folk tale, actantial model, structure, function, content, social norms, narratives, actant classes, didactic function.

How to Cite:

Qasim, Z. & Qasim, A. (2022). Narratology and character functions of Sohni Mahiwal: An actantial analysis. *Journal of Humanities, Social and Management Sciences (JHSMS)*, 3(1), 154-168. <https://doi.org/10.47264/idea.jhsms/3.1.11>

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1. Introduction

Folk tale is an important form of traditional, dramatic narrative (Thompson, 1946). It has the power to affect an individual's attitude, perception, behaviour, and many other aspects important both for an individual and the society (Prayoon, 1999, p. 6). Folktales characterize common people to whom every reader of the folktale can relate. Folktales preserve and transmit knowledge about a society, its individuals, and the social norms since they are a source of constructed beliefs, perceptions, paradigms, fear, formality, and fun. Most importantly, the folktales are part of the culture and national heritage. They portray the approved socio-cultural ways of life and taboos of the society which have conventionally been preserved through generations. Moreover, folktales are sources of entertainment for individuals and social classes.

Folktales from various cultures have been analysed to probe the structural patterns. Propp (1968, 1984), first of all, introduced the idea of the analysis of tales at structural level with his *Morphology of the Folktale*. The morphological classification of Russian tales by Propp, was followed by different linguists who studied the structure of folktales taken from different cultures. Further descriptions and studies of tales in different cultures for exploration of various structural patterns have underlined one prominent design – the reward/punishment model – besides many other features (Griffin, 1993; Labov, 1997). Structural studies of folktales led to further development and folktales have been studied from the perspective of content and purpose besides structure. Providing that, field, form, and function are the three major aspects in the genre classification (Swales, 1990), the content of the narrative can be regarded its field, narrative structure can be called as the form, and its purpose may be labelled as the function.

Herman (2000) conducted a survey focusing on the origin as well as the genealogy of the model of narrative "actants". He states that Actants were initially interpreted as titles or labels for the particular and common role that can be taken up by characters in recounting a narrative. Propp's actantial typology has primary contribution in Structuralism theories, which included the hero, the helper, the donor, the sought-for-person and her father, the dispatcher, the villain, and the false hero. However, existentialist theories based on the idea of self, might also have modulated the approach since structuralist narratologists were depending on linguistic theory to redefine characters involved in narratives as actants. Moreover, a more traditionally precise version of actants could have substantial operational magnitudes for modern analysts, concerned about employing actantial models for narrative study.

Fischer (1966) observes that one of the important functions that tales perform is that of supporting social values, however the values promoted may be related to a social group that comprises a definably small fragment of a population on up. The value that the tale supports may be opposite to the values of another group belonging to the same community. They may lead to values of another, even within a community, and may therefore tend to produce social rift on an upper level in addition to assimilation on a smaller group level.

Folktales in Pakistan are a mixture of fiction, facts, and beliefs. In the present study, the renowned Punjabi folktale, *Sohni Mahiwal*, has been analysed. The study is an attempt to view not only the structural features of the selected folktale, but it also attempts to relate its contents and functions with the structural elements explored through the application of Greimas' the Actantial Model since it focuses on the analysis of the roles played by different characters in the narrative. The objective of the study is to explore the relationship among the narrative

structure (form), the story content (field), and the social purpose (function). Hence, the study advocates the structural analysis not as an end but as a means, to appreciate the nature of folktales present in Pakistani culture.

2. Literature review

Previous research studies have looked into the structure of narrative in fiction works including fairy tales, novels, and most commonly in cinematographic adaptation or films as a whole. Pratami's (2016) analyses *The Hopeless Romantic's Handbook* novel (2007) by Gema Townly by employing Greimas model to classify all actants and actions in the narrative. She describes the emergence of real Mr. Right in major character's life who is Tom because he fulfils Kate's desire. Herman (2000) states that contemporary study on narrative analysis has arisen to reconsider the roles of characters in narratives. Study on life histories, for instance, has found that characters are not just the pre-existing subjects embalmed in certain kinds of clauses; they are rather intricate, evolving products of the interchange between narrative processing and narrative design. He explored a corpus based on fifteen natural-language narratives (specially, ghost stories). His study investigates how psychological representations of characters are encoded in stories. He labels these character representations as actants. Actants are prototypes that encode narrative participants as patients and agents, hence letting certain discourse objects to be placed into overall action structures like *Pursuit of a goal*. Considering orders of referring terms in the ghost stories, the study demonstrates that recognizing and tracing agents in narratives entails that data about participant *roles* be programmed in the narration of the story. Moreover, as long as they reconstitute incidences and objects as actions and agents, ghost stories offer distinctive understandings into the linguistic, cognitive, and interactional practices determining discourse anaphora in narrative frameworks.

