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Sheherzad's Life and Death: Interrogating Aspects of Narrative and Narration in the *Arabian Nights' Entertainments* and "The Death of Sheherzad"

Shritama Mukherjee

MPhil, Department of English, University of Delhi.

Abstract

The character of Sheherzad in the Arabian Nights' Entertainment has been known for her quick wit and the exemplary manner in which she is able to save her life when many others before her failed to do the same. She employs the power of narration as her means of escape from imminent death. In doing so, she weaves a web of narrative around her that, at once, is an escape and an entanglement at the same time. Her narrative, her story feeds off her narration; her stories are a part and extension of herself. They enable her to live, sustain her life and, therefore, when the danger of losing her life is over and she does not need to live by her narration anymore, her narrative suffers. She is relegated to the domain of the ordinary, the unadventurous, as the thrill of enjoying another day through the power of her words and she is forgotten. A distinction needs to be made between the character that Sheherzad is and the characters she conjures in her narration. She is unlike her characters. Conflating her narrative with her narration is an erroneous view of the story. She is her own woman, not a means to an end, or a tool for the stories in the *Arabian Nights' Entertainment*. This is where Intizar Hussain's "The Death of Sheherzad" becomes crucial to our understanding of the protagonist. The methodology of the paper would be to examine the intricacies of narrative and narration and distinguish the two vis-à-vis the character of Sheherzad as also to gauge the efficacy of the character as either the 'focalizer' or the 'focalized' by employing Mieke Bal's concepts on narratology. It will be the contention of this paper to dissociate the character of Sheherzad from her stories and the exploration of her fate as she loses control of her narrative is subsumed within the narrative set for her by external agencies.

Keywords: Narrative, narration, focalizer, story-narrative dyad, *Arabian Nights' Entertainment*

1. Introduction

Narrative, narration and narrating are all crucial aspects that create a story. The different levels of narrative impart movement to the story. "As narrative it lives by its relationship to the story that it recounts; as discourse it lives by its relationship to the narrating that utters it" (Genette, 29). In *Arabian Nights' Entertainments,* we find narration ranging from heterodiegetic to homodiegetic and even intradiegetic. In

Sheherzad's case, we see an intermingling of not only the different levels of narration but also her movement from narrating to being narrated. This will further be explored by the treatment meted out to her in Intizar Hussain's short story "The Death of Sheherzad". Thus, it is through the *Arabian Nights' Entertainments* and "The Death of Sheherzad", particularly the character of Sheherzad, that various aspects of narrative and narration will be examined in this paper.

Character:

The character of Sheherzad as it unfolds in *Arabian Nights' Entertainments* is one-dimensional and through the lens of an extra diegetic narrator. We are informed about her. Instead of getting to know her through her own words or judgments or actions that would qualify her character as realized enough in the course of the story, we have her as an agent—a tool—to propel the narrative. Her story is the backdrop for the thousand narratives that follow in order to help her retain her head intact. It can, however, be argued that she is an example of a homodiegetic narrator, one who participates in the story but she does not contribute much to it as we do not see any development in her. She is at best, "a diegetic character in the first narrative told by the extra-diegetic narrator" (Genette, 255-6). From the very beginning we have been informed that she is witty and have read and collected a thousand history books and is knowledgeable of regaling tales. It is then, made clear from the very beginning, that she is the 'promised one', the deliverer from sorrows and thus crucial to the story without being, in any way, a responsibility to the author, for character development. According to Mieke Bal, for the realization of character in a text, there has to be certain semantic axes, or contraries, through which development is sought (180). But Sheherzad has been portrayed in one light which is that of the witty damsel who wins over the king with her knowledge, grace and patience. In other words, the archetypal virtue personified as opposed to King Shahriyar's former queen or vice incarnate. It is thus, by "comparison" (180), another aspect that Bal categorizes as crucial for character development, that we may perceive Sheherzad. "[O]ften there is a connection or discrepancy between the character, its situation and its environment" through which we discern the character as having individual characteristics (180) but in *Arabian Nights' Entertainments* we find no discrepancies or hints of internal revolt or dilemma which would give some insight into who she is other than her story-telling skills. A character is however realized through the "functions it performs in a series of events" (180). In Hussain's text, Sheherzad not only participates in the story but also we find the tribulations she goes through which add to the development of her character and the final culmination. The loss of her story-telling ability encourages her to probe deep so as to find its cause and remedy it. There is hope, denial, dejection, and finally, resignation to her fate as considering herself 'dead'. There is movement, a range of emotions and no larger-than-life, extraordinary treatment of the character. In order to fully realize her potential, a palpable fall is shown from her former glory as the "Nightingale of a Thousand and One Tales" (Hussain, 97).

