

A Structuralist/Naratological Approach to Rifaat's "Mansoura"

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ABSTRACT

This paper is an analysis of Alifa Rifaat's "Mansoura" using Structuralism and Narratology as theoretical framework. This also shows how the narrator uses words as a means of instilling three levels of influence for her listening audience: the didactic, the mythical, and the ethical, and how the story may be schematized by showing underlying relations. This paper has specifically adopted narratology in order to explicate the various categories of audiences and their functions in the narrative.

Keywords: Structuralist, Naratological, Rifaat's Mansoura and short stories.

INTRODUCTION

The short story, is a narrative; which conveys a story with one or more plots. It is characterized by its shorter length, which encourages the economy of setting, dialogue, and action. Despite its limited scope, the short story is often

judged by its ability to provide a complete treatment of characterization and theme. Literary theory provides several means by which any scholar may approach a work of literature [1]. According to Bressler:

structuralism's approaches to textual analysis vary according to their subgroups such as Levi Strauss, Roland Barthes, Valdimir Propp, Tzvetan Todorov and Gerard Genette and Jonathan Culler. Genette for example, believes that tropes or figures of speech require a reader's special attention. Barthes, on the other hand, points readers back to Todorov and provides more linguistic terminology with which to examine a story. Although narratologists provide us with various approaches to texts all furnish us with a metalanguage - words used to describe language - so that we can understand *how* a text means *what* it means [2].

"Mansoura" begins at medias res when Sheik Zeidan recounts the story of Mansoura to his work men. Therefore, Rifaat uses the flashback technique to convey to the readers and the listening audience the events of the story. This discussion first explores language as a carrier containing several facets. The language system in the story serves the purpose of regenerating myth, teaching wisdom, and motivating hard work among a community of workers. According to Ferdinand de Saussure "Linguistic signs although essentially

psychological are not abstractions...linguistic signs are, so to speak, tangible: writing can fix them in conventional images [3]" A postcolonial theorist has argued that so many critics have paid attention to myth rather than history even when the theme of myth and history is clearly specified. The idea is that history itself is subsumed in the general topics of slave trade, colonialism and neo colonialism, giving very little attention to the pre-colonial era of African history. He clarifies his stand saying:

The argument here, then, is not that religion, beliefs, the supernatural, magic and myth have no place in the historical novel. Belief in them may be a locomotive force in history or an explanation for deeds done by men. To the extent that they open a window to the inner life of a people and their worldview, supernatural beliefs and myths are grist to the mill of the historical imagination. But they belong in the realm of the eternal, whereas history belongs in the everchanging world of human society [4].

Although structuralism is not concerned with the historical periods mentioned

above and Rifaat's story is not a historical tale, Ogundele's meticulous

identification of the ontology and role of the mythological is valuable for this discussion. In Rifaat's "Mansoura", Sheik Zeidan is successful in combining didactic, mythical and ethical elements

Didactic/physiological

Sheikh Zeidan's narrative transmits wisdom about the human condition. As he relates the story of Sayyid and Mansoura, he uses proverbial words to articulate words of caution: "But the lifespan of happiness is short, my son said the Sheik-as short as the life of a flower" [6]. The statement reiterates the concept of life consisting of divergent experiences of oppositional nature: happiness/sadness, loneliness/company, light/darkness. The story of Mansoura is structured in the shape of an hour glass.

Wandama and Mangut into his narrative. These elements function as follows: Didactic-physiological, Mythical-psychological, Ethical-physical [5].

The villain, Hindawi overcomes the protagonist at the level of conflict, Mansoura later emerges as heroine at the same time as she assumes the level of myth. In structuralism any component can be replaced, but the internal structure of the story remains the same. Mansoura could be the antagonist who ruins the relationship of a happily married couple with different names and the outcome by the end of the story, would remain the same.

