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The Study Of Narratives In Communication And Literature: A Theoretical And Critical Perspective

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Abstract: Narratives are fundamental to human life as narratives are everywhere performing countless functions in human life such as communicating ideas, thoughts, feeling, emotions and views effectively. The present research paper studies the concept of narrative and the theory of narratology propounded by the prominent theorists of Narratology, in brief, in order to get an extensive understanding of the concept of narrative. The paper also undertakes to study certain formal elements of narrative such as plot, character, point of view, time, setting, theme, language and various kinds of symbolism to enhance the analysis and interpretation of narrative techniques used in a narrative fiction. This paper further critically analyses some popular narrative techniques such as Flashback and Flash-forward, In Media's res, Dream Sequence, Ellipsis (narrative mode), In Cluing, Red herring (narrative) and Stream of Consciousness etc. that have been dominantly employed in English literature.

Index Terms: Linguistics, Structuralism, Formalism, Postmodernism, Ellipsis, Focalization, In Media's res

(I) Introduction

To narrate is "to give an account or tell the story of events or experiences etc. in speech or writing." Narrative or narration means the art of process of narrative. It is an account of events whether real or fictional. Narrative has been a subject of critical study and scrutiny in all traditional aesthetic theories, occidental as well as oriental. Birendra Kumar Bhattacharyya rightly remarks, "The knowledge of narrative forms is a crying need of the age in which the critical intelligence is preoccupied with learning the traditional modes of narrative that are available in the newly liberated societies of the Third world" (Bhattacharyya, 30). The present introductory section focuses on the concept of narrative in general and narrative fiction in particular. M.H. Abrams defines narrative as, "A narrative is a story, whether told in prose or verse, involving events, characters and what the characters say and do" (Abrams, 181). Michel.J.Toolan's definition of narrative presents an immediate move in the concept of narrative from generic identities to general categories. "Narratives are everywhere, performing countless different functions in human integration..." (Toolan, XIII). A narrative is a story telling or presenting by text, picture, and performance. Jose Angel Garcia Landa identifies presentations, various drafts, films, plays, comic strips, novels, news reds, chronicles, stories, tales, legends, myths, jokes and treatises of geological history as narratives in the broadest sense. Roland Barthes gives a descriptive idea about narrative and maintains that there are countless forms of narrative in the world (Barthes, 237). Gerald Prince defines narrative as, "the representation of at least two real or fictive events or situations in a time sequence, neither of which presupposes or entails the other" (Prince, 4). In this definition, Prince pinpoints three main features of narrative: A narrative is a delineation of a particular reality through various modes of communication, this delineation is intertwined in a frame of time and space which contains more than one event and in the end the events set in a chronological sequence need not necessarily presuppose or entail each other.

II) Theory of Narratology

However, narratology or the study of narrative deals with a narrative not in the conventional way as a fictional representation of life but as a systematic and structured formal design. The term 'narratology' (French, 'narratologie') is used to denote a systematize knowledge and understanding of narration or narrative. The term is first introduced by the French theorist, Tzvetan Todorov in 1969. Aristotle, the greatest Greek philosopher, is considered as the pioneering theorist of narratives. Originally, 'Narratology' is developed on the basis of Russian Formalism and French Structuralism. The narrative theorists were influenced by the assumptions of Russian Formalism and French Structuralism. The narrative theories after World War II are divided into distinct schools. The first school follows the formalist principles of Vladimir Propp (1968) and the Structuralist principles of Claude Levi - Strauss, Tzvetan Todorov (1977) and early Roland Barthes (1977). Vladimir Propp and Victor Shklovsky are the representatives of this school. Vladimir Propp's *Morphology of the Folktale* (1928) became a monumental work for all the narrative theorists after 1950. In his classic work, Vladimir Propp elaborates certain basic concepts of narratology such as structure, form and components of a system and their analysis, structure of plots and roles of characters. He also distinguishes between story (fabula), chronological order of events and plot (syuzhet), the authorial arrangement of events etc. The first school of Narratology was also influenced by the principles of structuralism. Structuralism is a method of analysis that investigates the relations and functions of elements in various systems. In Linguistics, Structuralism is represented by Ferdinand de Saussure; in Anthropology by Claude Levi - Strauss.

