A Morphological Reading of Shahnameh Based on Vladimir Propp’s Narrative Theory a Case Study: Zal and Rudabeh

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Abstract:  
Narratology is a new structural approach in narrative literature aiming to discover the syntax of the narrative, the language of the narrative, the system governing different narratives as well as their structure. Narrative theory was established in the 1960s by eliminating the narrator’s processing, determining the structural elements of the narrative, combining these elements with each other and analyzing the type of discourse. People like Shklovsky, Bakhtin, etc. have also expressed their views about narrative. New structural narratology was initiated by Vladimir Propp, the Russian anthropologist, with his fairy tales in 1928. Having analyzed several narratives, Propp concluded that narratives have both constant and changing properties. He summarized his findings in four principles of constant elements, known actions, characters and continuity of the characters’ actions. He also mentioned seven spheres of action and thirty one functions for the narratives. This study was conducted to analyze Shahnameh’s Zal and Rudabeh based on Propp model to see how compatible the 31 functions of Propp were with this story. The findings indicated that Propp’s model was superficial lacking such central elements as behavior, attributes, motive, cultural and religious domains, pivotal element of dream and forecast in Shahnameh especially in the present case, sequence of functions and number of heroes. Propp devoted several functions to magic element which was absent in Zal and Rudabeh. Moreover, 11 out of 31 functions of Propp were present in this story.

Keywords:  Propp, morphology, Zal and Rudabeh, functions, spheres of action

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Acceptance Date: 2/22/2014
1. Introduction

1.1. Narrative and narratology

Traditionally, narrative is a fictional prose or poetry that involves the events, characters and all the words and actions in it. Some literary genres like novel and short story are in the form of prose, epic and romance that are narrated by a narrator. There is no narration in the play because the characters appear directly on the stage, but in lyrics there is an indirect display of narration.

Narrative theory was established in the 60s by eliminating the narrator’s interpretation and determining the structural elements of the narrative and combining them. It made use of common tools in narrative and discourse analysis to present the story to the audience. Bressler defined narratology as a kind of structuralism founded by Vladimir Propp, Todorov, Barthez and Genette, and showed how the meaning of the narrative was determined by its general structure not by separate elements of the narrative. To determine the meaning of a text, narratologists emphasized the syntactic elements like tense, relation and configuration (1).

However, the best method to learn about a theory is analyzing its development through the history. Northrop Frye, in anatomy of criticism, broke the fake boundaries between prose and poetry, oral and written, and short and long narratives. Moreover, he revealed the relationship between the trend of history and changes of literary fiction; for instance, regarding the myth, the hero is superior to other human beings in terms of type, and in romance, the hero is superior to others in terms of rank. Myths, folklores and tales are examples of romance. He considered epic for supreme imitative form and realistic fiction for servile imitative form as instances of narrative. For ironic form, he accounted for narratives and novels like Billy Bad, the fool and Dubliners. In supreme imitation, the hero is superior to others in rank, but not in terms of environment. In servile imitative form, the hero is not superior to others in both rank and environment, and in ironic form, the hero is lower in power and intelligence than human. He provided examples of narrative from the bible and epic poems for the myth.

He then discussed different types of narrative and rejected the classification of literature into three categories of drama, poetry and fiction. He based his classification on the style of presentation to audience and considered oral works as epic poetry and written works as poetry.

1.2. Defining narrative

Schultz and Kellogg, in the nature of narrative, presented another view about the history of narrative. Although they accepted the viewpoint of Frye on the linear developmental cycle from myth to realism, they have presented a tree structure instead of classifying it, which is begun with epic and divided into conventional branches (6).

According to Schultz and Kellogg, epic is the result of combination of the myth, legend, history, anecdote and genealogy. Over the time, epic is changed into experimental and fictional narrative. These subgroups are also divided into other subcategories, but they finally come together and form a new category, one of which is novel (6).

In his classification, Frye had not taken history and biography into account, but Schultz and Kellogg included them in different kinds of narratives. In the analysis of oral narratives such as Iliad and odyssey, Schultz and Kellogg found out common characteristics and believed that general form of these works is based on three principles: repetition, likeness and symmetry.

Wallace Martin believed that these structural levels assist the poet to make harmonic lines, recount the events and relate them to each other, and keep the general trend of the narrative in mind. Meanwhile, these structural levels do not impede the creative changes (8).
Victor Shklovsky, another theorist, believed that all aspects of formal elements of narrative can be achieved by analyzing the linguistic rules and rules of artistic creation. He asserted that the language of literature is different than the common languages and techniques and in fact, defamiliarized the reality and provided us with a new form, but as we get familiar with these forms, they become old-fashioned and the artist looks for a new form. Therefore, Shklovsky believed that the history of narrative is the history of simplifications and reversing several fundamental rules of literary structure (7).

