

An Analysis of the Concept of Time in Bina Shah’s “*The Optimist*”: A Narratological Study

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Abstract

*This paper primarily aims at applying Gerard Genette’s narratological framework of time to the study of Bina Shah’s *The Optimist*. This study focuses to highlight the time shift processes in the short story to know how the writer presents her characters’ events of several years in a short space of the text with non-linear approach of time. Time is one of the several components of narratology like mood, voice, narration, focalization, etc. The present study comprises of three main sections. The first section deals with introduction of the study. The second section deals with the elaboration of the categories of time used as the theoretical framework, based on Genette’s narratological model related to time (Tense). The third section deals with analysis of the short story under study aspire to identify the elaborated categories. Genette divides time into order, duration and frequency. The order is further subdivided into analepses and prolepses. Duration is divided into summary, scene, pause and ellipses. Frequency is divided into singulative, repetitive and iterative. Hence, after the analysis, the present study shows that Bina Shah’s *The Optimist* is employed with non-linear concept of time where writer has presented events of several years of Adnan’s and Raheela’s lives in a short space of the text.*

Key terms: Narratology, short story, tense, mood and voice

Introduction

This paper provides a narratological analysis of a Pakistani English short story *The Optimist* (2007) written by Bina Shah. The study focuses on the importance of the use of the time shift in the works of fiction by applying Genette’s model of narratological time on Bina Shah’s *The Optimist*. The story revolves around the issue of arrange marriage in Pakistani context. The marriage takes place between two cousins, Adnan and Raheela and ends with divorce. The story has three narrations. The first narration is made by Adnan. The second narration is made by Raheela and the third narration is again made by Adnan. The first narration starts with recounting of past events by Adnan. The story covers the period of characters’ study, discussion of marriage proposal, marriage and divorce. These all events of characters’ lives are narrated on only thirteen pages of the text. Most importantly, the events are not recounted chronologically. Hence, the story is observed



with several time shifts in the form of flash-forwards and flashbacks that have compelled the researchers to reconsider the study from the perspective of narratological time to what Genette (1980, p.35) states, 'time' in the world of fiction is identified in terms of 'the relationship between the story time and the narrative time or discourse time' and it does not follow chronological order. There is always distortion of time in the narrative texts. This study spotlights the components of time shift to answer the question how do Bina Shah has employed the concept of narratological time to recount events of several years of her characters' lives in a short space of the text?

To explore the concept of time shift and its importance in the selected short story, the researchers have firstly elaborated the categories and sub-categories of the time as presented by Genette (1980) in his narratological model in the form of theoretical framework. Secondly, the researchers have identified those categories in *The Optimist*. By analyzing *The Optimist*, it has been found that the short story is employed with time shift that helps author to recount events of several years on the short space of the text (thirteen pages only).

Literature Review

The Optimist (2007) is a short story comprising of events of several years of lives of Adnan and Raheela (the story time) recounted on the thirteen pages of the text (the discourse time). Seemingly, Bina Shah has employed the technique of omission. According to Genette (1980), it is not possible for author to recount every moment of the actual story of character in the narrative text, therefore, he follows some techniques of omission. These techniques are studied under the domain of narratology.

Narratology, as term suggests is the study of narrative or in Tzvetanian terms is "the science of narrative" (Gholami, 2013, p.25). The term was coined in late sixties of the twentieth century (Fludernik, 2009). Russian formalists were the first who analyzed folk stories under the domain of narratology (Prince, 1982). Abdullah (2015), Chatman (1978) and Prince (1982) demonstrate that narratology is based on theory which deals with the study and analysis of narrative structure in narrative fiction. According to Fludernik (2009), narratology is narrative theory. It is taught and used as a genre. Its purpose is to illustrate various correlated narrative structures in the narrative texts and to identify how these components are connected in the domain of narratological models understudy. According to Arege (2012), narratology is concerned with the manner in which stories are told and not the interpretation of stories.

Narrative is one of the parts of narratology. It comprises of a story or stories either in verse or prose, consisting of plot (events, characters, action and dialogues). It is present in both poetry and prose. In prose, novels and short stories are instances (Ahmadian and Jorfi, 2015). Genette (1980, p. 25) demonstrates, "narrative refers to the narrative statement, the oral or written discourse that undertakes to tell of an event or a series of events. Narrative, in common parlance, is technical word which is associated with literary works of fiction like short stories, novels and epic poetry (Bal, 2009). Several narratologists have contributed in evolving several models of narratology to study works

of fiction (Cohn, 1995). However, the narratologists like Bal(2009), Chatman(1978) and Rimmon-Kenan(2002) consider Genette (1980) as their predecessor and one of the pioneers of narratological models.

