

Focalization in A Thousand Splendid Suns: on the Highlight of the Theme and Characterization

Shu Hong

Sichuan University, China

Keywords: focalization; narrative structural construction; characterization; thematic highlighting

Abstract: As the first Afghan-American writer in English, Khaled Hosseini appeared on the stage of literature as a black horse with his two best-seller novels published, *The Kite Runner* in 2003 and *A Thousand Splendid Suns* (Suns in short) in 2007. By telling a story of two seemingly irrelevant but sophisticatedly connected Afghan women, the second book shows an obvious superiority in thematic choice and narrative techniques over the first one, where the changes and shifts in focalization bound to the heroines and other characters act as a distinguishing mark of its author's narrative ability reaching a higher level.

1. Introduction

As the first Afghan-American writer in English, Khaled Hosseini appeared on the stage of literature as a black horse with his two best-seller novels published, *The Kite Runner* in 2003 and *A Thousand Splendid Suns* (Suns in short) in 2007. By telling a story of two seemingly irrelevant but sophisticatedly connected Afghan women, the second book shows an obvious superiority in thematic choice and narrative techniques over the first one, where the changes and shifts in focalization bound to the heroines and other characters act as a distinguishing mark of its author's narrative ability reaching a higher level.

2. Definition of Focalization and Its Classification

Gerard Genette, in his worldwide famous book *Narrative Discourse*, takes up the term "focalization" to correspond to "focus of narration" (186-189). He further classifies focalizations into three types. The first type, nonfocalization or zero-focalized narrative, describes such a situation where the narrator knows more than any character does (Genette, 189). This limitlessness gives the narrator a powerful capability of integrating every part of the story and organizing the plot organically. Whereas its obvious narrative empowerment, nonfocalization has an equally obvious drawback. The ubiquitous interference of the omniscient narrator narrows the imaginations and judgments of the reader who may be bored with narrator's telling everything in such a direct way. Besides, since no human has the super power to know the detailed emotions and insights of all characters, this omniscience descends the work's trustworthiness.

The second type, internal focalization, states a restricted narration which means the narrator says what certain character knows with no right to narrate what the certain character does not know. The narrator or narrators are characters of the story; they naturally melt into the plot as protagonists and witnesses, instead of dissociating from the development of the whole story like outsiders. This naturalness gives the reader a sense of authenticity, however, the omniscience of a certain character must be restricted strictly while the narrator has no right to jump beyond the perspective of this character. Thus, when the author deploys his work by use internal focalization, he may find himself easily stuck if he has to narrate a certain event but the character is elsewhere.

The last type of focalization is given a corresponding name to the second type, that is, external focalization, which is rather objective because even the narrator cannot know what the character thinks or feels but only what he sees or hears. Narrators in external focalization step out of the psychological mind of the characters without any subjective judgment or criticism, being just as a

camera to record what happens in the story objectively. Due to its rigid detachment, this type of focalization may probably widen the gap between the author and the reader, for the former may understand the characters in a much different way from the latter. Compared with internal focalization, external focalization lacks an author-to-reader intimacy and it cannot achieve an omniscient observation as nonfocalization can.

In Khaled Hosseini's *A Thousand Splendid Suns*, the proficient use of focalization patterns, especially zero and internal focalization as well as the adept switch and interweaving of the two, play an important role in the success of this novel as a worldwide best seller.

3. Character-bound Internal Focalization Shift

In *Suns*, two heroines, Mariam and Laila, whose lives begin with no signs of relation, after brought jarringly together by the tragic sweep of war, they support each other with mother-daughter love to live through the war and survive from gunfire, violence and fear. Through a talented ingenuity of narrative organization, Hosseini conducts a shift character-bound internal focalization to build two full, round and vivid Afghan women.

