

Focalization Analysis in “Under the Volcano” & “Yacobian Building”; A Comparative Study

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Abstract In this paper, I try to support Gerard Genette's conception of focalization, that was first proposed by him in his book *Narrative Discourse* (1980). Focalization is known as the perspective of the narrator in fiction. It includes a comparative study of layers of focalization in multicultural perspectives by analysing the narratological techniques in two of the most controversial novels. Those novels represent two worlds apart; one is Alaa Alaswany's *Yacobian Building* and the other is Malcolm Lowry's *Under the Volcano*. In both novels, the narrators are absent from the two stories told. These narrators are depersonalized and they are lacking definable personalities and opinions.

Keywords Focalization, Narratology, Comparative Literature

1. Introduction

In his *Under The Volcano* (1947), Malcolm Lowry formulates through narrative voices his ideas on the nature of the creative process in literature, which is comparable to Alaa El-Aswany's *Yacobian Building* (2002). Both writers exploit the stream of consciousness technique for revealing the thoughts and feelings flowing through the minds of the characters. *Under the Volcano* and *Yacobian Building* are exquisite examples of self-conscious narration that are nearing the scope of Arabic and English literature for their innovative narrative strategies.

2. Literary review

Under the Volcano has been compared to Yacobian Building, as both Lowry and El-Aswany throughout their works shift between each character's stream-of-consciousness in an innovative style. What reinforces the comparison is that both novels exposes the emotions of desperate and destructive characters facing the end of their lives. Lowry's novel depicts the last day of a fallen British diplomat in a Mexican Village. And the eruption of Popocatepetl volcano transports Firmin back into his memories, to his internal world, but also through the present, where he confronts his brother Hugh and his estranged wife, Yvonne.

By contrast, *Yacobian Building* depicts the conversion of Upper and Middle classes at times of converging with one another. This building used to be a prestigious apartment

blocks for government ministers, wealthy manufacturers and foreigners in 1952, many of those residents fled the country, and people of a more rural background and lower social state caste than the previous residents. This conversion resulted in corruption, undemocratic political system dominated by "the patriotic party", a perceived degradation of morals, and lack of social cohesion.

My analysis advocates Genette's perspective of focalization explained in his book "Narrative Discourse" 1980. According to his definition, focalization means the perspective of the narrator in fiction. Narratives can be "non-focalized, internally focalized or externally focalized" [1]. Genette bases his theory on a clear-cut distinction between "mood" and "voice". The former term addresses the question, "who is the character whose point of view orients the narrative perspective?" (who sees), while the latter asks, "who is the narrator?" (who speaks). In *Under the Volcano* and *The Yacobian Building*, the narrators are absent from the two stories told. These narrators are depersonalized and they are lacking definable personalities and opinions.

3. Discussion

Although focalization may vary within a text, we can classify both *Under the Volcano* and *Yacobian Building* as Genette's second type, "internal focalization" in which "the narrator says only what a given character knows". The focalizations in both novels are variable: as in Lowry's novel the depersonalized narrator "sees" through the minds of Lauruelle, Yvonne, Hugh, and the consul, also in El-Aswany's novel, the depersonalized narrator "sees" through the minds of Zaki Bey El-Dessouki, Buthayna El-Sayed, Hatem Rasheed, and Hagg Azzam.

Genette notes that a text has internal focalization if "it can

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be rewritten in the first person, changing only the grammatical pronouns"[2]. This view suggests a particular closeness between the narrator and the focalizing character and indeed, internal focalization appears to reflect the border between two consciousnesses, as in El-Aswany's novel:

Then he stares long into the darkness of the room, gradually soaring until he beholds himself in his mind's eye as a police officer strutting proudly in his beautiful uniform... He imagines that he has married his sweetheart Busayna and that they have moved to a suitable apartment in an up-market district far from the noise and dirt of the roof[3].

To explain the field of Genette's "internal focalization", MiekeBal the narratologist introduces another category of "double focalization" in which:

The external focalization watches along with a person, without leaving focalization entirely to a character focalization. This happens when an object (which a character can perceive) is focalized, but nothing clearly indicates whether it is actually perceived.[4]

Thus, an external focalizer at the first level of focalization "looks over the shoulder" of a character focalizer at a second level in an attempt to put critical comments into the reader's mouth. In other words, the narrator intrudes himself into his narrative and addresses his reader directly over the heads of his characters. Bal notes that double focalization is "comparable to free indirect speech, in which the narrating party approximates as closely as possible the character's own words without letting it speak directly"[5]. This interrelationship between focalization, subjectivity and forms of discourse represents the narratological similarities between *Under the Volcano* and *Yacoubian Building*.