Genette (1980) is one of the classical narratologists whose models of narratology have been studied and will be studied for years (Fludernik, 2009). Genette's (1980) narratological models comprise of three main categories, voice, mood and tense. Genette (1980, p. 20-27) divides 'voice' into narrator and narratee pertaining to their levels and paradigms. He (ibid) further divides narrator and narrator into extradiegetic and intradiegetic levels. This aspect is not relevant to this study. 'Mood', Genette (1980, p. 161-162) divides into narrative distance and focalization. This aspect is also not relevant to this study. The third aspect is 'tense' that Genette (1980, p.26-34) has discussed comprehensively.

Genette (1980, p. 27) names 'tense' as 'narrative time'. Narrative time is 'pseudo-temporal' which deals with relations of chronology between the story and text. The 'story time' is the actual duration of events which refers to the sequence of events and the length of time that passes in the story (Genette, 1980, p.27). The 'text time' or discourse time as Genette (1980, p.28) calls, is said to be 'pseudo time' where no chronological order of events is followed. The time order is distorted or is not followed strictly. The author of the text narrates or omits events where he feels necessity. The 'discourse – time' (the text-time) covers the length of time that is taken by the telling or reading of the story and the sequence of events as they are presented in the discourse (Genette, 1980, p.28-32). This temporal relation of time, Genette (1980, p. 35-116) has classified intoorder', 'duration' and 'frequency'. This aspect is discussed in the following section of theoretical framework.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework is based on the concept of time as presented by Genette. He has divided time into order, duration (dealing with speed of events), and frequency of those events.

1. Order

Order is the 'pseudo-temporal arrangement' (Genette, 1980, p. 35). It shows relationship between the events presented in the story and the way these events are arranged in the narrative. In other words, it determines the relationship between the chronology of the story and the narrative (Genette, 1980). Arege (2012) explains that the chronology of the story contains of events which are placed in order as they happen in the world of fiction and the chronology of the narrative comprises of events as they are narrated in the narrative. In normal format, a story contains events in an appropriate order as they happen in succession. Most importantly, in chronological time order, these successions of events in the story are recounted in the narrative in proper order of their happening (Genette, 1980). Simply, one may say that the story events and the narrative discourse are dealt in the same way. But, it does not occur in narratives

because all events of real story cannot be recounted in the narrative in proper order or there cannot be perfect temporal relationship between the events of the story and their recounting in the discourse of the narrative (Genette, 1980; Rimmon-Kenan, 2002).

Therefore, the sequence of events of the story, according to Genette (1980, p. 35-36), is disturbed or distorted in the one or the other way in the narrative and termed as 'anachrony'. 'Anachronies' are of various kinds of the discordance between the story and the narrative (Genette, 1980, p.40). This interruption of order of events in the narrative happens in two ways, i.e. by putting events in the narrative which had happened somewhere in the past or long time ago (analepses) or by means of recounting events in the narrative in advance (prolepses) (Genette, 1980). Genette (1980) explains that these anachronies (analepses and prolepses) are put to distort the order of the primary narrative.

Analepses are often known as flashbacks (Genette, 1980). Rimmon-Kenan (2002, p.46) defines, "an analepsis is a narrative of a story-event at a point in the text after later events have been told. The narration returns, as it were, to a past point in the story". Prolepses, on the other hand, Genette (1980) explains, are anachronies which are inserted to disturb the order of primary narrative when events are told before their happening later in the narrative. In simple words, prolepses determine the events in the narrative that are told in advance which are going to happen at later stage in the narrative (Arege, 2012). One may say that prolepses are anticipatory summary (Rimmon-Kenan, 2002). Prolepses are often known as flash forwards (Genette, 1980).

2. Duration

Duration is another temporal component which deals with narrative speed (Genette, 1980). It determines the relationship between the duration of events that happen and the length of text in which those events are recounted (Genette, 1980). In other words, the duration establishes the ratio between the story time and the textual space. The story time is often measured in terms of minutes, hours, days, weeks, months and years. The textual space is the length of the text which is often measured in lines, paragraphs and pages (Abdullah, 2015; Rimmon-Kenan, 2002). The relationship between the duration of events and the length of text is determined in two ways. The one way is when an event of a story comprising of a long period is narrated in a short space of the text known as the acceleration in terms of the narrative speed (Genette, 1980). It can be exemplified as an event of one hour may cover 100 pages of the text (Abdullah, 2015). The other way is when an event of a story comprising of short period is recounted in the long space of the text, commonly, known as deceleration in terms of the narrative speed (Genette, 1980). It can be exemplified as an event of 5 years may take the space of 1 paragraph or page (Abdullah, 2015). Genette (1980) has divided duration into summary, scene, pause and ellipses.