Mikhail Bakhtin, another narrative theorist, in rejecting the theory of Shklovsky, believed in defamiliarization and disclosure. He took these ideas from satire and parody and tried to compare the artificiality of literary or perceptual rules through these literary styles. Bakhtin claimed “Shklovsky does not know there is no reality in satire and narrator cannot be the comparison criterion”. Unlike Shklovsky that believed narrative defamiliarized the world, Bakhtin believed that narrative defamiliarized various ways of talking about the world.

1.3. Propp and his viewpoint

In morphology of fairytale, Propp approached this issue from another perspective and stated as physics and math sciences have harmonic classification and unified terms formulated by specialized congresses and their principles are gradually completed by the teacher’s welcoming the student, there is no similar thing in the realm of tale, and variation and complexity of the materials make the planning and precise solution of the problems difficult (3).

Following the others’ classification of narratives such as Boïte & Polivka and Volkf & Arne, Propp based his morphology on describing the tale according to its constituents and relationships between these components. Analyzing a series of Russian tales, he concluded that narratives have fixed and changing properties. The names and features of the heroes are changed, but their functions are the same. He then classified the tales according to the actions of the characters and summarized his findings in four principles:

1. Function of characters serve as stable, constant elements in a tale.
2. The number of functions in the fairy tale is limited.
3. The sequence of functions is always identical.
4. All fairy tales are only one type regarding their structure.

Propp selected 100 tales by Asanov, from 50-150, and after analyzing them concluded that there were no other actions for characters to do. Then, he determined 31 functions for the tales in which some of the functions are in pair like prohibition and violation (2 and 3), combat and victory (16 and 18), pursue and freedom (21 and 22). However, some of the functions are general such as functions 1-7 indicating preparation, functions 8-10 showing complexity, along with another group that includes transfer, combat, return and transfiguration.

In addition to these 31 functions, Propp introduced 7 characters: Villain, donor, hero, false hero, dispatcher, helper and princess (and her father). Of course, each of these characters can take more than one function or several characters can have a similar function. Finally, Propp presented seven spheres of action for characters:

1. Villain: evil X, combat L, pursue P
2. Donor: delivering magical tools D, submitting the tools to hero T
3. Helper: transference of hero R, liquidating lack or defeating villain E, rescuing hero from pursuit S, carrying out difficult task A, transfiguration of hero Tr,
4. Princess: setting difficult task T, marking the hero M, unmasking the villain DV, identifying hero I, punishing the second villain P, marriage N.

5. Dispatcher: dispatching hero on a mission Y

6. Hero: decision making and moving ↑W, reaction against donor’s request H, marriage N

7. False hero: 1W, H, his only task F (3).

Analyzing the first work of James Joyce from the viewpoint of Propp, Tolan questioned Propp’s views for disregarding cultural backgrounds that are very important in these tales. He argued that “maybe Propp believes structuralism and morphology involve reduction and details and unnecessary subjects should be eliminated in them”, but the questions raised are what the basis of being necessary and unnecessary is, how much this comparison is defendable, why 31 functions and not more. Propp argued that only 31 functions are required to analyze the tales. However, the question remaining is that what the basis of this requirement is (5).

In literary theories and their application in Persian literature, Taslimi considered the findings of Propp as comparative, old and cliché criticism and argued “searching the shared traditions and foundations is not related to current texts. Comparative criticism is an old, tricky and even non-scientific method. In comparison of the texts, we cannot compare several texts and show their common narratives. But some of the post-modernistic narratives can be analyzed by Propp’s clichés” (4).

Another problem with Propp theory is that all functions that are not found in Propp’s 31 functions are shown with o. it should be noted that there are cases in which the actions of the heroes cannot be attributed to any of the functions that were mentioned. These instances are extremely scarce and in most cases we are confronted with cases that are not comprehensible without reference to a source, or other forms that are taken from other groups of tales (comic tales, epics, etc.). We define these functions as vague elements and will indicate them with o symbol (3).

The present study was aimed to analyze Shahnameh’s Zal and Rudabeh based on Propp narrative theory and to compare its functions with elements of this story.

2. Results and discussion

Morphological reading of Zal and Rudabeh based on Propp narrative theory is presented as follows:

I:
One of the members of a family absents himself from home. (Definition: abstention. Designation: E)

After Zal returns to Sam and transferring the power to him by his father, he decides to cruise his territory and arrives in Kabul.

