

Linguistic Characteristics of Narration in Nathalie Sarraute's *Childhood*

Mahboubeh Fahimkalam¹, Mohammad reza Mohseni²

^{1,2}Assistant professor, french Departement, Arak branch, Arak Azad Islamic University, Iran

ABSTRACT

"Childhood" is one of the books of french author "Nathalie Sarraute. She presents in this work, a new form of the "I" i.e. the author. Sometimes, this "I" is a child who narrates the events and sometimes this "I" becomes visible like a narrator who analysis the events. This article attempts to study not only the function of narration of the work, but also to research about style of writing, structure and important characteristics that distinguish the new novel from traditional one.

KEYWORDS: Childhood, narrator, Sarraute, event, new novel.

INTRODUCTION

The twentieth century was witness to a great development in criticism. Formists and structuralists played a significant role in the emergence of this development. "Knowing the narration" was one of the topics studied by them. This new science discusses different methods of writing and analysis of narrative literature. No doubt one of the ways applied by writers to make their stories moving is to present it in the form of narration. Writers of modern novels have particularly made use of this method to create works different from their predecessors. "Childhood" by Sarraute devised a new method of narration to create changes in the trend of modern novel writing.

It is tried in this article to show that Sarraute, as a theoretician and novelist, has used new methods of narration in his novel to express her views.

What distinguishes "*childhood*" from other novels of the early century is its narrative functioning. Therefore, this research tries to deal with the lingual, temporal and functioning features of narrating this work.

DISCUSSION

"*Childhood*" is the story of Natasha, the second child of a disintegrated family living in France. The father and mother separate from one another. The mother stays in Paris while the father leaves for Moscow. After a short while, Natasha goes to Moscow to live with the step-parents. Most of her childish memories spring from her childish thoughts and life beside the step-mother. Throughout the story the writer makes use of the element of narration to recount her mentalities about her childish actions and thoughts.

In this novel, Nathalie Sarraute expresses her childish memories in the from of inward monologue which is narrated by the character of the story and criticized by the narrator. Thus, as the emergence of the new novel requires, the narrator makes customary the modern method of story writing and a special way of narration.

Element of Time in Narrating *Childhood*

The time of narration in this novel can be studied from three aspects:

1. Order of narration: By disturbing the sequence of the events, the writer changes the time of their occurrence and some times creates a sort of movement and dynamism in the narrative structure of the story. The memories are not recounted on the basis of observing the time-place principles. In other words, there is no sign of time-place divisions. Lack of coherence in the narration of story and absence of the narrator at some scenes makes the memories of the writer be narrated in a sporadic and disintegrated manner. Therefore, unlike the method used in the classic novel writing, the element of time does not follow a logical sequence and the reader becomes aloof from the core of the events and loses sympathy with the main character of the story. In view of this, the work thoroughly distances from the classic novel and comes close to the modern one. It should be mentioned that most of the memories have been juxtaposed according to the similarity of concept; but the events are constantly (between the ages 7-11) replaced in different places like Russia (beside mother) and France (beside

*Corresponding author: Mahboubeh Fahimkalam, Assistant professor, french Departement, Arak branch, Arak Azad Islamic University, Iran. E-mail: m-fahimkalam@iaiu-arak.ac.ir

father), so naturally the tone and the manner of expressing the character and narrator alters in different seasons of the work.

In knowing the narration of the story, another thing that draws the attention of the reader is the tense and mood of the verbs: In the classic autobiographic novels, the 'continuous past' was used for relating and narrating the story, and the method of narration would be shaped by observing the time order of the events and the relationship of the ideas; while the childish novel is quite different from the classic novel. Choosing an aged narrator by the writer who is talking with the child while keeping his distance from her with insight and awareness, and usage of 'present tense' instead of 'past tense' are among the innovations of Sarraute in creating the modern novel.

"Granny likes to come. I wait for her; I listen to the sound of the steps on the staircase and the landing.... Now it is her; the door bell is ringing; I want to hurry up; I'm being held; wait! Don't move.... The door of the room is opened; a man and a woman in white clothes hold me and place me on their lap; they embrace me tight." (Sarraute, 24)

2. Time length of narration: This aspect is not equal to the time of the story's occurrence and its importance. Explaining every minute detail of the events and prolongation of the discourse in expressing a memory by the story character does not indicate its importance; but it implies the scale of its effectiveness of the event on his mind. The longest memories are inserted in chapters 8, 9, 22, 55 and 64 of the book (memory of being beside the step-mother, being alone and taking refuge in by the books and toys). It could be said to be the saddest scenes are seen on these pages.

3. Repeated expression of the events (time alternation): If we look closely at the work we will see that, in narrating the story, a single event is expressed several times in different forms by the character; and this somehow builds the plot of the work. This implies the great impact of the event on her childish mind. For instance, we can mention "mother's absence" :

"My nights were dedicated to mom when I was in bed; I would take her picture from below the pillow, I'd look at it and cry.... I can't be away from her any more..." (Sarraute, 108)

But in some parts of the work it seems the frequently happened events are referred to merely once. We can, for example, mention to "Getting upset at her step-mother."