Summary is the form of acceleration which consists of recounting of events of several days, months or years in a few paragraphs or a few pages of the text without description of detailed action and narration (Genette, 1980; Rimmon-Kenan, 2002). In simple words, summary is devoted a short space of the text to a long period of story time (Abdullah, 2015).

In the scene the both duration of story and duration of text are identical (Genette, 1980; Rimmon-Kenan, 2002). The best example of scene is dialogue (Abdullah, 2015). Dialogue is one of the main characteristics of the drama but it has been also used in the narration (Arege, 2012). According to Abdullah (2015), apart from dialogue, commentary and generalizations in the narration are also parts of scene. During scene the pace of narration slows down which is known as 'deceleration' in terms of the narrative speed (Abdullah, 2015, p. 50).

Pauses consist of descriptive segments of the text which render no action (Rimmon-Kenan, 2002). Genette (1980) demonstrates that when a narrator describes something like a picture to provide more information regarding any event is said to be the pause in the text. Simply, it is suspension of narration temporarily to describe any event that the narrator feels is important (Ahmadian and Jorfi, 2015). It may include 'landscapes', 'socio-cultural' or 'socio-historical backgrounds' or 'state of mind' (Fudernik, 2009, p. 33).

'Ellipses or omissions' are the maximum speed where story duration is corresponded by zero textual space (Genette, 1980, p.108; Rimmon-Kenan, 2002, p. 53). It is not necessary that an author may provide every detail of events of actual story because it may not be possible. Therefore, an author may omit some information or detail and leave for readers to figure out the information from the gaps left due to omissions (Abdullah, 2015). Ellipses are useful to accelerate the pace of the story (Rimmon-Kenan, 2002). Writers often use ellipses to establish suspension in the story (Fludernik, 2009).

3. Frequency

Frequency or repetition shows relationship between the 'occurrence of events in number of times in the story and mentioning of those events in number of times in the narrative' (Genette, 1980, p. 113). In other words, frequency deals with question of how often? When events that occur once, twice or several times in the story are narrated once, twice or several times in the narrative, the frequency is observed (Genette, 1980; Rimmon-Kenan, 2002). Genette (1980) has elaborated three modes of frequency, singulative, repetitive and iterative.

Singulative frequency is mentioning of events once in the narrative what happened once in the story or mentioning of events in number of times in the narrative what happened number of times in the story (Genette, 1980; Rimmon-Kenan, 2002). Repetitive frequency is mentioning of events several times in the narrative what happened once in the story (Genette, 1980; Rimmon-Kenan, 2002). Iterative frequency is mentioning of events once in the narrative what happened several times in the story (Genette, 1980; Rimmon-Kenan, 2002).

Research Methodology

This study is qualitative in nature and is based on the textual analysis of a short story, *The Optimist* written by Bina Shah. The study is analyzed in the light of theoretical framework based on narrative time, one of the aspects of Genette's model of narratology. The data was collected and analyzed with close reading technique.

An analysis of the short story

In this part of the study, selected paragraphs are highlighted where the narrative time of the story is manipulated in the form of order, duration and frequency. The story begins with narration of Adnan who is recounting the past events that happened on the day of his wedding:

I know Raheela doesn't love me. She chose to tell me this on the day of our wedding in Karachi. The moment our nikah was signed she said that she hated me (para.1, p.169).

The opening sentence of the above paragraph is in normal order but the rest of the two sentences are analepses. Adnan is recounting the events what happened on the day of his wedding somewhere in the past. This extract is the example where the time shift is observed. The normal order of the story is distorted after the first sentence and then the narrator takes readers to the past events. In this analepses, one may also observe instance of repetitive narration when Adnan is mentioning of Raheela's hate which happened once but is recounted several times, twice in the above passage and many times later in the story. Adnan continues to recount:

She didn't move a muscle, not even to shift her forehead into furrows of disdain. Her eyes stayed perfectly blank but the lips still moved, whispering words that stung. 'This will never work. You know I don't love you. I can't stand the sight of you, Adnan. I'm only doing this to make my parents happy. I'll be back in England before the year's out.' She threw a glance my way. 'Oh, my God, don't even try to make me feel sorry for you. I can't stand men who cry.' (para.4, p.169).

The first part of the above paragraph is the instance of pause that describes Raheela's appearance on the day of wedding. It is the static setting. The next part is the example of scene because here Raheela is in conversation with Adnan as dialogue is the best example of scene. But, the dialogue "I'll be back in England before the year's out", is the example of prolepses. Here Raheela is telling her plan in advance in the story that happens at the later stage of the story. Moreover, the following paragraph recounted by Adnan is another mixture of time shifts:

I've loved Raheela from the day I saw her photograph. I still remember all the details; a beautiful sea-green shalwar kameez, dark hair cascading down her shoulders, milky eyes looking straight into the lens, not dipped shyly away to portray innocence. It was her cousin's wedding, the way they have them in England, in some strange recreation centre with a dirty pool (para. 8, p.170).