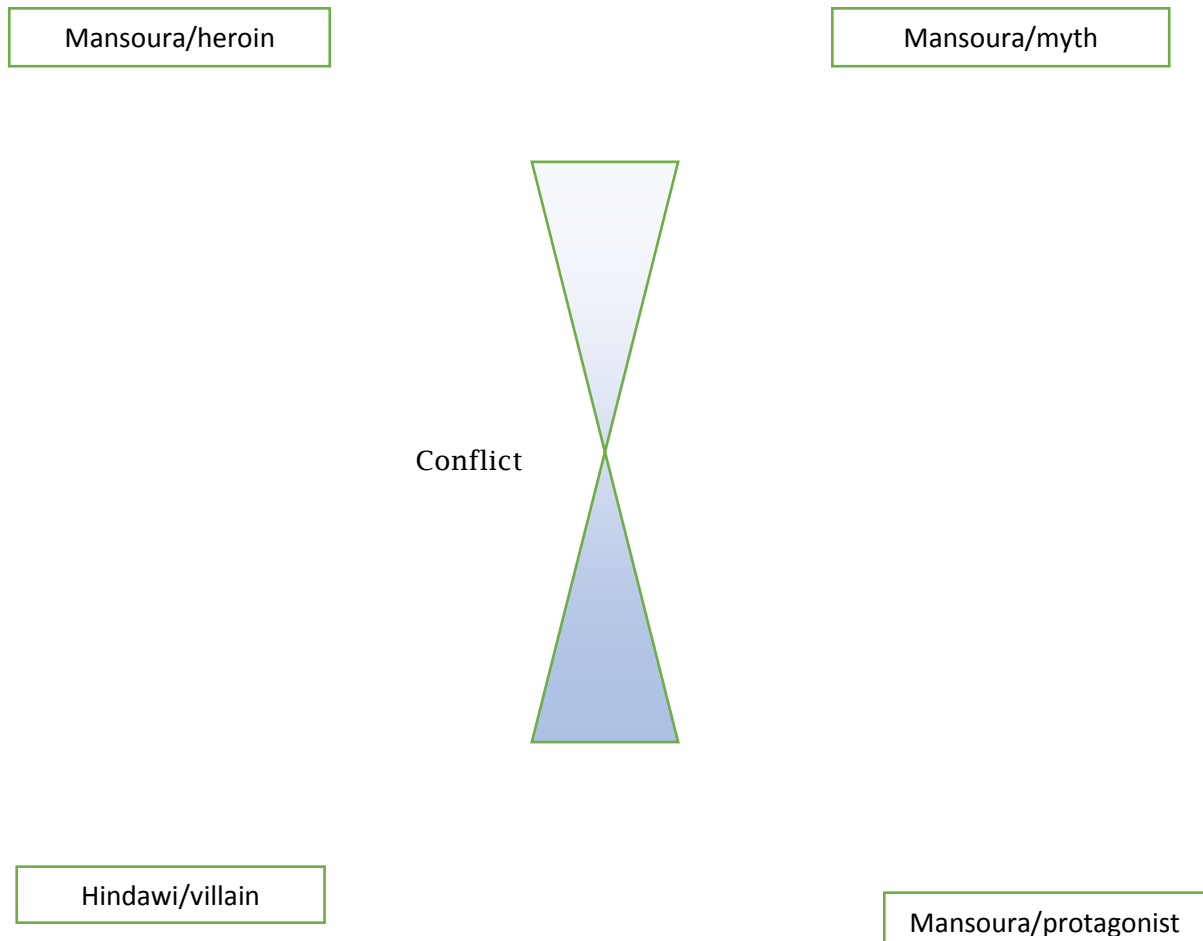


Figure 1: structuralist representation of Rifaat's "Mansoura"

The Sheikh draws attention to the conversation of cunning men or women. In Rifaat's "Mansoura" Hindawi convinces Sayyid that he can earn a quarter of his harvest of beans so that he might give his wife, an easier life. Hindawi gives specific attention to the fact that Mansoura's *galabia* is torn, and that she fetches water for others in the cold winter. Sayyid, being a simple man, thinks that this arrangement is in his best interest. So, he works the night shift in Hindawi's beans farm. Sheikh Zeidan teaches his audience to scrutinize conversations for traces of hidden intentions. The Sheikh also believes that women like Mansoura are vulnerable because she is poor, unprotected and very attractive. Concerning her affair with Hindawi, he believes that it is possible Mansoura was raped but kept mute, or she might have been lured by the gifts that Hindawi

offered her, or she simply betrayed her husband's trust. The moral of this part of the story is for individuals to protect and treasure personal relationships, no matter how poor or humble they may consider themselves. The Sheikh's reference to "the wife" is an indirect reference to his own wife who remains anonymous throughout the story. The miscarriage of justice is another level in the narrative which has subversive characteristics. It is suspected that Sayyid killed Mansoura because he says: "Only blood, washes dishonour clean [7]." No one questions him about whose honour and whose blood he refers to. It is revealed that Sayyid and Hindawi, understand perfectly well, who actually deserves the imprisonment. But Sayyid bears the sentence for the sake of his pride. The power of karma catches up with Hindawi even after he flees to Cairo.

