Focalization: An Investigation into the Narratology of Moniru Ravanipur's "Kanizu"

Seyed Gholamreza Shafiee-Sabet [*]
Assistant Prof. of English Literature
Islamic Azad University
Bushehr Branch, Iran
Email: grezashafiee@gmail.com

Atefeh Rabei
Independent Scholar, Iran

Email: ati_rabeie@yahoo.com

Abstract

According to the French Structuralist Gerard Genette, the term "point of view" is not an all-comprehensive one for the discussion of narration because, in his view, there is often a difference between the person who tells about an event and the person who sees it. He has, thus, proposed the term "focalization" to make a distinction between the two components of narration. Later critics also proposed new aspects and dimensions to Genette's term and made it a key issue in Structuralist criticism. In this article, drawing on Genette's and other critics' views, we have tried to analyze how, through the interaction of different components of focalization, meaning is shaped. The study shows that "Kanizu" includes narrative complexities that are often ignored in traditional criticism.

Keywords: Focalization; Narrative, Structuralism, "Kanizu", Ravanipur, Genette

Introduction

Traditionally, in the discussion of narrative fiction, the critics employ the terms "first person and third person point of view". The former is used when the

narrator is telling the story from inside the narrative, and the latter is used when the narrator is outside and often anonymous. This type of classification, however, has raised questions and critiques. Steven Cohan and Linda Shires, for example believe that

> The classification of first-and third-person narrations usefully designates the internal or external relation of narrating agent to the story, but we must also acknowledge the problem it poses for analysis. Strictly speaking, a "third-person narrator" is a contradiction in terms: a third person cannot narrate. The pronouns *he* and *she* refer to the characters being narrated, not to an agency responsible for the narration. A first-person pronoun appears to refer to a narrator only because of circumstance; the character being narrated happens to be a narrating agent as well. (91-92)

Moreover, the problem with this categorization is better revealed when we consider what is called "second person point of view" the best sample of which can be found in Italo Calvino's novel *If On A Winter's Night A Traveler.* At the beginning of the seventh chapter of the book, for example, we have:

> You are seated at a café table, reading the Silas Flannery novel Mr. Cavedagna has lent you and waiting for Ludmilla. Your mind is occupied by two simultaneous concerns: the interior one, with your reading, and the other, with Ludmilla, who is late for your appointment. You concentrate on your reading, trying to shift your concern for her to the book, as if hoping to see her come toward you from the pages. But you're no longer able to read, the novel has stalled on the page before your eyes, as if only Ludmilla's arrival could set the chain of events in motion again. (141)

The second person point of view called "you" is the agent if the actions of the story such as sitting, reading, thinking, waiting, etc. "You" is actually interacting with other characters, but as Cohen and Shires state, ."'You' [is] obviously not the narrating agent responsible for the text: you [is] a reader not

the narrator" (92). Who is the narrator, then? And where is s/he? It seems that the pronoun "you" is only concealing the agent of the narration because "you" is being addressed rather than addressing any other character, and therefore, there must be another agent as the narrator. According to Cohen and Shires, "This example of second-person narration exposes the limitations of classifying agents according to pronouns, for in narration pronouns refer for their antecedents to the characters performing the action being narrated" (92).

Among different propositions, Genette's notion of "focalization" seems to be a more comprehensive term and, thus, has succeeded to take the discussion of narrative a step forward. In his *Narrative Discourse* (1972), Genette brings about a thorough study of Marcel Proust's *In Search of He Lost Time* based on a structuralist orientation in which any narrative is a part of the general system of language and extracts rules and regulations to investigate the way meaning is constructed in stories and narratives of different kind. Genette's goal in that book is, in Gerald Prince's words, "to discover, describe, and explain the mechanics of narrative" (in Peter Messent 9). In other words, Genette's is not an attempt to present a new interpretation and meaning of a certain text, but to shed light on and reveal the mechanism of narrative. Put differently, he tries to explain how a narrative constructs its artistic influence.

