

NARRATOLOGY

Aneesh Kumar C

Budhanoor, Chenganoor Kerala, India

Abstract

Literary and cultural theories have increasingly claimed cultural centrality for narrative. Stories are the main way we make sense of things. The theory of narrative ('narratology') has been an active branch of literary theory, and literary study relies on the theories of narrative structure. It tries to understand how particular narratives achieve their effects. Narratology is the study of narratives or stories. Ancient literature in the form of epics or dramas thrived on narrative. As the 'science of narrative', narratology has expanded its scope and became an important field in literary criticism. The Russian Formalists have contributed a lot to the study of narratology.

Key Words: *Narratology, Fabula, Sjuzhet, Narrator, Narrative Power, Narrative Mode*

"In the end, we all become stories."

- Margaret Atwood

Stories are everywhere. People tell stories and their lives are shaped by them. They tell stories about what happened in their dreams, about how they fell in love, about the origins of the universe, stories about war and about peace, stories to remember the dead and to confirm a sense of who we are. The telling of a story is connected with questions of power and authority. Stories are multiple and multilayered. Besides, stories have something to tell us about stories themselves. That is, they have self-reflexive and metafictional dimensions.

Narratology is a term used since 1969 to refer to the branch of literary study devoted to the analysis of narratives, forms of narration and varieties of narrator. As a theory, narratology is mainly associated with European structuralism. Modern narratology may be dated from Vladimir Propp's *Morphology of the Folktale* (1928). David Macey writes:

Narratology draws on two main sources. It owes much to Levi-Strauss' application of linguistic principles to the analysis of myths and the thesis that apparently disparate myths are in fact variants on more basic themes that express underlying and constant universal structures. The second major source is the poetics of Russian Formalism and Propp's morphological analysis of Russian folktales, which demonstrates that a limited number of narrative

elements (functions) and roles can be combined in different ways to generate an almost infinite number of stories. (264)

A direct link between French Structuralism and Russian Formalism was established in 1965 with the publication of Tzvetan Todorov's collected translations of the Formalists' *Theory of Literature*. Todorov's work is associated most often with the study of narrative, and he helped formulate the Structuralist conception of narrative as the common element of organization among diverse examples. In his study of Henry James's tales, for example ("The Structural Analysis of Narrative" in *Poetics of Prose* [1971]), he contends that they all revolve around a missing center, a point of desire that is sought but that never appears. The study of narrative (or narratology) is one of the most abiding strands of Structuralist thinking.

Narratology is the study of narratives or stories. Ancient literature in the form of epics or dramas thrived on narrative. Aristotle analysed the ancient Greek drama and identified the beginning, middle and end of a play as worthy of attention by the dramatist. He also identified the elements of hamartia, peripeteia, anagnorisis, etc. which are even now vital to the development of character and action in a narrative. As the 'science of narrative', narratology has expanded its scope and became an important field in literary criticism. The Russian Formalists have contributed a lot to the study of narratology. Narratology involves many forms like structural narratology, cognitive narratology, visual narratology, natural narratology, confessional narratology, eco-narratology, feminist narratology etc. According to Peter Barry, "Narratology" is the study of "how narratives make meaning, and what the basic mechanisms and procedures are which are common to all acts of storytelling. It is "the attempt to study the nature of story itself, as a concept and as a cultural practice" (Barry 215).

Russian Formalists like Viktor Shklovsky, Boris Tomashevsky, Tzvetan Todorov etc. took up the study of narratives as a way to find out the strategies used in plot construction. The central formalist distinction is between 'fabula' or story and 'sjuzhet' or plot. The 'story' is the actual sequence of events as they happen, whereas the 'plot' is those events as they are edited, ordered, packaged, and presented in what we recognize as a narrative. Peter Barry says:

[...] the 'story', being the events as they happen, has to begin at the beginning, of course, and then move chronologically, with nothing left out. The 'plot', on the other hand, may well begin somewhere in the middle of a chain of events, and may then backtrack, providing us with a 'flashback' which fills us in on things that happened earlier. The plot may also have elements which flash forward, hinting at events which will happen later. (215)

According to Hayden White, even history is written in the form of narrative. The function of the historian is to "charge...events" with "a comprehensible plot structure" (White 92).

Science is composed of stories: astronomy attempts to narrate the beginnings of the universe; geology seeks to tell the story of the formation of mountains and plains, rivers, valleys and lakes; evolutionary psychology purports to tell

us the story of how we came to be as we are. For centuries, millions of people have come to understandings about their place in the world, the meaning of their lives and the nature of politics, ethics and justice through stories about the lives of Christ, Buddha, or the prophet Mohammed. (Bennett and Royle 53)

A narrative is a series of events in a specific order - with a beginning, middle, and an end. Besides, narratives also involves 'anachronisms' – flashbacks, jumps forwards, the slowing down and speeding up of events and other experiments with the linear time-sequence (Genette 48). 'Time' is a crucial aspect of narrative. Along with this the element of 'causality' constitutes another important dimension of narratives. The logical or causal connections between one event and another constitute the fundamental aspects of every narrative. Detective stories completely rely on the logic of cause and effect. Moreover, the ending of a narrative occupies a special role in the study of narratives. Peter Brooks has analyzed the ways in which the readers' desires are directed towards the end.