This novel contains 51 chapters in which the first 15 focuses on Mariam's perspective while the second part, Chapter 16 to 26 switches the focalizer to Laila, where Mariam is presented by her observation. In the first two parts, Hosseini applies fixed internal focalization to render the two protagonists separately. When the tale comes to the third part, Chapter 27 to 47, as the narrative focalization shifts between Mariam and Laila in turn, the author changes to variable internal focalization. At last, in Chapter 48 to 51, after Mariam sacrifices herself to Laila's freedom and happiness, focalization shifts back to fix on Laila only to narrate the ending of the whole novel.

3.1 Character-bound Internal Focalization Shift for Narrative Structural Construction.

Khaled Hosseini shows an ingenious talent in constructing his story and the eloquent layout in narrative perspective transitions in *Suns* is the best proof of the author's exquisite story-telling craft.

In the first 15 chapters where the narrator fixes on Mariam's perspective, a neighborhood family catches her eyes and for three times in Mariam-focalized part, and the narrator depicts this family in details. That is the family of Laila, who has not been born at the time Mariam noticed her mother, father and brothers.

Mariam turned around and found a light-skinned, plump woman wearing a hijab, like her.

She had short, wiry black hair and a good-humored, almost perfectly round face. Her lips were much fuller than Mariam's, the lower one slightly droopy, as though dragged down by the big, dark mole just below the lip line. She had big greenish eyes that shone at Mariam with an inviting Glint. [...] "My name is Fariba. I live on your street, five houses to your left, the one with the green door. [...] My husband's name is Hakim." (Hosseini, 71-72)

This encounter with Laila's family happens in Chapter 10, soon after Mariam marries Rasheed and moves to Kabul. Then in Chapter 12, that family is again shown through Mariam's observation and Rasheed's remarks.

On their own street, Mariam saw Fariba and her son Noor, who was dressed in a suit. Fariba, wearing a white scarf, walked beside a small-boned, shy-looking man with eyeglasses. Her older son was there too- Mariam somehow remembered Fariba saying his name, Ahmad, at the tandoor that first time.

[...]

"Best you stay away. She's a nosy gossip, that one. And the husband fancies himself some kind of educated intellectual. But he's a mouse. Look at him. Doesn't he look like a mouse?" (86)

In the last chapter of the first part, focalization acts as a means of foretelling when Mariam watches her neighbors again, "She saw Fariba leaning against the wall of her house [...] Fariba was smiling, and her palms were pressed against the swell of her pregnant belly. The other woman [...] was holding a little boy's hand. Mariam knew the boy's name was Tariq." (103) These three times of focusing on the neighbor family from Mariam's perspective present all key characters in the next part on the scene, unborn Laila, her adorable teacher father, her now pregnant mother whose heart will be broken later

by the death of her two soldier sons, and Tariq, Laila's lifelong lover. The narrator deliberately leaves unfilled blanks to the reader to wonder, associate and detect the relativity of all the characters and events, then being enlightened in the later development of the plot, though it remains unpredictable for Mariam to imagine her own destiny being altered to connect with an unborn neighborhood girl by the utmost sadness of their tragic motherland.

When the tale comes to the second part, where narration about Laila's growth and family life is located at Laila's perspective, Mariam becomes the object of Laila's focalization.

Outside, as she was climbing on the carrier pack of Babi's bicycle, Laila spotted a car parked up the street, across from the house where the shoemaker, Rasheed, lived with his reclusive wife. [...] Laila caught a fleeting glimpse of the man in the backseat: thin, white-haired, dressed in a dark brown suit, with a white handkerchief triangle in the breast pocket. The only other thing she had time to notice was that the car had Herat license plates. (118-119)

The first time description of Mariam from Laila's angle mentions a very important and correlated incident. The man waiting in the Benz is Mariam's father Jalil who makes her a "harami", a bastard, whose silent permission once broke Mariam's heart when she was forced to marry Rasheed and who comes to ask for his daughter's forgiveness before he meets his final destiny. This incident is relatively told later in the book, in Chapter 41 when Mariam tries to call Jalil for help to solve the poverty of their family and in Chapter 50 when Laila visits Mariam's kolba and find Jalil's letter telling the love and regret from a father filled with ashamed guilty to his beloved daughter of illegal marriage.