Mythical/Psychological

This aspect is put into effect in the narrative as Sheikh Zeidan emphasizes the idea that Mansoura has special powers. Only after her death does the full release of her power manifest. According to the Sheikh, Hindawi looked up at the bulldozer and he supposes that: "perhaps for him the arm of the bulldozer had become the swollen arm of Mansoura with the rusted bangles...so you see my boy, why it is that we always call upon Mansoura to make the work easier for us. Mansoura, my son, has special powers" [8]. At this point, the reader suspects the Sheikh has inputted some of his own imagination to

manipulate the psyche of his workers so as to spur them into working harder at their job. He raises a chant as they work: "O Mansoura, O Allah...O Mansoura O Allah" [9]. The omniscient narrator observes that when the chant is raised the workers resemble a caravan of camels. The bulldozer seems like the leading camel, while Sheikh Zeidan seems like the camel driver chanting away as he drives on the caravan. He successfully uses Mansoura's story as a motivation for his crew. A work-song with the power to make a difficult job easy.

Ethical/Physical

Mansoura's story serves as an initiation/orientation for the crew of sewer workers. Once her story has been shared with a new recruit; the workers regroup and continue their work-ritual believing in the power of Mansoura, the village beauty, now helper of the labourers. "Hands and voices were raised in supplication for mercy for that person who, whenever they fitted a pipe and asked help in her name, seemed to lighten the load for them, as though hidden wings were bearing the pipe along their stead"[5]. Mansoura's story

is the engine that gets the crew moving. The men seem familiar with the routine of question and answer that usually occurs whenever a new member joins the crew. But as to the original story of Mansoura, it is not certain that the version told to Dashan is accurate as others still give it rapt attention as though they hadn't heard the story or this particular version. In the subplot of "Mansoura", Hindawi uses "sweets" to symbolize pleasure and "sweat" to symbolize labour. Sayyid works hard at Hindawi's beans with the sweat of his

brow hoping to give Mansoura a sweet life, but Hindawi brings physical sweets to win Mansoura's attention. the loss of Sayyid's companionship proves too much of a sacrifice for Mansoura. The conventional characters expected in any narrative: the hero, villain and tragic hero, poetic justice is evident in the story. Mansoura's death becomes a promotion which liberates her from the limitations and burdens of her earthly existence into an immortal realm. While alive she brought about "an earthquake in men's bodies" [7]. She was eventually killed by one whom her beauty struck, but at death she empowers men by making their work easier. Her story assumes spectacular powers as related by Sheikh Zeidan; he exclaims: "O light of the Prophet! You see - at the mention of her, the light burst forth!" [5]. A close observation of the main plot which is also the perspective of the omniscient narrator, reveals some oppositions between his physical appearance and his perceived character as the oracle of Mansoura's myth. He is described as having a "a scrawny backside" "thin legs that were like the branches of a tree from which the bark has been stripped" [6]. He is also too poor to buy a set of boots. He uses pieces of sackings and nylon with bits of string to wrap over his legs. He is the oldest member of the gang and is given great regard by the younger members who call him