II:
An interdiction is addressed to the hero. (Definition: interdiction. Designation: K). (reverse of interdiction. Designation K2).

Mehrab, the governor of Kabul and one of the descendants of Zahak, welcomes Zal and after entertaining him, invites him to the palace but Zal, due to the conflicting beliefs between two families and dissatisfaction of Sam with such a relationship, rejects his invitation.
III:

The interdiction is violated. (Definition: violation. Designation: Q)

When one of the audiences tells about the beauty and charm of Rudabeh, Zal makes an attempt to visit her in any way possible. This interdiction is also executed for Rudabeh because she sends her maids to Zal to get news from him. Elsewhere, she secretly invites him to a palace away from her father’s harem and talks love with him until morning and they make promises to each other.

Interdiction is also violated by Sam, as he writes a letter to King Manouchehr to get permission for Zal and Rudabeh’s marriage for the sake of his son although he knew King Manouchehr did not agree with this marriage and did not like to have someone from Zahak family in his dynasty. Finally, king Manouchehr violates the interdiction too and after asking some questions from Zal and finding he is smart, agrees with his marrying one of the descendants of Zahak, Rudabeh.

IV:

The villain makes an attempt at Reconnaissance. (Definition: reconnaissance. Designation: V).

V:

The villain receives information about his victim. (Definition: delivery. Designation: W).

VI:

The villain attempts to deceive his victim in order to take possession of him or of his belongings. (Definition: trickery. Designation: J).

VII:

The victim submits to deception and thereby unwillingly helps his enemy. (Definition: complicity. Designation: G).

VIII:

The villain causes harm or injury to a member of a family. (Definition: villainy. Designation: X).

IX:

Misfortune or lack is made known; the hero is approached with a request or command; he is allowed to go or he is dispatched. (Definition: mediation, the connective incident. Designation: y).

At the end of the story, after Zal adores his father again and reminds him of the cruelties he has done to him, asks him to give up his decision (going to Kabul, destroying it and killing the people on the order of King Manouchehr). Eventually, Sam dispatches Zal to the capital city with a letter.

X:

The seeker agrees to or decides upon counteraction. (Definition: beginning counteraction. Designation: w).

Zal heads for the capital with a letter for king Manouchehr and anxiously runs to someone’s home.

XI:

The hero leaves home (Definition: departure. Designation ↑).
XII:
The hero is tested, interrogated, attacked, etc., which prepares the way for his receiving either a magical agent or helper. (Definition: the function of the donor. Designation: D).

XIII:
The hero reacts to the actions of the future donor. (Definition: the hero’s reaction. Designation: H).

XIV:
The hero acquires the use of a magical agent. (Definition: provision or receipt of a magical agent. Designation: Z).

XV:
The hero is transferred, delivered, or led to the whereabouts of an object of search. (Definition: spatial transference between two kingdoms, guidance. Designation: R).

XVI:
The hero and the villain join in direct combat. (Definition: struggle. Designation: L).

XVII:
The hero is marked. (Definition: marking. Designation: M).

XVIII:
The villain is defeated. (Definition: victory. Designation: V).

XIX:
The initial misfortune or lack is liquidated. (Definition: dispose of evil. Designation: K).

Misfortune or initial lack occurs first to Rudabeh, as Mehrab, the governor of Kabul, finds out about Zal and Rudabeh’s love and decides to kill his daughter, but Sindokht, his wife, cleverly prevents him from killing her. The initial misfortune or lack is also liquidated for Mehrab’s family and Kabul, as upon the king’s order to destroy Kabul, Zal says you must first kill Zal, and writes a letter to king Manouchehr by his father and liquidates this great danger.

XX:
The hero returns. (Definition: return. Designation)

In this story, there is another hero in addition to the main hero. Sindokht intelligently liquidates the misfortune. She first saves her daughter’s life and then goes to Sistan, gives Sam many gifts and prevents him from attacking Kabul. She then returns to Kabul and before departure sends a quick messenger to Mehrab as a sign of good news.

XXI:
The hero is pursued. (Definition: pursuit, chase. Designation: P).

XXII:
The hero is rescued from pursuit. (Definition: rescue. Designation: S).
XXII:
The hero, unrecognized, arrives home or in another country. (Definition: unrecognized arrival. Designation: C).

At night, Rudabeh adorns the palace and puts on make-up and waits for her lover to secretly take him to her palace and talk.

XXIV:
A false hero presents unfounded claims. (Definition: unfounded claims. Designation: F).

