

An Analysis of The Actantial Model in The *Avatar: The Last Airbender* (2024) TV Series

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ABSTRAK

Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk mengungkap skema dan peran aktansial dari karakter utama dalam serial TV *Avatar: The Last Airbender* (2024) musim pertama. Dengan menggunakan teori model aktansial yang dikembangkan oleh A. J. Greimas dan mengaplikasikan pendekatan strukturalisme, para peneliti berfokus pada analisis tindakan karakter. Lebih lanjut, para peneliti menggunakan metode kualitatif dalam mengumpulkan dan menganalisis data yang relevan dengan teori. Berdasarkan hasil analisis, para peneliti mengidentifikasi tiga skema yang dianggap lengkap karena mengandung semua elemen aktan: subjek, objek, pengirim, penerima, penolong, dan penentang. Para peneliti juga melakukan analisis karakterisasi terhadap tiap karakter untuk mengungkapkan peran aktansial mereka dalam setiap skema. Adapun jenis pengkarakterisasian yang paling banyak muncul adalah karakterisasi melalui dialog antar karakter dan tindakan eksternal karakter.

Kata kunci: aktansial, struktur, naratologi, strukturalisme, serial televisi *Avatar: The Last Airbender* (2024)

ABSTRACT

This research aims to reveal the actantial scheme and actantial roles of the major characters in the first season of *the Avatar: The Last Airbender* (2024) TV series. Using the actantial model theory developed by A. J. Greimas and applying a structuralist approach, the researchers analyze the characters' actions. Furthermore, the researchers use qualitative methods to collect and analyze relevant data. Based on the results of the analysis, the researchers identify three schemes, which are considered complete as they contain all the key elements: a subject, object, sender, receiver, helper, and opponent. The researchers also provide an analysis of the characters' characterization to reveal their actantial roles in each scheme. The most common types of characterization are those conveyed through dialogue between characters and their external actions.

Keywords: actantial, narrative, narratology, structuralism, *Avatar: The Last Airbender* (2024) TV series

A. INTRODUCTION

TV series, as a prominent form of popular culture, serve as a medium in which diverse narratives are conveyed to wide audiences (Soucy-Humphreys et al., 2023). These serialized audiovisual texts encompass a broad range of genres, including drama, science fiction, horror, adventure, fantasy, etc. (Castro, 2023). *Avatar: The Last Airbender* (2024) is a notable example of a TV series that successfully integrates the adventure and fantasy genres. The series gained significant popularity upon its release in early 2024 and was compared by the audiences to the previous film version entitled *The Last Airbender* (2010). *Avatar: The Last Airbender* (2024) TV series tells the story of a boy named Aang who is destined to become an Avatar at a very young age. As an Avatar, he is expected by many people, including his master Gyatso, to maintain the stability of the world from the Fire Lord's ruthless regime. Initially, Aang never wanted to become an Avatar. Instead, he only wanted to be a boy who simply plays around with his friends without worrying about serious matters. However, Aang finally realizes that the world needs the

Avatar when he discovers that Gyatso has died because of the actions of the Fire Nation. He realizes that the world needs him. And so Aang's adventure to become the Avatar begins.

In this research, the researcher applies the theory of narrative structure because the theory can help to understand the narrative and the structure in it. This theory can also be utilized to reveal the role of the character in a narrative. The theory that discusses narrative structure is also known as narratology. As Hébert (2022) states, narratology studies the way stories are put together. One of the structuralists who developed narratology is A. J. Greimas. Greimas' narratology is the result of a universalization of Vladimir Propp's narratology. Greimas makes Propp's complex theory easier to understand by turning it into a more generic, abstract, and universal story structure (Buckland, 2021). This simplification resulted in six functions, which Greimas later referred to as 'actants.'

