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**Rhetorical Narratology and Dialogism: A Study of Narrative Progression and Speech
Representation in Khaled Hosseini's *The Kite Runner***

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A Thesis

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Abstract

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This thesis has two broad purposes: first, to investigate the relationship between rhetorical narrative theory and Mikhail Bakhtin's concept of dialogism; second, to apply rhetorical narratology for the study of Khaled Hosseini's *The Kite Runner* (2003). To this end, a brief review of the history of narratology from its birth in the narrative poetics of Russian formalism to the heyday of French structuralism is provided. This phase is often labelled as classical narratology, and is contrasted with postclassical narratology. While classical narratologists attempted to find a universal grammar under which one could presumably subsume all narratives, postclassical narratologists resist any centripetal approaches and are open to various centrifugal influences, including, cognitive sciences, media studies, postcolonialism, feminism, rhetoric, and narrative ethics. Among the many offshoots of postclassical narratology, rhetorical narratology has been adopted as the most applicable approach with regard to *The Kite Runner* because of the significance of ethical issues both in rhetorical narratology and the novel. Rhetorical narratology conceives of narrative as a communicative act involving ethical implications. Rhetorical narratology as delineated by James Phelan can be divided into (1) ethics of the told, (2) ethics of

telling, (3) ethics of production, and (4) ethics of reception. This thesis studies only the first two. Here, ethics is conceived as meta-ethics, that is, the ethics of otherness. However, since ethics is a much controversial term, I borrow Bakhtin's concept of dialogism as to refer not only to the formal heteroglossia of the novel, but also to the dialogic relationship between self and other. Thus, dialogism is reinterpreted as a philosophy whereby existence is always preceded by the other. The ethical implication of such a philosophy is to underscore the priority of active response to other in ethical encounters. Integrating rhetorical narratology and dialogism, I then turn to a detailed analysis of ethics of the told and the telling in *The Kite Runner*. Ethics of the told, or the representational level, refers to the character-character relations and is analyzable through the narrative progression of the text. Ethics of the telling, or the narrational level, refers to the narrator-character relations, and is analyzable through the speech representation of the text. In the end, it is argued that while the representational level of *The Kite Runner* underscores responsibility for the other, thus dialogic approach to the other, its speech representation suppresses the voice of the other, thus monologic approach to the other. This conflict is considered as the main theme of the novel.

Key words: rhetorical narratology, dialogism, classical narratology, postclassical narratology, ethics, the other, narrative progression, speech representation, *The Kite Runner*

Introduction

This thesis has two broad purposes: first, to investigate the relationship between rhetorical narrative theory and Mikhail Bakhtin's concept of dialogism; second, to apply rhetorical narratology for the study of Khaled Hosseini's novel *The Kite Runner* (2003). To this end, Chapter I discusses the development of narrative theory from its classical (mostly structuralist) paradigm to the postclassical diversification from which rhetorical narrative theory has emerged. Since one aspect of rhetorical narratology has to deal with ethics – ethics of the told, the telling, production, and reception – Chapter II examines Bakhtin's concept of dialogism in relation to the study of narrative ethics in order to reconceptualize dialogism as to refer not only to the formal heteroglossia of a novel but also to the dialogic relationship between self and other. Finally in Chapters III and IV, carrying an analysis of *The Kite Runner*, it is argued that ethics can be read as a theme in *The Kite Runner*. My argument is to emphasize the simultaneous co-existence of monologic and dialogic attitudes toward the other in a single narrative. While the narrative progression of *The Kite Runner* underscores the priority of responsibility for the other, thus dialogic approach to otherness, the representation of speech in the novel, which is dominated by the authorial consciousness, suppresses the voice of the other by leaving a minimum space for the other to speak, thus monologic approach to otherness.

