

A Study of Narratological and Narrative Aspects of Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Namesake*

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Abstract:

Jhumpa Lahiri is a great writer from the field of Indian English Novel. She has earned great name and fame as a good storyteller. This article aims at analysing the plot of her novel – *The Namesake* – under the light of narratology; and attempts to bring forth how successful Jhumpa Lahiri is in her handling of those narratological aspects. The article first discusses, in a brief manner, the field of narratology and its various components. Then it talks about how these narratological aspects occur in Jhumpa Lahiri's novel, for which the researcher has used Manfred Jahn's model of analysis of fiction. The approaches Jahn talks about and the occurrence of these approaches in the text of Lahiri's novel are put together. The text of the novel is analysed in alignment with the three groups proposed by Manfred Jahn. Narratological aspects such as narrator, focalization, narrative tense, narrative situation, etc are searched in the novel under consideration and are duly analysed.

Keywords: *Narratology; Narrative; Focalization; Diegesis; Mimesis; Action*

I. Introduction

Nilanjana Sudeshana Lahiri, popularly known as Jhumpa Lahiri, represents the younger generation of Indian English novelists. Indian English novel has been performing well since the moment it has been pioneered by the three legendary writers – R. K. Narayan, Mulk Raj Anand and Raja Rao. After independence, the contribution to this field increased tremendously with Anita Desai, Manohar Malgaonkar, Shashi Deshpande, Ruth Praver Jhabvala, Arun Joshi, Kamala Markandaya, Khushwant Singh, Gita Mehta, Vikram Chandra, Mukul Kesavan, Gita Hariharan, Arundhati Roy, Kiran Desai and many more. Jhumpa Lahiri has taken this great tradition to new scales ever since she entered the literary arena in 1999 with a short story collection – *Interpreter of Maladies*. She shot to great fame with this book which won the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction and the PEN/Hemingway Award. She published her first novel – *The Namesake* – in 2003. This novel also earned her popularity &

success, and established her as a noteworthy writer universally. It is evident from her works that Lahiri is quite modern as well as experimental in her narrative techniques.

II. Narratology and its Components: An Overview

Narratology studies and makes an analysis of text, particularly literary text. It provides certain concepts, models and approaches to make a proper analysis of narrative techniques of any work of literature. Manfred Jahn, Professor at University of Cologne, Germany, and a renowned expert in this field, asserts that “the roots of Narratology go back to Plato and Aristotle” (2.1.1). Seymour Chatman, an American film and literary critic and Professor Emeritus of Rhetoric at the University of California, Berkeley, published a seminal work on narratology entitled *Story and Discourse: Narrative Structure in Fiction and Film*. Therein he writes that the objective of narratology is “the establishment of minimal narrative constitutive features” (19). Gerald Prince, an American academic and literary theoretician, affirms that narratology facilitates to show the structure behind a narrative text. He puts that narratology “studies the nature, form and functioning of narrative . . . and tries to characterize narrative competence” (66). In short, we can say that narratology is related with study of a writer’s writing style. Monika Fludernik calls narratology as ‘Narrative theory’. She defines narratology as “the study of narrative as a genre” with a distinct objective to show “how the narrative emerges from the narrative text, the words on the page” (8). She concludes that narratology uses a model of linguistics and gets demonstrated through language systems. Narration, narrative, action, narrative modes, focalization are some prominent elements of narratology. Manfred Jahn categorizes narratological aspects in three groups. He puts narration (voice), focalization (mood), and narrative situation in the first group. The second category comprises action, story analysis and tellability while the members of the third group are tense, time, and narrative modes. Chatman, following Plato’s and Aristotle’s “distinction between ‘mimesis’ (imitation) and ‘diegesis’ (narration)” (Jahn 2.1.1), proposes two types of narratives – diegetic narrative and mimetic narrative – and divides various literary genres into these two basic groups. Diegetic narrative genres include “novels, short stories and epic narrative where as mimetic narrative includes play, movie, cartoon, etc” (Chatman, *Coming to Terms* 115). The division of genres into two categories, as made by Chatman, is purely based on the method of expression chosen by an author. In the present

paper the novel – *The Namesake* – by Jhumpa Lahiri is analyzed under the light of narratological viewpoints discussed above.