Vilhjálmsdóttir & Tulinius (2009) employed Greimas' actantial model and semiotic square to explore four career counsellors' narratives of the client. They found the model of great value as it highlights the primary concerns of both the counsellor and the client. This methodology provides the counsellor with a way to evaluate and deliberate on counselling practice. Moreover, Handayani's study (2010) was based on the application of Greimas' structural analysis on Tolkien's *The Hobbit*. It is the story of Bilbo Baggins who prefer to live peacefully in his cozy hole in the Hobbiton. The researcher found that there were various structures which were still absurd, intricate and hard to decipher. The characters were complex, and the problems faced by the main characters in doing the adventure for getting the treasure make the reader confused and it is difficult to understand the meaning as well as the theme of the novel.

Azar *et al.* (2014) explored the *Ilahi-name* of Attar through application of the modern literary theories comprising semantic pattern of Greima's, structuralist narratology, and morphological pattern introduced by Gerard Genette. They investigated two stories of *Ilahi-name*, *Daughter of Ka'b* and *Her Love and the "Pious Woman"*, for narrative function and interpreted the texts by following Greima's narrative model. They studied the selected stories by identifying the circumstances of the narrative discourse by applying the focalization theory of Genette, as well as the plot, i.e., Actantial model comprising six actants: subject/object, sender/receiver, supporter/opponent, to investigate the narrative texts based on semantic square.

According to Nadeem (2017), "Greimasean approach is a structuralist approach, but the analysis implicates the investigation of class struggle, ideology and power relations" (p. 78).

Nadeem analysed a *dastan* narrative *Hoshrubah* (a classical storytelling genre in the subcontinent) by using Greimas's actantial model. One of major transcending point of Nadeem's research was to stress upon the power of discourse itself, and the storyteller as the Dastan narrative is oral tradition, he claims, "the dastangos (storytellers) execute an ideological nexus between power and control" (p. 76). Moreover, he has attempted to bring the hidden ideologies on the surface which serve as a major source of motivation for the actants such as Asad, Amar and Ayyar to achieve their purpose. In the end, this ideology helps the subjects to achieve the object which is their sacred mission to implement a decisive crackdown on transgressors of Hoshrubah.

Greimas's actantial model has also been employed to highlight major roles of characters in stories. Hashanah (2014) explored gender meanings in Toni Morrison's *Beloved* using Actantial Model by Greimas to analyse the actions of the characters in the story and reveal the motivation of the characters represented in the story. The research shows that women have important roles in the novel. The gender meaning as narrated in the story show that women play stronger roles than men. Contrary of this study, Sharita (2016) has identified gender differences where women are found only as objects in her study based on a movie, *The Book of Life*, analysed through actantial scheme. It was found that there was a hidden structure beneath apparently balanced storyline. The lead male characters in both the scenes occupied the role of the subject and receiver actants. Meanwhile, the lead female character, Maria, continuously occupies the object actant.

3. Theoretical framework

Discourse, according to Greimas (1987), is not 'an articulation of successive structures, but redundancy of simple hierarchal structure' (p.104). He introduced the Actantial Model which analysed the structure of discourse as well as the relationships within. The actantial model is an instrument that can be ideally used to examine any thematized or real action particularly those portrayed in stories or images. Greimas, in actantial model, explores 'one of the possible principles of organization of semantic universe (Aston, E. & Savona, G. 1991, p. 37). Greimas breaks down the narrative into several components which help in better understanding of the text. In the actantial model, the roles that characters perform in the literary work may be divided into six parts, labelled as actants. Actantial analysis involves assigning every element of the action, being described to one of the actantial classes.