There are two arguments as regards characters in a story, as formulated by Marvin Mudrick—'purist' and 'realistic'. The former "points out that characters do not exist at all except insofar as they are a part of the images and events which bear and move them, that any effort to extract them from their context and to discuss them as if they are real human beings is a sentimental misunderstanding of the nature of literature" (Rimmon-Kenan, 33). This view is true to the treatment of Sheherzad's character in *Arabian Nights' Entertainments* where, if taken out of context, she will not survive on her own. She is propelled by the events that take place around her—the former queen's betrayal, the king's disastrous decision, her wisdom

and ability to enthrall the king by her story-telling skills, and his falling in love with her. The events are so devised that the story reaches a natural conclusion of the happy nuptials. The 'realistic' view "insists that characters acquire, in the course of an action, a kind of independence from the events in which they live, and that they can be usefully discussed at some distance from their context" (Rimmon-Kenan, 34). This is achieved in Hussain's text where Sheherzad has an entity and identity other than her story-telling skills. She is now the queen, a content mother of three princes, mother-in-law to the most beautiful princesses and happy grandmother to three granddaughters. She cannot, in the whole span of the story, remember her thousand and one magical tales and therefore no longer serves the purpose of merely delineating fanciful stories. She is realized with individual traits such as conflict in her thoughts and a crisis in her existence—she is at odds with herself, the former Sheherzad, ready to spin tales or her present self, a shell of the former one, but with the power to introspect and be able to have an understanding of her affliction. Her resentment at not being able to tell a story anymore and its realization deprives her of her identity—a limited identity, albeit—one that had no existence beyond her stories and the day she did not have any need for her stories, her identity fell into disuse as well.

Hero:

Mieke Bal in her *Narratology* identifies certain qualities or parameters through which one can assess whether the character in question can be the hero of the text. In *Arabian Nights' Entertainments,* we are faced with the question whether or not to pronounce Sheherzad as the hero. Although she brings about the whole action in the text, she is realized through an outside, omniscient narration which, conveniently, either regards or disregards her. The text is not her own, her actions are not her own—all of it is premeditated; she is there to serve a particular purpose and once she is done anthologizing the thousand tales, the extra diegetic narrator does not want her anymore and she is wed off to the King, sent for a bath in the hamam and robed in royal garb. Qualification, distribution, independence, function and relations are the parameters through which we are to assess the hero. "[C]omprehensive information about appearance, psychology, motivation, past" come under qualification (Bal, 183). In this respect, we may say we have some information about Sheherzad, her behaviour, learning and wit before she became the queen, although not a great deal has been spent in developing her character afterwards. That she was beautiful and looked breathtaking is pointed out in the end when Sheherzad and Duniyazad are made to change dresses for the kings, but the question remains whether such treatment is "comprehensive" enough. "[P]sychology" and "motivation" are by far the most neglected aspects in drawing her character. As regards distribution, she appears scantily in the text and it cannot be said that the text is devoted to highlight her. Sheherzad is not an independent character. She, in *Arabian Nights' Entertainments* is never shown without a foil, be it her father, her sister or the King. She is, moreover, always hiding behind the power of her words, we never get a peek inside her mind, we never get to know what her thoughts are and, in the last scene, when she is to be realized as the queen, she appears along with Duniyazad, her sister. In Hussain's text, however, we get to see the workings of her mind, her failings and her innermost feelings. We see her devoid of her stories or any other accompanying character. The psychological development, the suffering, her crisis of identity, are all put forth to show life in action and not some stock 'type' of a character. As regards relations, she is related to every one of the characters of the story and finds validation through these relations. In Hussain's text, despite being related to she fails to establish her identity.

