Framed Narrative as a Discursive Technique

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Abstract

One of the traditional techniques in the art of storytelling has been the device of the "framed narrative" or the telling of one story within another. This is a technique that has endured from the Middle Ages to the present times and has been popular amongst all sorts of storytellers. In this paper, I attempt to understand the structure of a framed narrative in terms of what Thomas M. Leitch, calls the "discursive" principle in his book, What Stories Are. I have endeavoured to define framed narratives using Leitch's unique elucidation of tension that occurs between the teleological and discursive elements and is fundamental to all narrative genres. I also try to find parallels and associations of framed narratives with other genres/works of literature.

Keywords: Discursive Technique, Teleology, Narrative, Storytelling.

Introduction

"*I have constructed the main work and the adventitious parts of it with such intersections, and have so complicated and involved the digressive and progressive movements, one wheel within another, that the whole machine, in general, has been kept a-going - and what's more, it shall be kept a-going….*" (*The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy*, Book 1, chapter XXII, pp 66).

In the *Ramayana*, Valmiki who is said to have written the epic, is also the sage in the story who shelters Sita when she is expelled from Ayodhya. Valmiki recites the story of Rama to Lava and Kusa (Sita and Ram's sons who are born while Sita is in exile). And Lava and Kusa recite this story of Ram to Ram, and this is how we, the larger audience get to hear the story. In a manner typical of the oral tradition, the contained or the inner stories of both the ancient Indian epics the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata* are framed by a sequence of inverted commas which mark the story as told to so-and-so by so-and-so and then again to so-and-so until it reaches the current reader/ listener. The two epics are the most familiar framed narratives in Indian literature. The origin of framed narratives as well as epics is perhaps linked to the oral tradition. An epic is often seen as a creation of bardic poets who voice the values of a people in the process of entertaining them in an essentially communal context. Similarly, collection of stories we call framed narratives probably grew out of tales that were offered as illustrations of the ideas that cultures regarded as necessary for survival, they were

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the manifestations of moral values. Oral performances became literary compositions when they were recorded or compiled by a scribe. The long rambling plots of earlier epics in which crisis follows crisis, are characteristics of stories composed for serial delivery. Coming down as they did from different languages, religions and even different tellers, they could hardly have a homogeneous or monolithic structure.

In this paper, I attempt to understand the structure of a framed narrative in terms of what Thomas M. Leitch, calls the "discursive" principle in his book *What Stories Are*. I also try to find parallels and associations of framed narratives with other forms of literature. The purpose of all fictions is to create a believable world, a world that is homogeneous, feasible and therefore "acceptable". There are various techniques or rhetorical resources available to the author of an epic, novel or short story through which a fictional world can be imposed upon the reader. Upon these techniques depend the entire strength and quality of the illusion built in a reader's mind. Mark Schorer says that to speak only of content is not enough. He defines technique as the difference between content or "art". He further asserts, "when we speak of technique, then we speak of nearly everything; technique is the only means he (the artist) has of discovering, exploring, developing his subject, conveying its meaning, and finally, of evaluating it" (67). Henry James in his book, *The Art of Novel* asserts that the purpose of any technique is primarily to heighten the intensity of the fictive illusion. Wayne C. Booth describes "Rhetoric" as a term by the means of which a writer shapes his selected materials, gives it form or imposes rhythm upon his world of action. Hence fresher forms of fiction appear with alterations in sensibilities in every century.

Indeed, fictional narratives have undergone a wide range of change and development. For instance, what we would nowadays classify as short stories were denoted as novels or novela (in Spanish) or novella (in Italian) from the sixteenth to the eighteenth century, tales of the kind one finds in Boccacio's *Decameron*, Marguerite of Navarre's *Heptameron* and Cervantes' *Novelasejemplares.* These may be regarded as the forerunners of the modern novel. From the authoritative telling in early narration to the stream of consciousness technique in the twentieth century, artists have used various techniques and created several genres to take us into their fictional world as also to explore and define values in their areas of experience.