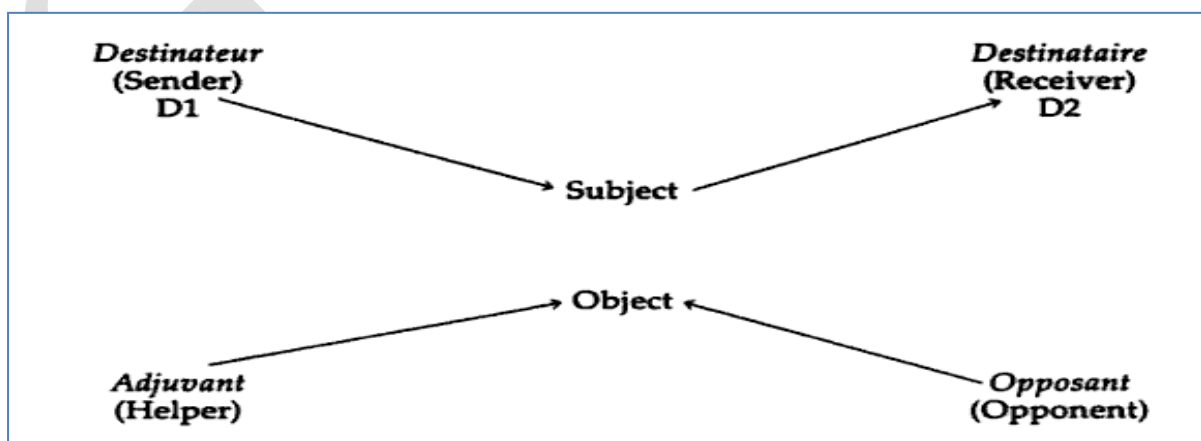


Fig.1. the Actantial Model from Aston, E. & Savona, G., *Theatre as Sign System: A Semiotics of Text and Performance*. London, Routledge, 2013 (p.37)

3.1. Six Actants in Greimas Model

The actantial model is divided into six components, or actants:

- a) The subject who wants to take the desired object or who wants the elimination of a particular object.
- b) An object who is desired by the subject
- c) The sender who instigates the action
- d) The receiver who benefits from the action.
- e) A helper who helps to accomplish the action,
- f) An opponent who hinders the action.

3.1.1. Six actants and three axes

Greimas (1987) describes ‘the principal semiotics actants’ (p. 14) of discourse in three distinct categories: a) Subject vs object, b) Sender vs receiver, and c) Helper vs opponent. Each of the categories mentioned forms an axis of the actantial description, namely: axis of desire, axis of power, and axis of transmission.

a) The axis of desire: subject/object. The subject is what is directed toward an object. The relationship established between the subject and the object is called a *junction* (Hebert, 2006). If the object is conjoined with the subject (for example, the prince wants the Princess), it is called conjunction. If ‘the subject wishes to be joined by the object of value not as an acting subject’ but as an existing subject...the conjunction would be made by the acting subject. On the contrary, if the subject wants to get rid of the object, it is termed as disjunction (p.228).

b) The axis of power: helper/opponent. The helper assists in achieving the desired junction between the subject and object, whereas the opponent hinders it. Greimas states that ‘the helper and opponent function as if they were actants representing in a schematic fashion the benevolent and malevolent forces in the world, incarnations of guardian angel and the devil of medieval Christian drama’ (Schleifer, 2016, p.107).

c) The axis of transmission (the axis of knowledge): sender / receiver. The sender is the element requesting the establishment of the junction between subject and object. The receiver is the element for which the quest is being undertaken.

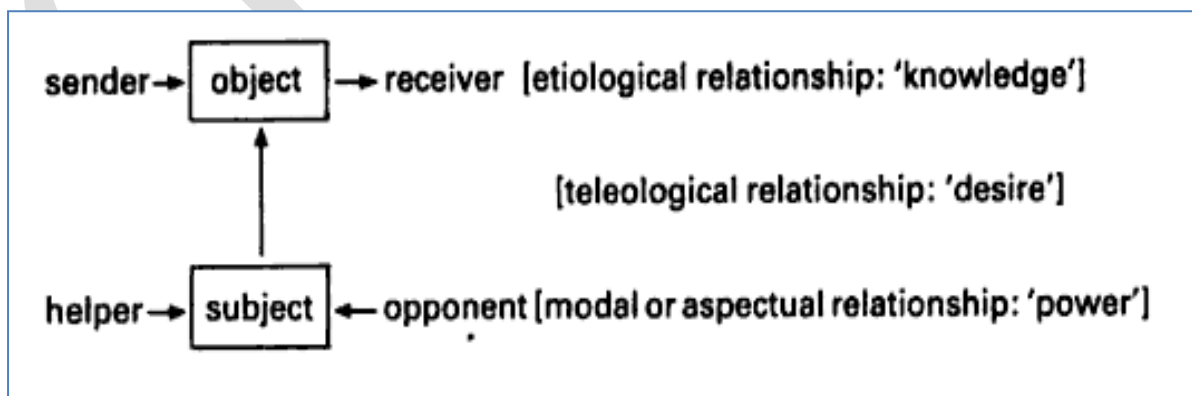


Fig.2. The Three Axes in Actantial Model from Schleifer, R., A.J Greimas and the Nature of Meaning: Linguistics, Semiotics and Discourse. London, Routledge, 2016. p. 103.

3.1.2. Character/non-character actants

According to Greimas, an actant may not always be parallel to a character, as far as the traditional meaning of the terms is concerned. From the perspective of accepted ontology, an actant may relate to:

- a. an anthropomorphic being (for example, an animal, a talking sword, a man, etc.)
- b. areal, non-living element, including things (e.g., a sword), though not restricted to the physical things (it may be the wind, the space to be journeyed),
- c. a concept, Greimas called 'susceptible to individualism' (p.255-256) such as love, hope.

