

A Thematic Analysis of Sacrifice and Promise-Breaking in the Legend of Lake Toba and *Tsuru no ongaeshi*: A Comparative Literary Study

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Abstract

This study aims to analyze the themes of sacrifice and broken promises in the Indonesian Lake Toba legend and the Japanese story of *Tsuru no ongaeshi* through a comparative literature approach. Both stories share similar motifs: the relationship between humans and non-human creatures transformed into humans, as well as the existence of prohibitions or promises that must not be broken. This study used qualitative methods with thematic analysis techniques to identify and interpret key themes in both texts. The results show that the theme of sacrifice in the Lake Toba legend is manifested through the dedication of female characters in domestic and family life, while in *Tsuru no ongaeshi*, sacrifice emphasizes the concept of moral and spiritual reciprocity. Meanwhile, the broken promise in both stories serves as a turning point that determines the plot. The Lake Toba legend ends with a collective natural disaster, while *Tsuru no ongaeshi* ends with a personal and emotional separation. These differences reflect the differing cultural values between Indonesian and Japanese societies regarding the moral consequences of human actions. Nevertheless, both stories emphasize the importance of maintaining trust and commitment in relationships. This research shows that the themes of sacrifice and broken promises are universal values that are present in various cultures, but are interpreted differently according to their respective social and cultural contexts.

Keywords: *comparative literature, sacrifice, promise breach, folktales*

Introduction

Literature reflects the values that exist and develop within a society. Through literary works, humans express experiences, beliefs, and worldviews passed down from generation to generation. In this context, oral literature, such as legends and folktales, plays a crucial role as a medium for conveying moral and cultural values. According to William R. Bascom (1965), folklore functions as a projection system, a validation of cultural norms, an educational tool, and a means of social control. Therefore, analyzing folklore not only provides aesthetic understanding but also provides insight into the value structure within a society.

The Legend of Lake Toba is a well-known folktale in Indonesia, particularly in the Batak tradition. This story tells of a man named Toba who marries a woman who transforms into a fish on the condition that her identity not be revealed. Conflict arises when this promise is broken, which then leads to the formation of Lake Toba as a consequence. This story not only serves as a geographical origin myth but also contains a strong moral message about the importance of keeping promises and controlling emotions.

On the other hand, the *Tsuru no ongaeshi* story from Japan is also a folk tale that is full of moral values. This story tells of a stork who was saved by a man, then transformed into a woman to return the favor. She weaves beautiful cloth at the expense of her own feathers, with the condition that she should not be seen while weaving. However, the man violated this prohibition, which then caused separation between the two. This story emphasizes the value of reciprocation (*ongaeshi*) and the importance of trust in interpersonal relationships.

Both stories share similarities in narrative structure: a relationship between a human and a non-human creature transformed into a human, as well as a prohibition or promise that must not be broken. When this prohibition is broken, significant consequences arise for the characters. This similarity demonstrates the existence of universal motifs in folklore, which Stith Thompson (1955) calls international motifs, story patterns that appear across cultures with significant variations.

However, despite these similarities, the two stories also exhibit differences that reflect their respective cultural values. In the Lake Toba legend, the broken promise leads to a collective natural disaster, while in *Tsuru no ongaeshi*, the violation results in the loss of a personal relationship. These differences demonstrate that each culture has its own way of interpreting the consequences of human actions.

The themes of sacrifice and broken promises are the primary focus of this study because they are crucial elements that drive the plot and shape the moral message. Sacrifice in both stories demonstrates deep devotion and affection, both within the context of family and social relationships. Meanwhile, the broken promise reflects human weakness that can damage trust and have serious consequences. In literary studies, theme is an essential intrinsic element to analyze because it is directly related to the meaning the author wishes to convey. According to M. H. Abrams (1999), theme is the central idea that underlies the development of a literary work. Therefore, thematic analysis can help uncover hidden messages within a story.