Theoretical Framework

Genette rejects the classification of the narratives based on pronouns. In his view, the term "point of view" does not reveal all aspects of narration. He believes there is a difference between the one who narrates an event and the one who sees it. In other words, in Genette's view, the narrator is not necessarily the person who narrates a story from his own angle of vision. Thus, to make a distinction between the two—the one who tells and the one who sees—Genette has proposed the term "focalization" which is, in Michael Toolan's words, "the angle from which things are seen" (68). To be seen, however, is not limited to the visual perception, but   includes as well, in Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan's words, the "cognitive, emotive and ideological orientation" (73). Rimmon-Kenan also believes that the term "focalization" "has the great advantage of dispelling the confusion between perspective and narration" (73). In this regard, Toolan states:

> The great and continuing nuisance perpetuated by the term 'point of view' is that it does nothing to discourage the conflation and confusion of two distinct aspects of narrative practice. Those two separable aspects are:
>
> 1 The orientation we infer to be that from which what gets told is told.
>
> 2 The individual we judge to be the immediate source and authority for whatever words are used in the telling. (68)

It is necessary to add that the notions of focalization and narration, or focalizer and narrator, may sometimes, be merged. In such a case, the narrative is the agent that tells the story, and the focalizer is the agent that sees, feels or thinks about the events.

Another important difference between focalization and point of view is the blurring of the distinction between the first and third person point of view in the former. In Rimmon-Kena's words, "in both, the focalizer is a character within the represented world. The only difference between the two is identity of the narrator" (75). One can consider the case of "Eveline" in Joyce's *Dubliners* in which the narrator tells the story but whatever he tells us are the events the main character sees and feels. Or in Scot Fitzgeralds' *The Great Gatsby* in which Nick Caraway—the narrator is different from Nick Caraway—the experiencing character. The latter is the focalizer and the former is the narrator.

Types of Focalization:

There are two criteria to discuss the different types of focalization: position of the focalizer and the degree of its persistence. Relative to its position, focalization, then, is divided into the external and the internal focalization. And in regard to its persistence, it is classified into fixed, variable, and multiple focalizations. In his definition of the external focalization, Toolan contends:

> External focalization occurs where the focalization is from an orientation outside the story (what this seems to mean is that the orientation is not associable with that of any character within the text). In any event, in such cases, the narartor/focalizer separation tends to collapse, so that the

> focalization has no particular interest independent of the narration" (69).

And regarding internal focalization, Toolan states: "Internal focalization occurs inside the represented events or, perhaps better, inside the setting, and almost always involves a character-focalizer" (69).

Moreover, In Genette's view, focalization can be fixed, that is, limited to one character, variable, that is, alternating between two predominant characters, or multiple, that is, shifting among several characters.

The Focalized:

Besides the two elements of narrator and focalizer, focalization also includes a third one called, "the focalized" which is defined by Cohen and Shires as, "what is being seen and, thus narrated" (95). In Miek Bal's view, "the subject (the 'focalizer') is the agent whose perception orients the presentation, whereas the object ('the focalized') is what the focalizer perceives" (in Rimmon-Kenan 76). Like the focalizer, the focalized includes the two types of internal and external in which, according to Toolan , "the distinction is between viewing from outside or from within. In the former, only the external, literally visible phenomena are reported; in the latter, facts about the feelings, thoughts and reactions of a (or several) character(s) are reported, so that a penetrating intrusive portrayal is achieved" (70-71).

Facets of Focalization:

The most important facets of focalization, according to Rimmon-Kenan, are perceptual facet, psychological facet and ideological facet. The perceptual facet includes two coordinates of space and time. As Messent states, it is "the point in time and space—at which the focalizer is situated" (21). The narrator/external focalizer—who is outside of actions of the story—often has a panoramic view, or the possibility to yield a simultaneous focalization of things happening in various places. In internal focalization, however, the focalizer is "a limited observer" (Rimmon-Kenan 80) with the possibility to narrate what is exposed to his senses.