3.1.3. Actantial syncretism

According to Greimas, 'role is an animative symbolic entity' but anonymous and social, the actor, nonetheless, is an integrated individual assuming one or several roles (as quoted by Schleifer, 2016). Actantial syncretism arises when a particular component, identified as an actor (e.g., a character in the traditional meaning of the word), contains a number of actants from different categories (for example, subject and helper simultaneously) or a number of actants belonging to the same category that have distinct actions in the analysis.

3.1.4. Observing subjects

Actantial account closely analyses subjects, since they influence how the components are arranged within the actantial categories. Classification is mostly based on the reference observing subject: the one connected with the ultimate truth of the text (Hebert, 2006. p. 51). For example, an observer-character may believe that a certain other character is a helper in a certain action, who, in reality, may be the opponent. The character, who falsely mistakes an actant is an observing subject. Similarly, reference observer is somebody who knows the reality of the actant mistaken by the observing subject. Observing subject assumes the reality, while the reference object is in knowledge of ultimate reality.

3.1.5. Time of observation

Categorizations may fluctuate, based not only on the viewer, but also as a role of time. Thus, one may (and sometimes should) establish an actantial model for every observer and respectively relevant temporal point of a single particular action. There are a few forms of temporality or time:

- a) Time as represented in the story (the events presented in chronological order),
- b) Narrative time (the order in which events of the story are presented),
- c) Tactical time (the linear sequencing of semantic units, for example, from one sentence to the next).

3.2. Actant sub-classes

Greimas, in his model, talked about several actantial sub-classes that can enhance an analysis. These sub-classes are as follows:

3.2.1. True/false actants

The analysis can adopt the reference evaluations straight away, or it can show the dynamics between the reference and assumptive evaluations. For example, if the observing subject mistakenly believes that a certain character is a helper, then this helper would be true for this observer, but false for the reference observer.

3.2.2. Anti-actants/antactants

The relevant antactants for use in analytical practice are:

- a) The anti-sender,
- b) The anti-receiver,
- c) The anti-subject.

For example, consider the subject *Prince* and the object *save the Princess*. The ogre is the anti-subject (he and the prince are in contention for the same object), the anti-sender (he is certainly not asking the prince to save the Princess) and the anti-receiver (he will in no way benefit from the rescue of the Princess – quite the contrary).

3.2.3. Real/possible actants and active/passive actants

Greimas model also includes the distinctions between real/possible actants (based on ontological status) and active/passive actants. A friend who should have helped but could not help may be classified as a possible helper.

In terms of active/passive helper, an active helper is somebody who actively assists the subject in completing the action. Whereas a passive helper is the one who does not deliberately take part, but the role he plays during an action, directly or indirectly helps in completion of an action. For example, a gun that should have fired the attacking lion, but it didn't, is considered to be the passive helper of the lion in attaining its subject.

3.2.4. Intentional/Unintentional Actants, Whole/Part, Class/Element

Some intentional/unintentional, whole/part and class/element are some important sub-classes. An anthropomorphic actant will play its role either intentionally or unintentionally. Thus, a character may not know that he is a helper or sender relative to ascertain action.

In the whole/part distinction, according to Greimas, an analysis done at the level of the parts helps to reveal the differences that emerge between a description of the whole and that of its parts. Usually, the more specific the actant (with respect to the parts rather than the whole), the better the analysis. Thus, it is more accurate to say that the prince's courage is a helper in his own cause than to state that the prince is an overall helper.

Lastly, the analysis can benefit in a similar way from the distinction made in set theory between class and element. For instance, a witch is always an opponent in traditional fairy tales; but in some perverted texts, it does happen that a witch may intentionally and voluntarily support the hero.

The actantial model can be summarized as follows:

