



Psycho-narration in Richard Flanagan's *The Narrow Road to the Deep North*

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Abstract

Narrative technique is of paramount importance in writing a novel. It may be defined as various styles used by the author to communicate the context of the novel in an interesting way. Flanagan has given profound significance to the aspects of human affectivity, especially during the overwhelming situations of life, in his novel *The Narrow Road to the Deep North*. The purpose of the article is to find out the components of psycho-narration in the novel. Psycho-narration is one of the narrative techniques where the third person narrator reports the consciousness of the characters. The article also explores the brilliance of the novelist, who has efficiently employed memory, flashbacks and interior monologues to propagate the thought process of the characters. The portrayal of the distinctive nature of the characters are analysed using Ben Jonson's Comedy of Humours, since each character has peculiar personalities.

Keywords: psycho-narration, consciousness of characters, flashbacks, interior monologues, characterization, human affectivity

Introduction

Narrative technique is the most indivisible component of a fictional work of art. Narration means the art of storytelling where the experience, thoughts and feelings of the author are expressed. Technique is an important aspect of literary writing, which focuses on the author's dexterity to present a story in an understandable way. Thus narrative technique helps the author to communicate the story to the readers implicitly. A novel comprises fragmented incidents and events. In order to bring about a convincing association between these incidents, the use of narrative technique is important.

In narrating a novel, the mode of narration or point of view is of paramount importance because it determines in whose perspective the novel is narrated. It is a set of techniques employed to convey the story to the reader. The novel *The Narrow Road to the Deep North* (NRDN) is narrated in the third person omniscient point of view, which is ascertained in the beginning of the novel, "Why at the beginning of things is there always light? Dorrigo Evans' earliest memories were of sun flooding a church hall in which he sat with his mother and grandmother. A wooden church hall. . . . Women who loved him. Like entering the sea and returning to the beach. Over and over" (Flanagan 1).

The narrator is a person who tells the story and relates the events to the reader. An omniscient narrator is a non participant in the novel but connects the reader to the story. This narrator has unlimited knowledge about the characters and even comments on the behaviour of the characters. He assumes a god-like position and unfolds the hidden thoughts and secret events in the novel. The narrator also has flexibility to jump between spaces and times. Flanagan's novel has a narrator who is infinitely wise and well informed about the characters' thought, feeling and emotions.

The narrator is aware of the mental process of both major and

minor characters in the novel. The illegal affair between Dorrigo and Amy, the truth of Dorrigo being a womanizer, the existence of Amy are all revealed by the narrator to the reader before all the other characters. There are enormous shifts between time and spaces in the novel. The novel starts with Dorrigo's memory of his early childhood, shifts to the present with Lynette Maison, again to the past memories of Amy, and then deflects to the present and to the past war memories, and finally to the present with the death of Dorrigo. Amidst these fluctuations Flanagan has achieved a perfect flow of narration with coherence. The third person omniscient narration is used in the psychological novel since it depicts the mental exploration of the characters.

One of the ways in which the mental activity of the characters is expressed, is through Psycho-narration. According to Elizabeth Black, the consciousness of the characters in Psycho-narration are enunciated through various methods among which are the narrator's comments, description and observation and the narrator's report of thought acts (NRTA). She expounds "Sometimes a narrator will analyse the mental disposition of the character . . . combine it with comments on the characters attitude." (Black 138). The omniscient narrator in NRDN comments about each character in the novel, for instance, a comment on the weakness of Dorrigo is described as, "The men called Dorrigo Evans *colonel* to his face and *the Big Fella* everywhere else. . . . But the Big Fella was noble where Dorrigo was not, self-sacrificing where Dorrigo was selfish" (Flanagan 48).

The narrator's report acts as a simple way to project the thought process of the characters. Black elucidates that NRTA is a beneficial device because it helps to report the thought process of characters, animals and also the dying person. The thought process of Dorrigo whose double mind in eating a steak is displayed brilliantly:

He gulped again; still his mouth ran with saliva. . . . To the contrary, Dorrigo Evans understood himself as a weak man who was entitled to nothing, a weak man whom the thousand were forming into the shape of their expectations of him as a strong man. It defied sense. They were captives of the Japanese and he was the prisoner of their hope. (Flanagan 52)

These lines are ironical, suggesting the hypocrisy of the leaders. The narrator makes use of this method for the full access to the thoughts of the characters.

Dorrit Cohn in *Transparent Minds* denotes “. . . one of the most important advantages of psycho-narration over the other modes of rendering consciousness lies in its verbal independence from self articulation” (Cohn 46). Here the narrator orders and explains the characters’ thoughts better than the characters. In *NRDN*, the thought of Amy, who is confused whether she is an immoral woman, is articulated by the narrator in order, “. . . Amy recognized as disappointment, of dust balls and dryness mixed with the slumping grease of defective meals and the doomed assignation of travelling salesman and women. . . . Am I one of these women? Amy wondered as she made her way to the top floor. Am I one too?” (Flanagan 136). The non verbal penumbral and vague thoughts are also depicted by the narrator. Nakamura’s blend thoughts of his identity which he cannot describe in words are described by the narrator.