A Narratological Approach

Narratologists such as James Phelan and Peter J. Robinowitz say that a "fictional narrative is a single text combining multiple tracks of rhetorical communication." They say that the rhetorical approach is ultimately most concerned with the author's telling to his or her audience. This approach to rhetorical narrative theory identifies some categories of audiences: the first is the authorial audience which is the group for whom the author writes. They share the knowledge, values, prejudices, fears and experiences that the author expects from his or her readers, grounding the author's rhetorical choices. The second is the actual audience that pretends to join the narrative audience. An audience existing in the narrator's world who regard the characters and events as real rather than

uncle, even though his age and poverty keep him in a vulnerable position. To counteract this problem, he enforces his influence through initiating all his workers with the myth of Mansoura as he places himself in a position of witness to all the events that surrounded her emergence as a revered personality with special powers. His state of vulnerability is relational with the state of Mansoura who has not only overcome her own vulnerability, but has also given Sheikh Zeidan the power of sustaining his own influence over his crew through reinforcing the belief that she makes their jobs easier whenever they call upon her, thereby enhancing unity in the text. The bulldozer in the story, though an inanimate object, is pivotal to the progress of the narrative. It is described as bearing resemblance to the lead camel in a caravan, it is also personified when it is said to resemble the swollen arm of Mansoura. Most important, this bulldozer is the means by which Mansoura brings justice to Hindawi. Just after Sheikh Zeidan concludes Mansoura's story, he "stared out silently at the bulldozer crouched in the semi darkness like some beast of burden taking its nightly rest" [7]. These are sign posts in the story signifying the overall state of transformations that are prevalent throughout the story.

invented, accepting the story's world regardless of whether they conform to those of the actual world but may not necessarily accept the narrator's portrayal as accurate but accept the world presented as a real one, because of their default position. Another category is the intratextual audience specifically addressed by the narrator. The narrative audience is a role that the actual reader takes on while reading, the narratee is a character position in the text, one that the narrative audience observes. These theorists declare that: "generally speaking then, postclassical narratologies along the lines sketched by Nünning seem to move toward a grand contextual, historical, pragmatic and reader-oriented effort (6)". For others such as M. Amerian and Jofi, their review reveals that post classical

narratology should not be restricted to literary forms alone. It is related to the verb “narrate” therefore whatever is narrated is narrative. This approach

Wandama and Mangut opens the study and analysis of narratives to benefit from other disciplines [6].

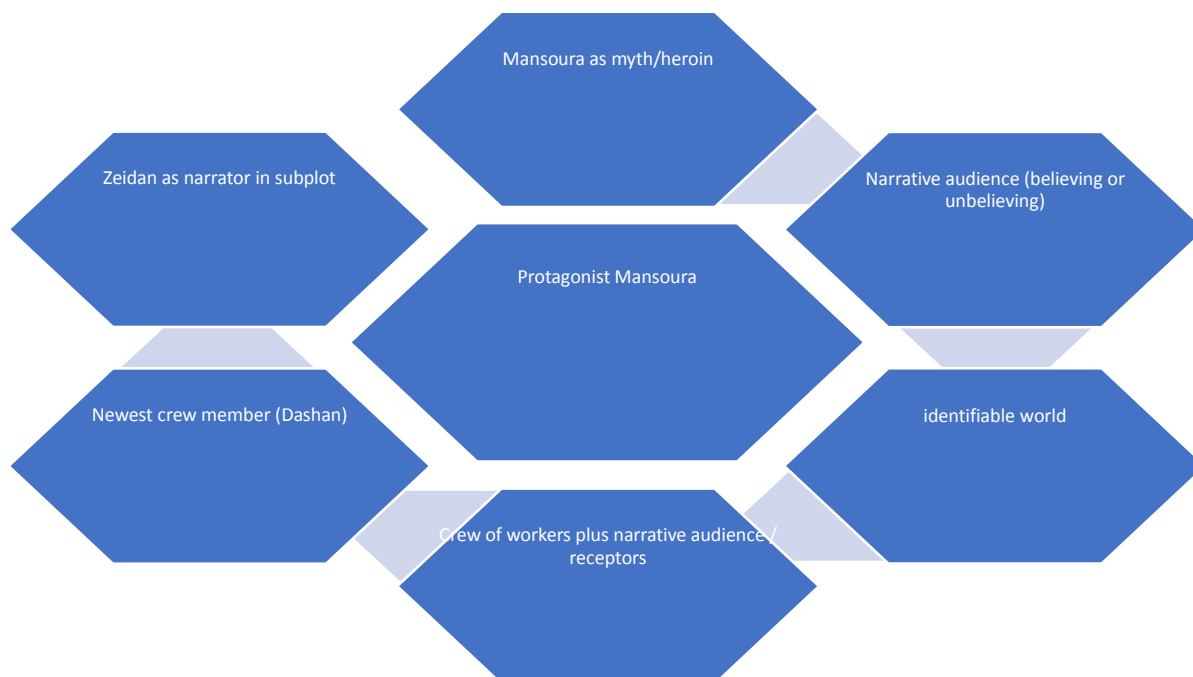


Figure 2: revised from Walsh “A Theory of Narrative”