The psychological facet of focalization is comprised of the two components: the cognitive and the emotive. The cognitive component covers the area of knowledge and includes "what a character believes, knows, conjectures, remembers, conceptualizes" (Messent 24). The emotive component

involves issues related to the fact whether the character is subjectively and emotionally involved or uninvolved. The ideological facet includes the worldview of narrator-focalizer or the characters. Ideology is what is defined, by Boris Uspensky, as "a general system of viewing the world conceptually" (p.8), and thus signifies the system of values and norms according to which, in Rimmon-Kenan's words, "the events and characters of the story are evaluated" (83). Here is Toolan's view:

> Often, it seems, one ideology or world-view, of an external narrator-focalizer, is the dominating norm, and any characters' ideologies that deviate from this standard are at least implicitly (and sometimes explicitly) censured. On the other hand, there may be a juxtaposition of different ideological orientations without any overt adjudication between them, so that the reader is torn between different views of certain events in particular and (by extension) the world in general. (74)

Focalization in "Kanizu":

"Kanizu" is the story of a young village girl called Maryam who has immigrated to the city of Bushehr with her parents. In the city, she gets familiar with a woman—Kanizu—who is detested by everyone in the family and the neighborhood because she is a "whore" (6). Maryam seems to be the sole person who regards Kanizu not as a prostitute but as a human being capable of human compassion and kindness. She believes it is Kanizu's loneliness and poverty that has made her resort to prostitution.

At the beginning of her relationship with Maryam, Kanizu is young and pretty and popular among men, but gradually she gets addicted to Alcohol, loses her beauty, and is ultimately deserted and is found dead. As readers, we do not see how she dies. We can only guess, based on what is narrated, that her death is due to her addiction to alcohol, and because she is homeless, she has been left dying on a corner of the street.

The plot begins with the death of Kanizu observed by Maryam when she—Maryam—is leaving school. It is Maryam who sees the events of the story and the (3rd person omniscient) narrator who tells them. The main action

of the story is, therefore, Maryam's observation of what the people do to the dead body of Kanizu, and the memories of her relationship with Kanizu based on association. That is, a word, an event or an object reminds Maryam of an event or a dialogue with or about Kanizu.

As we can see in this summary, the action of the story is narrated from the point of view of Maryam and as she is a character inside the story, she is therefore an internal focalizer. That is to say, whatever is narrated is the result of what she sees, hears, and in general, her sensory perceptions. Here is an example from the starting point of the narrative:

> Arriving on the street from the school, Maryam saw the men in front of the Tavakkoli's tavern who were belly laughing and pulling the chador of a woman whose leg was striking out of the street gutter. (1)

Or in another example:

> Maryam felt that her legs could not carry her. It was as if something had crumbled inside her. A hand as large as the hands of the people in the square combined was squeezing her throat. Her eyes were burning. She felt a strange queasiness in her stomach. The crowd was growing by the minute. A man was ululating. Another was snapping his fingers and wiggling his butt. (1-2)

In the first example the agent who sees the "men" and the "chador" in Maryam as it is indicated by the verb "saw". In the 2nd example, the verb "felt" reveals the fact that the narrator is reporting what the narrator is feeling, seeing and hearing. This is how the story continues, that is, the narrator tells what Maryam observes. Even the direct and indirect speech by other characters—like Maryam's mother—is a part of what Maryam hears and sees. So far, therefore, the narrative has a fixed internal narrator.

There are, however, instances in which the narrator tells us about issues that are out of Maryam's sight or beyond her mind. In other words, as any other character, limited by time and place, it is improbable for her to have the chance to see or even hear what's beyond her sensory perception. The narrator,

however, sometimes breaks the spatio-temporal framework of the focalizer and, drawing on her position as the omniscient narrator, hints at issues and events beyond the focalizer's understanding. Here is an example:

> Kanizu would follow the men around and plead with them [1]. When she got tired, she would look in the garbage, collect the empty battles and is the hope of a drop would hold them up over her mouth [2]. No one would follow Kanizu around anymore, except the porters who at sunset would drag their weary bodies to the old ruined caravansary outside the city [3]. (20)

Sentence [1] obviously belongs to Maryam, as the focalizer, since a paragraph later she tells Kanizu, "Don't poke in the trash" (20). In sentence [2] there is also the possibility of Maryam's watching Kanizu collecting the empty bottles. In this sentence, thus, Maryam is the focalizer, too. In sentence [3], however, considering the fact that Maryam is in the 4th grade, that is, she is 10 years old—she is too young to be present around the "ruined caravansary outside the city" (20). This sentence is, therefore, uttered by the narrator. That is to say, here the narrator is the focalizer, the external focalizer.

