

REVIEW ARTICLE

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From Narrative to Nairrative: The Narrative Turn

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ABSTRACT

Rukmini Bhaya Nair in this important theoretical intervention in Linguistics, Cognitive Science and Postcolonial Studies picks out the authorlessness of narrative as the template to reexamine and reinterpret theories from philosophy of language and mind in her project of delineating the structural and textual aspects of narratives. In tuning her analysis to decentring of narratives from the speakers to the listeners, authorlessness emerges as the ground of propositional, logical and hermeneutical understanding and inferencing of/from narratives that move from one to the other. The central argument of the book evolves through Dennett's notion of 'self' as the author of narratives that creates more selves than one. This augurs a critique of both narrative and self from listener's point of view that emphasizes the possibility of 'freeplay' beyond the structure of the narrative offered by its decentred author(s).

Rukmini Bhaya Nair develops a listener response model of 'narrative cognition', essentially a variety of linguistic and communicative competence, biologically and culturally conditioned to share stories, talks and conversations. Nair advances an ingenuous thesis that it is through the acts of narrating stories that communicative contexts are created in which one's own tale meshes up with the tale of others in order to serve the social function of expressing affect and emotion. Nair locates an architectonic function of not just sharing meanings by narratives but yielding a place to listeners within the multiple possibilities of co-interpretation, who finally emerge as the key recipients of what the narrative means. This indicates that meanings do not lie in the heads of the speakers or tellers, but they necessarily lie a-head in the

'affect' that it is able to create. Nair moves from effects, which are mostly guided by the multi-layered cognitive and social mechanisms, to affect, which partly is cultural and biological but mostly is an open re-creative enterprise, a retailing of the narrative that listeners would undertake within herself and with others. Nair terms this move from effect to affect as a move from Narrative to Nairative, as she retails the received theories of narrative to show how one listens to stories of others and stories other than one's own. This is a strategy of testing theories of narrative with respect to something that narratives can't be sure of, that is how it touches the other, which even the other can't fully grasp.

Nair picks out the authorlessness of narrative as the template to reexamine and reinterpret theories from philosophy of language and mind in her project of delineating the structural and textual aspects of narratives. In tuning her analysis to decentering of narratives from the speakers to listeners, authorlessness emerges as the ground of propositional, logical and hermeneutical understanding and inferencing of/from narratives that move from one to the other (Nunning 1997). It is as if the absent selves in those authorless narratives are woven into a network of transaction between a set of people who realize their selves in handing down and in receiving the narrative. This gives birth to an ongoing tradition of sharing 'tall tales' that involves a large number of actors crisscrossing time and space in a fashion that keeps stories alive in transmission. Life of stories are sustained and prolonged or curtailed by the length and breadth of its transmission and the width of the circle through which it is circulated. The life of the story, for Nair, is composed of performativity plus narrative representation of the self that is absent in the act of authoring the narrative. Therefore life of stories becomes an ever-perpetuating participatory device that multiplies itself. The trap of the narrative warps time, people and space into it. It is like a Penrosean non-computable performative act of the social mind, not conditioned by the current limits of rationality and imagination. Within a framework of interaction between cultural and biological parameters of life, explanations of narrative competence hinges upon establishing causal relationship between content and cognition only to give rise to paradoxes that call for a move beyond decidability of linguistic meaning and context. Nair focuses on conditions of success of narrative communication more often than not by qualifying the parasitic nature of language that never unites with what it communicates. Nair's oft-repeated concern for perlocutionary uses of language remains as the inexplicable and indiscernible fabrication of a narrative performance. While such a performance is the kernel of narrative affect, it violates

formal, logical and linguistic conventions by placing itself or by taking the place of rules and laws (Flaudernik 2004; Hedges and Fishkin 1994). Performance moves into an other realm from where one can look back at the entire cognitive, semantic and logical operations of language governed by objective and subjective conditions. Further, such operations and conditions are incommensurate with the acts of narrativization as it carries out a proliferation of the narrative through multiple agencies built within the narrative. It is instructive to note that Nair presents many such moments of narrativization of conventional, formal and logical operations of language through a simultaneous performative presence of herself as narrator and the turns and meanings that these moments are supposed to achieve.

