

**In search of narratological concepts: the case of  
Wassini's 'female of mirage ', or the 'who is who?' game**

حول البحث في مفاهيم سردية: رواية 'أنثى السراب' لواسيني  
الأعرج أنموذجا، أو لعبة 'من هو من؟'

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**Abstract:**

The present paper attempts to draw upon narratological concepts, namely *narration*, *focalisation*, and *narrative situation*, by investigating the way they are employed in Wassini's "*Female of Mirage*". An analysis will be made of the textual elements that project the narrative *voice*, of the *narrative situation*, and the implications thereof. Applying Genette's categorical distinction, it is argued that a narrative is sometimes misleading.

It is the author's contention that Wassini plays the 'who is who?' game. The ability to alternate positions shows the skill of the author and the ingeniousness of the processes used.

**Keywords:** Narration; focalisation; narrative situation; Wassini.

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هذا المقال هو محاولة لتوظيف بعض المفاهيم السردية، بالأخص *السرد*، *التبئير*، و *حالة السرد*. سنتناول رواية "أنثى السراب" لواسيني الأعرج أنموذجا، و بالتالي يتم إجراء تحليل العناصر النصية التي من شأنها أن تبرز *الصوت السرد*، مع دراسة *'حالة السرد'* و القراءة المترتبة عن ذلك. باستغلال الحالات السردية بمفهوم 'جينيت' (Genette)، إنه من إيماننا العميق أن قصة ما ليست دائما واضحة، بالنظر إلى أن سردا ما قد يكون مضللا.

إن قراءتنا هي أن واسيني يلعب لعبة 'من هو من؟'. إن التحول من حالة إلى أخرى يدل على براعة الكاتب وكذا العمليات المستخدمة. كلمات مفتاحية: *السرد*؛ *التبئير*؛ *حالة السرد*؛ واسيني.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

A *narrative* is anything that tells a story, via a text, a picture, a performance, or a combination of these. In order for the narratologist to present a structural description of a narrative, s/he analyses it into its component parts (namely, *voice*, *focalisation*, and *narrative situations*) and then sorts out functions and relationships.

So as to analyse a narrative into the above three component parts, we will take the case of Wassini Larej's novel, namely *'Female of Mirage'*. All along the present paper, an analysis is made of: (1) the narrator's *voice* as projected by expressivity markers or textual expressions, which determine the distinctiveness and thus the overt/covert of voice; (2) *focalisation* by determining whether or not there is internal focalisation and the implications thereof; and (3) the narrator's *relationship* to his/her story, specifically the question of whether

the narrator is present or absent therein. The narratological framework used, all throughout, is mostly based on Genette (1980), but reference is also made to the more complex work of Stanzel (1984). The paper ends up with some interpretive implications that might add welcome new insights to the bulk of knowledge at hand.

## **2. On Narratological Concepts**

Narratology is *a* study of narrative (Herman, 1999). According to the narratological framework of Genette (1980), a narrative is subject to a categorical distinction that uncovers the structure of all narrative form. A structural analysis of a given narrative deconstructs it into its component parts (that is, *voice*, *focalisation*, and *narrative situations*) and then sorts out the functions and relationships inherent therein; as put by Bal (2009), both the *narrator* (i.e. voice) and *focalisation* are said to determine the *narrative situation*. Below is an attempt to account theoretically for these concepts, while coupling them with a practical analysis of the way they are realised in Wassini's work so as to capture the projected narratological structure.

### **2.1 Narration (voice)**

In order to identify a text's narrative voice, the relevant question that one should ask is '*who speaks?*' i.e. the text's voice. As a matter of fact, the more textual information projected on a narrator, the more distinctive his/her voice will be.

A *narrator* is, then, the voice of the narrative discourse; he decides what is to be said, what is to be left unsaid, and from what point of view (Genette, 1980). The novel we selected is *epistolary*, a novel in which there seem to be two narrators (Leila and Wassini, respectively – see below). Example markers or

textual information indicating the narrator's voice are: *mood*, *pragmatic*, *subjective*, and *rhetoric* indicators.

