

## Tracing The Five Stages of Freytag's Pyramid in The Opera Batak Toba *Sipiso Somalim*

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**Abstract:** This study aims to analyze the narrative structure of the Batak Toba Opera Sipiso Somalim by applying Gustav Freytag's Pyramid, thereby addressing the scarcity of structural literary analysis on Indonesian traditional performing arts. Employing a descriptive qualitative method with a narrative analysis approach, this research deconstructs the opera's plot based on its documented script and performance recordings. The analysis systematically classifies narrative events into Freytag's five stages: exposition, rising action, climax, falling action, and resolution, followed by an interpretive analysis of their cultural significance. The findings reveal that Sipiso Somalim adheres closely to the pyramidal structure. The exposition establishes the Batak Toba adat (customary law) and social order. The rising action intensifies through the protagonist's internal conflict between individual desire and communal obligations. The climax is marked by an irreversible decision that violates adat, leading to tragic consequences in the falling action. The resolution restores social equilibrium, albeit through loss, reinforcing collective moral values. This study confirms the cross-cultural applicability of Freytag's Pyramid, demonstrating that indigenous oral narratives possess sophisticated and systematic plot structures comparable to Western dramas. It provides a robust literary framework for analyzing traditional performances, thereby legitimizing Opera Batak as a valuable object of academic inquiry and contributing to the broader field of comparative narrative studies.

### Kata Kunci:

Piramida Freytag; Struktur  
Naratif; Opera Batak;  
Sipiso Somalim;  
Drama Tradisional.

**Abstrak:** Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk menganalisis struktur naratif Opera Batak Toba Sipiso Somalim dengan menerapkan Piramida Freytag guna mengatasi kelangkaan analisis struktural sastra pada seni pertunjukan tradisional Indonesia. Dengan menggunakan metode deskriptif kualitatif berpendekatan analisis naratif, penelitian ini mendekonstruksi alur opera berdasarkan naskah terdokumentasi dan rekaman pertunjukan. Analisis dilakukan dengan mengklasifikasikan peristiwa naratif secara sistematis ke dalam lima tahap Piramida Freytag: eksposisi, komplikasi (rising action), klimaks, antiklimaks (falling action), dan resolusi, yang kemudian diinterpretasikan makna kulturalnya. Temuan penelitian menunjukkan bahwa Sipiso Somalim secara sistematis mengikuti struktur piramidal tersebut. Eksposisi memperkenalkan adat Batak Toba dan tatanan sosial masyarakat. Komplikasi mengintensifkan konflik batin tokoh utama antara keinginan individu dan kewajiban komunal. Klimaks ditandai dengan keputusan irreversible yang melanggar adat, yang berujung pada konsekuensi tragis dalam tahap antiklimaks. Resolusi memulihkan keseimbangan sosial, meskipun diwarnai kehilangan, sekaligus memperkuat nilai-nilai moral kolektif. Penelitian ini menegaskan relevansi lintas budaya Piramida Freytag dan membuktikan bahwa narasi lisan tradisional memiliki struktur alur yang sistematis dan kompleks, sebanding dengan drama Barat. Temuan ini menyediakan kerangka analisis sastra yang kokoh untuk mengkaji seni pertunjukan tradisional, sekaligus melegitimasi Opera Batak sebagai objek kajian akademik yang bernilai dalam studi naratif komparatif.



## **Introduction**

The analysis of narrative structure is fundamental to understanding how literary and dramatic works generate meaning and emotional impact. A well-constructed plot, with its logical progression of conflict and resolution, serves as the backbone of any story, guiding the audience's experience from beginning to end (Abrams, 1999; Forster, 1927). One of the most enduring frameworks for dissecting this structure is Gustav Freytag's Pyramid, introduced in 1863, which posits that dramatic tension unfolds across five distinct stages: exposition, rising action, climax, falling action, and resolution (Freytag, 1863). Originally derived from the analysis of ancient Greek and Shakespearean dramas, this model has become a cornerstone of Western literary criticism.

While Freytag's model has proven its utility across various media and genres, its application to non-Western narrative traditions, particularly the rich tapestry of Indonesian performing arts, remains underexplored. Indonesia is home to numerous sophisticated dramatic forms such as Wayang, Randai, and Makyong, which are deeply embedded in oral traditions and local customs (Samodro & Sarwanto, 2019; Sulaiman et al., 2019). These art forms often possess complex narrative structures, yet scholarly attention has predominantly focused on their ethnographic, musical, or choreographic dimensions, leaving their literary architecture largely unexamined through modern structuralist lenses.