III. *The Namesake*: Plot Outline

Jhumpa Lahiri is very much famous for her critically acclaimed ability of storytelling. Apart from three novels, she has published two fantastic collections of short stories. *The Namesake* is her debut novel and second work (after *The Interpreter of Maladies*). This novel, in no time, earned accolades from critics as well as readers. Later it was adopted for and turned in to a movie bearing the same title. It deals with problems of Indian immigrants residing in the United States of America, and abroad in general. Commenting on the themes of Lahiri's work D. Sumalatha asserts: "Lahiri's literary works are concerned with the diasporic postcolonial situation of the Indians and Indian-Americans, who are caught between two identities and two cultures – the Indian traditions that they have left behind and a totally different western world that they have to live in" (352). Lahiri, as in most of her literary creations, populates Indian immigrants as central characters in *The Namesake* also. The novel has one more issue which is a recent development in the world of Indian Diaspora. It is the struggle of new generation of Indian immigrants, who is born and brought up in the USA, and has less connection to India. Gogol, the protagonist of the novel, represents this class of Indians are raise abroad. Gogol's parents, Ashoke and Ashima, serve secondary protagonists to the story. The novel begins in 1968 when Ashima, who is nearing her due date of delivery, is shown in kitchen making some Indian snacks and thinking about the snacks and its availability in Kolkata. Soon she is admitted to hospital where she gives birth to a baby boy – the protagonist. The naming of the boy happens in very dramatic ways and incidents. The clash between Indian custom of naming and American way of giving names to new-born babies comes to surface. As a result of all dramatic incidents, the baby boy is named as Gogol. The name Gogol is given because of Ashoke's special connection with a 19th century Russian writer Nikolai Vasilyevich Gogol. This boy, who later develops into the main character of the story, hates the name Gogol through his childhood and adolescence. That is why the title has this word – 'namesake'. It is in the concluding part of the novel Gogol realizes the efforts taken by his parents in his upbringing.

IV. Narratological Components in *The Namesake*

Here, for the purpose of doing narratological analysis of Lahiri's novel, I am going to use the model proposed by Manfred Jahn in which narratological components are divided into three groups. The model is introduced in one of the previous paragraphs.

a. Narration (Voice), Focalization (Mood), and Narrative Situation

I begin with the first group that comprises narration (voice) and focalization (mood) and narrative situation. Narration (voice) is related with narrator of the story or novel. Gérard Genette, a French literary theorist, asserts that "a narrator is the speaker or 'voice' of the narrative discourse" (qtd. in Jahn 3.1.1). Jahn makes a classification of narrator in two types. The first is overt narrator ". . . one who refers to him/herself in the first person ("I", "we" etc), one who directly or indirectly addresses the narratee, one who offers reader-friendly exposition whenever it is needed"; and the second, covert narrator is ". . . one who neither refers to him- or herself nor addresses any narratees, one who has a more or less neutral (nondistinctive) voice and style, one who is sexually indeterminate" (Jahn 3.1.4). This classification of overt and covert is dependent on how the presence of a narrator is signaled in the text. Looking into the novel I found that the narrator in *The Namesake* is covert. The following few lines from the opening paragraph show that no character is referring to oneself through I, we, etc.:

On a sticky August evening two weeks before her due date, Ashima Ganguli stands in the kitchen of a Central Square apartment, combining Rice Krispies and Planters peanuts and chopped red onion in a bowl. She adds salt, lemon juice, thin slices of green chili pepper, wishing there were mustard oil to pour into the mix. (*Namesake*)

The same trait continues throughout the novel. Characters' actions are informed without any interference. Actions are informed as they happen.

Further Manfred Jahn makes "a *categorical* distinction between *two* principal types, homodiegetic and heterodiegetic narrators and narratives" (3.1.5). Jahn follows Genette while saying that this distinction is based on the narrator's "relationship to the story" – ie, whether s/he is present or absent from the story (3.1.5). The homodiegetic narrator is one who is one of story's acting characters or one who tells a story of personal experience. On the other hand a heterodiegetic narrator isn't present as a character in the story. Following the extract from the novel cited above, I can say that the novel *The Namesake* has heterodiegetic

narrator/narrative as the story is told through omniscient narrator who is not present as a character in the story. Lahiri uses third person heterodiegetic narrator.