We are able to read present moments – in literature and, by extension, in life – as endowed with narrative meaning only because we read them in anticipation of the structuring power of those endings that will retrospectively give them the order and significance of plot (Brooks 94).

The paradoxical attraction of a good story involves 'balancing of digression' and 'progression towards an end.' Usually, narratives move from a state of equilibrium through a disturbance of this stability, and back to a state of equilibrium at the end. The end is the point of 'revelation and understanding.' It satisfies the reader's 'desire to know' (epistemophilia). But the modernist narratives problematise and parody the traditional realist endings.

One of the basic distinctions in narrative theory is the difference between 'story' and 'discourse.' Jonathan Culler observes that narrative has a double structure: the level of the 'told' (story) and the level of 'telling' (discourse) (Culler 89). The Russian Formalists call them 'fabula' and 'sjuzhet.' Story involves the events or actions that the narrator tells, the events represented. Discourse involves the way in which these events are told. Narrative theory generally tries to analyze the ways in which they interact. Many modernist and postmodernist texts experiment with the relation between these two levels, to 'defamiliarise' our sense of how narratives function. They reveal the multiplicity of any narrative – its openness to different readings, its differing narrative perspectives, its shifting senses of place and time.

Narrative involves a linear series of actions connected in time and through causality. It also involves the relation between teller and listener/reader. As Barbara Herrnstein Smith suggests, the narrative should be understood in terms of "Someone telling someone else that something happened" (Smith 28). As Jonathan Culler has put it, "To tell a story is to claim a certain authority, which listeners grant" (Culler 89). Another significant aspect of narrative theory is to find out different kinds of narrators (first person or third person, objective or

subjective, reliable or unreliable, omniscient or not, 'point of view', 'voice' and so on). Malik and Batra write:

As with the narrative, the narrator has also been classified by Gerard Genette into categories like *autodiegetic*, in which the narrator as the main protagonist relates the story in the first person (as in *The White Tiger*); *homodiegetic* in which the character in the narrative is not the leading one and is mainly used to report the events (as in *Wuthering Heights*); and *heterodiegetic* in which the narrator is the omniscient author who is outside the narrative and tells the story in the third person (as in traditional novels). (177)

An understanding of the relationship between teller and listener/reader naturally leads to questions of narrative power. A beautiful example for this can be found in *A thousand and One Nights*. Scheherazade, the narrator of these classic Arab tales, is one of the most famous storytellers in literature. She has been sentenced to death by the king but is able to postpone her execution by telling him stories. By ending her story each night at an exciting point, she is able to delay her death for another day because the king wants to find out what happens next. This points to the enactment of narrative power. As Ross Chambers suggests, "To tell a story is to exercise power" (Chambers 50). In this way storytelling becomes an 'oppositional practice', a practice of resistance used by the weak against the strong. Narrative power may be the only strategy left for the weak and dispossessed. Without narrative power, they may not be heard. Another significant area of interest in narratology is 'narrative mode.' It can be direct, indirect or Free Indirect Discourse. Closely related to Free Indirect Discourse is the technique of 'Stream of Consciousness.' The term was coined by the psychologist William James to describe the unbroken flow of conscious and unconscious thoughts, feelings, perceptions, memories etc.

There are many questions of narrative, then, which may be considered in relation to literature: temporality, linearity, and causality, so called omniscience, point of view, desire, and power. But most of all, perhaps, it is the relation between narrative and 'non-' or 'anti-narrative' elements that fascinate and disturb. Aspects such as description, digression, suspense, aporia and self-reflection, temporal and causal disorders are often what are most compelling in narrative. (Bennett and Royle 58-59)

Narratology began basically as a formalist/structuralist enterprise. In these postmodern times, newer concepts continue to turn heads. Theoreticians like Roland Barthes, Claude Bremond and Francois Lyotard have freed narrative from fiction and even literature. According to Michael Ryan, "No sooner had narrative come of age as a theoretical concept than it began to invade fields as diverse as historiography, medicine, law, psychoanalysis, and ethnography" (Ryan 344). In these fields and many others, narratology continues to refine basic concepts and methodologies and to open up new areas of application, while the more general idea of "narrative knowledge" has become a vital component of nearly every theoretical approach imaginable. Jan Alber and Fludernik, in describing "postclassical

narratology,” refer to “a large transdisciplinary project that consists of various heterogeneous approaches” in history, film studies, fine arts, art history, cognitive psychology, psychoanalysis, social and political science, sociolinguistics, disability studies, and new media. They also include “transmedial” approaches that “seek to rebuild narratology so that it can handle new genres and storytelling practices across a wide spectrum of media” (8). The trend toward a narratology of “unnatural narratives” – “anti-mimetic narratives that challenge and move beyond real-world understandings of identity, time and space” (14) – indexes both the variety of and necessity for narrative understanding in a rapidly changing world.

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