

The Wise Crone: The Two-Faced Archetypes in Global Folk Horror and Comparative Literature

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ABSTRACT

The research objects of this study are three old-woman folk narrative motifs from different cultural backgrounds, namely Nenek Kebayan of Malaysian folk narrative, Shanlao (Yamamba/Yamauba) from Japanese folk narrative and Baba Yaga from Russian folk narrative. It claims that, despite their cultural differences across regions, the three are a universal “dual-sided” type: they all appear as weak and marginalised grandmothers but are actually benevolent, wise, nurturing guardians and forest monsters that eat people. This feigned exterior is used to evaluate the moral, humble, and inner nature of visitors who cross its threshold. There are two types of functions for this double-sided archetype. On the other hand, it is a wisdom archetype and a social-political distributor, a saviour of narratives; it can enable supernatural marriages, set political borders, and empower legendary heroes (Reider, 2019; Putih & Said, 2007). However, it can be portrayed as an evil entity hiding in the woods and forests that pulls scoffing or insolent people off the road. If misguided people do fall into this way, they should be left behind as punishment for their rudeness and insolence (Ekmekçi, 2022).

The study employs a comparative literature research approach. It uses the Structurally Uncanny Haunted House Framework (SUHHF), developed by Yusof (2019), to analyse the architectural logic of haunted-house horror scenes in film and television (TV). It applies it to the three supernaturally controlled spaces in this study: the canopy of the tropical rainforest in Malaysia, the isolated mountain peak in Japan, and the hut with legs in Russia. The three core analytical dimensions mentioned in SUHHF respectively relate to the inner characteristics of the older women's territories, the physical and psychological elements of transition that cause transgressors to become lost, and to the fearsome secret spaces to which the older women's lairs lead (Comaroff & Ker-Shing, 2013). The ultimate goal of this study is to increase cross-cultural understanding of this grandmother archetype and to illustrate the enduring human fear of wild women in our world, as well as the lethal impact of violating nature, throughout literature, regardless of cultural differences (Aldana Reyes, 2016).

INTRODUCTION

Apparently, universal horror and folklore are evergreen genres that cross generational interests – perhaps tapping into basic fears that resonate in the collective psyche. Preserved oral stories, literature, and later film and television retellings all share themes of fear that often reflect common human fears. In 2016, Xavier Aldana Reyes traced the Latin origins of the term “horror”. He revealed its basic narrative functions, thereby allowing the development of a clear conceptual framework for studying the cultural characteristics of this type of narrative. However, once again, it is important to note that there is a difference between the horror character of folk horror and that of old Literature: folk horror characters are not solely for sensory shock. Instead, they are elaborate cultural markings and taboos that convey complex sociocultural messages and considerations. The experiences of the societies they came from are woven into their stories, in which they then implicitly serve as moral guardians.

In the local art and literary sphere, there is already considerable research and discussion on two notable historical figures featured in local horror stories: Pontianak and Langsuir. However, the discussion of the primary object of study in this paper, Nenek Kebayan, an exceptionally placed woman of great wisdom in Malay folklore, should be more cross-cultural. The number is interculturally archetypally associated with witches in the West, Yamamba (Japan), and Baba Yaga (Russia), as noted by Osman (2020). The three key research considerations/activities for this paper are analysing, closely and carefully, the differences and similarities between the roles of these three types of archetypes within their respective cultural contexts, and investigating in depth the dual social role played by each of these types of archetypes. In this work, no single symbolic interpretation of these figures is accepted; rather, the complexity of their signifying logic emerges from their original sociocultural context. This study began with an intent to find solutions to cross-cultural dilemmas with an overall approach and comparison analysis method, as well as using the only provided SUHMF method to look at three core aspects, and to examine the logic behind the target image “occupying its habitat” and “punishing intruders” (Yusof & Osman, 2020).

LITERATURE REVIEW

Malay legends consider the supernatural being Nenek Kebayan one of the most important figures in Malay life, agriculture, and folklore. It has often been applied to explain traditional Malay society. The Malays were always subject to the vast, undeveloped natural environment, which shaped their struggles throughout history. In pre-colonial and colonial times, they sought spiritual protection through animism to keep the land and possessions close. In today's popular lore, the Nenek Kebayan is a demon, but in the past, he played an essential role in sustaining ecological zones and balancing social order. The traditional definition by classic academics Per Othman Putih and Aripin Said (2007, p. 20) can be applied in defining her traditional scenario of appearance, along with the various social roles she has in classic legends which can be broken down into warner, traditional role, healer, child counsellor, community elder and the bridge that connects the mortal world and the God realm apart from the *kayangan*. Field observations by anthropologist Peletz (1996, p. 370) show the evolution of this figure's archetype in the modern post-colonial world—from a guardian-spirit archetype to one that may align with the shadow archetype in Jungian personality theory.