The next member of the first group is focalization, which is also called mood or point of view. The term focalization is coined by Gérard Genette. Following Genette's model, Jahn defines focalization as "the selection and restriction of narrative information relative to somebody's perception, knowledge, and point of view" (3.2.1). Focalization answers the question 'Who sees?' The focalization is then subdivided in several types – zero or non focalization, internal focalization, and external focalization. I find zero or non-focalization in *The Namesake*. As per Jahn when a "story's events are narrated from a wholly unrestricted or omniscient point of view" (3.2.2), then such story has zero or non-focalization. The story in *The Namesake* is told by omniscient third person narrator who has all sort of information about characters and about what happens to them. Gérard Genette, further, divides focalization into three more sub-types namely fixed focalization, variable focalization, and multiple focalization (189-190). Genette establishes that in fixed focalization, a story is told entirely through a single point of view – either first person or third person. A variable focalization occurs when a story has two or more narrator, and every narrator presents his/her perception or knowledge of the things happen to him/her or with others. Multiple focalization "occurs in texts in which the events are told two or more times, each time seen through a different reflector" (Jahn 3.2.5). Lahiri's novel is written with fixed focalization as the whole story is presented by a single omniscient narrator who is not present in the story, and who tells the story without any interference. Ashoke Ganguli, Ashima Ganguli, their children Gogol and Sonia are the key characters of this novel. But none of these characters is a focalizer. By doing this, the author is benefitted with greater freedom in putting the insight of multiple characters before readers. We can have a specimen of such inner thoughts of characters in the following lines:

But nothing feels normal to Ashima. For the past eighteen months, ever since she's arrived in Cambridge, nothing has felt normal at all. It's not so much the pain, which she knows, somehow, she will survive. It's the consequence: motherhood in a foreign land. For it was one thing to be pregnant, to suffer the queasy mornings in bed, the sleepless nights, the dull throbbing in her back, the countless visits to the bathroom. (*Namesake*)

The third person narrator is a focalizer and the lives of the Gangulis are focalized object.

The third aspect is narrative situation. Manfred Jahn cites Stanzel's model of narrative situations which include complex frameworks aiming at capturing typical patterns of narrative features (3.3.1). The structure of Lahiri's novel matches to the conditions of authorial narrative. According to Jahn an authorial narrative is "told by a narrator who is absent from the story, ie, does *not* appear as a character in the story. . . . An authorial narrator sees the story from an outsider's position, often a position of absolute authority that allows her/him to know everything about the story's world and its characters, including their conscious thoughts and unconscious motives" (3.3.1). *The Namesake* fulfils all above cited conditions – the narrator is an outsider who sees things omnisciently, knows everything about the Gangulis and other characters of the novel, following which it can be said that the novel has an authorial narrative.

b. Action, Story Analysis, and Tellability

Manfred Jahn's second group has action, story analysis, and tellability as its members. According to Jahn 'action' is "a sequence of acts and events; the sum of events constituting a 'story line' on a narrative's level of action" (4.1). In short, action is related with plot or sequence of events and their correlation with each other. Lahiri's plot is simple and impassive. Lahiri makes her point clear: ". . . in my own work, I just want to get it *less*—get it plainer. When I rework things I try to get it as simple as I can" ("Interview"). The actions are presented in a very simple and easy manner with a moderate pace. Two train accidents occur in the story – one with Ashoke and another with Gogol. The main 'story line' depicts conflicts of identity and struggle of members of a family. We see a struggle in the lives of Ashoke, Ashima and, more dominantly, Gogol.

As far as the 'story analysis' is concerned, I put here that this novel is about the lives of Indian immigrants and the difficulties faced by them while adapting to the new cultural atmosphere. Conflict is the hallmark of lives of Indians residing abroad. It is mainly a cultural conflict. Lahiri's characters, too, suffers with the same internal conflict. The story also displays Lahiri's attachment to her Bengali heritage. We can see many examples of this trait throughout the novel. There are plenty of references to Bengali food. In fact, the novel begins with Ashima preparing a snack sold everywhere in Kolkata. She is so crazy about this

snack that she has been eating it all through her pregnancy: “Ashima has been consuming this concoction throughout her pregnancy, a humble approximation of the snack sold for pennies on Calcutta sidewalks and on railway platforms throughout India, spilling from newspaper cones. Even now that there is barely space inside her, it is the one thing she craves” (*Namesake*). In addition, there are references to Bengali ceremonies, family customs, religious rituals, etc. “*Daknam*” and “*bhalonam*” is a reference to a Bengali custom of giving two names – pet name and good name – to new born babies:

. . . a practice of Bengali nomenclature grants, to every single person, two names. In Bengali the word for pet name is *daknam*, meaning, literally, the name by which one is called, by friends, family, and other intimates, at home and in other private, unguarded moments. . . . Every pet name is paired with a good name, a *bhalonam*, for identification in the outside world. Consequently, good names appear on envelopes, on diplomas, in telephone directories, and in all other public places. (*Namesake*)

For this reason, Ashima has two names – Ashima and Monu. Ashoke also has a pet name – Mithu. The main protagonist of the story also has two names – Nikhil as a ‘*bhalonam*’ and Gogol as ‘*daknam*’. In fact, this custom of giving two names plays a crucial role in Gogol’s life.