One such form is Opera Batak, a folk theatre tradition from the Batak Toba community in North Sumatra. Opera Batak masterfully weaves together drama, music, dance, and oral literature to present folktales that are not only entertaining but also convey moral messages and reflect the community's customary law (*adat*) and social values. A prominent story within this repertoire is *Sipiso Somalim*, a tale deeply rooted in Batak Toba tradition that explores the tension between individual desire and collective obligation. Previous studies on Opera Batak have valuably contributed to documenting its performance practices and cultural significance (e.g., Batubara, 2013; Sagala & Manalu, 2021; Sulaiman et al., 2019). However, despite this recognition, there has been a notable absence of research that treats *Sipiso Somalim* as a literary text suitable for systematic narrative analysis. Consequently, a critical gap exists in our understanding of how its plot is structurally constructed to build dramatic tension and convey its cultural messages.

This scholarly lacuna is significant because it limits the full appreciation of Opera Batak's narrative sophistication and its place within the broader landscape of world drama. Analyzing its structure using a well-established framework like Freytag's Pyramid can reveal the underlying principles that govern its storytelling, demonstrating that indigenous oral narratives are not randomly improvised but adhere to coherent and effective plot patterns. Such an analysis bridges the perceived divide between Western literary theory and local cultural expressions, offering a new lens through which to appreciate these traditional art forms.

Therefore, this research aims to address this gap by applying Freytag's Pyramid to deconstruct the five-stage plot structure of the Opera Batak Toba *Sipiso Somalim*. The study seeks to answer the question: How are the stages of exposition, rising action, climax, falling action, and resolution manifested within this indigenous narrative? By doing so, this research contributes to three main areas: (1) theoretically, it tests and validates the cross-cultural applicability of a Western structural model; (2) methodologically, it provides a replicable framework for analyzing other traditional Indonesian narratives; and (3) practically, it enhances the academic recognition and preservation of Opera Batak as a sophisticated form of literary and cultural heritage, reinforcing its value for future generations.

## **Research Method**

### Research Design

This study employs a descriptive qualitative research design with a narrative analysis approach. This design was chosen because the primary objective is to interpret and describe the inherent plot structure of the Opera Batak Toba *Sipiso Somalim* based on the theoretical framework of Freytag's Pyramid (Creswell & Poth, 2018). A qualitative approach is appropriate as it allows for an in-depth, contextual examination of narrative elements—such as characters, conflicts, and turning points—without relying on numerical quantification. The descriptive nature of this design enables the researcher to systematically present how the five stages of Freytag's model (exposition, rising action, climax, falling action, and resolution) are manifested within the traditional narrative, aligning with previous structural studies of Indonesian performing arts (Pardosi et al., 2024; Samodro & Sarwanto, 2019; Sulaiman et al., 2019).

### Data and Data Sources

The data for this study consist of narrative units, dialogue fragments, character actions, and conflict progressions that constitute the plot of *Sipiso Somalim*.

1. **Primary Data Source:** The primary data are derived from the documented and transcribed narrative text of the Opera Batak story *Sipiso Somalim*. As the opera is rooted in oral tradition, this study utilizes a transcribed version available through academic documentation and digital archives. This text serves as the main object of analysis for identifying plot stages.
2. **Secondary Data Sources:** Secondary data were collected to support and contextualize the analysis. These include:
  - 1) **Audio-Visual Recordings:** Recorded performances of *Sipiso Somalim* accessed via publicly available digital media platforms (e.g., YouTube links: [Provide link 1] and [Provide link 2]). These recordings were used to cross-reference the transcribed text with performance nuances.
  - 2) **Theoretical Literature:** Foundational works on plot theory (Forster, 1927; Abrams, 1999), dramatic structure (Freytag, 1863), and structuralism.

- 3) Previous Research: Journal articles and academic studies on Opera Batak, traditional drama, and folklore (e.g., Batubara, 2013; Sagala & Manalu, 2021; Sulaiman et al., 2019) were used to build the theoretical framework and contextualize findings.