Flanagan has used memory as a narrative tool in the novel. The novel is all about memory since it is written on the real past memories of Flanagan’s father Archie Flanagan. Anne Whitehead denotes that in the medieval and early modern traditions a book is viewed as a memory cue to facilitate remembering. *NRDN* stands as a memorial cue to remember the plight and excruciation of the Australian POWs in the Japanese camp. Flanagan has written this book because his father does not want the people to forget this history, since nothing endures in the world except the present.

Dorrigo’s memory plays a significant role in the novel, it is through his memory the novel is narrated. Whitehead in “Freud’s Mystic Writing pad” summarises Freud’s notions about memory. According to Freud the unconscious is the repository of memories, which are passive and cannot be deleted. These memories are triggered when a proper stimuli is posed by the environment. But then if these memories are traumatic they produce a breach in the shield that protects the memories, in order not to make them conscious. As a result floods of traumatic memories haunt the thoughts of people. In the same way Dorrigo’s separation from his mother, from Amy and the traumatic experiences of war inhabits his whole life. As a consequence he condemns memory as ‘a creator of horrors’. Throughout the novel the recollection and the remembrance of the past traumatic experience is delineated to create a lasting impression on the readers.

For this effect, Flanagan uses flashbacks and interior monologue. Matshakayie-Ndlovu defines flashback technique as “. . . an interruption in the continuity of a story by presentation of some earlier episodes” (qtd. in Ndlovu 189). Flashbacks are used to present the vivid memory of the past, in order to achieve a meaningful understanding of the novel. Dorrigo’s memories about the war is activated when he is

asked to write a fore note to Rabbit Hendricks’ book ‘Illustration of the POWs’, “When they arrived in Siam in early 1943 it had been different” (Flanagan 21). His memory about Amy is stimulated by Lynette Maison’s questioning about Amy to Dorrigo. The next moment the story shifts to the description about Amy and the illegal affair, “Her eyes burnt like the blue in a gas flame. They were ferocious things” (65). Flashbacks are also given as background information about the novel. *NRDN* is about the POWs who are taken as captives by the Japanese Empire to build a railway for weapon transport from Thailand to Burma. It also helps to shift focus on many characters and to express their personality. The ambivalent nature of Dorrigo and others characters are understood for it is a kind of introspection in the perspective of the characters.

Interior monologue, as M. H. Abraham states “. . . is then reserved for that species of stream of consciousness which undertakes to present to the reader the course and rhythm of consciousness precisely as it occurs in a characters mind” (380). Flanagan uses the interior monologue to elaborate the psyche and the personality of the characters irrespective of their role in the novel. The stream of thoughts of Dorrigo in his death bed is presented as it is without the intervention of the author:

. . . a man they had never understood, he was dreaming of just one day: of Darky Gardiner and Jack Rainbow, of Tiny Middleton, Mick Green, Jacek Mirorski and Gyppo Nolan. Little Lenny going home to Mum in the Mallee. Of one hundred men shaking his hand. One thousand others, names recalled, names forgotten, a sea of faces. Amie, amante, amour. (Flanagan 442)

Characterization is the process of describing the characters. In *NRDN* direct characterization is employed where the persona of the characters are said by the author himself. Psychological characterization is that which involves the fears, emotions, desire and intentions of the characters. Flanagan explicates a detailed analysis of both major and minor characters. Dorrigo is considered to be ambivalent, guilt ridden, quixotic and cynical man. Amy as a independent and radical woman, Keith as a guilt ridden and envious man, Ella a submissive and moral woman, Nakamura and Kota who are guiltless and proud, lastly the POWs who all are filled with guilt, traumatic memories and agonies are vividly displayed in a shrewd way. Flanagan’s characters can be categorized under Ben Jonson’s *Comedy of Humours*. J.M. Bamborough explains about the term humour with respect to Jonson, “. . . it is properly a medical term referring to one of the substances, choler (or yellow bile), melancholy (or black bile), phlegm and blood, which were supposed to circulate in the body and to give a man his distinctive ‘temperament’ or physical psychological characters...” (30). The protagonist of the novel Dorrigo Evans comes under the category of ‘mercurial man’, whose temperament changes frequently. In the presence of Amy with him he feels optimistic and happy (sanguine), in the POWs camp he is angry while confronting the Japanese soldiers, optimistic in motivating the POWs by saying “charge the windmill”, and at times melancholic for their brutal suffering. After the war he becomes melancholic because of the loss of

Amy and his unsatisfied marriage. Therefore he is a man with mixed emotions.

Darkey Gardiner, one of the POWs is an example of a man of perfect temper as in the words of Jonson with equal proportion of humours. He exhibits all the four humours whenever it is needed. He is an epitome of hope, a person who sees hope in even small things. Though he dies in the camp due to the brutal beating of Japanese, he accepts life as it is, without regret. Rooster Macneice is a choleric person. Keith Mulvaney is a phlegmatic man with feeble wit and Jimmy Biegelow is both phlegmatic and melancholic since he is sad and slow. The Japanese come under the category of choleric. The psychological change in the characters due to war is also well depicted in the novel.

To conclude Flanagan has used psycho-narration and other narrative devices to produce a lasting effect on the minds of the readers. Even though the novel is classified as a historical novel, it has the salient features of a psychological novel that are employed distinctively to effectuate the aspects of human affectivity.

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