Pushing further on voice lines, a word about *overt*ness as opposed to *covert*ness is warranted. All novels project a narrative voice, yet its *distinctiveness* varies. Narrators can be characterised as being *overt* or *covert*. An *overt narrator* is one who has a distinctive voice tending to refer to him/herself in the first person, to convey attitudinal ideas, to offer exposition when need be. Contrariwise, it is totally the reverse situation which holds true for a *covert narrator*. It bears mentioning that a narrator can better achieve *covert*ness by using an *internal focaliser* to tell the events (see below).

With regard to Wassini's '*Female of Mirage*', and as concerns *mood* or *emotion* which is a voice indicator, we can depict the character Leila having two moods: one, when younger, being full of life, full of hope, mad of love, scared, indifferent and not determinate about her name (Leila, Meriam, or else) – when writing her letters; one, when older, being more decisive, jealous, fed up, determined – when narrating. As for Wassini, he appears more scared, anxious, determined, in comparison with his younger age at which he sounds full of hope and love, dreamful, indifferent to danger.

Regarding *pragmatic indices*, one can notice that the narrators acknowledge an actual addressee; Leila presents an addressee-oriented exposition all along the novel; there is an indication when need be of the temporal-spatial setting. We know who the characters are and what they do in the story. The narrative, then, clearly renders the narrator's perceptual scope: all of the perceptual things Leila sees, feels, or hears are accounted

for – even the 'fly'. The story also renders her memories, thoughts, plans, and those of the characters as well.

As regards *subjective indicators*, Leila's and Wassini's discourses are full of expressivity markers (e.g., first-person self-reference), value judgments (e.g., 'these killers'), indications of ideological attitudes and a moral agenda (e.g., marriage kills life, hope, and freedom – for Wassini), matters of interest (e.g., writing for Wassini, music for Leila), persuasive attitudes (e.g., Leila trying to persuade us, the readers, that Meriem – another character – is rather a *paper-woman* i.e. a paper-version of the real Leila), etc.

Voice, however, is not that simplistic a concept. Given the influence of Bakhtin's (1981) theory of narrative, it has become commonplace to handle any given text as being *dialogic* containing a multiplicity of voices; in a narrative, *dialogism* is achieved by allowing for a patchwork of *authorial*, *narratorial*, and *characterial* voices, producing thus dialogic voices.

It should be justified, by now, to ask: how many voices does Wassini's text project? Whom do they refer to? And what interpretations are brought to bear thereon? The novel at hand is an *epistolary* narrative in which there appear to be more than one *dialogic voice*, one of which being the protagonist's voice – Leila's. Leila's voice depicts her as being a narrator addressing, on the one hand, the reader and, on the other hand, addressing both Wassini, a character in the story, when writing him letters and at the same time the reader (for she wants to publish their secret letters and render their secret life public). Wassini as a character also happens to inhabit the voice of the second narrator in the novel when writing narrative letters, yet letters addressed not to the reader as such, but to a character in the novel – Leila

or Meriem, respectively. Needless to note that Wassini has the additional *extratextual*, dialogic voice, being authorial in function. Another perceived voice that is made audible is that of a third-person internal focaliser (see section on Focalisation below) – his student, respectively, making Wassini prophet-like in character.

Pushing further on this line, one should be justified to question the *author's voice*, to our mind. Normally, the author's voice is suspected in one of two cases. First, the author's voice can be raised provided there is reason for doubting it is more or less identical to the narrator's; such is the case for *nonfictional* (see section on 'interpretive implications'), (auto)biographic narratives. In point of fact, it is already acknowledged by both narrators – namely, Leila and Wassini – that they have the intention of making public their hidden and secret life through publishing their letters, an act being part of an (auto)biography. Second, it can be suspected when the voices of both the author and the narrator are believed to be different i.e. believing that the author intentionally uses a narrative voice distinct as it is from his/her own – perhaps a strategic style for *hiding* purposes (this is precisely our conjecture). As will be shown below, there is reason to suspect that the author Wassini is inhabiting a womanly voice all along.

## 2.2 Focalisation

With respect to *focalisation*, the relevant question is ‘*who sees?*’ By focalisation, it is meant the presentation of an event through the subjective perception of a character, a focaliser's perception or point of view; it is the handling of information by foregrounding the focaliser and backgrounding the narrator. The

narratologist, that is, seeks to identify a text's source of information (Genette, 1980).

A *focaliser*, then, shapes the events by presenting his/her thoughts, knowledge, perceptions, let alone his/her ideological and cultural attitudes. More often than not, the focaliser is held to be the narrator: this is termed *external focalisation*. However, narrative information may also be selected through a character's visual scope or – more broadly – perceptual range i.e. *internal focalisation*.