This research uses a comparative literature approach to analyze these two stories. Comparative literature allows researchers to identify similarities and differences between literary works from different cultures and understand how cultural context influences the form and meaning of these works. According to Rene Wellek and Austin Warren (1956), comparative literature not only compares texts but also considers the historical, cultural, and social aspects behind them.

Furthermore, this research is relevant to the development of cross-cultural studies, which are increasingly important in the era of globalization. Increasingly intense intercultural interaction demands a deeper understanding of different cultural values. By comparing the Lake Toba legend and *Tsuru no ongaeshi*, this research is expected to contribute to enriching comparative literature studies, particularly in understanding universal and local values in folklore.

Several previous studies have examined the Lake Toba legend and *Tsuru no ongaeshi* separately, particularly in the context of moral values and narrative structure. However, research specifically comparing these two stories with a focus on the themes of sacrifice and broken promises is relatively limited. Therefore, this study has novelty in comparatively examining these two stories.

Synopsis of the Lake Toba Legend

The legend of Lake Toba tells the story of a young man named Toba who lives as a humble fisherman. One day, he catches a magical fish that transforms into a beautiful woman. They eventually marry under one strict condition: Toba must never reveal his

wife's true origin. Their marriage produces a son who is often disobedient and gluttonous.

At a critical moment, overwhelmed by anger, Toba breaks his promise by calling his son "the child of a fish." This violation triggers a catastrophic consequence: his wife returns to her original form, and a massive flood engulfs the land, ultimately forming Lake Toba.

From a thematic perspective, this legend emphasizes the moral weight of keeping promises and the destructive consequences of breaking them. The element of sacrifice is reflected in the wife's willingness to abandon her original identity to live as a human, a sacrifice that ultimately ends in tragedy due to the husband's failure to uphold his vow.

Synopsis of *Tsuru no ongaeshi*

The Japanese folktale *Tsuru no ongaeshi* centers on a poor man who rescues an injured crane. Shortly afterward, a mysterious woman appears and becomes his wife. She weaves exquisite cloth that improves their economic condition, but she imposes one condition: her husband must never watch her while she is weaving.

As time passes, the husband becomes increasingly curious and pressured by material needs. He eventually breaks his promise and secretly observes her. To his shock, he discovers that his wife is actually the crane he once saved, now plucking out her own feathers to weave the cloth as an act of self-sacrifice. Once her identity is revealed, she leaves him forever.

Thematically, this story highlights sincere sacrifice as a form of gratitude, contrasted with the consequences of broken promises. Unlike the Lake Toba legend, which results in a collective natural disaster, this tale ends in personal loss and emotional regret, underscoring the intimate impact of betrayal.

Based on this background, the research questions are formulated as follows:

- (1) How is the theme of sacrifice represented in the legend of Lake Toba and *Tsuru no ongaeshi*?
- (2) How is the theme of broken promises interpreted in these two stories? and
- (3) What are the similarities and differences in the representation of these two themes in their respective cultural contexts?

The purpose of this study is to analyze and compare the themes of sacrifice and broken promises in these two stories, as well as to uncover the cultural values they contain. Therefore, this research is expected to contribute to the development of comparative literary studies, particularly in the analysis of cross-cultural folktales.

Method

This research uses a qualitative approach with a descriptive-analytical method within the framework of comparative literary studies. The qualitative approach was chosen because this research focuses on the interpretation of meaning and analysis of literary texts, rather than quantitative measurements. According to John W. Creswell (2014), qualitative research aims to understand phenomena in depth through the analysis of narrative data.

The descriptive-analytical method was used to describe and analyze the themes contained in the two stories: the legend of Lake Toba and *Tsuru no ongaeshi*. This method allows the researcher to systematically outline the intrinsic elements of the literary works and then interpret them based on relevant theories.

