

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background of the Study

Moral values such as kindness and sacrifice have been foundational pillars of human societies for centuries. These values reflect essential aspects of human nature: empathy, compassion, and altruism that enable individuals to live harmoniously in communities. In ancient societies, moral codes were often passed down through oral traditions, legends, and folk stories, which served both to entertain and to educate. The consistent presence of these values across cultures and eras underscores their timeless significance. However, in the modern era, marked by rapid technological development, economic competition, and increased individualism, such values are often obscured by material concerns and personal ambition. This transformation calls for a renewed exploration of traditional narratives that illuminate the enduring relevance of moral ideals such as kindness and sacrifice (Zipes, 2020).

One of the most effective ways societies have preserved and transmitted these values is through folklore. Folktales, as a branch of oral literature, are narratives rooted in the traditions and collective experiences of a community. They are typically told and retold across generations and reflect the shared beliefs, fears, aspirations, and ethics of a people. According to Brunvand (1998), folklore acts as a cultural repository, a mirror that reflects the moral framework of a society. In this context, folktales become an important source for analyzing how values like kindness and sacrifice are constructed, communicated, and perpetuated within a particular cultural system.

According to Song (2017), Korean folktales are primarily transmitted orally and deeply reflect cultural beliefs, identity, traditions, and social customs, offering a rich corpus for the analysis of moral and metaphysical teachings. These narratives—shaped by Confucian ethics, Buddhist spirituality, and indigenous animistic beliefs—emphasize values like filial piety (hyo), loyalty, sincerity, karma, and rebirth. Classic tales such as *The Story of Sim Cheong*, *Heungbu and Nolbu*,

and *The Tiger and the Dried Persimmon* vividly illustrate these virtues through their storytelling structure, rich symbolism, and clear moral resolution.

In *The Story of Sim Cheong*, the eponymous protagonist sacrifices herself for her blind father by jumping into the sea as an offering to the Dragon King. Her act of selflessness ultimately results in her father's sight being restored and her rebirth as a queen, an outcome that reinforces the moral message that virtue, especially when rooted in filial love, leads to eventual reward. Similarly, in *Heungbu and Nolbu*, the kind-hearted Heungbu is rewarded for his compassion toward an injured swallow, while his greedy brother Nolbu is punished for his selfishness. This tale illustrates the virtue of genuine kindness and the idea of moral reciprocity. Meanwhile, *The Tiger and the Dried Persimmon* employ humor and irony to expose the folly of arrogance and the irrational nature of fear, highlighting the importance of humility and awareness as moral values.

Despite the profound moral substance of these stories, scholarly attention has often been limited to general discussions on Confucian or Buddhist teachings, or broad examinations of narrative structure and archetype. Many studies, such as those by Cho & Han (2020), Ryu (2019), and Lee & Park (2017), have examined the cultural significance of Korean folktales, but often without a detailed thematic focus on specific values such as kindness and sacrifice. This leaves a theoretical gap in understanding how these values are expressed through literary techniques such as character development, plot progression, and symbolism. Moreover, there is a practical gap in recognizing the relevance of these stories in contemporary discourse, where traditional moral clarity is frequently replaced by ethical relativism.

According Sherry Turkle (2011), today's globalized and hyper-mediated environment has contributed to a shift in moral perception. Young generations are more likely to be influenced by mass media, social platforms, and popular culture, which often present ethically ambiguous characters and outcomes. These influences can erode the clarity and strength of traditional moral teachings. Popular culture tends to valorize individual success, autonomy, and self-interest, sometimes at the expense of communal responsibility and ethical reflection. In contrast, traditional

folktales offer narratives that emphasize communal well-being, sacrifice for others, and the intrinsic value of kindness. These tales carry the potential to reconnect individuals with values that have historically sustained human relationships and social balance.

According to Narvaez (2016), the increasing dominance of individualistic and media-driven culture has weakened the transmission of traditional moral values among younger generations. From personal observation and informal discussion, it is evident that many young individuals today are unfamiliar with the moral richness embedded in traditional narratives. Instead of engaging with stories that promote altruism and community, they are often drawn to narratives that celebrate self-assertion, competition, and personal triumph. This trend creates a cultural disconnect—a growing distance from the values that once formed the ethical foundation of society. In such a context, revisiting traditional folktales becomes not merely an act of cultural preservation but a moral necessity.

The study of kindness and sacrifice in Korean folktales is therefore both timely and culturally significant. As Brunvand (1998) emphasizes, folktales serve as cultural repositories that reflect and transmit the moral framework of societies, providing insight into the ethical imagination and collective values of past communities. By exploring how these values are embedded in traditional stories, we gain insight into the moral imagination of past societies and the narrative strategies used to cultivate ethical sensibilities. Such an analysis can deepen our understanding of the role of folklore in moral formation and cultural continuity. It can also highlight the relevance of these values in addressing contemporary issues such as social alienation, ethical confusion, and the erosion of empathy.