One of the traditional techniques in the art of storytelling has been the device of the "framed narrative" or the telling of one story within another. This is a technique that has endured from the Middle Ages to the present times and has been popular amongst all sorts of storytellers. Every fictional narrative comprises action or events, the inclusion or progression of which leads to the end of the story. This means that the end point of a narrative is built into the sequence of action as a part of the discourse and this in turn is what lends unity to a narrative discourse. It is at the end of the story that we realize that the events of the story were occurring to fulfill a particular purpose. This is known as teleology, and it depends upon the fact that a proper or satisfactory closure of a story is very vital to the pleasure of a reader. Hence, the end or the telos of a narrative can be understood in two senses: one, as a closure of the story, and two, as a "retrospective rationale" for which the story was written (Leitch 42-62). On the other hand, the discursive principle is resistance to an absolute teleology or an ultimate closure. Not every incident or episode in a narrative has a purpose, nor is every incident directed toward the end. The question of whether a given episode is logically necessary to a causal sequence is less important than whether it makes that sequence more interesting (Leitch 64-65). Any story can be summarized in a paragraph or even a sentence. While a story can be described as dissemination of information of a sequence of events, a plot

is the narration of those same events in an artful, interesting way. A story provides us only with information, but a plot provides us pleasure along with information.When an audience goes to some movies, or to games, it is not to obtain information, which they can also get from perhaps a newspaper or other means of communication, but they do so in order to experience a suspension of certainty which makes the resolution enjoyable.

The construction of afictional narrative depends upon the antagonism that occurs between the presentation of only those details which will explain the end of the story on the one hand and on the other a display of those details which may be irrelevant to the end but are important to the essence of the story. This conflict between the narrative forces is called polytropy. The structural principle followed by an artist whereby he adds potential narrative materials to an idea or a story and turns it into a narrative discourse is called the "polytropic principle". An author, therefore, maintains the interest and faith of his audience through polytropy. Hence, polytropy may be defined as the contradistinction that exists within a story between the teleological principle and the discursive principle of narration. This principle of fiction is also supported by Karl Kroeber who says, "one of my principal arguments is that story telling consists in the interaction of impulses that shape and define with counter impulses that expand and disorder" (8).

Readers expect a work of fiction to create a believable world. This world is created through adding details, digressions, ironies etc with an indiscriminate inclusiveness. These details convert a narrative to an area of experience. Even the most direct and humblest of narratives is more than a chronological series of events and requires some tangency to weave in characters, themes etc. To negate the episodic dimension of a narrative would be to negate and suppress the narrative structure itself. A narrative discourse may be called doubly discursive. It tends towards a logical conclusion, but it also tends to ramble on indefinitely. Despite the end which gives a story a unitary impact, and which a story predicates, a fundamental wish of every storyteller is to create a world without end. Nearly all narratives simultaneously quest for and try to postpone their ends. A rationale, an understanding is promised - but later. Even the audience's desire for a closure which would satisfy them is not whole- hearted for they want the story both to end and to continue endlessly for it is in the discursions that they find an echo of their own heart.

The discursive principle followed by authors of various forms of narratives is also the fundamental principle on which a framed narrative is based. The discursive principle can best be illustrated by soap operas which run for years without giving any indication of their ever coming to an end. An ideal soap opera would go on forever, surviving every twist or turn in the plot, denying the possibility of an authoritative teleology or an ultimate closure – nothing in a soap opera is irrevocable and nothing happens in a soap opera that cannot be altered. In the interest of endless suspense, complications are multiplied and there is always scope for further development. And yet, the audience has no trouble understanding soap operas, even in the absence of a coherent teleology because soap operas are watched not in order to determine the ultimate meaning of the world but to experience situations and characters in terms of various situations possible and contingent identifications and expectations. The genre of autobiography, also, by its very nature, defies teleology. An autobiography must always lack endings because they are stories that are incomplete. As in a soap opera, closure in an autobiography will remain contingent because each further day or year the author lives will generate new "retrospective patterns".