1. Data Sources

The data sources in this study consist of two types: primary data and secondary data. Primary data consists of the texts of the legends of Lake Toba and *Tsuru no ongaeshi*, obtained from various documented written sources. Meanwhile, secondary data consists of books, scientific journals, and other references relevant to the research topic, particularly those related to literary theory, folklore, and comparative literature.

2. Data Collection Techniques

Data collection techniques were conducted through library research. Researchers collected data by reading, taking notes, and classifying sections of texts related to the themes of sacrifice and broken promises. According to Sugiyono (2017), library research is a data collection technique conducted by reviewing various written sources relevant to the research.

During this process, researchers also selected data deemed most relevant and representative for analysis. The collected data were then grouped into thematic categories to facilitate the analysis process.

3. Data Analysis Technique

Data analysis was conducted using thematic analysis techniques. This technique aims to identify, analyze, and interpret themes that emerge in the text. According to Virginia Braun and Victoria Clarke (2006), thematic analysis is a flexible and effective method for identifying patterns of meaning in qualitative data.

The steps of thematic analysis in this study include:

1. Reading and understanding the text thoroughly.
2. Identifying units of meaning related to the research theme.
3. Grouping data into thematic categories (sacrifice and broken promises).
4. Analyzing the meaning of each category.
5. Comparing findings from both stories.

In addition, the analysis was conducted using a comparative literature approach to identify similarities and differences between the two works. This approach allows researchers to understand how cultural context influences the representation of themes in each story.

4. Data Validity

To maintain data validity, this study used theoretical triangulation techniques, which compare the analysis results with various relevant theories. According to Norman K. Denzin (1978), triangulation is a technique used to increase data validity by utilizing multiple theoretical perspectives.

Furthermore, researchers ensure that the data used comes from credible and academically sound sources. The citations and references used in this study were selected based on their relevance and quality.

5. Data Presentation Technique

The results of the analysis are presented descriptively in a systematic and structured narrative. Data presentation is carried out by integrating the analysis results with the theory used, resulting in a comprehensive interpretation.

By using this method, the research is expected to provide a deeper understanding of the themes of sacrifice and broken promises in the legend of Lake Toba and *Tsuru no ongaeshi*, as well as uncover the cultural values contained therein.

Results

This study analyzes two works of folk literature: the Indonesian legend of Lake Toba and the Japanese story of *Tsuru no ongaeshi*, focusing on two main themes: sacrifice and broken promises. The analysis reveals significant similarities and differences in how the two stories represent moral values, human relationships with other creatures, and the consequences of the characters' actions.

1. Theme of Sacrifice in Both Stories

In the Lake Toba legend, sacrifice is evident through the female character (Toba's wife), who is actually the incarnation of a fish. She is willing to abandon her origins and live as a human in order to build a family with Toba. This sacrifice is existential, as she must hide her true identity and live within the limitations of human nature. This demonstrates that sacrifice is made for the sake of love and the survival of the family.

Furthermore, sacrifice is also evident in the wife's patience in dealing with her husband's actions. She continues to fulfill her role as wife and mother despite being in a vulnerable position. However, this sacrifice has its limits, namely when the agreed-upon promise is broken.

Meanwhile, in *Tsuru no ongaeshi*, sacrifice is depicted by a crane transforming into a human to repay the kindness of a man who helped her. She creates beautiful woven cloth by plucking out her own feathers. This sacrifice is physical and repetitive, as it is repeated until her body weakens.

Sacrifice in this Japanese story emphasizes the concept of reciprocity (*ongaeshi*), the moral obligation to repay kindness received. As Ruth Benedict (1946) points out, Japanese culture highly values the value of debt of gratitude (*giri*) as part of social ethics.

2. The Theme of Promise Breaking

The theme of promise breaking is a major turning point in both stories. In the Lake Toba legend, Toba promises not to reveal his wife's identity as a fish. However, in a fit of anger, he breaks this promise by calling his son "fish boy." This violation triggers a major disaster, resulting in the formation of Lake Toba.