Actant is a term that refers to a figure that performs or is being subjected to an act. Greimas and Courtés (1979/1982) assert that an actant might be defined as anything that performs or experiences an act. In addition to actants, Greimas also developed the actantial model theory. This theory is used to analyze the characters' actions, which will then be classified into actantial classes. With actantial classes, the researcher can find out what the character's role is in a narrative. Actantial models provide various perspectives on how storytellers create roles and situations, allowing readers to understand how actions are determined rather than relying on the researcher's biased interpretation of reality (Max et al., 2023). Thus, A. J. Greimas's narrative structure is suitable for analyzing the story and identifying the roles of each major character in the 2024 TV series *Avatar: The Last Airbender* by focusing on their actions.

The researcher has reviewed three relevant studies that applied A. J. Greimas's narrative structure theory to film analysis. Aini (2023), in "An Analysis of Actantial Model in the *Cinderella* (2021) Film," identified seven actantial schemes, two of which were incomplete, and noted character role differences across adaptations. Martilova (2024), in "Storytelling through Film as a Social Communication Media Campaign (Narrative Analysis of Algirdas Greimas on Film *Photocopier*)," found a complete actantial scheme and a three-stage functional model. In "A. J. Greimas' Narrative Structure in the Animated Film *Turning Red*," Anshory et al. (2023) looked at conflicts between characters and divided the movie into three actantial and functional models, with Mei as the main character. While all three studies effectively applied Greimas's theory to films, none explored its use in serialized audiovisual texts or examined character development across episodic arcs for the gap addressed in this research. Moreover, neither study examined character role development across episodic arcs nor compared narrative evolution between adaptations, which this research addresses through the TV series of *Avatar: The Last Airbender* (2024).

B. LITERATURE REVIEW

1. TV Series

TV series are collections of episodes of moving pictures, which contain narrative forms and elements of fictional work. Forni (2020) defines TV shows as fictional stories composed of episodes with either completely or partially self-contained plots. Therefore, a TV series, as a fictional work, is composed of two literary elements, namely intrinsic and extrinsic elements (Allrath et al., 2005). Intrinsic elements are elements of the fictional work that appear within the scope of the work itself, such as theme, plot, character, characterization, setting, and perspective

(Wood, 2008). Extrinsic elements, on the other hand, are elements of a fictional work that are outside the scope of the work, such as the social conditions when the work was created (Wood, 2008).

2. Character and Characterization

Gill says that a character is someone in a book or story who has some kind of identity (1995). Thus, characters are figures in the form of human beings who are labeled with an identity in a narrative. Character, as the main element of a fictional work, plays an important role in driving the storyline. If a character exists, so does characterization. Characterization is a method used by authors to characterize a character in a narrative that can help the audience understand a character's personality and behavior. Gill (1995) says that characterization is the process of making a character. There are several ways to characterize a character in a narrative, namely characterization through appearance, characterization through dialogue, characterization through external action, characterization through internal action, characterization through reactions of other characters, characterization through contrast: dramatic foils, characterization through caricature and leitmotif, and characterization through choice of name (Petrie & Boggs, 2018).

3. *Mise-en-scene*

Buckland defined *mise-en-scène* as everything that appears before the camera (2015). *Mise-en-scène* is also defined as the director's way of controlling what is seen in the film frame (Bordwell et al., 2020). Therefore, the director controls any aspect that appears in films and series frames, known as *mise-en-scène*. This element is important for visual storytelling (Mena & Prabha, 2021). Some aspects of *mise-en-scène* include setting, costume and makeup, lighting, and staging, which encompasses movement and performance (Ghosh, 2022).

4. Greimas' structural narratology

In the context of literary studies, structuralism is a theory related to the structure of a text in a literary work (Ferreirós, 2022). Nayar (2009) posits that structuralism examines the interrelations among the components of a structure that yield meaning. According to Nayar (2009), narratology gave narratives a formula and organized the study of plot, character, and symbol. Therefore, narratology is the study of narrative by analyzing the elements in it, such as plot, character, action, and symbol.