Where free indirect discourse occurs, internal focalization also must occur, for in adopting words within a character's linguistic range, a narrator inevitably "sees" through that character's eyes. The following is a run-on sentence, encompassing several strands of narration:

The consul stumbled on without being seen, passing a booth where you could have your photograph taken with your sweetheart against a terrifying thunderous background, lurid and green, with a charging bull, and Popocatepetl in eruption, past, his face averted, the shabby little closed British consulate, where the lion and the unicorn on the faded blue shield regarded him mournfully.[6]

By way of mapping the above out: first the consul passes the photo booth-upon doing so, Lowry takes the opportunity to bring us into the booth, where we see the background- the charging bull, the Volcano. With little warning- all revolving around one word "past"- Lowry brings us back out to the consul, whose face is averted as he passes the British consulate. Lowry then takes that opportunity to describe the lion and unicorn on the Bc's shield: mournful. This is how Lowry stacks boxes into boxes- skillfully.

Comparable to Lowry, throughout the novel El-Aswany shifts between each character's stream-of-consciousness with little warning:

He (Zaki) would never throw Dawlat out, and he would

never take her to the court. He couldn't do it... He cannot forget the way she once was, which he loved. How delicate and shy she used to be, and how she's changed! How could she have brought herself to throw him out in front of the neighbors? And how was she able to sit in front of the officer at the police station and make out a report against her brother?[7]

We can see from this quotation that El-Aswany formulates through narrative voices his ideas on certain characters and the change of their behaviors through a wide range of time limit. Apparently, ordinary life in this sketch is full of fiction, in spite of the fact that it is a "realistic" representation of the everyday life. What this text also suggests is that a person (Zaki) recounting his sister's life (Dawlet) is actually telling fiction, and through self-exploration and self-questioning re-creates "reality". This is where we come to think about the term metafiction that is "given to fictional writing which self-consciously draws attention to its status as an artifact in order to pose questions about the relationship between fiction and reality".[8]

In *Under the Volcano*, the first four paragraphs of chapter one have an element of ambiguity in their focalization. At first the narrative appears from a distant external viewpoint before the narration "zooms in" by an internal perspective. For example, the reference to Laruelle as "the other"[9] reinforces this interpretation; because in cases of double focalization the focalizing character is normally referred to by his proper name. Also these paragraphs have a faint echo in Laruelle's thoughts: he recalls the consul "wandering around Cholula with its three hundred and six churches and its two barber shops"[10] Even Lowry suggests in his letter to Jonathan Cape, that Laruelle focalizes all of the remaining chapters with the final statement of chapter one " backwards revolved the luminous wheel"[11] referring to Laruelle's memory turning backwards in time.

In both *Under the Volcano* and *Yacoubian Building*, the characters take double focus, and the ascription of certain words to either the narrator or a particular character becomes a difficult attempt. Thus both novels plunges the readers into the state of uncertainty, confusion and delusion experienced by the focalizing characters. For instance, in *Under the Volcano*, Lowry uses a final attempt to beat back the inevitable victory of Fascism to throw a sense of futility of his protagonists' battle against guilt.

In excusing his cowardice, Hugh thinks "and the truth was, it was perhaps one of those occasions when nothing would have done any good". It's this fatalism that mars each's life, and it's this fatalism that prevents any of the three from taking action against the Pelado. As it turns out, it's that choice or rather lack of choice... that seals each's fate.[12]

By the same token, El-Aswany in *Yacoubian Building* focuses on the private life of Hatim Rasheed, the editor of *Le Caire*, and the son of an Egyptian father and a French mother. In the following quotation the narrator's game with the reader extends to drawing the reader into his own time and his own experiences by wondering about Hatim's dual lifestyles (the

successful editor and the homosexual in a society that condemns such behavior:

If one remembers that over seventy individuals work under his direction at the newspaper, the first question that comes to mind is, do they know about his homosexuality? The answer, of course, is yes because people in Egypt are interested in the personal lives of others and delve into them with persistence and focus.[13]

Internal focalization, as Genette describes, implies that "the focal character never be described from outside, and that his thoughts never be analyzed objectively by the narrator... Internal focalization is fully realized only in the narrative of **interior monologue**"[14]. Both *Under the Volcano* and *Yacoubian Building* defy Genette's viewpoint, and provide evidences that the occurrence of self-consciousness defies Genette's assumption that in cases of internal focalization, external description diminishes:

The consul looked at the sun. But he had lost the sun: it was not his sun. Like the truth, it was not his sun. Like the truth, it was well-high impossible to face; he didn't want to go anywhere near it, least of all, sit in its light, facing it. 'yet I shall face it'. How? When he not only lied to himself, but himself believed the lie back again to those lying factions, among whom was not even their own honor. 'Horror', he said. 'Yet I will not give in'. But who was I, how find that I, where had 'I' gone? 'The will of man is unconquerable'. Eat? I should eat... He didn't know himself.[15]

According to Genette, "the Consul looked at the sun" is an external description of the Consul's non-reflective action. Also 'I shall face it' with its first-person pronoun and quotation marks, illustrates reflective consciousness in the form of internal monologue. So the narratorial description of the Consul's actions is picked up within his thought. In other words, a character (the Consul) can bring non-reflective (non-linguistic) consciousness to the level of reflection (represented thought).