Such an issue, that is, the simultaneous existence of internal and external forcalizers, is not odd in the world of fiction and cannot be considered as a drawback in the narrative. In fact, this is a case of "transgression" which is, in Messent's words, "a central notion in [Genette's] study of narrative" (23). It suggests, as in the case above, how an author breaks, as Genette puts it, "the limits of his own narrative 'system'" (208) and causes a shaking of "the traditional equilibrium of novelistic form" (259). We can, thus, conclude that, in "Kanizu" in most cases we have an internal focalization. In other cases, however, the narrator and the focalizer are unified and the events are narrated by an external onlooker. The story is also of variable focalization which has been a part of what Toolan calls, 'a well-established tradition at least since Dickens" (71). From Genette's point of view, it is common to have changes in focalization because, as he says, "any single formula of focalization does not … always bear on an entire work, but rather on a definite narrative section, which can be very short" (191).

The other aspect of focalization is whatever the focalizer thinks of, sees and hears, or what is called the "focalized". As mentioned before, the focalized falls into the same category as the focalizer. In "Kanizu", the main action which is happening at the present time is the story of the death of Kanizu and the way the people around her behave with her dead body. Normally, when Maryam is the focalizer, she is an external observer and therefore the incidents are narrated from the outside. One can say, thus, that the focalized object in this part, including Kanizu's dead body and the people around it are external. Here is an example to better clarify the issue:

> It was the sound of the neighborhood street cleaner and the rattling sound of his cart. The sounds of raspberries could be heard, and the sound of the drunken man who was breaking wind and snapping his fingers while wiggling his bottom.
> "Step aside, coming through, we've got to move the deceased."
> "This isn't a deceased."
> "What is it then? If she wasn't a human alive, now that she has died, she is a deceased."
> "Throw her into the sea."
> "The sea is too good for her." (12-13)

The sounds and the movements here are those that Maryam, as the external focalizer, sees and hears. We don't even know the names of these people because Maryam doesn't know them. There are, however, a few cases of transgression, especially when Kanizu is concerned. She is now dead and what happens inside her (mind) is not accessible to Maryam, but they are reported. Here is an example:

> It was the voice of the drunken man who was staggering and pulling Kanizu by her feet. A lock of Kanizu's black, wet hair was stuck to her forehead. Her white thin lips seemed to be pressing tightly. A piece of thorn had caught in her hair. The names on her neck were covered by a layer of salty residue. Kanizu's head was turned to one side and *her eyes, large and complaining, were looking at Maryam.* Her hand

was curled like a small bowl, as if she wanted to take
something from Maryam. [Italics added] (13)

The details reported here are from outside and, as usual, from Maryam's point
of view. The word "complaining" in the phrase "her eyes, large and
complaining", however, seems to be of a different nature. Does it belong to
Maryam? Is the sense of complaining that Maryam sees in Kanizu's eyes her
own feeling? Or is it the (omniscient) narrator who is reporting from inside
Kanizu's dead body and eyes? Whatever it is, it's from inside Kanizu and,
therefore, she is an internal focalized object.

Among the principle focalized objects are Maryam's emotions and
thoughts. In general, because she is a character in the story and the main
focalizer, her emotions and thoughts are reported from within. In other words,
her emotions and thoughts are internally focalized. Here is an example:

> The storage was dark and narrow. The heavy damped air was
> mixed in with the smell of moldy flour and rice. Darkness
> and the sound of slithering snakes … hissing … it was as
> though something was flying. It was an arched thing that felt
> like tar, it was soft and her hand would leave an impression
> on it. She clung to the wall … now it softly walked on her
> hands. Maryam would not even breathe, her face was
> soaking wet and she was biting her lips not to make any
> noise. It was moving up her arm, thin and black … it got
> larger … it filled the entire storeroom. It turned around her
> waist and reached her lips … it became the shape of the fat
> man who was drunk and ugly and wanted to strangle her ….
> She screamed …. (11)

The thought and feeling of fear of remaining alone in the dark storage is totally
from within Maryam.