There are several experts in structuralist narratology, one of whom is Algirdas Julien Greimas. In his work entitled *Semantique Structurale*, Greimas simplified Vladimir Propp's 31 functions into three pairs of binary opposition (Buckland, 2021). According to Greimas, observing opposition can help discover meaning. He referred to this opposition as "semes" (Buckland, 2021). Greimas formulated six actants, which are divided into three pairs of semes, namely subject-object, sender-receiver, and helper-opponent. The actantial model is a theory used to analyze the actions of a character. The actantial model is a theoretical tool that may be used to evaluate any real or thematized action, but it is especially useful for analyzing actions that are portrayed in literary texts or images, according to Hebert (2020). Therefore, the actantial model can be used to analyze characters' actions, both in literary works and in TV series. Greimas further classified a character's actions into six components referred to as actants. The following is an explanation with examples of the six actors:

1. **Subject:** The person or thing who/which is sent on a mission to obtain a certain object.
2. **Object:** The person or thing who/which becomes the subject's target.
3. **Sender:** The person or thing who/which sends the subject on a mission to obtain the object.
4. **Receiver:** The person or thing who/which gets benefits when the subject successfully obtains the object.
5. **Helper:** The person or thing who/which helps the subject in obtaining the object.
6. **Opponent:** The person or entity that obstructs the subject's ability to obtain the object. (Schleifer, 2017)

C. METHOD

This research utilized a structuralist approach. Structuralists' view concerns the concept of structure, which is composed of fundamental units defined by the relationships among them. Hébert (2002) describes structure as an entity formed by interconnected terms and their relations. Literary studies use the structuralism approach as a method to analyze a story's structure. The structuralist approach emphasizes narrative operations and the investigation of literary interpretation (Pabiona, 2021). The method designed in this research is the qualitative research method. A qualitative research approach is employed for investigations pertaining to social or human conditions, wherein the data is non-numerical and provided in spoken form (Creswell, 2018).

The researchers collected the necessary data in the form of words, sentences, and images from the dialogues and scenes, which indicated the actantial model in all episodes of the *Avatar: The Last Airbender* (2024) TV series as the data source. The research presented the data in the form of verbal descriptions and scene images. Several steps need to be taken in collecting the required data. In the first step, the researcher watched and observed each scene and dialogue in the *Avatar: The Last Airbender* (2024) TV series from the first to the last episode. Thereafter, the researchers took some notes and screenshots of the scenes and dialogue texts that represented the characters' actions, either external actions or internal actions, which were used to reveal the actantial schemes in the series. Next, the researcher re-watched the series and double-checked the collected data to confirm its ability to depict the actantial schemes.

According to Miles et al. (2014), qualitative analysis involves three key steps: data condensation, data display, and conclusion drawing/verification. In this study, data condensation involved selecting strong and credible indicators of the actantial model from scenes and dialogue in *Avatar: The Last Airbender* (2024), while excluding irrelevant data. The condensed data were then organized and presented as visual scenes and verbal descriptions, forming the basis for analyzing the actantial schemes. Finally, the researcher drew and verified conclusions to ensure analytical validity, ultimately answering the research question.

D. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The findings detail the actantial models for Aang, Katara, and Prince Zuko, identifying the six key roles (subject, object, sender, receiver, helper, and opponent) for each based on their actions and dialogue.

1. Aang's actantial scheme

The first analysis focuses on Aang (Figure 1), who acts as the subject. His object is to master all four elements and restore balance to the world, a goal he accepts after witnessing the destruction of his home and people. This grief and sense of duty motivate his quest. The recipients of his actions are the people of the world.

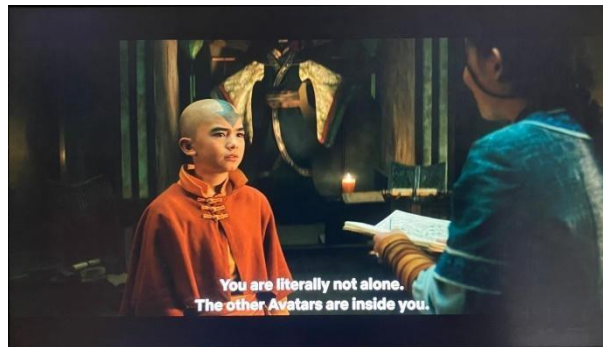


Figure 1. Katara's Support for Aang (Ep. 2, 22:10)

Aang is aided by helpers like Katara, Sokka, Zuko's notebook, King Bumi, the sage Shyu, and the previous Avatars Kyoshi, Roku, and Kuruk. He is blocked by opponents such as his own fear, the Wise Sages, June and Nyla, Commander Zhao, and Fire Lord Ozai. Prince Zuko also serves a dual role as a helper. Figure 2 is the actantial scheme for Aang's quest.