An epic has a polytropic, paradigmatic structure that both projects and defers closure. An epic is typically intransitive which means that isolated characters and individual episodes in an epic remain autonomous instead of being directed towards a single culminating point. Even when taken out of context, these episodes remain life-like just as a story taken out of a framed narrative can stand on its own. In *Odyssey*, Homer gives us a diffused account of Odysseus' voyage of return through many tales of his labours and misadventures. The episodes contained therein may be easily detached from the whole and enjoyed as separate poems. Not only the epic poem but also the character of the protagonist, Odysseus can be said to follow the polytropic principle. Odysseus is the exemplary narrative hero, who is not only perpetually open to adventures but is also curiously adept at turning them to his own ends. Homer himself uses the epithet "polutropos" for his hero which means "many-turning". As Odysseus goes through adventures, the audience's expectations of ultimate revelation continue to increase only to suggest that the greatest wisdom is to submit to the imperatives of an unending story line. Polytropy is thus at once the general theme of the narrative as well as its chief organizing principle.Thus, author of an epic maintains great diversity of topics within a narrative frame or within linked, sequential frames. Van Kelly says, an epic "attempts to adequate a spatio-temporal vastness and a sense of multiplicity of socio-political and cultural frames…, with a continuous narrative (or several narratives linked into a plausible semblance of continuity…)" (17).

Usually, in a play, the development is in the form of outward unfolding from a single point of departure and all the elements of the play are subordinated to this point. However, Bertolt Brecht carried the characteristics of epic even to drama. He developed a theory of dramatic technique known as epic theatre. Rejecting the methods of traditional realistic drama, he preferred a narrative form in which he used distancing devices such as asides and masks to create a historical frame around the action. This technique prevents the spectator from identifying with the characters on stage. The play is cut up into a number of autonomous pieces, each scene is for itself and therefore the action advances by fits and starts. Epic theatre is therefore defined by the heterogeneity of its individual episodes.

Often, a novelist's natural independence and flexibility, his sense that it is his own personal vision which gives shape and meaning to his art conflicts with authoritarian teleology and tries to tie him to 'rules' (which give unitary impact to a work). But novelists have often debunked these rules and circumvented the control that principle of 'regularity' imposes. The freedom thus acquired by breaking those rules leads to digressions in a work of fiction which makes the narrative more nuanced and more complex. Readers are invited to abandon themselves to the narratives without necessarily looking before or after to the successions of crises and resolutions which make up the tale. A certain latitude of effect and a certain range of inclusiveness must necessarily be allowed in every story sooner or later that violates the implicit principles of storytelling. Principles of form are repeatedly disrupted so that discontinuity is the norm and linearity is superseded by the arrangements of fragments.

This discursivity/ discontinuity is also the principle illustrated by "theatrical behaviour" typical of certain Dickensian characters. Charles Dickens employs the discursive principle to create an inclusive panoramic narrative. In his novel, *Pickwick Papers*, Dickens engages insight and inventiveness at the expense of form to represent vividly the surface attitudes and portraiture of life. The plot is merely a medium through which Sam Weller displays his dramatic and exaggerated treatises, his incessant unconnected comparisons and his matter-of-fact complacency. Although these divergences do not contribute to the plot, but they are exactly what makes Sam Weller a memorable character. Henry Fielding's picaresque

novel, *Tom Jones* is composed of a series of adventures of a knave and is clearly not organized according to any teleological principle. The ending is a mere contrivance which does nothing to make the story more coherent or intelligible.

Lawrence Sterne's *Tristram Shandy* shows how a novel can owe its coherence to something other than teleology. Sterne's ingenious digressiveness may be understood as a complex and delightful outcome of an interest in John Locke's theory about association of ideas. In the novel, its eponymousnarrator undertakes to relate his life from the moment of his conception to adulthood, but never goes beyond the fifth year because the narrative is constantly and flagrantly interrupted by exuberant digressions. Everything is connected to every other thing that occurred before or after or in another place. Tristram Shandy ends in the middle of Sterne's thousandth digression and ends without ever coming to the point. Sterne's essentially digressive imagination subverts any possibility of an intelligible teleology that could inform his work. Therefore, Sterne's subject – the life and opinions of Tristram Shandy – serves only as a linear sequence from which he can depart.