Facets of Focalization in Kanizu:

1. Perceptual Facet:

As discussed before, the perceptual fact of focalization includes the two coordinates of space and time. In fact, this facet is related to spatio-temporal limits of the focalizer in seeing and hearing, or in general perceiving, the narrative issues. In "Kanizu", it is impossible for the focalizer to present a panoramic view of the reality around her because she is a character in the story. She can only see the realities of the events in which she is physically present. Thanks to such a limitation, she is almost always present when something happens in the present time or the past. And in cases when she is not present, the narrator appears as the focalizer and goes beyond the limits of the internal focalizer.

2. Psychological Facet:

In both its cognitive and emotive components, this facet is of great significance in "Kanizu" because except the main action of the story, which is the events of the people's treatment with the dead body of Kanizu, the rest of the events and incidents of the story are memories of Kanizu that Maryam remembers. Given the spatio-temporal conditions and linguistic boundary of a young village girl, the author has tried to limit her narrative to the cognition and emotions of such a character. That is to say, whatever she knows, however simple, and how she feels, however immature, are presented within this linguistic boundary. A good example is when Maryam sees Kanizu with four men, in which the presented images are in harmony with Maryam's language and mind:

> Now Kanizu was dancing in a long golden dress, shaking her
> shoulders. She was snapping her fingers in the air, and they
> had surrounded her, like a small gold fish surrounded by
> sharks not knowing how to get away." (10)

What Maryam sees here is the image of Kanizu dancing among some men. She doesn't exactly know what is happening although she can feel it as she compares the relationship between Kanizu and the men like that of "a small gold fish surrounded by sharks not knowing how to get away." Moreover, the

use of the image of sharks—"bambak" in the local dialect—is in accordance
with Maryam's linguistic knowledge of a person living near the sea.

Another issue related to cognitive-emotive focalization, in "Kanizu" is the
employment of dialogues that directly reveal to the reader the thoughts of
different characters. In these dialogues, one can see an objective presentation of
the relationship between the focalizer and the focalized. This is important
because one cannot expect an adolescent girl to have a psycho-social
interpretation of the world around her. In fact, such an objective presentation of
the characters, that is, without the focalizer's intervention, makes the events of
the story more believable.

This aspect of focalization shows the author's attention to the form of her
story. This, however, goes against the views of some critics like Rasoul
Abadian who believes, "the writers of the 1360's [especially Moniru
Ravanipur] are seeking their own historical rights and therefore ignore the
formal principles of their stories." Or in another instance, he states, "because
the woman-writers have suffered gender discrimination, they could not cover
their emotions with form." One can say, in response, that at least in "Kanizu",
Ravanipur has tried, and often successfully, to deal with the form of her
narration.

3. The ideological facet:
This facet includes all the values and norms of the text introduced though, what
Rimmon-Kenan calls, "the character's way of seeing the world" or through
"explicit discussion of his ideology" (84). The text may have a dominant
worldview that subordinates other voices, or it may allow interplay of different
ideologies and voices and thus make a polyphonic text. What is of great
significance in the discussion of the ideological facet of focalization is how the
voices and thoughts interact.

In "Kanizu", none of the characters have an explicit discussion of their
ideology. It is, in effect, only their behavior and dialogues that reveal their
views regarding the main issue of the story, that is, the presence of a prostitute
in a traditional society. In general, the text depicts the conflict of opposing
views in this respect. The dominant ideology (in the society, not the narrative)
is the view represented by Maryam's mother and the men around the dead body

of Kanizu. In this ideology, Kanizu is a corrupt and sinful woman who should be expelled from the society. When she dies, therefore, the men around her can't help insulting her in one way or another. She is, according to the norms of the society, a "slut" (8), and as long as she is alive, her position is among the "trash" (27), and when she dies, her dead body should be collected by the neighborhood street cleaner.