The second group represented by Gerard Genette, Mieke Bal and Seymour Chatman considers narrative as a discourse. Seymour Chatman in his *Story and Discourse* (1978) makes a distinction between story and discourse. He explains that story is what is narrated (the what of it) and the discourse is how it is narrated (the how of it). According to Chatman a narrative has two parts. The first part, the story, consists of the content (the chain of events) and the existents (the characters and the items of setting). The second part, the discourse, is the means by which the content is expressed (Chatman, 478). Narrative aesthetics experienced a rapid shift with the publication of Gerard Genette's *Discourse du Racit* (1972), originally published in French and subsequently translated into English by Jane E. Levin as *Narrative Discourse: An Essay in Method* (1980). Gerard Genette has rendered substantial contribution to the structuralist narratology. Genette tries to systematize the nomenclature of the division between 'story' and 'plot' and suggests a threefold division. Before Gerard Genette, Russian Formalists suggested the concepts of 'Fabula' (story) and 'Syuzhet' (plot). Roland Barthes and Tzvetan Todorov also suggested an analogous division, 'Racit' and 'Discourse'. 'Racit' is the basic story similar to the 'Fabula' and 'Discourse' is the artistic construction similar to the 'Syuzhet'.

Genette takes more interest in 'racit' and makes out certain fundamental elements and techniques of narrative such as time, mood and voice. Time is the relations of chronology between the time and the story and pseudo - time / time of the narrative. It includes order, duration and frequency. According to Genette 'mood' is a set of modalities that monitor narrative information. 'Mood' means the diverse ways of telling of events, according to one point of view or the other. This 'mood' consists of focalization and distance dealing with diegesis and mimesis. The concept of 'voice' is the relationship between the verbal actions and the character who reports them. It includes narrators and speech. The readers often confuse voice with point-of-view. Gerald Prince in *A Dictionary of Narratology* distinguishes between the two. Mieke Bal is one of the first narratologists in her *Narratology: Introduction to The Theory of Narrative* (1985) attempts to present a systematic account of theory of narrative. She defines a narrative text as "a finite, structured whole composed of language signs. A narrative text is a text in which an agent relates a narrative. A story is a fabula that is presented in a certain manner. A fabula is a series of logically and chronologically related events that are caused or experienced by actors..." (Bal, 8). Mieke Bal used the term 'focalization' to refer to the relations between the elements presented and the vision through which they are presented. Bal asserts that the subject and the object of focalization must be studied separately. The person who performs the role of focalization is the focalizer. It is from this view that the elements are viewed. Bal says that this point can lie with a character, as an element of the fabula, or outside it. If the character himself or herself performs the role of the focalizer, then that character carries greater a technical advantage over other characters, because the reader will observe with the character's eyes and Bal says the reader "... will, in principle, be inclined to accept the vision presented by the character" (Ibid, 104). For convenience, Bal abbreviates this character - bound focalizer / focalization as CF and maintains that this character bound focalizer brings about 'bias' and 'limitation'. The character bound focalization can move from one character to another character. This move helps us to see how different characters view the same facts differently.

Roland Barthes, one of the significant narrative theorists makes a rapid shift from structuralist approach to post structuralist approach towards narrative. He employs the methods of structuralist linguistics,

anthropology and poststructuralism in understanding narrative. In his essay, “Structural Analysis of Narrative” (1977), Barthes places narrative at the level of discourse arguing that “the language of narrative is one (and clearly only one) of the idioms apt for consideration by the linguistics of discourse...” (Barthes, 84). While structuralist study of narrative concentrates on the text as an object of study, the poststructuralist, postmodern theorists deconstruct the narrative and accentuate the function of a subject (reader, listener, and viewer) in the act of analysis and interpretation of meaning.

(III) The Elements of Narrative:

The various definitions of narrative and the perspectives of the narrative theorists make it clear that a narrative is composed of certain formal elements such as plot, character, point of view, time, setting, theme, language and various kinds of symbolism. As a painter skillfully uses shape, color, perspective and aspects of visual art to create a painting, a writer of narrative fiction uses all the above formal elements to create artistic effect in fiction. An understanding of the formal elements of narrative will enhance the analysis and interpretation of narrative techniques used in a narrative fiction. Plot is a literary term for narrative structure. Thus plot is the artistic arrangement of events. It is how the author systematically puts together events to develop his underlying idea. The study of plot of a novel helps the reader to understand how the novelist has structured different parts together and thereby gets the idea of author’s perspectives of life and his novelistic craft.