.. That a system of signs do not cohere themselves into what a narrator tries to bind them to, that they move in a complex play of mutual substitutions is not what Nair likes them to be. She seems to maintain the Wittgensteinian point that there is no a priori basis of difference between the acts of narrative and the cognitive/representational function that it is supposed to perform, rather what *constitutes* the *difference* is the act of using language that arises out of an embeddedness of the human being as an user within an emergent matrix of social and cultural inter-relationship. Nair chooses these action coordinating mechanisms of use of language as the key to an externalism about mind whereby processes, events and causes in the external world form an integrated system with physical-functional states of the internal brain mechanisms. This helps her to avoid the gulf between the representation and the world, while at the same time she can give an autonomous role to language in establishing a communicative fit between word and world. In a sense, her project is to discover both the usual and unusual ways in which narratives carry out this performative role by putting language to use in various contexts. As this is without a set of fixed roles, language also suffers for not always being successful in establishing the link that is desired between subjectivity and agency. This is more evident when both subjectivity and agency are suspended in language, although the act of suspension produces a certain genre of narrative, may be poetry or fiction. Like a hermeneutic revelation of the ontological incapacity of language to create the sense of agency of human beings spoken of in language, Nair locates how the entity called 'language' turns this incapacity to replace the Subject as actor by subjectivity that creates its own domain within language. Language therefore complicates the physical absence of the human being as its user into a token logical subject referred as an 'It' that blends with various degrees and types of

emotional and inner details of subjectivity and their desired connection with the world. Nair's radical thesis is that although language can function without a Subject standing outside it but there is no termination of subjectivity, it is rather a demonstration of inessential core of language that weaves together the manifold relationships that is formed between the subject and the object. What language complicates is the representation of the absent Subject through the presence effect, where it annuls the absence as an element of meaning and language. But this 'complicating action' of language requires a complex act of imagination that turns subjectivities into cogs of communication with all its attendant cognitive processes at the service of language taking turns at talks and conversations. Language embodying a fundamental contrast between absence and presence laps on several registers of affecting itself by possibilities of the unfamiliar and the uncanny so that it can differ and defer the sensible and the known. At the same time it keeps itself open to something that is not yet affirmed. It distances itself from the 'real' and by doing so it acquires a relative freedom that it otherwise has been bound to, if it had just presented a copy of what happens out there. It expands our sense of what happens, so every utterance that we make with a purpose finds its own context in a larger network of communication. It never closes itself off to an agreement of meanings but leaves open the space of meanings as it happens in communication. Therefore mere declaration of intent does not communicate, what communicates is the potential to affect through the intent. For example, if somebody wants to threaten somebody else, she needs to generate a context through acts of communication that brings the affect of threat. If language co-ordinates act, such acts constitute meaning. Meaning giving acts of language users in turn enters into a strategic collaboration with possibilities that could emerge out of co-ordination of action. This further shows how one is already embedded into an already pre-existing communicative context from where every act of communication would only generate an exchange between flesh and blood human beings that would precede and follow every single act of communication.

Methodological Commitments

While Nair expresses her ontological commitment to such an anthropomorphic situation of communication, she is also ready to acknowledge the relative autonomy of language involved in acts of communication. This allows a greater theoretical freedom to separate human cognitive functions from patterns of language, while she maintains an inseparable linkage between cognitive abilities and acts of

communication. This gives her the necessary strength to mobilize cognitive science in support of linguistics with a slant to specific genres of communication such as conversation and fiction. While doing so, of course she embarks upon the path of conceptual reduction of linguistic/communicative categories into cognitive and vice versa and in the process quite a few skeletons in the cupboard are shifted from one side to the other and they are dressed up in a cross-disciplinary attire. The asymmetric forces of cognitive science and linguistics are melted in the softer cusp of literature and poetry and in the process the muscles of hard sciences sometimes overwhelm these softer expressions. It is here that Nair carries out a faithful affiliation to cognitive sciences without minding how the transformed understanding of narratives, stories and poems get regimented to programmatic truth-values of genetics and computer science. Nair, a proclaimed post-colonial critic, a committed decoder of voice of the marginalized has dissociated the centres of her narrative by transforming their language only into a refrain to programmatic language of neural empathy, where the house of being is invaded by pre-programmed genetic codes of producing Nairratives. The question is, can the language of victimhood be transformed into program codes of software and even if such natural language processing is done on the language of pain and suffering, would it communicate the state of being in the state of art? (Mulhern 2002).