As the third decade of the second millennium draws to a close, narratology begins to take new turns and twists. To maintain its vitality, every science, narratology being presumably a science, needs some refurbishing every now and then. Having superseded the formalist prison house of language and the structuralist pseudo-scientific paradigm with its unquenchable desire for devising a universal grammar of all narratives, contemporary narrative theory pays attention

instead to the particular and the local rather than the essential and the universal. In a world where the realities of the outside are too real to be bracketed in the name of textual immanence, Proppian or Genettean typology seems nothing less than a conservative gesture. Postclassical narratology includes once more the referential side of language, which under the auspices of Saussurean linguistics, and in the name of objectivity, had been excluded in classical narrative theory.

While classical narratology primarily refers to the narrative poetics of Russian formalism and French structuralism, what has been called *postclassical* narratology since the 1990s refers not to a unified theory of narrative but to an interdisciplinary approach with a wide range of interests, from cognitive sciences, feminism, postcolonialism, to rhetoric and ethics, among many other things. The lowest common denominator of postclassical narratology is its inclination toward contextualization and interpretation in contrast to structuralist imprisonment in form/structure as well as its blindness to context-orientated interpretation.

Highly skeptical about structuralist proclaimed scientificism and essentialism, postclassical narratology celebrates relativism, constructivism, pluralism, and localism. However, postclassical narratology does not place itself in a position of total rejection of the structuralist veritable heritage. Postclassical narratology is open to extensions, reconceptualizations, redefinitions, and (re)exploitations of the previous concepts and methods. Among the many offshoots of postclassical narratology, rhetorical narratology stands out as the most applicable with regard to Khaled Hosseini's *The Kite Runner* because of the preoccupation of both rhetorical narratology and the novel with ethical issues. In *The Kite Runner*, the referential side of the signification coin shows up in the traumatic matrix of Afghanistan.

The Kite Runner is the first novel published by an Afghan-American author in English. The context of its production due to the post 9/11 Afghan-American conflict, and the context of its reception, written in English mainly for an American audience and strongly based on western conventions of popular literature, have given a special aura to the novel.¹ *The Kite Runner* is the story of the immigration of an Afghan family to America after the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan and the subsequent takeover of the Taliban. The second part of the novel is the story of the return of the protagonist-narrator (Amir) from America to the Taliban-reigned Afghanistan to save Sohrab.

Since its publication, *The Kite Runner* has ignited controversies about its representation of otherness. Is the other in the novel a stereotypical (new) orientalist image, one critic has wondered?² Or is it possible to read for instance the representation of otherness in *The Kite Runner* as a global allegory of ethics?³ What kind of self-other relation is represented in the novel? To address these questions, this thesis intends to integrate rhetorical narratology with Bakhtin's concept of dialogism. Such a project can (1) illustrate Bakhtin's critical stance toward formalism and structuralism, and thus contribute to an understanding of postclassical, especially rhetorical narratology, (2) show the possibility of reading "ethics" as a theme rather than doing ethical criticism with a pre-established system, (3) help us to reconceptualize Bakhtin's dialogism as pertaining to the self-other relations, and finally, (4) show that in the light of Bakhtinian dialogic approach, a narrative should not be read as a coherent whole with an either/or logic, and thus, to underline the fact that there are two contradictory approaches toward the other in the novel. While the narrative progression of *The Kite Runner* represents the priority of responsibility for the other, its speech representation suppresses the voice of the other.

Let me define a few key terms before we proceed farther.

Rhetorical narratology: rhetorical narratology as it pertains to my thesis, is the study of the ethical implications of narrative on representational and narrational levels. According to Phelan, there are four ethical levels of analysis in rhetorical narratology: (1) ethics of the told, (2) ethics of the telling, (3) ethics of production, and (4) ethics of reception. In my thesis, I analyze the first two. Ethics of the told, or the representational level, refers to the character-character relations, and ethics of the telling, or the narrational level, refers to the narrator-narrated relations.

Ethics: Ethics here is conceived as meta-ethics, and not as the study of morality. More specifically, the relationship between self and other, or ethics of otherness. The concept of otherness here engulfs other people, both single and as groups. In short, how a character/narrator act in relation to other characters defines the study of ethics in *The Kite Runner*.