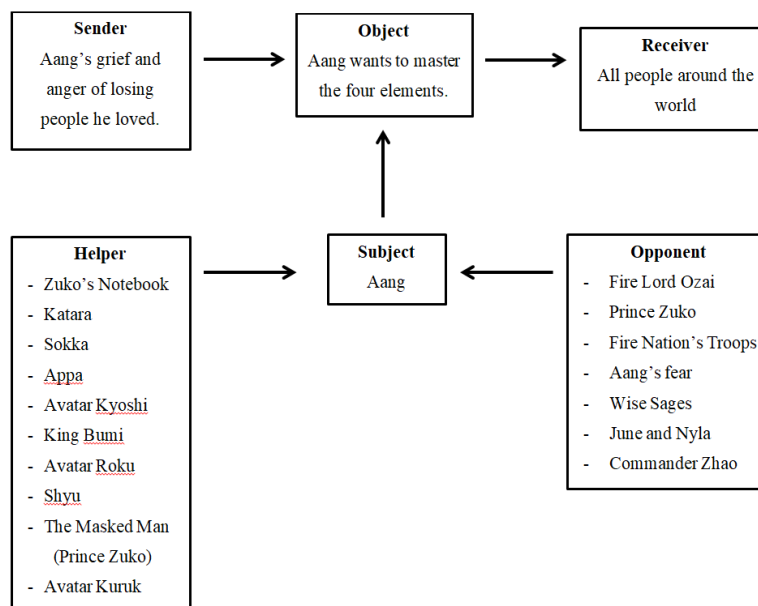


Figure 2. The Actantial Model of Aang's Character

The main part of Aang's character growth is how he goes from being a scared, unwilling youngster to someone who accepts his fate and duty. At first, Aang avoided Avatar training because he felt mentally unprepared. After seeing his home destroyed and learning he had lost his people, he feels guilty. This grief, which he experiences as a sender, is what facilitates his

personal growth. It turns his unwillingness into a commitment to make sure that the sacrifices of his loved ones were not in vain. His trip is mostly about philosophy, and he learns important things from the past Avatars, who support him along the way. Avatar Kyoshi shows him how powerful the Avatar State is, Avatar Roku teaches him how to use diplomacy instead of violence, and Avatar Kuruk tells him how hard it is to be the Avatar. Aang has not reached his goal of mastering all four elements at this time, but he does progress a lot mentally. He has gone from denying his role to fully accepting it. He is no longer running from his destiny; instead, he is actively searching for the help he needs to achieve it.

2. Katara's actantial scheme

Katara's actantial model (Figure 3) identifies her as the Subject whose Object is to become proficient in waterbending. The Sender represents Katara's internal self-awareness and her desire to preserve her culture. As the last waterbender of her tribe, Katara herself is also the receiver of her quest's success (Figure 3). Her helpers include Aang, her grandmother, Jet, and the healer Yagoda. She faces opponents in Sokka, who initially discourages her, her traumatic memories, and the patriarchal system of the Northern Water Tribe, embodied by Master Pakku.



Figure 3. Quest given by Katara's grandmother (Ep. 2, 04:11)

Katara's model features two characters with dual roles. Sokka, initially an opponent, becomes a key helper. Master Pakku, her primary antagonist who underestimates her, also becomes an unintentional helper during their duel by teaching her advanced moves. Katara ultimately achieves her object, proving her strength, forcing Pakku to allow women to fight, and making him realize the value of change. See Figure 3.