Note again that the present novel is an *epistolary* narrative which presents events from several points of view. Thus, insofar as Wassini's novel is concerned, what cannot escape attention is the fact that the narrative happens, in part, to present the story's events as seen through the eyes of a third-person internal focaliser (in addition, for instance, to the first-person narrators' accounts: Leila and Wassini). The narrator Leila makes use of an internal focaliser – namely, Wassini's student – by using a covert heterodiegetic narrator, thus hiding behind the internal focaliser's consciousness, perceptions, and thoughts. We find the narrator's discourse closely mimicking the focaliser's voice, making its own vocal quality highly indistinct. As a consequence, attention is drawn, away from the narrator and the processes of literary 'mediation' (see Fludernik, 2010), directly to the mind of the focaliser.

## **2.3 Narrative Situation**

The term *narrative situation* is used to denote complex patterns of narrative practices (see Genette, 1988; Stanzel, 1984). In trying to identify the different narrative types or situations, we shall focus our attention now on the issue of the *relationship* of

the narrator to the story being told i.e. whether or not the narrator is present therein. Using Genette's (1980) model, there is a *categorical* distinction between *two* principal types of narrators and narratives: *homodiegetic* (i.e. first-person narrative) and *heterodiegetic* (i.e. third-person narrative).

Insofar as a *homodiegetic narrative* is concerned, the story is told by a narrator who is a character in the world of his/her story (Genette, 1980; see also Bal, 2009). That is, a text is said to be homodiegetic if there is some use of *first-person* pronouns in action sentences. It is also characterised as a story of personal experience. First-person narrators have the same limitations as ordinary people (Lanser, 1981). They do not know, that is, for sure what will happen in the future; they cannot be present in different places at the same time; and they certainly cannot dig into the minds of other characters.

By contrast, a *heterodiegetic narrator* tells a story in which s/he is *not* present as a character (Genette, 1980; see also Bal, 2009). A narrative is, therefore, heterodiegetic (for Stanzel (1984), authorial) if all of its action sentences are *third-person* sentences. A heterodiegetic narrator's status of an outsider makes him/her an authority having unlimited abilities such as omniscience and omnipresence.

In our case, Wassini's '*Female of Mirage*' presents events mostly in the form of a series of letters written by two characters, so it is understandable enough that narrative situation switches as soon as one letter ends or gets consumed – without forgetting, of course, the main narrator's account outside the context of letter writing. On the basis of the foregoing distinction, and having recourse to Genette's, Wassini's novel is, on the whole, a homodiegetic narrative on the grounds that the narrator(s) is(are)



present as (a) character(s) in his story, telling – we believe – an *autobiographical* story about a set of past experiences.

Moreover, Wassini's homodiegetic narrative is an *epistolary* novel: a novel whose events are mostly in the form of a series of letters written by one or more characters (in our case, Leila and Wassini):

It allows the author to present the characters' thoughts without interference, convey events with dramatic immediacy, and present events from several points of view. [...] Its reliance on subjective points of view makes it the forerunner of the modern psychological novel. (Britannica, 2005)

Back to homodiegesis, the characters Leila and Wassini, being first-person narrators, are restricted to a highly personal, subjective, and limited point of view. They have no direct access to events they did not witness in person – therefore, no authority thereon. The narrator's handling of these limitations justifies the slant of the narrative voice when introducing Wassini's student to give her account, compensating thus for the lack of omniscience and omnipresence.

### **3. Interpretive Implications**

In order to bring the foregoing accounts to bear upon our interpretations and implications, we shall make use of Genette's model, but also of Stanzel's theory of typical narrative situations. The novel we selected as a case for our study seems to be – to our mind – a *homodiegetic* narrative on the whole, and partly *heterodiegetic* containing a passage characterised by Stanzel's figural narration. We shall raise questions from a number of fronts and deal with the possible interpretive implications.

To start with, of significance to the present work is the distinction between the terms *person* (like authors, readers) and *character* (rather a paper-being). Note that Wassini happens to be both a person (i.e. an author) and a character (i.e. a paper-being) at the same time. Note, too, that Leila is a character, or say a paper-being, who believes herself to be a real-life person, and who tries to persuade us, the readers, that Meriem – another character – is instead *the paper-woman* i.e. a paper-version of the real Leila.