Dialogism: Bakhtin's concept is interpreted as a philosophy whereby existence is always determined by the other, and thus dialogism denotes the priority of the other (people) in all aspects of life, including ethical responsibility for the other. Dialogism subverts the self/other relation as other/self.

In the light of rhetorical narrative theory, and using Bakhtin's dialogism as the ethical framework of the thesis, the applied method, by which I mean the elements of textual analysis, with regard to *The Kite Runner* can be outlined as follows:

First, using Claude Bremond's model of narrative progression, I select parts of the novel in which one character's choice in relation to another character has in one way or another a decisive effect on the narrative progression of the text. For example, while Hassan is being raped

by a bully, Amir has two choices: to intervene, or to hide himself behind a wall. Amir chooses the latter, and his choice determines the whole narrative unfolding of the text. Had Amir made another choice, the narrative progression would have definitely been different. Or in another example, while an Afghan woman is threatened to be raped by a Russian soldier, Amir's father (Baba) has two choices: to intervene, or to remain silent. Baba chooses the first. Analyzing such scenes constitutes the study of narrative ethics on the representational level.

Second, I study the speech representation in *The Kite Runner*, that is, how the narrator represents the other characters' speech. Selections where direct or indirect discourse is used, are cited. For example, the following is a speech representation of Baba early in the novel: "If there's a God out there, then I would hope he has more important things to attend to than my drinking scotch or eating pork" (19).⁴ Given Baba's character and his consciousness, the speech cannot be fully his, and thus the above speech representation reflects the dominant voice of the authorial consciousness. Moreover, the idea of speech is expanded to include generic features of the text too. In other words, representation of speech refers also to the kind of generic codes by which a text is made. Thus, concerning *The Kite Runner*, the authorial choice of genre codes can be interpreted as the self-other relation, in the sense of the ethical responsibility of the self in narrating the other. This is highly significant especially in the postcolonial context in which the novel has been produced. This section constitutes the study of narrative ethics on the narrational level.

In conclusion, it is argued that ethics, that is the self-other relations, can be read as the main conflict in *The Kite Runner*. While the representational level of *The Kite Runner* privileges responsibility for the other as the ethical dimension of self-other relation, the narrational level privileges the dominant voice of the authorial consciousness, and thus de-privileges the other.

Khaled Hosseini's narrative strategies, more specifically, the narratorial voice and the speech genres, show the dominance of the authorial consciousness.

Chapter I: Classical/postclassical narratology

This chapter begins with a tentative comparison between classical and postclassical narratology and ends with an introduction to rhetorical narratology.

Since classical narratology refers primarily to the narrative poetics of Russian formalism and French structuralism, section 2 briefly reviews structuralism from its Russian and Saussurean origins to later French developments. It is my contention that structuralism was (is) not a coherent movement and thus it cannot be boiled down to a single definition.

Section 3 introduces postclassical narratology. Of particular relevance here is David Herman's cognitive approach where narrative is conceived as the (re)configuration of world knowledge through mental frames and scripts. Comparing and contrasting Herman's cognitively based definition with classical narratology's emphasis on temporal sequentiality as the mark of narrativity illustrates the divergent projects of classical and postclassical narartologies.

Section 4, discusses rhetorical narratology with a focus on the five principles of rhetorical narratology as proposed by James Phelan. Furthermore, the relationship between rhetorical narratology and ethics is illustrated. Here it is argued that in the light of rhetorical narratology, ethics can be considered a theme in literary works.