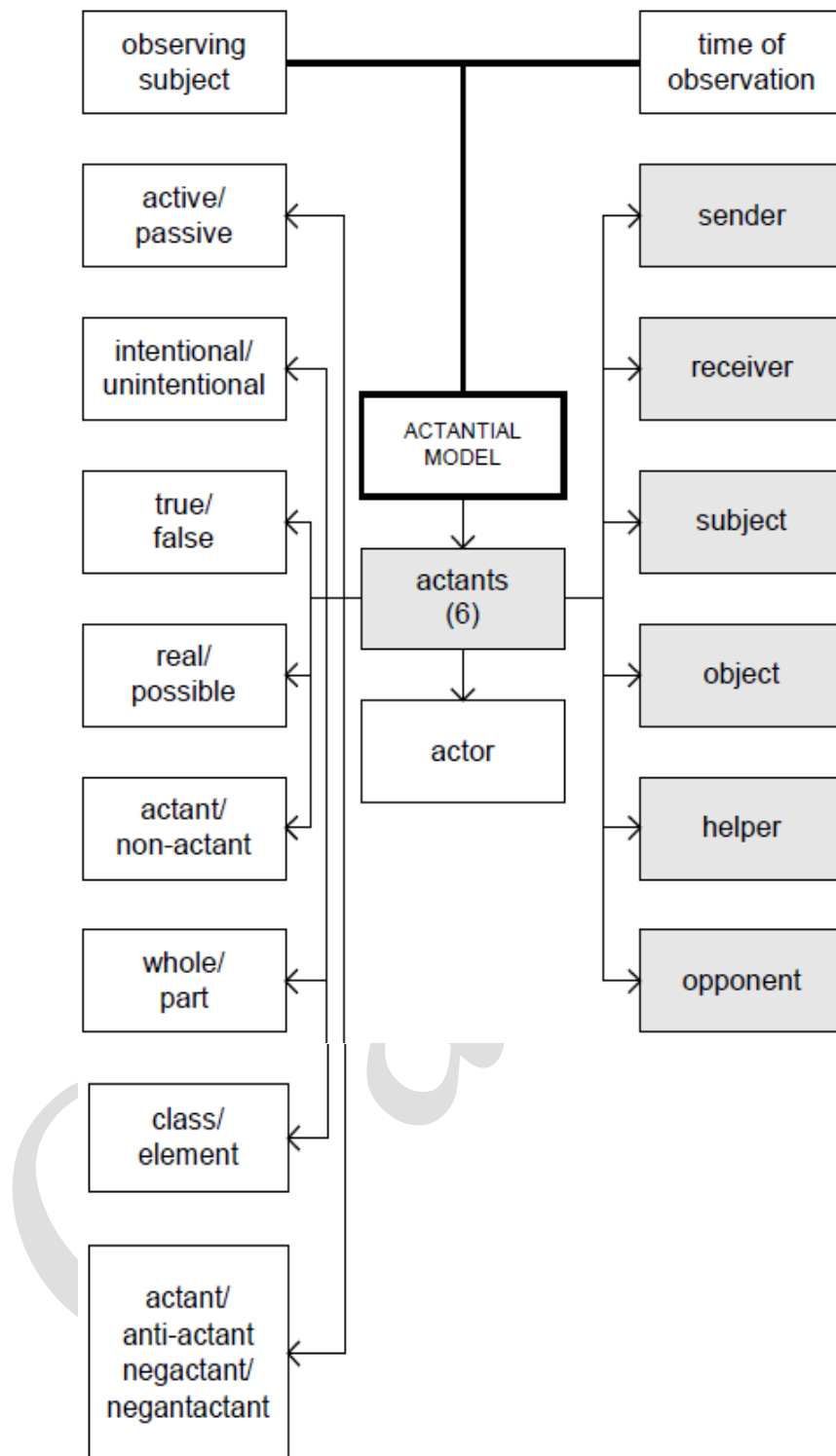


Fig.3. Summarizing the Actantial Model from Hebert, L. (2006). Tools for text and image analysis: an introduction to applied semiotics. Retrieved from <http://www.revue-texto.net/Parutions/Livres-E/Hebert_AS/Hebert_Tools.html>

4. Results and analysis

The actantial analysis of the Sohni Mahiwal is summarized in the figure and table below:

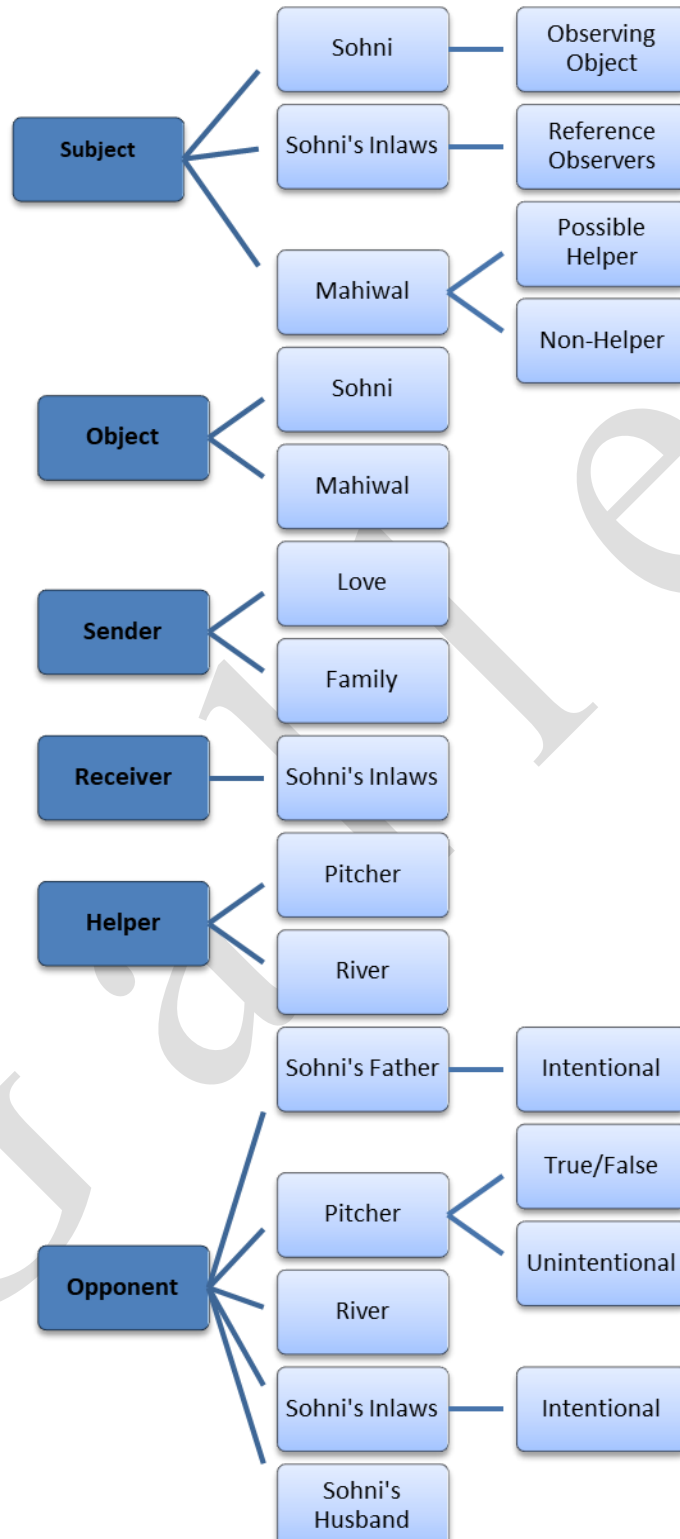


Fig.4. Actantial Model of Sohni Mahiwal

Table 1: *Actantial Model of Sohni Mahiwal in Tabular form*

Actants	Actant Classes	Actant Sub-Classes
Sohni	Subject, Object	Observing Object
Mahiwal	Subject, Object	Non-Helper, Passive Helper
Sohni's Father	Opponent	Intentional
Pitcher	Helper, Opponent	True/False, Unintentional
Sohni's Inlaws	Subjects, Opponents, Receiver	Unintentional
Sohni's Husband	Opponent	Anti-Actant
River	Helper, Opponent	
Love	Sender	
Family's Honour	Sender	

4.1. Subject and object

There are several subjects in the folktale, Sohni and Mahiwal.

First of all, Sohni is the subject of the story who desires to be conjoined with the object of her desire, Mahiwal. Sohni loves him from the core of her heart and wants to stay with him forever.

Mahiwal is also the subject of the story because he is in love with Sohni. Mahiwal squanders his money immensely in order to be close to Sohni, who is the object of desire of Mahiwal. Moreover, the relationship between subject and object in both cases is that of conjunction as the subjects' desire to be with the objects.

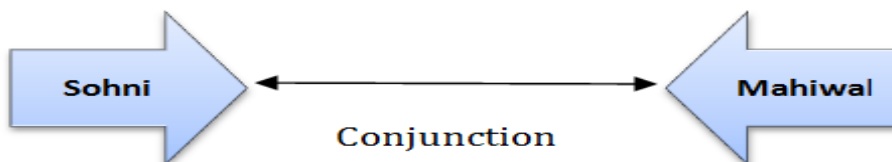


Fig. 5. The axis of relationship between Sohni and Mahiwal

Sohni's in laws are another subject of the story. However, the relationship between the subject and object is not based on love in this instance. On the contrary, Sohni's in laws want to get rid of Sohni for their honour's sake. Sohni, too, does not have any interest in living with them. This type of relationship between subject and object is called disjunction.

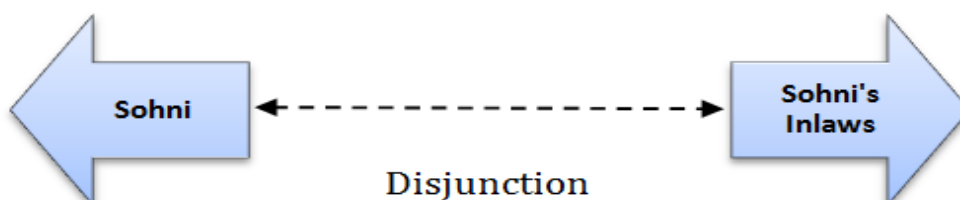


Fig.6. The axis of relationship between Sohni and her Inlaws

4.1.2. Sender

In Sohni and Mahiwal's folktale, there are two senders who instigate the action taken by the subjects. The two senders are as follows:

In case of Sohni and Mahiwal, the love they feel for each other instigates them to struggle for the achievement of their beloved. Sohni was married to her cousin, but her love for Mahiwal was so overwhelming that she was helpless and went to meet him in the darkness of night.