The technique used in *Tristram Shandy* may be likened to stream of consciousness technique used in 20th century by writers such as James Joyce and Virginia Woolf. In the stream of consciousness novel, the vagaries of the human mind determine the shape and direction of the narrative. Typically, such a novel contains diffused episodes and numerous repetitions. It permits clutter, mess, muddle, trivia, the unexplainable events, the irrelevant detail. It might end anywhere for it only seeks to depict the multitudinous thoughts and feelings which pass through the mind, without leading us to any definite teleological revelation.

In Cervantes' *Don Quixote*, the plot contains several lengthy digressions including the interpolated stories of the Curious Impertinent and the Story of Cardenio and Lucinda which were to later supply plots for many seventeenth century plays. These interpolations become radically disruptive and displace teleology as the primary structural principle. T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* is made up of an assemblage of images, loosely strung together by a common theme. A sequence of pictures is built up from the parts of a scene, rather than presenting a scene from beginning to end. There may not be any logical connection between one picture or another. Each picture or image appears to be a single frame of a film. Throughout the poem, there are startling movements from sentence to sentence and image to image. This gives it the appearance of a verbal collage. The different fragments of the poem, however, together represent the state of modern civilisation. Similarly, a travelogue almost completely does away with a plot. In a musical, plot is simply a thin line, reduced only to serve as an impetus for the various songs the film contains. A Charlie Chaplin movie is nothing but a series of episodes which show him bumbling from one misadventure to another. Epics, Shakespeare's plays within plays, the extensive use of epistolary forms in 17th century, picaresque tales of Fielding, Lawrence Sterne's *Tristram Shandy* have all contributed to or have derived from this technique.

Just as a soap opera is a succession of crisis and resolutions, a picaresque tale a series of episodes, a travelogue a series of spectacles of places, Charlie Chaplin movie a series of histrionics, a stream of consciousness novel a series of thoughts and feelings, an epistolary novel a series of letters, so also a framed narrative is a series of stories. Just as these separate episodes, spectacles etc are interconnected externally or internally through themes, motifs or characters, so also these collections of stories are unified within a framing device. Hence, there is a story that is used as a surrounding structure and a number of other stories are

inserted within this frame of a single narrative. A framed narrative by its very nature defers an ultimate teleology. The repeated openings and closings within the text not only evoke a nested structure but also develop suspense for the reader. It is like a writer playing con game with the reader, drawing him farther and farther in with the promise of an explanation.

"Frame", "Chinese box", "Russian Doll" or embedded narrative is how it is variously labelled. The practice of framing is called enchassement (by Tzvetan Todorov) and encadrement (by Viktor Shklovsky). A framed story may contain another tale, story-within-a-story, or a series of stories. Thus, there are two basic forms of frame technique – cyclic or single frame. In the former, there is a preliminary narrative within which one or more characters proceed to tell a series of short stories, while the latter constitutes a self-contained story linked to the frame by a narrator. The framed or Chinese box structure of a narrative consists of multiple diegetic levels wherein stories successively frame other stories often to the point of infinite regression. Just as the pleasure of a story lies in its details and discursiveness, the pleasure of the framed narrative often lies not in the containing narrative but in the contained narratives. Indeed, the main narrative may even be irretrievable in the maze of stories that are added to it. As the textgets deeper, we might lose sight of the first story as also the first teller because the characters within stories begin to tell other stories and so on, even though everything is still contained within the first story. Hence, the pleasure lies not in the main narrative but in the layers of stories contained within.

The use of the frame-tale technique allows a narrator to tell tales endlessly. One tale may frame another tale which in turn may frame another, suggesting the possibility of an infinitely prolonged descent through tales within tales. Just as the most basic sentence can be made infinite by inserting an infinite series of subordinate clauses, so also a narrative can be extended infinitely by enclosingsubordinate narratives within the main one. Typically, a framed narrative keeps postponing its arrival at any terminal. Once plunged into the potentially infinite sequence of stories within stories, the audience rarely wants to find their way back from this fascinating labyrinth. Indeed, the technique of framed narrative has been often used by the storytellers to show their sheer delight and joy in the art of storytelling.