Then in Chapter 19, at the funeral of Laila's brother, Mariam is inspected by Laila again: "Rasheed's wife, Mariam, came in. She was wearing a black hijab. Strands of her hair strayed from it onto her brow. She took a seat along the wall across from Laila" (148). The focalization on Mariam from Laila tightens the narrations into an ingeniously organized whole where two lives melt into one.

3.2 Character-bound Internal Focalization Shift for Characterization.

In *Suns*, Hosseini builds two strong-hearted and war-tortured Afghan women, Mariam and Laila, with crafted skills through the shift of focalization on the two. From Chapter 27 to 47, when Mariam and Laila are suddenly pulled together to get through hostility, develop a solid friendship and share with the constant violent abuse of their husband Rasheed, each chapter is based on either Mariam's or Laila's perspective. Through the shift focalization, dialogues as well as the free direct and indirect speeches, the characteristics of each protagonist are well depicted. Under the focalization of Mariam, Laila's appearance is described clearly for the first time.

She looked at the girl, at her blond curls, her slender neck and green eyes, her high cheekbones and plump lips. Mariam remembered seeing her on the streets when she was little, tottering after her mother on the way to the tandoor, riding on the shoulders of her brother, the younger one, with the patch of hair on his ear. Shooing marbles with the carpenter's boy. (214)

From Mariam's angle, Laila's beauty is examined closely for the first time in the whole novel. Likewise, Mariam is observed by Laila throughout the third part of the fiction. In Chapter 40, where the narration focuses on Laila, Mariam was once again measured from Laila's eyes.

Mariam was forty now. Her hair, rolled up above her face, had a few stripes of gray in it. Pouches sagged beneath her eyes, brown and crescent-shaped. She'd lost two front teeth. One fell out, the other Rasheed knocked out when she'd accidentally dropped Zalmai. Her skin had coarsened, tanned from all the time they were spending in the yard sitting beneath the brazen sun. (314)

From Laila's eyes, a weather-worn and fear-beaten woman who has born with too much sadness and heartbreaking is presented in front of the readers. This face is far different from that of 25 years ago when Mariam first saw her face on her wedding day, that "not pretty but, somehow, not unpleasant to look at either" face (57). Years of torture from her atrocious husband and sufferings from seven times miscarrying push Mariam to a more miserable life filled with fear and misfortune than the life where she was born as a bastard.

In the last but one chapter, Chapter 50, when Laila makes up her mind to go back to and help rebuild her war-torn motherland, the first place she visits is nowhere but Mariam's born city Herat.

The remote kolba where Mariam was raised till her fifteen-year birthday reminds Laila of all the details about Mariam's appearance. From Laila's angle, the narrator leads the readers to look at the young Mariam who is eventually given a conclusive remark by both Laila and the narrator.

Laila watches Mariam glue strands of yarns onto her doll's head. In a few years, this little girl will be a woman who will make small demands on life, who will never burden others, who will never let on that she too has had sorrows, disappointments, dreams that have been ridiculed. A woman who will be like a rock in a riverbed, enduring without complaint, her grace not sullied but shaped by the turbulence that washes over her. Already Laila sees something behind this young girl's eyes, something deep in her core, that neither Rasheed nor the Taliban will be able to break. Something as hard and unyielding as a block of limestone. Something that, in the end, will be her undoing and Laila's salvation. (428)

The strongest heart of enduring all mischief and misfortunes without breaking down is the savor for not only Mariam but also Laila herself. They are the bravest survivors of this brutal madness and bloodiness; their salvation nourishes an increasingly growing hope never to be destroyed.

4. The Direct Intervention of Author for Thematic Highlighting

In *Suns*, Hosseini shows a great talent on narrative structuring by using not only internal focalization but also non-focalization narrative pattern. Every now and then, Hosseini himself jumps into the story and directly intervenes with the criticisms of the plot development. His analysis, definition and judgment toward no matter the plot, character or the background information, no matter tender or satiric, are important structural clues to draw the readers' attention with indication and help them get a better understanding of the book thematically.