By ‘Tellability’ Jahn means that “a story is required to have a point, to teach a lesson, to present an interesting experience” (4.3). *The Namesake* presents lives of immigrants dangling between two cultures. The novel shows how Ashima is connected with her motherland and how eagerly she wants to grow her son in the same culture and atmosphere. She urges to Ashoke: ““I’m saying hurry up and finish your degree.” And then, impulsively, admits for the first time: “I’m saying I don’t want to raise Gogol alone in this country. It’s not right. I want to go back”” (*Namesake*). The novel shows a family’s struggle in identity formation. Gogol, in particular, is the main victim of this struggle. He struggles with his names, particularly with pet name Gogol. The story exhibits that Gogol suffers dislocations at various levels – familial as well as cultural. Relationship between parents and children is one more shade the novel exhibits.

c. Tense, Time, and Narrative Modes

Tense, from the third group, has two types – “the narrative past and the narrative present” (Jahn 5.1.1). *The Namesake* is told through present tense. The following lines from the novel make the thing quite clear:

"It's all there," Ashima **says**, watching her husband. "I already checked."

"What are the eyes like? Why won't he open them? Has he opened them?"

She **nods**.

"What can he see? Can he see us?"

"I think so. But not very clearly. And not in full color. Not yet."

They **sit** in silence, the three of them as still as stones. "How are you feeling? Was it all right?" he **asks** Ashima. (my emphasis)

Hence it can be inferred that the novel's tense is narrative present. The whole novel uses the same tense pattern.

The story in *The Namesake* runs for thirty years. The plot, set between 1968 and 2000, spans for two generations, and occurs in chronological order with a little variation (of flashback). The train accident happens with Ashoke is presented through the device of flashback.

Narrative mode, the third member of the group, speaks about modes of expression. It is related with the ways of expression employed by a writer in a story. Narrative modes include Dialogue, action, description, exposition, etc. Manfred Jahn classifies it into two types – showing and telling. In showing mode “there is little or no narratorial mediation, overttness, or presence. The reader is basically cast in the role of a witness to the events”, and in telling mode “the narrator is in overt control (especially, durational control) of action presentation, description, characterization and point-of-view arrangement” (Jahn 5.3.1). As far as the narrative mode is concerned, I include Jhumpa Lahiri's novel in the category of ‘showing’. The narrator of the story is omniscient third person who is not present in the story. This omniscient narrator shows readers things happening to/with the characters. The following excerpt from the novel will justify my point:

At dawn a taxi is called to ferry them through deserted Cambridge streets, up Massachusetts Avenue and past Harvard Yard, to Mount Auburn Hospital. Ashima registers, answering questions about the frequency and duration of the contractions, as Ashoke fills out the forms. She is seated in a wheelchair and

pushed through the shining, brightly lit corridors, whisked into an elevator more spacious than her kitchen. On the maternity floor she is assigned to a bed by a window, in a room at the end of the hall. (*Namesake*)

One will find the same way of expression throughout the story. The third person focalizer views everything and passes the same information to the readers. Moreover, the novel has conciseness and brevity. Jhumpa Lahiri makes this clear in the following words: “My writing tends not to expand but to contract. If I do write more novels, I think they'll be more streamlined and concentrated” (“Interview”). She is not inclined to write novels which are huge and panoramic.

V. Conclusion

In the conclusion, I firmly say that Lahiri has put a very well-knit plot in her novel *The Namesake*. Characters undergo a proper development. Especially the character of Gogol changes drastically as the end of the story nears. The above discussion will definitely justify my point that the narratological aspects like narrator, focalization, tellability, time analysis and narrative modes are nicely put in place. All these aspects add to the charm and interest of the story. For example, Lahiri's use of third person narrator provides her greater freedom in informing the inner monologues of all central characters. However, she remains completely objective in her role as an omniscient focalizer. Precision and brevity are other hallmarks of this novel. In short, the effective use of narrative devices contributes to the popularity of the novel and the writer as well.

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