1. Introduction

Postclassical narratology is skeptical about classical structuralist narratology for its proclaimed scientificity, anthropomorphism, disregard for context, and gender blindness.¹ Postclassical narratology is not a unified theory. It draws on various interdisciplinary approaches including linguistics, cognitive sciences, possible-world theory and artificial intelligence, feminist theory, postcolonial studies, and rhetorical narratology.² One could argue that postclassical narratology

is more the study of narrative in general than a particular theory of narrative. As Herman notes in *Narratologies*, “No longer designating just a subfield of structuralist literary theory, *narratology* can now be used to refer to any principled approach to the study of narratively organized discourse, literary, historiographical, conversational, filmic, or other.”³

Risking overgeneralization, it is arguable that while classical narratology is theoretically centripetal in its insistence on subsuming all narratives under one single universal grammar, postclassical narratology is centrifugally open to various influences and hybridizations. The following table is a tentative comparison between classical and postclassical narratology:

Table 1: a comparison between classical and postclassical narratology⁴

Classical (structuralist) narratology	Postclassical narratology
1. Text-centered	1. Context-oriented (context of production and reception)
2. Main focus on closed systems and static products	2. Main focus on open and dynamic processes
3. Emphasis on theory, formalist description, typology and taxonomy of narrative	3. Emphasis on application, thematic readings, interpretation, ideological, cultural, and ethical evaluations
4. Ahistorical and synchronous in orientation	4. Historical and diachronic in orientation
5. Focus on essential and universal features of all narratives, <i>the langue</i>	5. Focus on particular effects of individual narratives, <i>the parole</i>

6. Role of textual elements and functions	6. Role of the reader
7. Theoretically centripetal	7. Theoretically centrifugal
8. A unified (sub) discipline	8. An interdisciplinary project

Postclassical narratology proposes extensions of the classical model that open fairly focused and restricted realm of narratology to methodological, thematic, and contextual influences from outside. In order to understand how postclassical narratology is an extension of its precedent siblings, we need to analyze the development of narrative theory from its early twentieth century rise in the poetics of Russian formalism to the heyday of French structuralism.

2. Classical narratology

Classical narrative theory basically refers to the narrative poetics of Russian formalism and French structuralism, but is not limited to any of the two.

The word “structuralism” is equally applicable to work carried out in the social sciences, philosophy, and the humanities. It seems hard to deny the fact that human knowledge and life is structured in one way or another. Without perceptible structures life would turn into a chaos.

The birth of structuralism is associated with the general movement in the history of ideas involving the attempt to give the status of science to humanistic areas of knowledge which were traditionally considered to lie outside the scope of science. At first glance bringing such a subjective realm of knowledge as the humanities, including literature, under the presumably objective lens of science may seem a misstep. However, as we will see, this was masterfully done.

Born in Russia and Switzerland and confirmed in Prague, structuralism found fertile soil in France in marginal academic institutions outside the university, coming to fruition in the 1960s in the work of intellectuals such as Claude-Lévi-Strauss, the philosophers Michel Foucault and Louis Althusser, the psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan, and the literary critics Roland Barthes, Claude Bremond, Algirdas J. Greimas, Tzvetan Todorov, and Gerard Genette. This does not mean that the mentioned names were full-blown structuralists. Nevertheless, even when one places himself in opposition to structuralism, its existence is officialized like it or not.

Almost everything began with language. The structuralists drew an analogy between language systems and social systems. Following Ferdinand de Saussure’s principle that language has a systematic (synchronic) as well as historical (diachronic) form, structuralists defined

societies as complex systems ruled by a social contract, of which the participants are not always conscious, so that the contract is latent rather than manifest – similar to Marxist theories of false consciousness. Their aim was to gain a comprehensive view of the social and institutional relations existing between individuals and between individuals and institutions, with a view to establish the overall structure of society at large. Revealing the latent structure(s) of a society by which the individual is assigned a false consciousness about herself was warmly welcomed by most neo-Marxist thinkers including, Althusser and Foucault.

Even the anti-structuralists would concede that structuralism has “left its mark on the intellectual tradition.”⁵ Though officially denounced as dead by some poststructuralist thinkers, one cannot deny the enormous impact it has left on literary studies, among many other disciplines. It is a rule thumb of the Bakhtinian dialogic approach to leave a space for the other voices to be heard. Structuralism, despite its faults, has its many merits.