The promise breaking in this story demonstrates that words have performative power that can have real consequences. As J. L. Austin (1962) points out, certain utterances not only convey information but also initiate actions.

In *Tsuru no ongaeshi*, the promise breaking occurs when the man peeps at his wife while she is weaving, despite being told not to. Curiosity and mistrust drive him to break his promise. As a result, the crane reveals its true identity and leaves the man forever.

Unlike the Lake Toba legend, which ends in a natural disaster, the promise breaking in the Japanese story results in the loss of an emotional connection. This demonstrates the differences in how the two cultures interpret the consequences of moral transgression.

3. Representation of the Relationship between Humans and Other Creatures

Both stories depict the relationship between humans and non-human creatures (fish and cranes) that transform into humans. In the Lake Toba legend, this relationship is domestic and family-oriented. Meanwhile, in *Tsuru no ongaeshi*, the relationship is more symbolic and spiritual.

According to Claude Lévi-Strauss (1963), myths often reflect the structure of human thought in understanding the relationship between nature and culture. In this context, both stories demonstrate how humans interact with the "other" and how the boundaries between the two can be transgressed.

4. Moral Consequences

The analysis shows that both stories emphasize the importance of keeping promises as a primary moral value. Breaking promises impacts not only the individual but also the environment and social relationships.

In the Lake Toba legend, the consequences are collective and cosmic, while in *Tsuru no ongaeshi*, the consequences are more personal and emotional. This difference reflects differing cultural values regarding responsibility and the consequences of human actions.

Discussion

A thematic analysis of the Lake Toba legend and *Tsuru no ongaeshi* shows that both stories share a similar narrative structure, but are built on distinct cultural value systems. The themes of sacrifice and broken promises are central to the narrative, driving the conflict and resolution in both stories.

1. Sacrifice as a Universal and Cultural Value

Sacrifice in both stories can be understood as a universal value present across cultures. However, its form and meaning are strongly influenced by the respective cultural contexts. In the Lake Toba legend, sacrifice is more closely linked to women's roles within the family. The wife character demonstrates loyalty, patience, and devotion as part of her identity.

This aligns with Simone de Beauvoir's (1949) view that women in many traditional narratives are often positioned as "the Other" whose function is to support men. The female sacrifice in this story reflects the construction of gender within a patriarchal society.

In contrast, in *Tsuru no ongaeshi*, sacrifice is not only linked to gender but also to the moral value of reciprocity. The crane character makes the sacrifice as a form of moral responsibility for the kindness she receives. This concept is closely related to Japanese culture, which emphasizes social harmony and moral obligation.

According to Takeo Doi (1973), the concepts of *amae* (emotional dependence) and *giri* (social obligation) are fundamental to interpersonal relationships in Japan. The sacrifices in these stories reflect these values.

2. Promise Breaking as Moral Critique

The promise breaking in both stories serves as a critique of human weaknesses, particularly in terms of emotion and curiosity. In the Lake Toba legend, the promise breaking occurs out of anger, while in *Tsuru no ongaeshi*, it occurs out of curiosity.

According to Sigmund Freud (1923), human actions are often influenced by unconscious impulses that are not always rational. In this context, promise breaking can be understood as a manifestation of the characters' internal conflicts.

However, both stories also demonstrate that promise breaking is unjustifiable, regardless of the reason. The consequences serve as a form of moral punishment, emphasizing the importance of integrity and trust.

3. Comparative Literature Perspective

In comparative literature studies, these two stories demonstrate a common motif known as the "international motif." According to Stith Thompson (1955), motifs such as creatures transforming into humans and unbreakable prohibitions are common themes found in folklore across cultures.

However, despite these shared motifs, each culture provides a different interpretation. In the Lake Toba legend, the breaking of a promise results in a geographical change (the lake), while in *Tsuru no ongaeshi*, the breaking of a promise results in the loss of a relationship.

These differences demonstrate that literature reflects not only universal human experiences but also the specific values of particular societies.