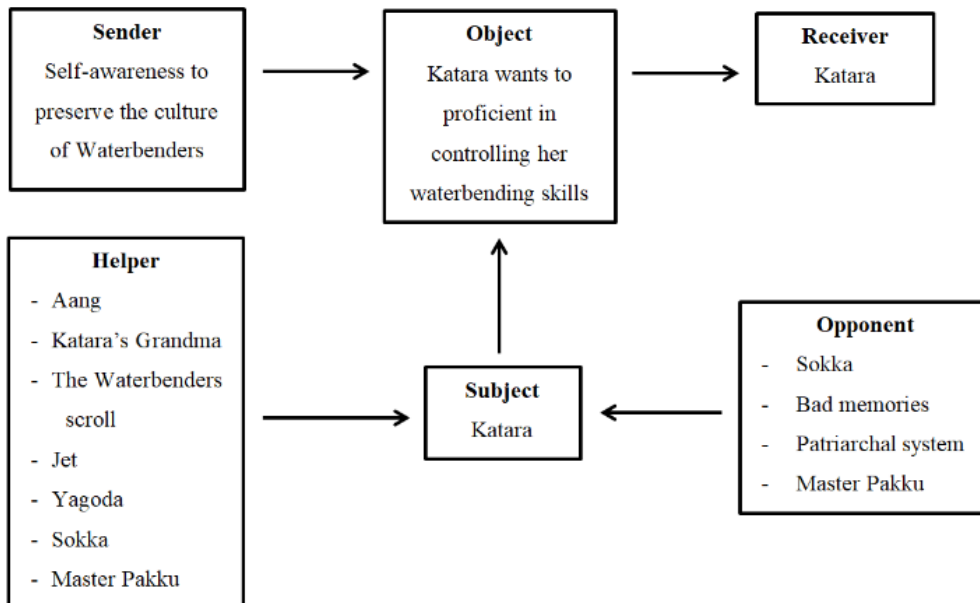


Figure 3. The Actantial Model of the Katara Character

Katara's growth is one of the most important, since it shows how she went from being a struggling novice to a powerful master and a force of social change. She is the last waterbender in her tribe, and at first, she has trouble controlling her powers. This is because she is aware of her mission to protect her culture. Her brother Sokka (Opponent) is holding her back because he is worried about her safety, and the trauma of her mother's death is affecting her bending. Katara is constantly looking for new things to learn. She learns how to manage her emotions from Jet, how to heal from Yagoda, and how to find balance from Aang. The Northern Water Tribe is where she reaches the peak of her growth, as she fights the patriarchal system (opponent). After hearing that women do not fight and feeling underestimated by Master Pakku, she refuses to accept these limits. She challenges Pakku to a duel and eventually forces him to let women join the combat. Katara accomplishes her object by the end; she is not only a skillful and confident waterbender, but she is also a bold leader who has broken a long-standing sexist convention.

3. Zuko's actantial scheme

The final analysis focuses on Prince Zuko (Figure 4), who is driven by an obsession to achieve his goal: capturing the Avatar to regain his throne. The sender of this mission is his father, Fire Lord Ozai, who assigned him this task after banishing him. Both Zuko and Ozai stand as the receivers should the quest succeed.



Figure 4. Task from Fire Lord Ozai (Ep. 6, 44:13)

Zuko's primary helper is General Iroh, who provides constant advice, protection, and support, along with the temporary assistance of the bounty hunters June and Nyla. Zuko's opponents are numerous, including Sokka, Katara, his sister Princess Azula, and his rival Commander Zhao, who plots his assassination. Lieutenant Jee also plays a dual role, first as an opponent and later as a helper. Ultimately, Zuko fails to achieve his object, as Aang merges with the Ocean Spirit to end the siege. See Figure 5.