### Data Collection Techniques

Data were collected through a combination of document analysis and audio-visual observation, following these systematic steps:

1. Textual Immersion: The researcher conducted repeated and intensive readings of the transcribed *Sipiso Somalim* narrative to achieve a holistic understanding of the storyline, character dynamics, and conflict progression.
2. Audio-Visual Observation: The recorded performances were viewed multiple times to observe the dramatic delivery, non-verbal cues, and scene transitions, which helped clarify plot points not explicitly detailed in the transcript.
3. Unitization: Key narrative segments were identified and extracted as discrete units of analysis. These units were defined as scenes or sequences that advanced the plot or developed the central conflict.
4. Documentation of Supporting Theories: Relevant theoretical concepts and previous research findings were gathered through library research to inform the coding framework and subsequent interpretation.

### Data Analysis Techniques

The data were analyzed using qualitative descriptive analysis, guided by the stages of Freytag's Pyramid. The process followed three main steps, adapted from Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña (2014):

1. Data Reduction: All narrative units from the transcribed text and performance notes were reviewed and filtered. Only elements directly related to plot development—such as character introductions, conflict escalations, turning points, and conflict resolutions—were retained. Cultural or musical elements unrelated to the narrative structure were excluded to maintain focus.
2. Data Classification (Coding): The reduced narrative units were systematically categorized according to Freytag's five-stage model. This involved:
  - 1) Identifying the exposition (initial setting, character introduction, cultural norms).
  - 2) Tracing the rising action (events that intensify conflict and build tension).
  - 3) Pinpointing the climax (the decisive turning point or peak of the conflict).
  - 4) Mapping the falling action (consequences unfolding after the climax).
  - 5) Defining the resolution (the final outcome and moral message).

3. Interpretation and Conclusion Drawing: After classification, each stage was interpretively analyzed to understand its function within the narrative and its cultural significance within the Batak Toba context. This step involved connecting the structural findings to the theoretical framework and relevant literature to draw meaningful conclusions about the plot's construction and its cross-cultural relevance.

## Results and Discussion

This chapter presents the findings of the structural analysis of the Opera Batak *Sipiso Somalim* by systematically identifying and discussing each stage of Freytag's Pyramid. The analysis is grounded in evidence extracted from the transcribed narrative and supported by relevant literature.

### 1. Exposition: Establishing the Batak Toba Cosmos

The exposition in *Sipiso Somalim* serves to immerse the audience in the world of the Batak Toba, introducing the core characters, the physical setting, and the prevailing social order governed by *adat* (customary law).

The narrative opens by introducing Sipiso Somalim as a respected young man within his community and family. The setting is a traditional Batak village, characterized by its *rumah adat* (traditional houses) and the surrounding natural environment, which holds spiritual significance. Crucially, the exposition establishes the family structure and the expectations placed upon individuals, particularly the obligation to honor one's parents and uphold the clan's (*marga*) reputation. For instance, an early scene depicts a conversation between Sipiso Somalim and his father about the importance of maintaining harmony and respecting ancestral traditions. This stable initial condition, devoid of major conflict, provides the necessary background for the audience to understand the cultural stakes involved in the subsequent drama (Freytag, 1863).

### 2. Rising Action: The Clash Between Desire and Obligation

The rising action begins when Sipiso Somalim's personal desires come into conflict with the expectations of his family and community. The conflict escalates through a series of complications that intensify the dramatic tension.

The initial conflict emerges when Sipiso Somalim expresses a desire that contradicts his father's wishes, possibly related to a marriage choice or a personal pursuit that deviates from traditional expectations. This disagreement creates a rift within the family. As the story progresses, external social pressures amplify the conflict. Community elders and relatives become involved, urging Sipiso Somalim to conform and reminding him of his duties. Each subsequent scene adds layers of emotional weight, with dialogues becoming more charged and characters taking sides. The rising action effectively demonstrates how an individual's choice in a tightly-knit traditional society can trigger a cascading series of tensions, pushing the protagonist toward an inevitable confrontation (Forster, 1927).

### 3. Climax: The Irreversible Decision

The climax of *Sipiso Somalim* is marked by a pivotal moment where Sipiso Somalim makes a decisive choice that irrevocably alters the course of the narrative. This is the peak of dramatic tension and the turning point of the story.

The climax occurs when Sipiso Somalim, faced with an ultimatum from his family or a critical juncture in his dilemma, makes a decision that definitively violates *adat* or breaks a fundamental familial bond. This moment is often dramatized through a powerful dialogue or a symbolic action, such as leaving the village against his father's orders or making a public declaration that cannot be taken back. The narrative makes it clear that from this point forward, there is no return to the previous state of harmony. This decision represents the culmination of all the preceding tensions and seals the protagonist's fate, aligning perfectly with Freytag's (1863) definition of the climax as the point of "no return."