This brings us to Nair's methodological programme of identifying narratives as structures. The methodology bases itself upon the findings from cognitive sciences and linguistics. Taking cognition as fundamental to linguistic and cultural acts of human life, it is conceptualized as a capability of emerging within symbolic assemblies. Although such assemblies are symbolic by their very nature, nevertheless one can see a grammatical pattern in them. A noun, for example is a symbolic structure that profiles a thing, while a verb profiles a process; a subject is one whose profile corresponds to the trajector of a profiled relationship and likewise an object corresponds to a landmark. Such symbolic roles are appropriated within a more complicated and connected network of syntaxes that constitute a narrative. A formal syntactical analysis of narrative in terms of grammatical and logical characteristics of the components of a narrative excludes the context of understanding between the speaker and the hearer. Nair suggests that no amount of specification of such formal 'felicity conditions' is good enough to explain what listeners gather from a narrative. This leads to two ways of understanding what the narratives communicate, one, a paradoxical 'Indian rope trick' that makes stories fragile but bound by how one

makes it relevant to the audience and two, narratives are those expressions of the self that voices concern for survival, where the story structure is supported by logical and argumentative means. Nair does not seem to maintain a fully open capability of reconstruction of narrative structure by listeners independent of the tellers of the story who present the tree structure of the narrative with its temporal, causal, evaluative and informative nodes. Such a narrative tree only allows the listener to reorder it through inferential moves and constraints that is guided by the logical tree. Of course how this tree is presented to the audience depends upon layers of co-operation from the listeners and such co-operation is generated through cultural and natural factors, on the one hand, and the plausibility/relevance of the narrative, on the other (Threadgold 1997). In case of fiction as a genre of narrative, Nair maintains that the pretence of truth telling is shorn off in strategies of presenting it in a relevant manner, while such a strategy leaves various *implicatures*, cultural and memetic. Nair invokes Richard Dawkins's idea of genes and Susan Blackmore's notion of production and transmission of *memes* through narratives to support Dennett's notion of genetic programme of story telling. Such built in programmes are manifest in tree structure of narrative that carries memes as configuration of symbols that replicates through differential means of enactment. In this mode of understanding the biological and cultural machinery of the narrative, one senses a tacit allusion to information technology. If memes are like data, then they could be inserted into the hardware of the brain just the way the computational theory of mind envisages. This further nears Nair's tree structure of narrative inferencing to a set of operations performed upon informational content of the narrative that help getting these contents replicated in some other bodies and beings who merely produce a fit between the word and the world in a direction drawn from necessities of survival. Through one's speech acts one just seeks a response from the other in a manner that there are a few co-operative conventions or better 'narrative pacts' to share what is at stake. Nair seems to share the Posthuman vision of human as computational and genetic machines who carry self-replicating memes through their narratives, which is nothing but a data structure in a certain hardware connected to drivers that switch us on or off to a giant transmission network.

This methodological stance of the book leaves many questions unanswered. For example, how do listeners differ from tellers? If listeners are to be guided entirely by logical trees that are ingrained within narratives, what explains acts of interpretation and recreation of

stories? Or didn't we move a little away from the Chomskyeen surmise that linguistics have to be concerned with ideal speaker-listener relationship within a homogeneous speech community? More often Nair's analytical drift towards situating the listener within the closure of language as construed within narratives replicates self-preserving memes of Linguistics almost like Faye's study of Nazi statements or Lenin's characterization of *avante-garde* culture. While she suggests plausibility as a criterion of narrative credibility and vice-versa, she does not offer an alternative linguistics that is enough plausible and credible. It is here that Nairrative meets the older structural understanding of narratives, on the one hand, and the protocommercial metaphors of meme discourse, on the other. Within that, Nair posits a world of victims of the State or natural disasters in order to retrieve the repressed narrative voices, but such a concern makes her to look at the response sequences through which story recipients express themselves. Reading such responses one gathers that the participants do offer a constraint on the structural patterns of the narrative by often subverting and incorporating their accounts, probably in dissonance. So one can find here that the hardwired brain does not only compute but it allows tuning of the narrative in which the object of the thought of/about the other goes beyond self-reference (Con Davis 1991). This is also not mere participation of the other as a listener or it is not a different story that the other is trying to tell, but it is a fundamentally a different cognitive state that is auto-affected. Consequently the hegemonic state of art victimizes the language of the oppressed and it is there that reason turns inhuman (Wright 1997). This turn of reason has nothing to do with abstract and autonomous stature of language.

Is there a Centre of Gravity?