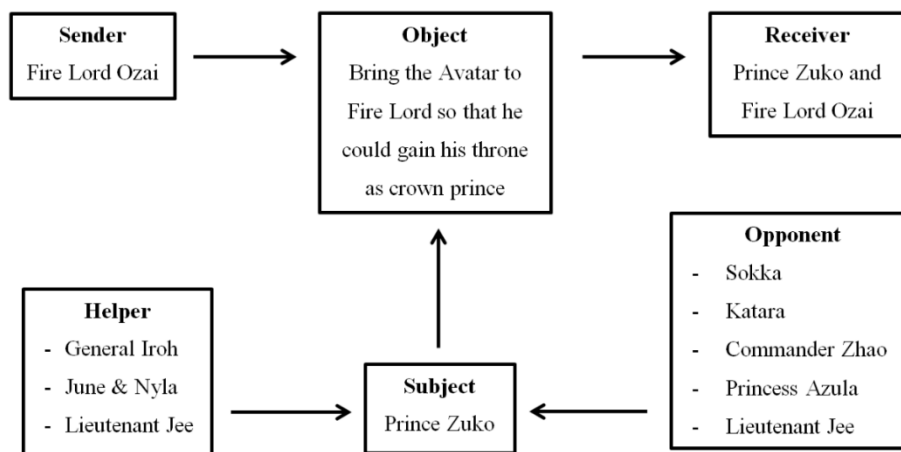


Figure 5. The Actantial Model of Prince Zuko's Character

Prince Zuko's character development is the most complicated since he has an internal conflict that starts to break down his one preoccupation. He begins the series with one goal: to find, capture, and bring the Avatar to his father. Fire Lord Ozai's order (sender) sent him on this mission. He was banished until he could get back his honor and throne, which made him a passionate and obsessed enemy. He is often chasing after Aang, but his character starts to reveal flaws. He is fighting not just Aang's team (such as Katara and Sokka) but also people he thought were on his side, like Commander Zhao and Princess Azula. His dual position as a helper in Aang's narrative is the most important turning moment. Zuko, who is known as the "mysterious masked man," frees Aang from Zhao's captivity. This goes against his main goal. This indicates that he is torn between wanting to catch Aang and hating his enemies more. By the end of the season, Zuko has not achieved his object and has changed from a simple villain into the most conflicted figure in the series, caught between his obsession and a new, paradoxical sense of honor.

4. Actantial schemes and character complexity

Greimas' actantial model, as explained by Hébert (2017), is a narrative theory used to classify characters' actions into six roles: subject, object, sender, receiver, helper, and opponent. In this research, the model is applied to analyze the major characters in *Avatar: The Last Airbender* (2024) TV series, revealing how their actions drive the plot. The analysis identifies three actantial schemes within the series. The first scheme, centered on Aang, is considered the main narrative axis—without it, the story would not unfold. The second scheme, focused on Katara's personal journey to master her skills, operates independently from Aang's mission and does not influence the central storyline. The third scheme, involving Prince Zuko, intersects slightly with Aang's plot but remains non-essential; while Zuko's role as an opponent adds tension, Aang's journey could continue without it.

Each scheme includes all six actants. Aang functions as subject, object, and helper; Katara as subject, receiver, helper, and opponent; and Prince Zuko as subject, receiver, helper, and opponent. All three characters serve as subjects due to their individual goals, but only Aang also functions as an object, highlighting his centrality to the narrative. Zuko's scheme features fewer helpers, making his mission to capture the Avatar more difficult and less likely to succeed. This research primarily conveys character through dialogue and external actions, but it also incorporates four additional methods. Internal actions are illustrated when Aang mourns the loss of his people, entering the Avatar state—a moment that reveals his emotional depth. Characterization through appearance is shown via the Waterbender's scroll, which visually guides Katara's learning process. Reactions from others, such as General Iroh's view of Fire Lord Ozai, portray Ozai's dominance and arrogance. Contrast is used through dramatic foils: Katara protects Aang, while Zuko relentlessly pursues him. However, characterization through caricature, leitmotif, and choice of name does not appear in this study.