Thus, this research seeks to analyze how selected Korean folktales construct and emphasize the values of kindness and sacrifice. Through literary and cultural analysis, this study aims to reveal the enduring power of these stories in shaping ethical consciousness and promoting communal values. By examining the specific narrative and symbolic mechanisms employed in the tales, the research contributes to a deeper appreciation of folklore as both a literary form and a moral compass for society.

1.2 Statement of the Problem

This study seeks to answer the following questions:

1. How are the values of kindness and sacrifice portrayed in selected Korean folktales?
2. What cultural and ethical insights do these Korean folktales reveal about societal ideals and human relationships?

1.3 Purpose of the Study

The purposes of this research are to:

1. Analyze the portrayal of kindness and sacrifice in selected Korean folktales.
2. Explore the cultural and literary significance of these values in Korean traditional storytelling.

1.4 Significance of the Study

This study is significant because it applies Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs to interpret the values of kindness and sacrifice in selected Korean folktales. Unlike traditional moral analysis, this approach explores how characters' actions reflect psychological motivations—ranging from love and belonging to self-actualization and self-transcendence (Maslow, 1970). For instance, Heungbu's kindness represents emotional and social fulfillment, while Sim Cheong's sacrifice illustrates a higher moral commitment rooted in transcendent purpose.

By linking literary analysis with psychological theory, this research offers a fresh perspective on character development in folklore. It contributes to both literary and psychological scholarship by showing how traditional narratives reflect the stages of human growth and ethical decision-making. Moreover, this approach highlights folktales as not only cultural artifacts but also as reflections of universal human needs and values.

1.5 Methodology of the Study

This study employs a descriptive qualitative method to explore the representation of kindness and sacrifice in selected Korean folktales. The

qualitative approach enables an in-depth interpretation of literary aspects, including character development, narrative structure, and symbolism.

The primary data in this research consist of three Korean folktales: *The Story of Sim Cheong*, *Heungbu and Nolbu*, and *The Tiger and the Dried Persimmon*. These texts are analyzed to identify how the values of kindness and sacrifice are represented through plot progression, moral lessons, and character actions.

In conducting the analysis, the study applies theoretical frameworks approach using Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs theory. These theory helps explain the manifestation of moral values and narrative functions within the stories. Secondary sources, such as journal articles and books on Korean folklore and moral education, provide supporting insights to strengthen the interpretation. The study does not involve fieldwork or survey methods, focusing solely on textual analysis to maintain a literary and cultural perspective.

1.6 Scope and Limitation of the Study

This study will analyze the values of kindness and sacrifice using Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs as the theoretical framework. The analysis focuses on three selected Korean folktales: *The Story of Sim Cheong*, *Heungbu and Nolbu*, and *The Tiger and the Dried Persimmon*. It examines how these values are expressed through literary elements such as characterization, plot, and symbolism.

The scope of this study is limited to textual analysis and does not include aspects such as oral performance, cultural variations, or modern adaptations. Since this is a qualitative literary study, the findings are interpretative rather than generalizable (Creswell, 2013; Ratna, 2004). Additionally, the focus on only three folktales means the results may not capture the full spectrum of moral values present in all Korean folklore.

1.7 Status of the Study

This study is situated within the broader context of research on Korean folklore and moral values. Previous studies have examined moral lessons in folktales—such as Ryu (2019) discussing filial piety and communal harmony, Cho and Han (2020)

exploring honesty and perseverance, and Lee and Park (2017) analyzing ethical symbolism in oral narratives. However, these studies typically adopt a broad or descriptive perspective and do not engage in thematic, psychological analysis of specific values.

In contrast, this research offers a distinct contribution by specifically analyzing kindness and sacrifice as core themes within select Korean folktales (Sim Cheong, Heungbu and Nolbu, The Tiger and the Dried Persimmon). It applies Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs to explore how these moral values are conceptually constructed, offering a theory-based literary approach that has not been emphasized in prior studies.

1.8 Organization of the Study

This study consists of four chapters, each of which is outlined as follows:

Chapter I presents the introduction, providing the background and rationale for conducting this research. It helps the reader understand the reasons for selecting the topic, the formulated research problems, and the objectives of the study. This chapter includes the background of the study, statement of the problem, purpose of the study, significance of the study, methodology, scope and limitation of the study, status of the study, and organization of the study.

Chapter II contains the review of related literature, which explains the relevant theories, concepts, and previous studies related to Korean folktales, moral values, kindness, and sacrifice.

Chapter III provides the analysis and discussion, which is the core of the research.

Chapter IV draws the conclusions based on the findings discussed in the previous chapter. This chapter summarizes the key points of the analysis and offers suggestions for future research related to Korean folklore and moral education.