It seems inadequate that a character in a story of such great magnitude will be so underdeveloped and therefore begs the inquiry whether the real hero of the story are her thousand narratives. She is merely the narrator, instrumental in introducing to the reader, in all their detail, her stories, which are well-distributed, have adequate descriptions and well sketched out characters. They can be independent narratives and do not necessarily require Sheherzad or the King's help to exist. They have definite functions in the story as well, which is to keep the King interested and allow Sheherzad to live for another day.

Focalization:

Focalization "is the relation between the vision and that which is 'seen', perceived" (Bal, 199). The character of Sheherzad is perceived through the predominant external focalization, which is the narrator's. We do not have any monologues or long speeches in order to get her side of the story. We are constantly informed about her and her decisions. However, the focalized (Sheherzad) in turn becomes the focalizer when she delves into her narratives. She, then, becomes, from a homodiegetic character, who merely participates in the story, an intradiegetic character, and focalizes on her narratives, a phenomenon known as narrative embedding whereby a character whose actions are the object of narration can himself in turn engage in narrating a story. Within his story there may, of course, be yet another character who narrates another story, and so on in infinite regress. Such narratives within narratives create a stratification of levels whereby each narrative is subordinate to the narrative within which it is embedded….Narration is always at a higher narrative level than the story it narrates. Thus the diegetic level is narrated by an extradiegetic narrator, the hypodiegetic level by a diegetoic (intradiegetic) one. (Rimmon-Kenan, 94).

Sheherzad's narration in the *Arabian Nights' Entertainments* has an "actional function". "Some hypodiegetic narratives maintain or advance the action of the first narrative by the sheer fact of being narrated, regardless (or almost regardless) of their content. *A Thousand and One Nights* is a classical example. Scheherezade's life depends on her narration, and the only condition her stories have to fulfill is to sustain the Sultan's attention" (Rimmon-Kenan, 95).

Sheherzad is the focus of the extradiegetic narrator in *Arabian Nights' Entertainments* whereas in Hussain's "The Death of Sheherzad", she is the internal focalizer. We see the world around her and share what she feels through her narrative. We become a part of her consciousness. "Sheherzad heard the stories with great wonder. Did I tell all these stories? she thought in amazement" and "I had been fully alive only on those nights, she thought ruefully….Now my nights are desolate. They are long and dark. The magic has fled from them. They have become barren" (Hussain, 98-99). An "internal focalizer may perceive the object from within, especially when she herself is both focalizer and focalized" (Rimmon-Kenan, 78). Sheherzad focuses on her feelings and herself from close quarters. She narrates and judges herself. She is no longer endowed with the humongous task of keeping the womenfolk of the kingdom safe by pacifying the King but, instead, can focus on her feelings. Her attention is no longer divided among thousand narratives. She spends time introspecting herself. She understands (or cannot understand) her present diminished state. She is now the focalized perceived from within whereas in *Arabian Nights' Entertainments* she was focalized from without by the external focalizer because of which we miss out on the intricacies of the character. In the *Arabian Nights' Entertainments,* she is at once the focalized and the focalizer, where her character was focused upon to introduce the narrator of the thousand tales to the readers and she, in turn, focused on the characters and events in her tales. The subject of focalization