Figure 2 is relevant for discussing the positioning of the narrative in Rifaat’s “Mansoura” as it relates to the wholeness of the story. The narrative audience who are actively listening to the story can elicit two kinds of reactions in a reader-oriented approach: one audience depending on their cultural context, could believe that Mansoura’s story is plausible in a recognizable world. Another audience could also believe that Sheikh Zeidan is telling tall tales about this Mansoura. Within the context of the story itself, the narratee’s stance is detached and impersonal, especially when describing Sheikh Zeidan’s character. Another narrator’s choice of words could have expressed some kind of affinity, if for example, instead of describing the Sheikh as having a “scrawny backside” or “thin legs that were like branches of a tree from which the bark had been stripped...”, the narratee could have instead, described him as undernourished/with legs comparable to a young tree from which the bark had been stripped. The narratee comes across as using an exaggerated

description of Zeidan’s thinness. The narrative audience listening to the Sheikh’s rendition of Mansoura’s story are further divided into two: the old crew and the newest member. The old crew members are familiar with the rendition of Mansoura’s story, but it happens in a formalized manner: “They sat in a silent circle like men performing a heathen rite. A soft clearing of the throats announced their readiness for the evening’s conversation, and they waited for the customary question that was asked whenever a new workman joined them” (48). Mansoura’s myth is transferred in a ritualistic style. Before reaching their point of “readiness” the crewmen came out of their tents under the night sky; performed their prayers; prepared tea while the *narghile* was puffed from mouth to mouth. This further contextualizes Mansoura’s myth in a folkloric manner [8].

This mode, allows the narratee to observe the intratextual audience through their speech, body language and actions without psychological depth, thereby giving the audience a

narrow view of their character. As Sheikh Zeidan moves over to this role of storyteller/narrator in the short story, he takes centre stage and begins by extolling Mansoura and leading his crew to say "the Fatiha on her soul and a prayer for the Prophet" [5]. From this perspective, Sheikh Zeidan takes an overlapping role as the narratee and character. He serves as a more reliable narrator because his characters develop and the crux of the conflict in the entire story emerges from his own perspective of the events. Sheikh Zeidan's perspective is written in the past continuous tense, using the intratextual

CONCLUSION

The short story is concise, not limited. It is complete, complete enough to apply various literary theories in order to gain a positive outcome. Regardless of its size, an analysis conjures up sufficient points to make a claim for any theory today. This has been achieved in this study. Alifa Rifaat's "Mansoura" through the lens of structuralism and narratology opens up structures which stand as the framework upon which the plot is developed. The plot might vary in theme or subject matter, but it remains within set perimeters. This, for the structuralist, is the basis for the interpretation of any literary text: without consideration of author or cultural bias. For the narratologist, the liberty of the audience is found in the ability to deduce its own interpretation

audience as a force that moves the story forward through their prodding and curiosity. This relationship requires further clarification. To the intratextual audience, Sheikh Zeidan is the narrator, but to the authorial audience, it is still the narratee who is speaking as an observer of events. Interestingly, Sheikh Zeidan as narrator assumes an involved, interested witness in his capacity. He is now an eyewitness to the events he speaks about: He sponsored Sayyid's wedding to Mansoura and also gives refuge to Hindawi when he was traumatized after Mansoura's death.

of the text. "Mansoura" displays the necessary structures for textual interpretation. The narrator has been able to create a progressive flow in the outcome of the plot. The three levels of influence the narrator instils in the listening audience become a progression to the eventual outcome of the text. The didactic/physiological, leverages upon the divergent experiences of oppositional nature to transmit wisdom of the human condition which waters the ground for him to implant the mythical ideas of Mansoura's 'special powers' which then becomes a motivation for the men to work harder. Eventually, the narrator is able to bring an ethical influence at the end of the story, even as it serves as an initiation for the new crew members.

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