The opening sentence of the above paragraphs is the example of repetitive narration as event of Adnan's falling in love happened once but is mentioned several times in the story and he also mentions of Raheela's photograph several times. The next sentence is the good example of scene because here the narrator is describing physical appearance and garments of Raheela when he saw her photo. The last sentence is the instance of ellipses because no information or detail about Raheela's cousin is given. He just mentions the occasion, not the description which is to be figured out by the readers. Another example of ellipses can be found in the following paragraph:

My mother sobbed her worries about me late at night or over the phone to her sisters, but she shouldn't have worried so much (para.10, p.171).

The above sentence signifies that information regarding his mother's worries that she narrated to him or to her sister are omitted. We are not told what worries were and how she told. Moreover, we also do not know who is her sister and where does she live. Further, the following paragraph is mixture of different narrative tools:

'Oh, God, Mum, not another story about Nahid. I can't deal with this today. She's my sister and I love her, but I just can't. You don't know what I've been through. There was this old crumbly who came in with ten year-old coupons to pay for his food. These bloody rude boys were opening packages of stuff and eating them before they were paid for. And this blind man brought in his guard dog and it pissed all over the floor in front of my check-out line!' (para.18, p.173).

The above paragraph is another example of pause and analepses which are encompassed with ellipses. The pause is created because Raheela is uttering dialogues. Analepses are present in a sense that recounting of events is related to the past happenings which are merely added to create suspense in the story. This time the narrator is Raheela. The first sentence is an ellipsis because the narrator does not provide information that what was Nahid's story. She just tells that she loves her which is an

instance of singulative narration because it happened once and is mentioned once. The rest of sentences are also examples of ellipses because no detailed information is provided about the persons and happening of events. One cannot find what went on among them. They are just mentioned once and are not repeated anywhere in the story.

Summary is another important segment of time (duration) which deals with speeding up of the events in the story. In this story this speeding up of events can be identified at several places. In this context the following paragraph deals with summary. Raheela narrates:

One night I picked up an English guy, took him back to Nina's place, woke up the next morning to find his jeans already gone from the chair he'd hung them up on the night before. It was the first time I'd ever done anything like that (para.33, p.176).

The first sentence of the above paragraph is an example of summary because the events of whole night are summed in a single sentence. This is also an example of ellipsis because whole night's events are omitted. What had happened throughout the night is not described. Another example of summary is to be found when Raheela narrates:

Two months later I was on a plane to Pakistan with the rest of my family, to become my cousin Adnan's unwilling bride ..., while eight hours passed by and I didn't say a single word to anyone (para.39, p.177).

In the above paragraph, two months' time is speeded up in one sentence. This sentence can be read within a few seconds which is the story time but events in the actual story could have taken long time. These lengthy details are elided which result in accelerating the pace of the story. The last part of the above paragraph is also an example of summary because the time of eight hours in the plane is passed like few seconds in just one sentence. It is again speeding up of the pace of the story. Other cases of summary are explicit from the last narrations of Adnan when he comes along with his wife to drop his in-laws at airport. His wife goes with her parents inside of the airport leaving her husband to wait for her outside. Adnan tells:

At the end of the week her family was ready to return to England (para.50, p.179).

The above sentence of paragraph is another instance of summary where a week's time is speeded up. Most importantly, Adnan's narration of his waiting at airport can be called as the best examples of summary:

Five minutes passed, then ten...through the fibreglass bridge (para. 54, p.180).

Adnan's above narration of ten minutes covers eight lines in the narrative. The next paragraph portrays summary as:

Twenty minutes passed and my stomach began to sink....put her to bed and let her rest (para.55, p.180).

Adnan's above narration of another ten minutes is devoted with the space of six lines in the narrative. Another paragraph on the same page has summary as:

When thirty minutes passed, I knew what she had done (para.56, p.180).

Adnan's another narration of ten minutes is just narrated in one sentence in the text.

Conclusion

By analyzing the concept of time as presented by Genette, in Bina Shah's this short story, one may grasp that the short stories like this do not follow adhered linear time but rather events are narrated contrary to chronological sequence. Shah's short story contains various tools of narrative technique related to the concept of time. The order of time is followed with analepses and prolepses, two anachronies in the words of Genette. Duration in the story is present in the form of summaries, scenes, pauses and ellipses. Frequency is present in the form of singulative and repetitive narrations in the short story. Thus, Bina's *The Optimist* possesses time shifts that enable the writer to recount events of several years of lives of characters without taking the space of several pages.

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