moves rapidly from Sheherzad to her tales in the *Arabian Nights' Entertainments* whereas in Hussain's text, it remains fixed—on Sheherzad and her mental vicissitudes, concluding with her final epiphany. "External focalization is panchronic in the case of an unpersonified focalizer, and retrospective in the case of a character focalizing his own past….In other words, an external focalizer has at his disposal all the temporal dimension of the story (past, present and future), whereas an internal focalizer is limited to the 'present' of the characters" (Rimmon-Kenan, 80). This is evident in the narrator-focalizer's treatment of Sheherzad where he threw in details about her from an unspecified time period. "In principle, the external focalizer (or narrator-focalizer) knows everything about the represented world, and when he restricts the knowledge, he does so out of rhetorical considerations…The knowledge of an internal focalizer, on the other hand, is restricted by definition: being a part of the represented world, he cannot know everything about it" (Rimmon-Kenan, 81). When Sheherzad, the intradiegetic narrator of her thousand tales focuses on her narratives, she deliberately withholds information so that she may live another day. However, in Hussain's text, she has restricted knowledge—she does not comment on the King or her sister or the proceedings of the court but focuses on herself, the subject of her focalization. While Sheherzad was objectively focalized by the narrator-focalizer in the *Arabian Nights' Entertainments*, the subjective experience and feelings come forth through the internal-focalizer, that is Sheherzad herself, in Hussain's text.

The story-narrative dyad:

For Gerard Genette, the "narrative act initiat[es] (invent[s]) both the story and its narrative, which are then completely indossociable" (15). The story of the *Arabian Nights* is the main story of King Shahriyar and Sheherzad. It so happens that Shahriyar develops a hatred for womankind upon learning of his former queen's betrayal. He launches a fresh attack on women by marrying the virgins of his kingdom only to have them killed the succeeding morn. Sheherzad, the daughter of the Wezeer, well-read and witty, intends to marry the King and makes her father agree to the union. On the wedding night, as planned earlier between Sheherzad her sister, Duniyazad, the latter asks the former, to tell her a story before leaving forever. With the King's permission she engages in a riveting tale but does not conclude by dawn so that the King is wills her to live another day so that he may hear the end of the story. This continues for a thousand and one nights after which the King, having fallen in love with her, accepts her wholeheartedly, ending his spell of misogyny and bloodbath. The narrative act of Sheherzad, initiated to retain her life invents both a chain of narratives as well as her life story culminating with her happy conjugal life with the king. However, there may arise a question as to which narrative act is initiated first—Sheherzad's life story (and the King's revenge on womankind) which gives rise to the thousand tales or is it the very act of narrating (the "narrative act" according to Genette) that gives shape and credibility to the whole story of Sheherzad and the King. But, according to Genette, story is "the totality of the narrated events" while narrative is "the discourse, oral or written, that narrates them" (13). In the light of such a definition, it may be said that narrative and story in Sheherzad's case may be interchangeable. The only problem remains is that of initiation; while the Sheherzad-King story initiates the narrative chain of a thousand tales, it cannot be the other way round. While the tales have a life and existence of their own, outside the framework of the Sheherzad-King story, the Sheherzad-King story will not be able to stand without the thousand tales as it will hinder the progression of the story.