The structure of a framed narrative is also like a visual collage. Each story merges in with the main narrative yet remains autonomous. Like a collage, a framed narrative readily opens itself to assimilate a heterogeneous assortment of narrative types, it admits multiple modes of discourse (dramatic, tragic, lyric, epic, burlesque etc). It also admits multiple perspectives, thereby decentring authority for instance in Boccacio's *Decameron* where everyone sits around and tells stories on a particular topic. Sometimes, a framing device is more or less perfunctory, only a pretext for assembling different items. We might say that the authors hold such collections together because of their fascination with the manifold roots and branches of narration itself, a preoccupation, so to say with the fictional process. This literary device is, therefore often characterized by self-consciousness about the storytelling process.

However, there are many other reasons why an artist might use the narrative technique of framed narratives. Viktor Shklovsky identifies four types of narrative frame-structure, each with a specific function: stories that are told so as to suspend or delay the main action (as in *Arabian Nights*), a 'debate of stories', where tales are told in order to argue; stories that are told for the sake of telling stories (as in *Decameron*); and finally, stories told to intertwine and create an intricate structure (65-67). William Nelles classifies narrative embeddings into two kinds – Epistemological embedding and Ontological embedding.

Epistemological embedding is characterised by its emphasis on communication, that means, the question of who speaks to whom is very important. On the other hand, ontological embedding pertains to a new system of reality or existence in the embedded layer as found in science fiction or dream narratives (89). Narrative embedding is primarily marked out by a change in the narrator. A shift in the narrator is also accompanied by a shift in the narrative level. Thus, the question of who the narrator is and at what level is an important one in the study of framed narratives. In the famous framed narrative, *Thousand and One Nights*, there are several narrators and correspondingly, there are several narrative levels within one story cycle. Sheherzade tells story after story to save her life. The characters in her story also tell stories and characters of those stories further tell stories. Hence, one story cycle might even run to the fifth or the sixth narrative level. And there are several story cycles within the narrative of *Thousand and One nights*. As such the structure of the *Thousand and One Nights* is immensely complex and labyrinthinic. However, the framing device is also utilized to achieve other effects. Joseph Kestner demonstrates how framing has been utilised in Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* and Emily Bronte's *Wuthering Heights*. Kestner asserts that the framing device not only emphasises the spatio-pictorial quality of the plot but also functions in another temporal manner as 'delay' (73).

In *Frankenstein*, Victor's story is enclosed within Walton's letter to his sister and Victor's story contains the creature's story, which in turn encloses the story of the Delacey family and Safie. This framing or boxing inward of one story into another can be represented by the following diagram:
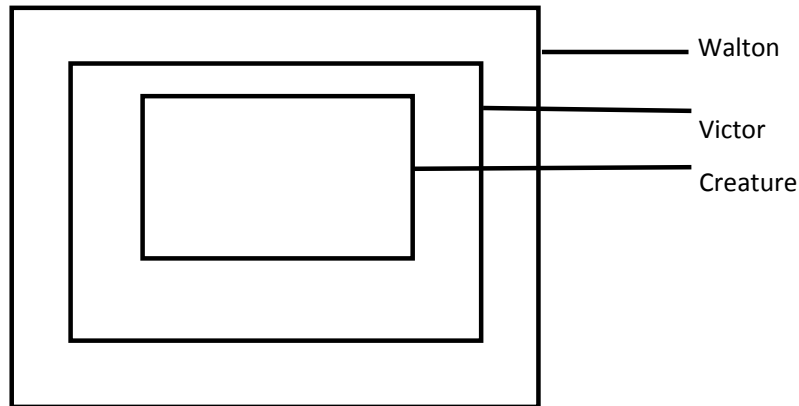
Each box represents the level at which each character's story stands. This diagram also clarifies how each story contains or is contained within another story. Such enclosure by distancing the creature's story "provides delay to ensure that Walton and the reader believe it". Also, we see, when Victor has finished telling Walton his story and Walton has resumed writing the letter to his sister Margaret in which Victor's story is enclosed, a reader may be expecting to move forward in the narrative after the large parenthesis of Victor's story has been closed. Instead, Walton returns in recursive fashion to this scene of the composition of Victor's story. Thus, we see how such enclosures when considered through the critical method of spatiality also help in showing simultaneous actions. Here, the content is made simultaneous with its formation. In *Wuthering Heights*, content is made simultaneous with narration.