XXV:
A difficult task is proposed to the hero. (Definition: difficult task. Designation: T).

After Zal arrives at Manouchehr’s palace and asks for permission to marry Rudabeh, the priests examine his wisdom on the order of the king. This part of the story is compatible with the puzzle test of Propp.

Some of the questions and replies are as follow:

Q: What are the twelve strong and happy trees from each a branch is grown without being added or lost?

R: Twelve months of the year and thirty days in each month for Iranians.

Q: What are two valuable and sharp horses, one of which is black and another is white, follow each other and never reach each other?

R: Night and day.

XXVI:
The task is resolved. (Definition: solution. Designation: A).

Finally, Zal get the king’s permission for Rudabeh’s marriage after going through many problems and responding the priests’ questions.

XXVII:
The hero is recognized. (Definition: recognition. Designation: I).

XXVIII:
The false hero or villain is exposed. (Definition: exposure. Designation: DV).

XXIX:
The hero is given a new appearance. (Definition: transfiguration. Designation: Tr).

XXX:
The villain is punished. (Definition: punishment. Designation: Pu).

XXXI:
The hero is married and ascends the throne. (Definition: wedding. Designation: N).
Although Propp has presented six subcategories for the ending part of the story, the hero does not come to throne in this story and only gets married with the king’s daughter.

3. Conclusion

Structural analysis is not an end by itself. On the other hand, this method could disclose some aspects of fictional art that were disregarded in conventional criticism, and create a massive evolution in narratology. Since Propp had selected merely 100 tales of the Russian author, Asanov, to analyze, it seems inefficient to generalize it to the literature of other nations such as Shahnameh and Zal and Rudabeh story, specifically. Some of these deficiencies are mentioned below:

- Lack of attention to motive, attributes and behavior of heroes as well as superficiality of the 31 functions.
- Lack of attention to cultural, religious and social backgrounds and cultural differences of the model with Iranian stories.
- Among Propp’s 31 functions, dream and forecast function is not taken into account, while, this it is an important element in the oriental culture and literature such as Shahnameh and Zal and Rudabeh, specifically.
- Magic is an issue to which Propp has devoted several functions and many subfunctions, whereas, it is lacking in the story discussed in this study.
- Propp argues that sequence of actions is always the same in narratives, but it is not true in the case of this story.
- There are several heroes in this story and in many other stories in Shahnameh (Zal and Sindokht are two main heroes), while Propp has no explanation for this.
- Finally, only 11 functions out of 31 functions of Propp were found in Zal and Rudabeh’s story.

Most of the Propp’s 31 functions were not compatible with stories of Shahnameh, that is most of the functions he had mentioned were not observed in this story, or many fundamental elements of these stories were not contained in Propp’s model. Most of the 31 functions revolve around such similar issues as magic, some of which are mentioned below:

VI:

The villain attempts to deceive his victim in order to take possession of him or of his belongings. (Definition: trickery. Designation: J).

XII:

The hero is tested, interrogated, attacked, etc., which prepares the way for his receiving either a magical agent or helper. (Definition: the function of the donor. Designation: D).

VIII:

The villain causes harm or injury to a member of a family. (Definition: villainy. Designation: X).
However, magic is lacking in the epic section of Shahnameh. In the first part of Shahnameh, the mythological section, since human is in early stages of life and there is little information about it, most of the things have become magical. Magic is a significant element in this era which is depicted in different books, and kings like Siamak, Tahmures and Hushang always challenge it.

In the epic section of Shahnameh, however, human overcomes the hardships of nature, acquires meal and clothing and his main concern is defending his territory and combating the enemies. Therefore, there is no trace of magic except some significant places such as training Zal, Rustam’s seven quests, Simorgh’s assisting Rustam to liquidate Esfandiar or Rustam’s combat with different demons (Div) like Akvan div, Olad, Arjang and white div.

In most of Shahnameh’s stories, there are several heroes and villains; however, Propp only mentions one hero and one villain in his model. This is especially true in the case of the number of heroes such as in Zal and Rudabeh (Rustam and Sindokht), Keyghobad (Rustam and Keyghobad), Rustam and Sohrab (Rustam and Sohrab), Keykhosro (Keykhosro and Giv).

This may be because the 100 tales that Propp had chosen were all myths. Propp based his model on these 100 tales and concluded there were no other actions that the characters of the tale could do. It seems that Propp’s model is a small scale and cannot be generalized to all the tales around the world.

4. Acknowledgment:

This paper is taken from a research project funded by Islamic Azad University, Kermanshah Brach, Kermanshah, Iran.

5. References