From another perspective, the novel under study seems to be a patchwork of both fictional work and nonfictional *autobiography*. Be it the one or the other, the fact that a homodiegetic narrator has a position within the world of the story's events makes it difficult for the reader to accept his/her rendition of the events; here arises the issue of *reliability*: the reader having reasons to suspect the narrator's trustworthiness. That is, first-person narrators tend to focalise the narrative through the perspective of a single character; as such, the question of motivation or psychology is more often than not raised (see Bal, 2009). Unreliability might be due to the narrator's personal involvement; as put by Olson (2018: 169):

unreliable narration—whether by a narrator in the conventional sense or by a focalizer—signals the need to read with greater acuity to resolve textual discrepancies. The recognition of unreliability interrupts the fluid narrativization process and urges the reader to imagine alternative stories.

Given that this is so, it follows that a first-person narrator hardly if ever presents an *objective* treatment of events (Allen, 2000); what is called objectivity might well be 'subjectivity in

disguise' (Bal, 2009). The reader rather sees the scene from the subjective perspective of the narrator or, worse off, from the perspective of any specific character. We say 'worse off' because such a treatment is pretended to be objective, but all what the narrator is doing might be hiding behind one or more of his characters or focalisers. In using a third-person, that is, as a focaliser, one (i.e. the author or the narrator – in our case, Wassini or Leila) gives the impression that one's attitudes are neutral or barely charged, which is not often the case (see Chatman, 1990).

Turning now to a close yet a different front on which Wassini's text might be discussed, and while drawing upon Stanzel's *figural narrative situation*, the use of a figural narrative by presenting events as if seen through the eyes of a third-person character (or internal focaliser) is a good strategy used to background the narrator and to foreground internal focalisation so as to give more credit and objectivity to the narrative accounts. The consequence is the fact that there is the likelihood of immediate adoption of the focaliser's (here, the narrator's) point of view on the part of the reader.

In Wassini's *'Female of Mirage'*, we are presented with a passage at a given stage in the story's events, indeed an account of Wassini, the character, as seen through his student's point of view, a covert focaliser. The narrator presents a direct view into the perceptions, thoughts, and feelings of the focaliser's mind. The character of Wassini is depicted as an ideal figure, and because the passage is a figural third-person (or heterodiegetic-covert) narrative, there is the clever, implicit and unstated claim of its being objective, reliable, and bias-free – however exaggerated this may seem.

Now to cut it all short, what does all the above imply? One goes so far as to conjecture a guess, namely the likelihood that the author is playing a *game*; he is using the narrator Leila, a first-person internal focaliser, as an undercover or a narratorial mediator (see Fludernik, 2010). Such a strategy foregrounds the narrator and backgrounds the author. We feel the author (and the narrator) fading into the background and going thus into hiding. What hiding strategies are brought to bear? Perhaps the author is inhabiting a *womanly voice* (Leila's) trying, thus, not to draw attention to himself. Perhaps, Wassini (the author) is making Leila (a character) inhabit his voice. Granting that he prefers to stay covert, it follows that he will avoid the use of the first-person pronoun as the main narrator in this epistolary novel; that is at least the impression somewhere in the novel, though scarce on the ground, the impression of hiding behind someone – Leila, respectively.

It is our contention that Wassini plays a *game* of standing positions, of hiding behind some character; to cut it short, he is playing the '*who is who?*' *game*: a game which mixes the real with the fictitious. The ability to alternate between the two situations shows the ingeniousness of the processes used, let alone the skill and technique of the author.

#### 4. CONCLUSION

To conclude, an attempt has, so far, been made to generate some questions and discuss them, for this is what theorising and practising are about. The narrative situations and the concomitant features described capture standard narratorial characteristics corresponding to different readerly expectations and interpretations belonging to different cultural frames.

It has been shown that the author is playing a *game*, using the narrator as an undercover or a narratorial mediator, a strategy which foregrounds the narrator and backgrounds the author. It is hoped that the interpretations just advanced are consistent with the general narratological framework outlined all throughout.

Playing games in narratives is commonplace, but one should just make sure one is not saying either too much or too little as a narrator; otherwise, violations to standard writing or practice might be committed. To end with a practical note, working on such violations might well make an interesting agenda for future research. Think it over!

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