The behavior of these men is undoubtedly very vile. They are, according to Abadian, "like animals that don't stop their wickedness even when they see a corpse, and can't stop laughing when they see a woman's dead body." As a result of Maryam's unfamiliarity with them, these men have no names; they are, in Abadian's words, "quasi-human beings in the body of men."

The character who better represents this ideologically traditional society is Maryam's mother. She is given more space to express her views because she is often close to Maryam. From her point of view, Kanizu does not fall within the framework of the accepted social codes of the city and, thus, when Kanizu is put to jail, she says, "she will learn to be civilized" (15). For her, Kanizu doesn't even merit a blessing and she is not pleased when Maryam prays for Kanizu. She says, "the world is full of hungry beggars. Pray for them, child" (14). What she desires is the complete elimination of Kanizu from the face of the society.

Such a view is the dominant ideology of the society in which Kanizu lives. It is, however, in sharp contrast with a less powerful ideology favored by only by Maryam and her teacher. Despite its unpopularity among the people, the latter ideology tries to reveal the futility and failure of the society's ideology and attempts to raise the paradoxes within such a traditional view. For example, when discussing the issue of "destiny" with Maryam, her mother believes everyone is predestined. She says, "Everybody's fate is written down from the day he's born, it's all clear till the moment he dies" (17). Yet, she believes Kanizu is the one who has determined her own destiny and, therefore, deserves her plight.

Despite the negation of the society's ideology in respect to the position of such victims of the patriarchal society as Kanizu, this ideology does not present a solution because it's so feeble that remains passive throughout the text. This is perhaps because the character that represents it is so cognitively and

linguistically limited that is not able to elaborate on better solution to the problem.

Conclusion

This study suggests that, despite the dominant view according to which "Kanizu" seeks only to display an image of the oppressed woman, the text has an artistic structure as well. This is depicted through the integral relationship between the triangle of narrator, focalizer and focalized. The narrator often expresses whatever the focalizer presents and whatever the focalizer observes—the focalized—is bound to her spatio-temporal and cognitive-emotional conditions. " Kanizu" has what is traditionally called an omniscient narrator but whatever is narrated is often limited to the observations of the focalizer who is a young, inexperienced village girl living in a complicated urban environment. Looking through Maryam's eyes, the narrator is able to present an "objective" view of the events of the story, and question, though passively, the dominant ideology of the society.

Such a criticism based on Genette's structuralist system reveals new aspects and artistic dimensions often ignored in the traditional criticism. Nevertheless, this is not an attempt to bring about new meanings and interpretations of the text because basically structuralism is an attempt to show how reality comes into being rather than discovering what realities are in the text.

Works Cited

Calvino, Italo. *If on a Winter's Night a Traveler.* Translated by William Weaver, New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1981.

Cohen, Steven, and Linda M. Shires. *Telling Stories: A Theoretical Analysis of Narrative Fiction*. London: Routledge, 1988.

Genette, Gerard. *Narrative Discourse: An Essay in Method*. Translated by Jane Lewin, with a preface by Jonathan Culler. Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1980

Messent, Peter. *New Readings of the American Novel: Narrative Theory and its Application*. London: Macmillan, 1990.

Ravanipur, Moniru. *Kanizu*. Translated by Hirad Dinavari, Azita Mokhtari, et al. with an introduction by M.R. Ghanoonparvar. California: Mazda Publishers, 2004.

Rimmon-Kenan, Shlomith. *Narrative Fiction: Contemporary Poetics*. London and New York: Routledge.1983.

Toolan, Michael J. *Narrative: A Critical Linguistic Introduction*. London: Routledge, 1988.

Uspensky, Boris. *A Poetics of Composition: The Structure of the Artistic Text and Typology of a Compositional Form*. Translated by Valentina Zavarin and Susan Wittig. Berkeley: U of California P, 1983.

آبادیان، رسول. «نگاهی به نویسندگان دهه شصت با مرور مجموعه داستان کنیزو نوشته منیرو روانـی پـور». روزنامـه همشهری، شماره ۳۲۴۵.

روانی پور، منیرو. کنیزو. چاپ سوم. انتشارات نیلوفر، ۱۳۷۰.