At the beginning of the whole fiction, when the five-year-old Mariam dropped her mother Nana's Chinese tea set and for the first time heard the word meaning bastard, "harami", from Nana, Hosseini makes his first intervention as an author, "Nor was she old enough to appreciate the injustice, to see that it is the creators of the harami who are culpable, not the harami, whose only sin is being born" (4). Later on, on Mariam and Rasheed's wedding day, when she signed her name of the marriage contract under a mullah's prayers, Hosseini stands out again and this time his intervention plays as the first foreshadow of the later plot development, "The next time Mariam signed her name to a document, twenty-seven years later, a mullah would again be present" (58). This foretelling echoes with Mariam's final destiny- she signed her name on the document which would sentence her to death for killing her husband Rasheed to save Laila- when she remembered her last signing her name twenty-seven years before. At the first time, her signature pulls Mariam into a torturous abyss given by a bloodily violent husband while the second and last sign finally brings her "a sensation of abundant peace" for becoming a woman who has loved and been loved as a friend, a companion, a guardian, a mother, not a pitiable, regrettable harami. Hosseini, on the last day of Mariam's whole journey, defines her life in a heartbreaking way, "This was a legitimate end to a life of illegitimate beginnings" (396).

Hosseini's attitude towards Mariam is sad and sympathetic; as to Laila, Hosseini shows more faith and hopefulness. On giving birth to her second child Zalmai, when Laila was operated without anesthetic, Hosseini praises Laila's motherhood via Mariam's perspective, "Mariam would always admire Laila for how much time passed before she screamed" (312). After Laila goes back to Kabul, seeing the ruins around the city, Hosseini concludes the war-torn Afghan tragedy which makes her marvel at "how every Afghan story is marked by death and loss and unimaginable grief" (421-422). Hosseini is just like a wise elder, who has witnessed enough sorrows and changes, yet, still believes that people there will find a way to survive, like Laila who wishes her parents could see all these struggles and changes over the days she comes back to their motherland where a sense of hope is awakening. Meanwhile, Hosseini lets Laila be sure that Mariam is with her everywhere, just like the hope in every Afghan people, which cannot be destroyed no matter how hard intruders try. "But, mostly, Mariam is in Laila's own heart, where she shines with the bursting radiance of a thousand suns" (443). Here Hosseini uses a meaningful metaphor to correlate with the theme, highlighting the message which the author sends to the world.

In a word, in *A Thousand Splendid Suns*, the cooperative use of almost all types of focalization and their fluent yet skillfully organized shift, as well as the traceable yet still beyond-the-expectation plot development achieved by the cooperation and shift of focalizations can be considered as a mark of Hosseini's narrative capability reaching a higher level than what he shows out in the creation of *The Kite Runner*.

Acknowledgement

This paper is one of the 2014 Sichuan University Central University Basic Research Fund Projects, entitled in "On the Narrative Art of Khaled Hosseini" (skq201428).

References

- [1] Genette, Gerard. *Narrative Discourse* [M]. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1972.
- [2] Hosseini, Khaled. *A Thousand Splendid Suns* [M]. New York: Riverhead Books, 2007.
- [3] James, Henry. "The Art of Fiction." *The Great Critics: An Anthology of Literary Criticism* [M]. Ed. James Harry Smith & Edd Winfield Parks, New York: Norton, 1967.
- [4] Phelan, James. *Living to Tell about It* [M], Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2005.
- [5] Li, Jihong. "The Kite under A Thousand Splendid Suns" [J]. *Writer Magazine* 2008,(4): 4-5.
- [6] Liang, Yumin. "Narrative 'Focolization': A Key for Thematic Analysis of Novels" [J]. *Journal of Neijiang Normal University*, 2009, 24(5): 111-113.