The character development of Aang, Katara, and Prince Zuko in *Avatar: The Last Airbender* (2024) directly supports the actantial mapping schemes that were found in the analysis. The growth paths of each character illustrate the fluidity of Greimas' actantial roles, showing that characters are not limited to fixed functions but develop within narrative situations. Aang's change from not wanting to do something to accepting it fits with his major role in the first actantial scheme, where he is the subject, object, and helper. His anguish serves as the motivation, driving him toward his objective, which is mastering all four components and restoring the world balance. The philosophical counsel from the former Avatars and his pursuit of external assistance show his active engagement in the helper position, while his interior journey highlights the emotional understanding underlying his structural function. Meanwhile, Katara's path is about preserving her culture and mastering herself. Katara tries to become a great waterbender and challenge patriarchal norms through constant study and fighting. Her actions (dueling Master Pakku) and her reasons (trauma and resilience) enhance her character. These make her a better receiver, helper, and opponent. The fact that her plan is not dependent on Aang's plan further demonstrates that it is structurally independent inside the story. Lastly, the scheme illustrates the complexity of actantial changeability by demonstrating how Prince Zuko evolves throughout the story. At first, Zuko's story was simple that he wanted to catch the Avatar. But as he has internal conflicts and changes his alliances, his story becomes more complicated. His moment of assisting Aang, even though he was his enemy, shows how his role

is both good and bad, and how Fire Lord Ozai's responsibility to send people to act conflicts with his own growing sense of right and wrong. His inability to achieve his objective solidifies his role as the most conflicting actor, representing both narrative disruption and transformation. These character arcs show how Greimas' actantial model can work with layered, changing roles in serialized stories. The mapping schemes clarify each character's narrative role and demonstrate how both internal and exterior character development enhances their structural importance.

This research builds upon previous studies that also employed Greimas' actantial model. Aini (2023), in "An Analysis of Actantial Models in the *Cinderella* (2021) Film," identifies role changes in major characters across Cinderella adaptations. While both studies find that characters often fulfill multiple actantial roles, Aini's analysis remains surface-level, focusing only on external actions. In contrast, this research offers a deeper exploration by mapping actantial schemes and integrating characterization analysis. Similarly, Anshory et al. (2023), in their study of *Turning Red* (2023), apply Greimas' actantial and functional models to examine character relationships. Although their analysis effectively identifies narrative roles, it lacks an in-depth look at characterization. This research addresses that gap by emphasizing internal dimensions such as dialogue and emotional expression, providing a more complex appreciation for character roles. Martilova (2023) also applies Greimas' model to assess narrative structure in "Storytelling through Film as a Social Communication Media Campaign (Narrative Analysis of Algirdas Greimas on Film Photocopier)." However, his focus remains on external actions. In contrast, this study incorporates both external and internal character traits, aiming to uncover character complexity and their contribution to the plot. Ultimately, while Aini (2023), Anshory et al. (2023), and Martilova (2023) utilize the same theoretical framework, this research advances the discourse by applying Greimas' actantial model to a serialized format of *Avatar: The Last Airbender* (2024). The extended duration of a TV series allows for richer character development and more intricate actantial dynamics. By combining structural analysis with detailed characterization, this study offers a comprehensive view of how major characters shape and sustain the narrative.

D. CONCLUSION

For the results of the analysis, the researchers identified three actantial schemes based on the internal and external actions of the major characters. Each of these schemes contains the six key elements called actants: a subject, object, sender, receiver, helper, and opponent. The researchers also found that none of the major characters is confined to a single actantial role only; rather, each character fulfills multiple roles. Aang acts as a subject, object, and helper. Katara acts as a subject, receiver, helper, and opponent. Similarly, Prince Zuko also acts as a subject, receiver, helper, and opponent. Aang only has two actantial roles, while Katara and Prince Zuko share the same four actantial roles. Despite having fewer actantial roles, Aang's actantial model serves as the main narrative structure driving the overall plot, as it covers the majority of characters and events in the *Avatar: The Last Airbender* (2024) TV series. Additionally, the most prevalent types of characterization identified in this research are those conveyed through dialogue between characters and their external actions, both of which significantly contribute to shaping each character's narrative functions.

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