In this work, time is closely evaluated from the viewpoint of a child: Time is sometimes short and transient for her (like the days when Natasha lives with her father and are spent with sweet memories), and at other times it is long and endless (like when Natasha is impatiently waiting for her childhood to end so that she can enter high school): "At that age, how lengthy were the years and time passed slowly." (Sarraute, 230) Indeed, sometimes time stops in "present" and this is also one of the indicators of the modern novel. It is totally different from the classic one from this angle.

Knowing the narration of the work

Since the novel "*childhood*" is based on narration, the dialogues have well proportioned. Thus, there is proportion and coordination among individuals, their behavior, style of narration, and the very dialogues. Natasha's words are in conformity with her age and those of the narrator also conform to her age and experiences, and the language of the father is vigorous, and complying with his status. In other words, the language of this story enjoys special features. The movement and dynamism of the words make this modern novel attractive for the reader. The lingual form and structure have a unique capability. Sarraute herself considers *childhood* as a poetic work. But the answer to the question: 'will a poetic work be harmed with the presence of a narrator?' needs a broad discussion and it is out the span of this discourse.

Undoubtedly, the narrator has a considerable role in shaping the novel. Applying the outlook of an omniscient, Sarraute expresses her actions towards the characters around her. The sudden change of the tone, reminds the reader of the narrator's meddling and presence. The conformity of the visions of the narrator, the writer and Natasha is felt when the wording itself and the ideas become congruous and all of them stand at one position. What distinguishes them is the tone of speech and the type of the vocabulary. What is told by Natasha in a childish language, Sarraute thoughtfully analyzes and the narrator sympathizes with the story character. The narrator of this story is an old woman at the time of narrating:

"But what you want to do.... recalling the memories.... does it mean that you are retired and have given to a normal life? And perhaps it is because you have become weak...." (Sarraute, 6)

So, it can be said that one part of the narration of *childhood* is formed by the dialogue between the characters with the narrator. As it was pointed out such kind of dialogues are in compliance with their minds and do not contradict with their social status and age. The difference between the narrator and the character of the story is sometimes revealed in the tone or the vocabulary used. In fact the dialogue between the character and the narrator

discloses their intellectual and spiritual difference for us. The tone and music of the phrases change according to their features. The word of the narrator, as an old and experienced lady, is wise and her vocabulary is often thoughtful.

Some people are of the opinion that combining the words of the narrator with those of the character of the story and their coordination has made the story more communicative. Yet it should be noted that in this level of communication, the character is the sender of the subject; the narrator is the taker and their place will never change. The writer has also cleverly applied grammar and separated their words with hyphen to make them distinct. Therefore, the functioning of narration is presented in a modern manner and the level of communicating the story is the same and no change is seen in it.

According to Jeanette," it could be said that the narrative genre of this novel is in narrating the world of the story is "homogeneous", for the narrator herself has experienced all these events from near."(Genette, 256) Thus the outlook of narrating the story is internal and first person. This angle is limited in the sense that the character of the story can only talk about her past and internal wishes. She can look at the outside and it is impossible for her to judge herself from outside; but in this novel Sarraute, devising in-text dialogue between the narrator and the character, has provided the ground for the character to be able to judge her childish beliefs, behavior and memories. In this method of recounting the narration of the story is ceded to an "I"; and since this "I" retells her real and imaginary events and then analyses them, she can be regarded as the "narrator-hero."

"Another element that has close relationship with this outlook is *the artistic distance* or *the aesthetic distance* that has been observed well by Sarraute."(Meghdadi, 280) Considering her feminine mentalities and sentiments one can say that she has been able to preserve the artistic distance from the events and explained them. But she describes in detail for the reader the scenes that have more affected her childish mind. Literarily speaking she presents a "wide scope scene" of the memory and shortly mentions the scenes that are less important for her. For instance, when she describes her step-mother's face she suffices to a sentence that does not draw the attention of the reader:

"Verra is thinner than ever. Her face is quite yellow. Her stomach is pointed. I don't know how she understands that she is expecting a baby." (Sarraute, 111)

But when she wants to describe the doll she has seen at the shop, she doesn't skimp details and even she sees the doll more beautiful than her step-mother's face:

"I cannot see the doll well; but its face is smooth and pink.... bright.... as if it is lit from inside.... the proud curve of its nostrils and its lips turning upwards.... they were very gorgeous. Everything in it was beautiful. Absolute beauty—being beautiful." (Sarraute, 87)

Conclusion

Childhood, written by Sarraute, has accompanied the special developments of the writer's life. Her story is wholly an expression of the events and experiences of her childhood that are narrated by the character of the story and the narrator in a unique manner. Sarraute has made use of the dialogue between the narrator and the character so that she can increase the actuality of her childish memories. Unlike the classic method in which the story is narrated impartially, the narrator of this work narrates and criticizes the events and she can be traced clearly in narration.

There are two variables in Nathalie Sarraute's *childhood* which don't let to present a stable picture of the writer's life: first, in looking to the past the importance of the events changes; and second, the "I" of the narrator of the events has altered from the time of happening till the time of narration according to the age, social status, and vision. Therefore, this work of Sarraute has narrative characteristics.

Sarraute in her work "*Childhood*" displays two methods of human thought and practice vis-à-vis the surrounding world: first, the special childish thoughts are expressed by the character in a simple way, and perhaps for the same reason there is an honest sympathy and like-mindedness between her and the reader; second, the approaches of the old age that are raised by the narrator introduce her in the form of an ethic individual.

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