Nelly tells the story of Isabella to Lockwood who in turn records it in his journal.When a picture is encased with in a photo frame, the picture merges with the frame yet remains disparate. Similarly, the framed story is frequently the same in the other as is

clear from the narrative structure of Wuthering Heights. An important characteristic of framed narratives – that of deferring closure may be explained in terms of what John Gerlach calls Direct and Indirect forms. The form that he calls direct is the one that has a continuous sequence of steps from start to finish, without the incursion of divergent occurrences. Gerlach says, "The expectation of resolution is kept constantly before the reader, and the resolution itself is certain…" (17). Such a story is directed to achieve a single effect. However, it is the opposite pole of an end-oriented design, that of indirection that is relevant to this study.

Gerlach explains the indirect form through Chaucer's Nun Priest's tale. This tale is embedded in the prologue of its teller (the Nun's priest) which in turn is embedded in the whole of *The CanterburyTales*. If we take just the Nun Priest's tale, that in turn contains other stories. The first frame is that of a widow's yard where Chaunticleer and Pertelote strut. Then follow two more tales: one about their disagreement over the dream and the other about Chaunticleer's capture and release. Here, Chaucer seems to be in no hurry to complete his story. Instead of finishing the old tales, he begins new ones, thereby making the whole structure of the story complex. Clearly, the pleasure of the multiple perspectives is the goal and the not the elusive end. And any reader who just wants to know what happened in the end has not exploited the pleasure of reading for what is interesting is not the end but the pleasure of the journey of arriving there and for this objective, the end is best suspended (Gerlach 21).

Our perception and appreciation of a story is obscured by multiple elements of the story as well as by keeping the end tenuous. However, the necessity to achieve conclusion can also not be disregarded because without signals that indicate an imminent closure, the sense of openness would not exist: "The impulse for indirection is inherent in any direct narrative….Only when the elaboration becomes more noticeable than the direction of the movement are we properly in the indirect mode" (Gerlach 22). Joseph A Kestner in his book, *The Spatiality of the Novel* has spoken of framed narratives in terms of virtual spatiality. Virtual Spatiality defines the relation of the temporal art of the novel to the spatial arts of painting, sculpture and architecture. This concerns the appearance of spatial artistic properties in the novel, including the relation of a scene to painting, particularly the concept of framing or encadrement. Kestner explains the complex nature of the scene, its momentary aspect in contrast to the constancy of place in terms of theory of motifs given by Russian formalist, Boris Tomashevsky which is really an expansion of the concept of the contrast between story and plot. Bound motifs crucial to the causal chronological course of events cannot be eliminated (which is the story). Free motifs are what makes up a plot and includes details and digressions. Further free motifs are usually static, concerned as they are with descriptions while bound motifs are dynamic because they especially concern the action. Static motifs may predominate while dynamic motifs keep the narrative moving.

Kestner describes a scene thus: "With its pictoral elements of two-dimensional, one-point perspective, scene may be a static motif, that is, an element of plot conceived as 'description'. The contrast between scene and place is very clear: scene could be omitted but place never" (70). Scenes which are both free and static demonstrate a strong potential to achieve powerful effects in the narration. There is a highly specialized form of this pictorial static element in a framed narrative. It may be concluded that framing is a discursive technique which not only helps in creating a context for the narrative but also offers the readers, multiple levels of meaning and thereby allows for multiple levels of interpretations.

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