Today, cases of possession by spirits that are attached to the figure ‘Nenek Harimau’ have continued to happen, including the consistent media attention that mainstream contemporary media receives for the figure, which may be attributed to her persistent oppression of rigidified patriarchal orders throughout the history of the colonised society. To avoid misinterpretations of traditional analysis that is often isolated, parallels and similarities with other types of folklore throughout the world are laid out in light of this figure's entire history, from traditional to contemporary statements. Nenek Kebayan and Baba Yaga, as more or less geographically remote supernatural beings, are compared in terms of their similarities and differences (Johns, 2004). The witch image, as found in cross-cultural folk literature, when conveyed through public discourse, is reduced to a purely evil, limited aspect. This stereotype is, however, undermined by their respective images of the Russian and Russian-Japanese witches, which are different stories altogether and demonstrate their moral ambivalence (Reider, 2021).

In the Russian folktale, Baba Yaga, a multi-layered, ambiguous, and otherworldly figure gifted with magical powers, was a “wanting to play the hero” (Propp, 1968, p. 323) who posed challenges to the hero that, when overcome, yielded magic. The Yamamba, for her part, is also caught up in a dualistic cultural definition; she is on the one hand a caring nurturer who raised the hero known as Kintarō who served the demon Minamoto no Raikō, and, on the other hand, a man-eating witch, as exists in folk tale and in Noh theatre, who eats the trespasser who enters forbidden ground (Reider, 2019; Copeland & Ehrlich, 2021). These figures of fear can better be understood when juxtaposed with the neighbouring cross-culturalism of the Malay Nenek Kebayan. The commonality among their various forms of ambiguity lies in their basic cultural features.

METHODOLOGY

The methodology used in this research is qualitative, employing a Comparative Literature approach to align with a cross-cultural study and enhance methodological clarity. The three figures were chosen for the distinctiveness of their cultural spheres (Southeast Asian, Japanese, and Eastern European) and because they developed this folkloristic character independently, leading to the emergence of the OAFP, an old forest woman with nurturing

and punitive powers. Primary literary and folkloric sources used for this comparative analysis are traditional Malay epics (romantic tales such as Hikayat Malim Deman and Hikayat Inderaputera) for Nenek Kebayan; classical Noh theatre scripts; and existing regional collections of folktales, including Yamamba and Baba Yaga. To investigate how these three figures affected spatial control and performed their dual functions, their narrative behaviours and spatial domains were directly mapped onto the three dimensions of the SUHHF.

Theoretical Framework

This study combines these different cultural scripts through comparative analysis and situates them within the context of the Structurally Uncanny Haunted House Framework (SUHHF). Ahmad Muhyiddin B Yusof (2019) is the first to attempt to analyse the architectural aspects of the physical haunted house in film and television productions, and the haunting effect on those who enter it. The theoretical base is taken from the concept of horror architecture put forward by Joshua Comaroff and Ong Ker-Shing in their 2013 book. This study clearly shows the high level of justification given for this transfer, from physical haunted architecture to literary wilderness spaces. Wilderness spaces in folklore are indeed defined through architecture. The privy forest land of the crone, containing wild natural features, is mapped directly onto the oppressive corridors, locked doors, and secret rooms of a constructed haunted house. The crone plays with the natural surroundings to create a psychological and physical trap similar to that of a haunted building. This study explores the three fundamental aspects of the SUHHF:

The Surmounted Corpse

This dimension examines an oppositional relationship between the landscape and the atmosphere of a haunted place. It now also encompasses "architectural incursion" – with notions of abandonment, natural decay, and the melding of old and new rules. In this study, this aspect is given the more restricted form of the wilderness as a fortress to exclude the other.

The Hazardous Transition

The second dimension, "The Hazardous Transition", relates to the logic of that perception, transition seen as an opportunity for spirit-wielding spells in spaces. In the literary context, the physical thresholds of the original are adapted to symbolise the paths which must fade away, and the tree lines and misleading terrain the crone uses to entice the travellers who wander her path.

The Trojan Compartment

The third dimension, the "Trojan Compartment," is structurally deceptive: look at it superficially, and it seems innocuous, but horrors lurk, suppressed somewhere. In this study, this dimension is applied to the exterior appearance of the crone's cabin or the inner sanctum of her cave.

Analysis

The Crone's Nature Of Archetype

Through a cross-cultural approach, a core analysis of the three classical archetypes: Nenek Kebayan (Malay culture), Yamamba (Japanese folklore), and Baba Yaga (Slavic culture) is completed. First, it provides an in-depth examination of some shared traits, such as being older women who are excommunicated or who live apart from the secular world — i.e., the social order of ordinary life. Baba Yaga, a mobile thatched hut on fowl's legs, lives in the Russian wilderness (Reider, 2010), Nenek Kebayan eats in the perimeter of mangrove forests of the Malay Archipelago, and Yamamba lives in the bottom of mountains and thick forests over the Japanese Archipelago. They have unique abilities that do not conform to the world's rules and are usually at odds with conventional societal norms.