Nair's explanation for a necessary centre of gravity in the self for performing acts of narrative following Dennett, which as a saving grace is only an 'illusion' and not the real self, does not fully address the post-structuralist objections to conceivability of such a centre, either illusory or real. It sounds like Kant's famous assertion that 'existence' is not a real but only a logical predicate. This idea of Kant led to the correction of the natural attitude that 'theoretical propositions' are to be correlated to 'self-existence of empirical variables'. This correction has its paradoxical manifestation in 'intentional objects', which could be fictional without its real existence and in case of such intentional cum fictional objects, no distinction is possible between the factual and fictional. Nair's position, following Dennett that stories are cranked out by a narrative programme

(a tree of propositions) that does not distinguish between the fictional and factual only heightens the dilemma of natural attitude versus intentional stance. It leaves the question of 'self' as an assumed identity or existence without really giving it an ontological status. Although Dennett denies an ontological status to the 'self', still he gives it the place of an 'illusion' created by acts of narrative. But an illusion has an intended object aimed through constitution of a sense in a Fregean and phenomenological point of view that creates a 'subject-effect', which in turn makes the cognition of an illusion possible. In case of an act of narrative, the absent self of the narrator constitutes the fictionality of the narrative, the so-called illusion of the self. Nair maintains a position that in the course of constructing the narrative, the self in a narration is constructed as a center of cognitive activity. But this center obviously involves self-consciousness. Nair is not ready to grant this autonomy to the self, as self in fiction is an illusion *de jure*. This means a constructed self within the fictional world, which is also a constructed world. But the self appearing as an illusion must conceive of a real self. If such a real self is culturally constituted, then it does not have any special characteristics, such as intentionality or an in built capacity to narrativize, which Nair's supposedly 'illusory self' in fiction is contrasted with. In effect there seems to be no distinction possible between the real self and the illusion of self. Put once again in Kantian terms, the conscious experience in fiction constructs an object of cognition without the reference necessary for veridical cognition. This brings forth the connection between intentional stance and naturalistic attitude: self as a subject of illusion is already constituted by an intentional stance, while such a stance makes it possible for the subject to take a naturalistic attitude towards itself as an object of cognition to its own self. This further makes the self only functional within the realm of fiction as it is only programmed to represent an object of cognition, which allows an ungrounded play of the concept of nature in the self of fiction. The blend between fictional and cognitive is possible only if the circumlocution on the part of narrator in expressing the self is avoided in treating her 'I-thought' only as an input and not as a determinant of content of her thought. This only gives credence to the post-structuralist claim that the self of the narrator is never present to itself and this absence is iterated in the body of the text through a simultaneous constitution of sense and a relation of intentionality. Such a text does not give itself to an episteme of subject and it also does not subject itself to the endless invention of the same. Acts of narrative only gives rise to relationality between the subject and the world without implying a

singular existence, but a plural trans-finite existence that decentres existence in the cognition of existence itself. This cognitive decentring of the self and world in the relationality between them marks a play that terminates the determination of the subject or the being. Language as a play of decentered notions of self and world turn these concepts into an erasure of meaning. Nair's notion of fictionality denies this decentring of the subject in the purely formal notion of programming of the narrative as an inherent cognitive capability of the subjects engaged in a network of communication. Rather it produces fictionality as a narrative capability performed through an annihilation of the self in its intentional acts. But this annihilation on the one hand results into concealing the self-world relationality, although it is presupposed in the very act of narrativization. On the other hand, this presupposition of a prior relationality prevents the narrative constitution of differences within the very structure of the relationality. Such a constitution is made possible by an exterior of differences through which a structure of relationality assumes its concrete form. In this project of constituting the self-world relationality inside the narrative, Nair conflates the radical otherness of the self with simply the act of creating multiple centres of narrative gravity. Notwithstanding the cognitive role that self as other performs in the process of building up of the narrative, Nair treats the question of self-creation as a derivative of ontological question of reality versus illusion.

The book in its mobilization of various genres of narrative theory makes it possible to transform the ordinary speech acts into fictional speech acts and vice versa. After this book, what stands in contrast to representation, now arises not before, but after it as a narrative event. It corrects our perception that truth is a property of object by telling us that it is a property of sentences in the narrative. Further the context dependent fictional objects bear the same syntactical structure as context transcendent truth claims and both depend upon the encounter with the world. Such a convergence between the factual and the fictional is in tune with current celebration of openended-ness. The book not only adds to the existing critique of syntactical determinism but also opens up a new debate to explore the connection between narrative and fiction. In this approach one realizes that meaning and inference are not bounded by a single conceptual locus. Rather, meaning is a complex operation of projecting, blending, and integrating over multiple spaces. Meaning never settles down into a single shade of narrative, rather it is self-multiplying, parabolic and fictional.

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