In fiction, the term ‘character’ is used to refer to a textual representation of human beings. They are the human beings, (animals in some stories) created by the writer to execute the action in a story. The character development is a crucial element in a narrative and in many fictional works, the close study of characters is essential to comprehend the entire story. The character formation is a meticulous and mindful endeavor of the writer. E.M. Forster in his *Aspects of the Novel* propounds the superiority of the character to action and privileges character. For him, the twentieth century novel is, in fact, the sum total of the growth and development of personality, it is ‘exploration of the human personality.’ Later the critics like Vladimir Propp, Tomashevsky and Barthes recognized the significance of character and they changed their conception that characters and actions are always complementary to each other; one depends upon the other and the two can never be detached. Plot and character are the corresponding and reciprocal critical concepts. Thus in a literary work, especially in fiction, plot and character carry similar importance and they are intimately connected. The previous studies of the narrative elaborated the concepts of dynamic and static characters, major and minor characters, constituent and inconstituent ones etc. However, it was E.M. Forster who developed the notion of round and flat characters. According to E.M. Forster, flat characters are what were formerly delineated as “humours”, “types” or “caricatures”. They are constructed around a single idea or quality. Such a person cannot be described by a unique sentence or a label. There is no development with them. They never get changed by surroundings. Hence they are also designated as static characters. In real life, we rarely encounter such characters, but in novels their role is mostly evident, especially for the benefit of contrast. On the contrary, round characters are complex, multifaceted, multi-dimensional, dynamic and unpredictable. These characters can actually be tragic and can move us arousing various feelings and emotions. Such characters display new aspects of personality every time. The novelists use two peculiar methods of delineation of characters in a narrative such as showing and telling. The method of ‘showing’ is a dramatic or theatrical method in which the author shows the character carrying out certain actions and speeches. The reader derives the qualities and traits from the characters’ actions, speech, or appearance. The author may use various techniques such as ‘stream of consciousness technique’, ‘interior monologue’, ‘soliloquy’ and other techniques to show characters’ inner thoughts, feelings and emotions. Another method of ‘telling’ is a direct method of telling the qualities and traits of a character in description or narration. In this method, the author possesses the authority to narrate the qualities, traits and the intentions of the characters.

In its technical sense, the term ‘point of view’ is used to refer to the ‘angle from which a fictional work is narrated’. It denotes the source and scope of the narrative voice. M.H. Abrams observes that point of view, “... signifies the way a story gets told, the mode (or modes) established by an author by means of which the reader is presented with the characters, dialogue, actions, setting, and events which constitute the narrative in a work of fiction” (Abrams, 240). According to Gerald Prince, point of view is, “The perpetual and conceptual position in terms of which the narrated situations and events are presented” (Prince, 73). Thus the several narrative theorists have provided wide ranging interpretations on point of view and have contributed to its nature and meaning. Point of view is a vital aspect of a narrative fiction as the author’s choice of point of view has a considerable effect on the story’s voice and on the type of information given to the readers. The modern novelists carefully and consciously employed this literary device of point of view so as to elucidate and illuminate their subject matter in the best possible way.

The authors of narrative fiction have developed and adopted different modes to narrate a story. The most extensively used modes are first person point of view and the third person point of view.

Though time is an imperceptible element, it is one of the most significant and indissoluble components in a work of narrative. The time element is so crucial that it can neither be excluded nor overlooked while designing a narrative because time is “crucial to narrative”. Novel is a narrative craft that aims at telling a story and a story is a narration of events associated by subject matter, and it is related by time. E.M. Forster acknowledges the importance of time when he writes, “... it is never possible for a novelist to deny time inside the fabric of his novel ...”(Forster, 31). MiekeBal, in her treatise *Narratology: Introduction to The Theory of Narrative* (1985), deals mainly with two aspects of time: duration and chronology. According to Bal, duration is the time span and there can be diverse possibilities of duration of a story. For instance one evening, one night, some days, one season, one year, some years, many centuries or some indefinite time period. The main narrative of *The Arabian Nights* contains a story which takes one season where as the story of the *Old Testament* runs in many centuries. MiekeBal further makes a distinction in the duration of a story between ‘crisis’ and ‘development’. The term ‘crisis’ denotes a short period of time in which events are condensed while the term ‘development’ denotes a longer period of time which shows a series and succession. The long period of time in biographies, autobiographies, bildungsromans, war novels, historical novels etc. show that they are the stories of development. The notable examples are *The Arabian Nights* and *Decameron*. But there are many narratives that are written in crisis form as they take a short period of time narrating a moment of crisis. MiekeBal identifies chronology as another important aspect of time. There are stories with chronological accuracy and chronological inaccuracy. The chronological inaccuracy is created due to the exclusion of an element in a sequence of events and occurrences. Such exclusion creates gaps in the series of events and occurrences and the readers find it complicated to get the exact meaning. But often the omitted events are brought in the story in some other part. Bal considers that such chronological inaccuracy is very significant in a narrative as it has the element of suspense and surprise.