The study also brings to the fore the cultural and religious frameworks that inform each archetype. Nenek Kebayan is a personified expression of the spiritual force of the woods, a fusion of animist and Islamic beliefs. The yamamba is a tribute to Japanese Shinto practice, with the mountain embodying nature's qualities of giving

and taking. Baba Yaga is situated at the crossroads of Slavic polytheism and Eastern Orthodoxy, serving as a magical tester and a deadly robber. These are not the one-dimensional, mean, ugly, monstrous characters people think of when they think of them – the stereotypical villains – but rather wisdom archetypes who embody the collective memory of the civilisations they represent. Often, they are not plots that activate key characters' motivations to drive key character arcs, nor are they instances of saving key characters from dire predicaments in the source plots. The most vital element in this is the idea of the Crone as one of the wise Archetypes.

Using Nenek Kebayan as a key site for comparative analysis, this exploratory examination of the functioning of the composite narrative of the wise older woman uncovers its cross-cultural operations. Nenek Kebayan is a guardian of the forest, testing visitors' determination. In myth, she presents incomprehensible dowry conditions, a gold-and-silver bridge, for instance, or a tray of mosquito hearts, setting her apart from the conquests of human empires but placing her firmly in the realm of holiness of nature. She is also a goddess, saved from a traditional Malay romantic story (*cerita penglipur lara*). She gives magical knowledge to the beautiful fairy called Hikayat Malim Deman and Hikayat Inderaputera, so that the fairy could marry the mortal prince.

In the same way, Yamamba takes Kintarō in, hiding from him the food she sources in the mountains, feeding him the necessary knowledge, and helping him connect the wilderness with the samurai court (Copeland & Reider, N.d.). Vasilisa the Beautiful is rewarded for her efforts by Baba Yaga, who hands her a glowing skull through which she can send her wicked stepmother and stepfather to their just retribution; Baba Yaga is the retributive agent. The three figures all have the combined interests of “tester,” “Caregiver,” and “Promoter of order”, making this view of the basic storyline-narrative value of the cross-cultural figure valid.

The Archetype of The Punisher Is the Crone

On the other hand, all three forest-crone types share the thematic function “threat in the forest.” Their job is to keep an eye out for violations of forest taboos and to act as forest umpires, each having forest-relevant supernatural powers: flight, invisibility, summoning storms, and causing illness. Rudeness, arrogance, greed or the physiologically taboo behaviour of a transgressor will trigger punishment.

Baba Yaga is punished when travellers do not pay attention to his needs or ask him for help without being polite. As she cooks and eats the transgressors, she hangs up the skulls of the transgressors on her fence as a concrete deterrent to enforce discipline in the forest. Nenek Kebayan punishes travellers who make noise, behave badly, or use jungle resources without paying (Yusof & Osman, 2020). With the thick jungle canopy, she disorients her victims' sense of orientation and uses games to isolate them, leaving them exhausted or mad psychologically. Yamamba punishes the greedy merchants, braggart hunters and the arrogant samurai. Impersonating a seemingly harmless older woman in the cover of mountain storms, she brings her secret weapons into play. When the traveller is rude, or when she spies into rooms that she is not supposed to see, she reroutes her into the deadly canyons or evolves into a man-eating monster and eats her (Ekmekeçi, 2022).

Suhhf Analysis: The Crone's Total Spatial Dominance

Archetype	Cultural Context	Nurturing/Wisdom Function	Punitive Function	Spatial Domain	SUHHF Dimension Focus
Nenek Kebayan	Malay / SE Asia	Healer, matchmaker, magical guide to heroes	Confuses and psychologically isolates transgressors	Edges of mangrove and tropical rainforests	Hazardous Transition (fading paths, voices)
Yamamba	Japanese / Honshu	Raises heroes, provides gifts of the mountain	Devours greedy or arrogant travellers	Deep, mist-veiled mountain ranges	Trojan Compartment (deceptive shelter)

Baba Yaga	Slavic / E. Europe	Bestows magical justice and mystical gifts	Boils/eats rude intruders; uses skulls as warnings	Deep birch forests; hut on fowl's legs	Surmounted Corpse (hut actively patrols)
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Suhhf Analysis: The Crone's Total Spatial Dominance

To clarify the dual functions of the crone in cross-cultural folktales, this paper rigorously applies the Structurally Uncanny Haunted House Framework (SUHHF) (Yusof, 2019). The main argument is that such witches tend to demonstrate their working practice by creating haunted architecture, making nature the medium of their art and using concepts reflected in the theory of architectural horror (Comaroff & Ker-Shing, 2013). This paper will contend that these crones do not rely on the corporeality of conventional Gothic houses for horror; rather, they assemble centres of power that are beyond the reach of the masses in far-flung natural sites. Territorialization manifests as distinctive geographical signs of settlements: Baba Yaga's mobile hut by Johns (2004); Yamamba's mountain caves by Reider (2010); and Nenek Kebayan's thick mangroves by Osman (2020). Whether or not the crone is present, it is an architectural element that intrudes on the natural environment.