In the aftermath of such insane nights, Hatim Rasheed would hole up at home for few days, seeing and speaking to no one, drinking a lot, passing his whole life in review, and remembering his father and mother with resentment and hatred. He would say to himself that if they had made a little time to look after him, he would never have sunk this low ... He wouldn't be afraid of him (Dr. Hassan Rasheed) at all and he would say to him, "Great scholar, since you'd dedicated your life to civil law, why did you get married and have children?... In these black moments, despair seizes Hatim, his sense of humiliation tears at him, and he surrenders himself to weeping like a child.[16]

The above quotation exemplify the shift in time that accompanies the movement from reflective to non-reflective consciousness. It is the expected time limit between experience and narration. For example, there is a difference in the following sentences focalized by Hatim:

a) Passing his whole life in review, and remembering...

b) If they had made a little time to ...

makes plain the presence of the narrator, needed to convey

Hatim's "introspection" that could not be represented through his reflective thought. (B), by contrast, could represent the flow of Hatim's thoughts (his realization of his parent's mistake to devote themselves to glory and wealth, leaving Hatim's and his body to servants to play around with) and could be read as interior monologue.

In both novels, the consul's experience of himself recalls Zaki El-Dessouky's high jinks. Lowry's and El-Aswany's attempts to distance consciousness are mirrored in their fictional worlds by the characters' creation of a third-person selves. For example, one of the Consul's most disoriented moments occurs at the end of chapter five, when he blacks out in the bathroom:

... Why then should he be sitting in the bathroom? Was he asleep? Dead? Passed out? Was he in the bathroom now or half an hour ago? Was it night?[17]

The Consul's question "am I asleep?" reflects the distinction between "who sees?" and "Who speaks?" by joining the speaking narrator with the experienced character. Once again, in "was he in the bathroom now or half an hour ago?", the Consul seems to consciously sink into non-reflective consciousness. If one can see oneself, in daylight, sitting in a bathroom, yet asking "was it night?", it means that one regards oneself as potentially detached from one's own experience. It seems that the Consul struggles to control the spontaneous workings of his memory.

By the same token, chapters focalized through Zaki Bey El-Dessouki contain also dislocations of consciousness. The following is an interior monologue that seems to run through his mind, and in a strange way he narrates himself:

Zaki felt the melancholy spreading little by little and throwing its black shadow over his life and he spent whole nights unable to sleep, drinking and smoking, and going over in his mind the events of the past... If the revolution had failed... he would have made minister for sure. Is it bad luck or a failing in his character that always drives him to make the wrong decision? Why did he stay in Egypt after the revolution?... And why hadn't he married?[18]

As the Consul blacks out in the bathroom, Zaki recalls the past as a film running before his eyes. Once again, the overuse of the third case of 'if' refers to his regrets about his past actions and his hint to his own experience in the third person pronoun draws him deeper into the realm of non-reflective consciousness. This highly self-conscious character (Zaki) creates a text that both hides the narrator and conveys a psychological depth.

Like Zaki, the Consul knows that he is deceiving himself (precious type of bore aesthete with an unctuous manner towards women)(248). Their feelings of self-consciousness place them among the traditional tragic heroes such as Hamlet and Macbeth, who march towards their doom with open eyes. Both characters are confused about the surrounding events; their minds seem to be overcrowded and overburdened with dark shadows released through

non-reflective consciousness.

4. Conclusions

Focalization analysis of both *Under the Volcano* and *Yacoubian Building* proves an exquisite example of transcending the typical self-conscious narration. Both novels are compared on the basis of not only following the elements of self-reflection, introspection and contemplation (memories, thoughts, ideas and feelings), but also because both share some of the literary perspectives which Genette tackles in his book "Narrative Discourse". We discuss focalization as a narrative technique which allows both stories to be presented from multi-layered perspectives. By tracing the heroes in parallel, we find the Consul and Zaki, Yvonne and Busayna, Hugh and Taha going back and forth in time to recount their descending to vice and despair. Both novelists elaborate the stream of consciousness and the overlapping of dual voice as narration techniques to highlight and depict the agony and tragedy of the protagonists.

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