4. Symbolic and Philosophical Meaning

Symbolically, the sacrifice in both stories can be interpreted as a form of transcendence, namely an attempt to go beyond oneself for the sake of others. However, the breaking of a promise demonstrates the limits of such sacrifice. When trust is violated, relationships cannot be maintained.

According to Paul Ricoeur (1984), narratives have the ability to shape human understanding of time, action, and identity. In this regard, both stories teach that human actions have long-term consequences that cannot always be rectified.

5. Relevance to Modern Life

The themes of sacrifice and broken promises remain relevant in modern life. In the context of interpersonal relationships, trust is the primary foundation that determines the continuity of a relationship. Any breach of trust, no matter how small, can have significant consequences.

These two stories provide powerful moral lessons about the importance of keeping commitments and appreciating the sacrifices of others. In an increasingly complex world, these values are becoming increasingly important to uphold.

Beyond serving as moral critiques of the characters' actions, the broken promises in the Lake Toba legend and *Tsuru no ongaeshi* can also be understood as profound reflections on the ethical dimension of human relationships. Both stories place trust as the primary foundation for building relationships, both within a family context and in reciprocal relationships between individuals. When that trust is violated, the relationship, built through sacrifice, loses its meaning and becomes unsustainable.

In the Lake Toba legend, the broken promise committed by the male character not only impacts the personal relationship between husband and wife but also disrupts the broader order. This demonstrates that, in the local cultural context, promises are not merely personal agreements but have social and even cosmic implications. When promises are broken, the resulting imbalance is felt not only by the individual but also by the surrounding environment, which in this story is manifested through natural disasters. Thus, the broken promise is seen as a violation of the harmony between humans and nature.

Conversely, in *Tsuru no ongaeshi*, the broken promise emphasizes the individual ethical dimension related to self-control and respect for agreed-upon boundaries. The curiosity that drives the male character to spy on his wife reflects human weakness in maintaining moral integrity. From an ethical perspective, these actions demonstrate a failure to honor the trust placed in them by others. As Immanuel Kant argued, keeping promises is a moral obligation that must be fulfilled regardless of personal consequences.

Furthermore, these two stories emphasize that the sacrifices made by the female characters are worthless if not balanced by commitment and responsibility from the other party. Sacrifice and trust are two complementary aspects in building harmonious

relationships. When either aspect is neglected, the relationship will experience irreparable damage.

Thus, through a comparative literature approach, it can be understood that these two stories convey not only local moral values but also universal ethical messages. These values remain relevant in modern life, particularly in the context of interpersonal relationships that demand trust, commitment, and moral responsibility.

Conclusion

Based on the results and discussion, it can be concluded that the Lake Toba legend and *Tsuru no ongaeshi* share similarities and differences in their representation of the themes of sacrifice and broken promises. Both stories demonstrate that sacrifice is a form of devotion born of emotional bonds, both within a family context and in social relationships, based on a sense of reciprocity.

In the Lake Toba legend, sacrifice is depicted through the role of a female character who devotes herself to domestic life, while in *Tsuru no ongaeshi*, sacrifice is more physical and is undertaken as a form of moral responsibility for the kindness received. This demonstrates the difference in value orientations between the two cultures: the Lake Toba legend emphasizes domestic and family values, while the Japanese story emphasizes social ethics and reciprocity.

Furthermore, the broken promise in both stories is a major factor in causing conflict and determining the story's ending. In the Lake Toba legend, the broken promise leads to a widespread natural disaster, while in *Tsuru no ongaeshi*, the breach leads to the severance of relationships between the characters. These differences reflect how each culture interprets moral consequences, both collectively and individually.

Overall, this research shows that despite originating from different cultural backgrounds, both stories share universal values, namely the importance of maintaining trust and valuing sacrifice. Therefore, comparative literary studies are important for understanding the similarities and differences in cultural values in literary works, as well as for enriching cross-cultural insights in literary studies.

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