The Hazardous Transition Analysis

This is a focus-based study that uses technology to analyse the transitory space in forests and the use of transition space by drones for punishment (Yusof, 2019). Baba Yaga flies around in the mortar and wipes over her footprints with a broom. At the same time, Nenek Kebayan uses quiet voices and exciting whispers (Yusof & Osman, 2020), tempting victims to act in line with their morals before leading them into a non-standard space (Kusaksri, 2016). To distract victims away from safe routes, Yamamba takes advantage of the commonalities between day-night transitions and the dim light of a mountain (Copeland & Ehrlich, 2021). The psychological shift from the village to the deep forest is a perfect application of the rules of the SUHHF, whereby any space is used to punish boundary-crossing. The dimension points to a welcoming exterior that leads into the horror: the hidden areas of the crone seem inviting, but there is no such thing on the inside (Comaroff & Ker-Shing, 2013). The cabins and the caverns in the mountains are actually quite rustic, but have a deeper, darker and more monstrous side (Reider, 2021). These concealed areas produce the leakage effect, the essence of haunted space, which can cause deep psychological terror. As an archetype, space commands by using the forest, which exists outside social order, as its starting point (Peletz, 1996). The idea of the crone is one of the basic subjects of comparative research in the field of folk literature. A systematic review shows that geographical fragmentation has historically restricted studies on this archetype. Slavic academics often use structuralism to provide an equal explanation of Baba Yaga as a 'psychological' "gatekeeper" within Russian culture (Johns, 2004). In recent years, the Japanese have rethought Yamamba as a symbol of female resistance to the post-war patriarchal systems (Reider, 2010; 2021). In the past, Nepak Nabi Kebayan was limited to reaching regional geographical areas in Southeast Asian studies (Osman, 2020). This deadlock was overcome and broken by the presentation by the scholar Ahmad Muhyiddin B Yusof of the SUHHF (Yusof, 2019). This structure provides a new way to compare behaviour across regions that are not haunted houses; it can, all the same, be said to adhere to the universal rules of the haunted house. Imports the Southeast Asia archetype into the dominant research on "the wild woman" culture around the world. This is often stated in general terms: a traditional patriarchal society lays a strict value discipline on women; frequently, it is said that all patriarchal societies mandate women to be dependent (as a fundamental precondition of ruling orders, Peletz, 1996), and this generality has to be nuanced by observing the dualistic nature of the crone. This study reveals that she serves as both a shadow projection of patriarchal hostility and a preserved wisdom archetype, with her staying power as an archetype due to the polar opposite of her role. In Jungian analysis, she is frequently considered and described as a projection of the patriarchal voice; however, here she also appears as a preserved wisdom archetype because of her polar opposite.

She breaks those who defy the boundaries with the dangerous transition mechanic. There is a need to outline future research directions and introduce ecological Gothic theory within SUHHF to explore how this archetype is being transformed by the removal of original wildernesses due to deforestation and urbanisation. Second, extending SUHHF to digital media and video games would allow us to explore the digitalisation of this archetype. Meanwhile, the concept of hazardous transition mechanics and the compartments of the "Trojan" have been embedded in the logic of survival horror games (Yusof & Osman, 2020), features that scholars can study in

contemporary digital spaces. The comparison of other cultural areas around the world, based on the SUHHF, leads to a discussion of a methodology in folkloric analysis. The boundaries of the wilderness should not only be seen as geological foregrounds, but spaces architecturally engaged, a condition for which future scholarship should take into account. The application of this method introduces the continuity of the deep tropical mangroves of the Malay Peninsula, the misty mountains of Honshu, and the birch forests of Slavic lands into a coordinated constructional structure. The crone's realm, then, is not a microcosmic aberration but one that has been “manufactured” to become a space of moral justice, a space of territorialization.

CONCLUSION

This study combines layered comparative analysis with the subjects: Nenek Kebayan from Malaysia, Yamamba from Japan, and Baba Yaga from Russia. The assessment is that, although they have differing cultural features, each is part of a structurally combined, arbitrary contact with the archetype. They are symbols of overturned culture in geographically distant places, embodying two roles: As wisdom archetypes, these beggars and mages serve as culture-keepers existing in the border zones between death and God (Reider, 2019); as poisons, they expose the sinfulness of greed and pride along with the deviant booty they carry for the wayfarer (Ekmekçi, 2022).

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