Sohni's in laws cared about the honour of their family. When Sohni's in laws saw her crossing the river to meet her beloved, they raged with fury. Their fear of losing the family honour was tearing at their heart. In order to save the honour of the family, Sohni's sister-in-law replaced the pitcher so that Sohni would be drowned in the river. Social pressure to preserve the family's honour, thus, compelled Sohni's in laws to undertake the action of replacing Sohni's pitcher with a broken one.

4.1.3. Receiver

Sohni's in-laws are the receivers in the folktale. They were the ones who benefited from the completion of the final action. They wanted to get rid of Sohni and for that reason, they replaced her pitcher with a false one. After the death of Sohni, her in laws did not have to fear about the disgrace of their family.

4.1.4. Helper

In the story, the pitcher that Sohni used for crossing the river in order to meet Mahiwal is the helper that aided Sohni in meeting her beloved. The river, as well, can be taken as the helper, which stayed calm throughout the night, so that Sohni could cross the river with ease. River can be termed as the passive helper.

Sohni's in-laws wanted to get rid of Sohni for saving their family's honour. They used the broken, sun-dried pitcher to achieve their goal. The false pitcher could not resist the severe river storm and as a result, Sohni was drowned. The pitcher, in this case, can be taken as a helper of Sohni's in-laws. Similarly, that night there was a severe river storm that hindered Sohni and caused the pitcher to break in the middle of the way. Sohni would have crossed the river if the river could have been calm. River, in this case, can be taken as the "passive helper" to her in laws.

4.1.5. Opponent

There are several opponents in Sohni Mahiwal's tale. The first opponent is Sohni's father who did not allow her to meet Mahiwal. Sohni's father also arranged Sohni's marriage to her cousin and sent her to a far-off village. Sohni's father was thus, an opponent who hindered Sohni in meeting with Mahiwal. Sohni's father is the intentional opponent because he deliberately opposed Sohni's relationship with Mahiwal.

The second opponent is Sohni's in laws as they kept Sohni from meeting her beloved. They planned her murder in order to save their family's honour. Third opponent would be Sohni's

husband because Sohni's father arranged her marriage to him and as a result, Sohni was separated from Mahiwal.

The other two opponents for Sohni in the story are the stormy river and the false pitcher. The false pitcher drowned Sohni in the middle of her sailing and the river storm caused the pitcher to break early. Sohni's in laws can also be taken as the intentional opponents. It can be noted that the pitcher is the unintentional opponent as it did not intentionally cause Sohni's death, rather it was manipulated by Sohni's sister-in-law.

4.2. Actantial syncretism

Actantial syncretism is evident in the folktale from the fact that in the story, a single person assumes the role of several actants from different classes.

Sohni is not only the subject because she desires Mohiwal, but she also happens to be the object of Mahiwal's desire. Similarly, Mahiwal is the subject as well as the object. Lastly, Pitcher and river are the helpers for Sohni but they are opponents for Sohni's in laws as they help Sohni in completion of an act that is harmful for their family's honour. Moreover, pitcher and river become opponents for Sohni when they cause her death in the middle of her journey.

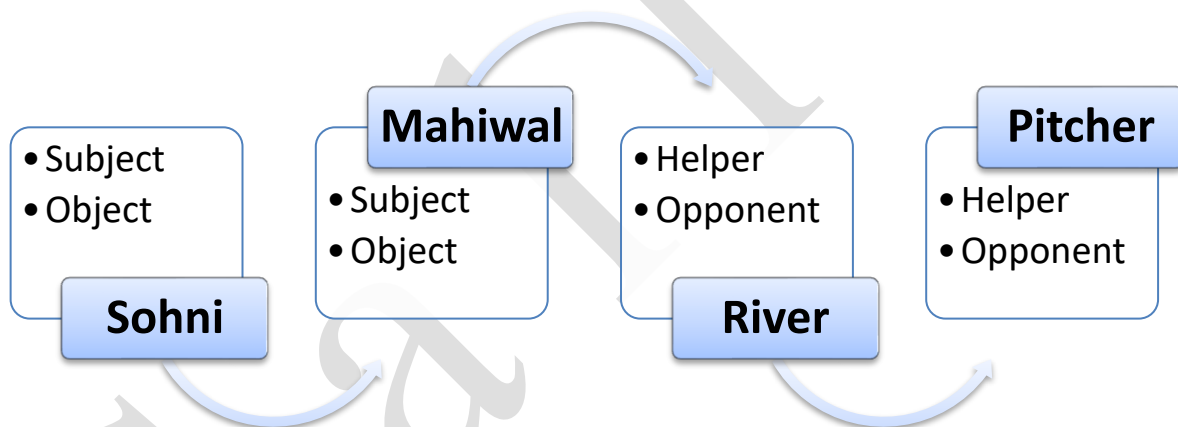


Fig.7. Actantial Syncretism in Sohni Mahiwal

4.3. Sub-classes of actants in Sohni Mahiwal

We can find variety of Actantial sub-classes in the folktale, Sohni Mahiwal. The analysis of the sub-classes is as follows:

4.3.1. Observing subject

Sohni happens to be the observing subject as she assumes something to be true, which is in reality false for the readers as well as the reference observer. Sohni considers the pitcher as her helper, but she is ignorant of the fact that the pitcher has been replaced by her sister-in-law. The pitcher was in reality her opponent which caused her death in the middle of her journey. Similarly, Sohni's in laws are the reference object because they knew the ultimate reality of the pitcher as mistaken by the observing subject.

4.3.2. Actants/non-actants and possible/real helpers

Mahiwal can be taken as the non-helper because he didn't help the drowning Sohni. He can also be taken as the possible helper because he tried his best to help her but unfortunately could not.

4.3.3. Anti-actant/antactant

Sohni's husband is an anti-actant because he is first of all an anti-subject: because Mahiwal and he desire the same women. Secondly, he is an anti-sender: he did not ask Mahiwal to search for Sohni and maintain a relationship with her. Finally, he is an anti-receiver: he did not get any benefit from the completion of action, rather lost his wife.

4.3.4. True/false actant

Pitcher is taken to be the true/false actant because Sohni mistakenly believed that the pitcher was a helper which in fact was an opponent. Thus, pitcher, as a helper, was true for the observing subject, Sohni, but false for the reference object, Sohni's in laws.

5. Discussion and findings

As for the field, the content of the tale, the narrative world consists of the lower socio-economic class, the potters, and the setting is rural. The tale comprises two equal narrative acts or sections. Each section consists of two scenes with a parallel structure and narrative progress. The narrative content may be divided into two episodes. Firstly, episode shows Sohni at her parents' place while the second episode is about Sohni's life at her in laws. In the first episode, she meets Mahiwal and falls in love and starts seeing him. As her activities come into the notice of her father, he fixes her marriage with her cousin, and she is sent to live with her in laws. The underlying reason behind this decision of her marriage was the threat of social disgrace that her father anticipated if the secret of her love for Mahiwal was known to the people of that area. The second move, or episode which is almost identical to the first one, results in the destruction of the lovers. The in women in the in laws perceive the nocturnal movements of Sohni and decide to get rid of her to save the family honour. So, in this episode, too, the love affair is going on but the act of stopping Sohni from seeing her love proves to be a permanent arrangement. The final phase of the second act, in contrast to the content of previous act, emphasizes the cultural pressure and punishment which the transgressors have to undergo.

Coming to the function i.e., social purpose of the tale, there is an overarching factor, called cultural norm, which is apparently invisible but is the main factor in war with the passion of the two leading characters of the tale, Sohni and Mahiwal. As mentioned above, the folktales have cultural elements and preach the approved norms of society. They not only are a source of entertainment but serve the didactic purpose too. The characters standing against the approved norms remain unable to get approval throughout the action and have to be removed from the face of social fabric to purge the community of their bad effects. The lower socio-economic community living in the rural setting, as found in the tale, has to face an enormous social pressure to conform to the social norms. So Sohni, like the Tess of D'Urbervilles and Maggie in Mill of Floss, is destined to die because there is no place in the society for the characters who transgress the moral boundaries. Although many poets have written about these

characters in their poetry and have been appreciating the true love and passion of the lovers but in every version of the tale the lovers are destined to die symbolically immortalizing their love.

6. Conclusion

In this study, the famous Punjabi folktale Sohni Mahiwal has been analysed in the light of Actantial model by A. J. Greimas. In this tale of two lovers, all the actantial classes: subject, object, sender, receiver, helper, opponent, were found. It was also noted that one particular character was not assigned only one specific role. On the contrary, there were many characters that were found involved in several actant classes simultaneously. The sub-classes of actantial model were also traced down. However, it is significant to mention that not all the sub-classes were found in the folktale Sohni Mahiwal. It can be stated in the light of the analysis that all the elements of the folktale that have been discussed in the models given by the foreign linguists are present in the local folktale, Sohni Mahiwal. There is a parallelism in the contents of two acts of the tale and it serves a definite didactic function at socio cultural level besides entertaining the readers/ listeners proving the strength of true love. Hence, the study advocates the structural analysis not as an end but as a means, to appreciate the nature of folktales present in Pakistani culture. Further studies can explore other folk tales of Punjab and other regions of Pakistan to investigate them for the elements of folktale as propounded by Greimas.

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