Against all my expectations and what I had been fed with in college, as I read and reread through literary theory books and anthologies in the hope of coming up with a single clear-cut definition of structuralism, I gradually came to modestly accept that Jonathan Culler was right: “that would lead only to despair.”⁶

In *Beginning Theory* (2009), Peter Barry implies a similar despair, but maintains that “if forced to do so [to define structuralism] I would say that its essence is the belief that things cannot be understood in isolation – they have to be seen in the context of the larger structures they are part of (hence the term ‘structuralism’).”⁷ Two questions arise: First, is “the belief that things cannot be understood in isolation” not also one aspect of Bakhtin’s dialogism? In other words, I am implying that one could begin to paint a healthier picture of structuralism if it is defined the way Barry defines it. Second, what is meant by a “structure”? To the latter question,

Barry answers that “[t]he structures in question here are those imposed by our way of perceiving the world and organizing experience, rather than objective entities already existing in the external world.”⁸ Now, I would like to pose a simple objection to anti-structuralists: what is wrong with finding out the ways in which we perceive the world and organize our experience? Does not the current state-of-the-art cognitive poetics prove that such a project is not totally misguided?⁹ This question is to imply that despite the faults in structuralist universalist claims, discovering the structures by which human perception is governed does not seem to be methodologically unsound. As we will see in section 3 of the present chapter, contemporary cognitive narratology has a similar aim, despite its conceptually different tools.¹⁰

The stereotypical image of structuralism is that it is a “vampire approach” which sucks blood out of the text. As Robert Scholes points out, such an image asserts that structuralism “has to do [. . .] with the reduction of texts to bloodless formulae.”¹¹ One book which has popularized such a stereotypical image, and has been very influential in (hastily) discarding structuralism, is Terry Eagleton’s *Literary Theory* (1996). According to Eagleton, a structuralist critic has a self-made inflexible ruler in his hand with which he diagrammatically schematizes the form of a story.¹² Eagleton makes an example:

Suppose we are analyzing a story in which a boy leaves home after quarreling with his father, sets out on a walk through the forest in the heat of the day and falls down, a deep pit. The father comes out in search of his son, peers down the pit, but is unable to see him because of the darkness. At that moment the sun has risen to a point directly overhead, illuminates the pit’s depths with its rays and allows the father to rescue his child. After a joyous reconciliation, they return home together.¹³

Notwithstanding the artificial nature of Eagleton's example, and the fact that he himself has the iron Marxist ruler in his hand with which he measures almost everything, he explains that, faced with such a story, the structuralist critic rewrites the above story in terms of low/high opposition, and the restoring of equilibrium between "low" and "high":

What a structuralist critic would do would be to schematize the story in diagrammatic form. The first unit of signification, 'boy quarrels with father', might be rewritten as 'low rebels against high'. The boy's walk through the forest is a movement along a horizontal axis, in contrast to the vertical axis 'low / high', and could be indexed as 'middle'. The fall into the pit, a place below ground, signifies 'low' again, and the zenith of the sun 'high'. By shining into the pit, the sun has in a sense stooped 'low', thus inverting the narrative's first signifying unit, where 'low' struck against 'high'. The reconciliation between father and son restores an equilibrium between 'low' and 'high', and the walk back home together, signifying 'middle', marks this achievement of a suitably intermediate state.¹⁴

For Eagleton, this is turning a blind eye to "the actual *content* of the story [*italics original*]." ¹⁵ I believe that his objection is to some extent true, however, there are two points to be made here. First, whose structuralism Eagleton is talking about? In other words, he is triumphantly narrating a single story of structuralism, as if there was ever such a single story. As most critics have confessed, "[i]t is difficult to boil structuralism down to a single 'bottom-line' proposition'."¹⁶ Second, certain concepts like binary opposition cannot be simply done away on the grounds that some structuralists used them in a special way for their apparently scientific project. In other words, despite the fact that some poststructuralist thinkers including most notably the deconstructionist practice of Jacques Derrida have shown the grave consequences of thinking in