The term ‘setting’ refers to the physical environment where narrative events actually take place. It includes the description of a particular locale, a manner of dress, customs, speech patterns and slang expressions. The setting is a vital element of a narrative as it enhances interest and adds meaning to the narrative. The setting is a practical matter of placement of the characters in and environment within which they can enact their roles in the story. It helps to know the location and time of the events. The element of setting serves to establish a credible framework for the events of the story to take place and for the characters to come around it. Gerard Genette defines a narrator as a ‘speaker or voice of the narrative discourse’ (Genette, 186). A narrator is an agent who sets up a communicative approach with the addressee (the ‘narratee’). The narrator chooses *what* is to be narrated, *how* it is to be narrated, from what point of view, and in what order. Narrators can be partially overt and partially covert. A covert narrator is also called as an indirect narrator- such a narrator disappears in the background and who goes into hiding. This kind of narrator generally does not use first person pronoun and shuns loud and striking voice.

Gerard Genette coined two terms ‘homodiegetic narrative’ and ‘heterodiegetic narrative’. The ‘homodiegetic narrative’ is equivalent to first person narrative and ‘heterodiegetic narrative’ is equivalent to third person narrative. In a ‘homodiegetic narrative’, the story is narrated by a homodiegetic narrator who is involved as a character in the story. The prefix ‘homo’ is used to indicate that the individual who performs the role of a narrator also enacts as a character. The distinction between a homodiegetic and heterodiegetic narrator is that a homodiegetic narrator always narrates a story of personal experience, where as a heterodiegetic narrator narrates a story about other people’s experience. In a homodiegetic narrative, the narrator often narrates an autobiographical story about past events and experiences. MiekeBal in her book *Narratology: Introduction to The Theory of Narrative* (1985) has coined two different terms such as ‘character bound narrator’ (CN) and ‘external narrator’ (EN). When the narrator narrates a story in which he himself performs the role of a character, it is called character bound narrator (CN). When the narrator narrates the story of someone else and does not perform the role of a character, it is called ‘external narrator’ (EN). CN is an insider one whose narrative seems to be autobiographical while EN is an outsider who narrates impossible or unknowable situations. Gerald Prince and Genette describe narratee (le narrataire) as one more narratological entity, which is as significant as the narrator. A narratee is a person who receives the message sent by the narrator. He / She is the collaborator whom the narrating is addressed. The role of the narratee is as significant as that of the narrator. Like narrator, narratee can be divided into different categories such as ‘extra – diegetic’ or ‘intra-diegetic’ narratee, covert or overt narratee. The roles and responsibilities of narratee are identical or sometimes greater than those of the narrators.

(IV)Some Popular Narrative Techniques:

The practitioners of the novel form have employed different types of narrative techniques in their works in order to attain certain literary effects and make their works more interesting. Some of the popular narrative techniques are Flashback and Flash-forward technique, In Media's res, Dream Sequence, Ellipsis(narrative mode),In Cluing, Red herring(narrative) and Stream of Consciousness. Flashback is one of the most popular techniques employed in novels and also in films. This technique is used to narrate the events that took place earlier to the story's primary sequence of events or to fill crucial back story. Flashback and Flash-forward techniques are two different faces of the same coin. In Indian narrative tradition, *The Mahabharata* is the earliest example of flashback technique. 'In Medias res' is a Latin phrase first coined by the Roman critic, Horace 'meaning into the middle of the things'. It is a narrative technique which starts the narrative in the middle of the story instead starting from the beginning. The other elements of the narrative such as the character, settings and conflicts are by employing flashbacks. This technique has its origin in oral narrative tradition and it has served as a convention of epic poetry. The earliest examples of this technique are Homer's *Odyssey* and *Iliad*. This technique has also been employed popularly in the Modernist literature. Ellipsis is a narrative device which is used to shorten the length of the story by allowing the reader to fill in the missing parts of the narrative with their imagination. This narrative device does not narrate all the events in a sequence but omits a portion of events. The readers, with their imagination fill in the narrative gap. The best example of this narrative device is *To The Light House* in which one finds such omission of events in the first and second part of the novel. First used in the nineteenth century, stream of consciousness is a narrative technique which is employed to reveal the character's thoughts, feelings, emotions and actions. The phrase was first used by William James in his *Principles of Psychology* (1890). This particular technique is used in psychological novels as it deals with an individual's psychological process or thought process.

(V)Conclusion

Thus narratives can be used in various contexts to communicate some information, message or stories more effectively. In general communication, narratives can evoke emotions, develop connections and transmit the information effectively, leading to audience engagement. In literature, narratives help the writers to raise curiosity among the readers and sustain their interest. In literature, narrative is essentially a story, whether narrated in prose or verse, which comprises incidents and characters and what the characters say and do. A narrative is generally narrated by a narrator, whether in the first, second or third person. In the novel, when its narration is assigned to a particular person, it becomes a technique used by that person. This person who is entrusted with the task of narration is the narrator and his perspective serves as a prism through which ideas are passed on to the readers. The writer employs certain narrative technique that contributes extensively to attain several literary effects.

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