In “The Death of Sheherzad”, Hussain initiates the narrative in media res, where we meet Sheherzad after a considerable amount of time has passed, and she is now the grandmother to three granddaughters. The narrative of this story comprises the story of her life when she has lost her ability of narrating. Narrating is “the real or fictive act that produces that discourse—in other words, the very fact of recounting”. What Sheherzad lacks is the ability to recount the past, her thousand magnificent tales; therefore, the inevitable ‘death’ of Sheherzad. Sheherzad derives credibility from her tales; when that is taken away from her—as there was no particular need for narrating (or, storytelling), the narrative of her life stopped. Through the lens of the author, that is the death of the character. “The chirping, chattering, storytelling Sheherzad who enetered your palace died a long time ago”—almost as soon as her tales were left redundant. The court copyist entitled with the task of anthologizing the tales served his purpose and with the last drop of ink, was sealed Sheherzad’s fate, the narrator was caught amid her act of narration and left impoverished. Narrating her life through her words is an impossible feat now and she can only remain “lost in the enchantment of those story-filled nights” (Hussain, 99). She was now a “woman possessed. She would try feverishly to recollect the stories she had once told with such elan. But nothing would rise from the fog of oblivion” (Hussain, 98). Her life now was a shadow of her former self and all she does was bits and pieces of her narration. The narrative act, that had long since been taken away from her and neglected, eluded her. “All the tales she had told in the past rose up in great swarms in the coils of her memory, but not one story was complete. Bits and pieces of stories swirled and eddied in the recesses of her mind” (Hussain, 97). Narrating her life was now impossible because that life went away the moment the crisis was meted out. The reconciliation brought forth through her tales as well as in her real life by the King’s change of heart resolved any possibility of further narratives in her life. The ‘death’ is brought about by her abandonment of her narrative act. The story of her life, thus suffered because of the stagnancy in her narrative. “Sheherzad spoke in a tearful voice, ‘you granted me life but snatched away my stories from me. I lived only in my stories. When my stories ended, my own story ended with them” (Hussain, 100).

Memory:

“Memory is an act of ‘vision’ of the past but, as an act, situated in the present of the memory. It is often a narrative act”—Sheherzad’s narrative is broken and because her memory of her past life, her glorious days cannot be recreated and that memory has long since been discarded. “[L]oose elements come to cohere into a story, so that they can be remembered and eventually told.” The ‘loose elements’ or her thousand tales elude her and they had been replaced in her memory by the happy life that she has spent with the King. “The story the person remembers is not identical to the one she has experienced. This discrepancy becomes dramatic and, indeed, incapacitating in the case of trauma. Traumatic events disrupt the capacity to comprehend and experience them at the time of their occurrence. As a result, the traumatized person cannot remember them; instead, they recur in bits and pieces, in nightmares, and cannot be ‘worked through’”—trauma caused Sheherzad’s memory to fail or recollect incidents from her past life in “bits and pieces”. The imminent danger of losing her life may have propelled her to create a narrative of thousand splendid tales but they were not strong enough to retain themselves throughout her life. Her narrative was founded on a faulty premise and suffered the inevitable consequence of slipping away from her memory. “The incapability that paralyses the traumatized person can be situated on both story and text levels. The events can be so incongruous that no fabula can be ‘recognized’ as ‘logical’ enough to make sense, at the moment of occurrence. At the later time of remembrance the subject cannot shape a story out of them. The

two moments fail to provide a framework for a meaningful act of focalization. On the text level, even if, thanks to efficacious therapy or other forms of help, memories have been formed—a story has come to cohere—the subject 'lacks words'" (Bal, 204-5). Even with Duniyazad's help, Sheherzad's memory could not be regained. "She managed to drum up the one about Aladdin and the magic lamp, but in that too, she couldn't quite get the chain of events right" (Hussain, 98), that is a lack of coherence and meaningful sequence of words and events.

Conclusion:

Narrative and narration inform every tale of the thousand tales in *Arabian Nights.* Sheherzad's life and the events surrounding it form a backdrop, or the story to her narration. Her act of narrating is, however, put to a stop with the happy resolution between her and the King. Years later (in Hussain's text, a reworking of the legend of Sheherzad), Sheherzad cannot remember her own narrative because of the break in it. Her story, therefore, suffers and the act of narration cannot be fulfilled. The loss of narrative power indicated the breakdown of the narrative chain and thereby the very act of narrating. The various levels of narration embedded in the *Arabian Nights' Entertainments* propel the narrative forward and help it to achieve a conclusion. The same is not the case with "The Death of Sheherzad" where no conclusion is possible other than a dejection and denunciation of the self because of lack of identity. Identity is rooted in the narrative event of Sheherzad's ability to narrate. When that ability ceases to flourish, Sheherzad's narrative faces an untimely 'death'.

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