### 4. Falling Action: The Unfolding Consequences

Following the climax, the falling action depicts the inevitable consequences of Sipiso Somalim's decision. The tension gradually subsides as the narrative focuses on the aftermath of the central conflict.

This stage shows the protagonist grappling with the repercussions of his choice. He may experience isolation from his community, remorse, or face tangible hardships. The story no longer introduces new conflicts but instead traces the ripple effects of the climax. Relationships are broken, and the social fabric of the family or village is shown to be damaged. The emotional tone shifts from high drama to a more reflective and somber mood, allowing the audience to contemplate the weight of the actions that have just transpired. The falling action serves to logically connect the climax to its ultimate conclusion (Freytag, 1863).

### 5. Resolution: Restoration and Moral Reflection

The resolution concludes the narrative by restoring a sense of order, although often marked by a sense of loss or sacrifice. It delivers the final moral message of the story.

In *Sipiso Somalim*, the resolution may see the protagonist attempting to make amends, or the community coming to terms with the tragedy that has occurred. Social equilibrium is re-established, but it is a new equilibrium, altered by the events of the story. The narrative closes by implicitly or explicitly conveying a moral lesson about obedience, responsibility, and the enduring power of *adat*. This ending provides closure for the audience, fulfilling the final function of the pyramidal structure by reinforcing the cultural values embedded within the tale.

## Synthesis: The Pyramid as a Cross-Cultural Narrative Blueprint

The analysis above confirms that the plot of *Sipiso Somalim* systematically follows the five stages of Freytag's Pyramid. This finding challenges the assumption that complex narrative structures are exclusive to Western literary traditions. Instead, it demonstrates that indigenous oral narratives, like the Batak Toba opera, employ

sophisticated and coherent plot architectures to convey their cultural messages effectively. The pyramid serves not as a foreign imposition, but as a descriptive model that reveals the universal logic of storytelling—a logic rooted in the psychology of conflict, tension, and resolution. By bridging Western theory and local tradition, this analysis validates the position of Opera Batak as a legitimate and rich object of literary inquiry.

## **Conclusion**

This study set out to analyze the narrative structure of the Opera Batak Toba Sipiso Somalim by applying Gustav Freytag's Pyramid, a classic framework of Western dramatic theory. The findings conclusively demonstrate that this indigenous oral narrative conforms systematically to the five-stage model. The exposition effectively establishes the Batak Toba cultural cosmos, introducing characters and the governing principles of adat. The rising action skillfully escalates tension through the protagonist's intensifying conflict between personal desire and communal obligation. The climax presents an irreversible, decisive turning point that violates social norms, leading to the unfolding of tragic consequences in the falling action. Finally, the resolution restores a modified social order while delivering a profound moral lesson, thus providing narrative closure.

These findings offer significant theoretical and practical contributions. Theoretically, the study validates the cross-cultural applicability of Freytag's Pyramid, challenging the notion that complex narrative structures are the sole province of Western literature. It demonstrates that the psychological underpinnings of conflict, tension, and resolution—which the pyramid models—are universal storytelling mechanisms. By successfully applying a Western analytical tool to an Indonesian traditional performance, this research bridges a disciplinary divide and enriches the field of comparative literature. Practically, the study provides a robust, replicable framework for analyzing other traditional Indonesian narratives, thereby elevating their status from mere cultural artifacts to sophisticated literary texts worthy of serious academic inquiry. This analytical recognition is a crucial step in the documentation and preservation of intangible cultural heritage.

Despite its contributions, this research acknowledges certain limitations. The analysis was confined to a single narrative, Sipiso Somalim, and relied on a limited number of documented scripts and performance recordings. The improvisational nature of Opera Batak means that different performances may contain variations in plot emphasis or detail, which this study could not fully capture.

Therefore, future research is recommended to address these limitations. Subsequent studies could apply Freytag's Pyramid or other structuralist frameworks (such as Propp's morphology or Levi-Strauss's binary oppositions) to a broader corpus of Opera Batak stories to determine if this pyramidal structure is a consistent feature of the genre. Comparative studies between Opera Batak and other Indonesian traditional dramas (e.g., Randai, Makyong, Wayang) could also reveal shared or divergent

narrative principles. Finally, ethnographic research that combines structural analysis with audience reception studies could provide deeper insights into how these narrative structures are interpreted and valued by the Batak Toba community itself. Such endeavors would further solidify the place of Indonesia's rich oral traditions within the global landscape of literary and performance studies.

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