

A Study of Narrative Perspectives in Isidore Okpewho's *Tides*

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Introduction

Narrative perspective refers to the set of characteristics that determines the method an author of a story uses to relay the plot to his audience. This encompasses both the narrator or storyteller, and the character from whose point of view the story is told. There is a narratological distinction between the story and the discourse or narrative: though all narrative presents a story, a story itself is a sequence of events in time and space. On the other hand, a narrative is an account of some or all those events. In this vein, a narrative could be compared to a plot. A story of one's life written as a text cannot include every aspect of one's life. It becomes the duty of the writer to select which events are to be included in the telling and which to be left out. Here lies the distinction between the story and a narrative. Shen Dan identifies this distinction as what-is-told and how-it-is-transmitted (381). He sums it up by using a simile which compares the story as a route-map while the narrative is the journey. The contrast between the story and narrative lies in the plot itself represented in the story and who tells the story. A story comes to life through a narrator who presents the story as series of events. The narrative is the representation of the story, rather than the story itself. Narrative perspective is the point of view adopted by the narrator in relating the story (Guillemette Lucie and Cynthia Lévesque)

According to Gerard Genette, the story is regarded as the (fictive) reality of which the discourse or narrative refers (26). From this definition, story telling is realized at three levels: we have the events as they occur, the narration of the events by the narrator, and finally the text, which is the result of the act of narration. Chatman asserts that 'since the story is regarded as primary and independent in relation to the discourse, the same course of events could, at least theoretically, constitute the basis number of different versions' (qtd in Broman, 20-22). The story represents the constant while the narrative represents the various possible ways of realizing the story. This goes to mean that events as interpreted by one narrator would clearly differ from other narrators who may or may not be characters in the story. This difference may arise because of psychological and/or ideological worldview. This distinction is what Genette ascribes the term 'focalization'.

Theoretical Framework

Genette defines focalization as ‘a restriction of ‘field’ that is a selection of narrative information’ (74). It is used interchangeably with perspective or point of view (Niederhoff, Burkhard) and is a term used in modern narratology for point of view (Guillemette and Lévesque). Point of view refers to the perspective from which events of a story is witnessed. It presents a text as a patchwork of shifting perspectives. The stories are aligned towards describing changes in viewpoints; either between the narrator and the fictional characters or between different characters. Focalization is the presentation of narrative information aligned towards the orientation, perception and thoughts of a focalizer. It refers to the relationship between perspective and perception, where a reader’s (or viewer’s) perceptions are limited to the perspective of a particular focalizing agent or reflector.

In Genette’s view, focalization can be fixed, that is, limited to one character, variable, that is, alternating from character to character within the narrative, experiencing their perspectives, or multiple, that is, shifting among several characters thereby experiencing different narrative perspectives within a scene. He further classifies focalization in relation to its position in the narrative into external and internal. External focalization is a form of presentation that is restricted to all information pertaining the thoughts of the characters. According to Toolan Michael, ‘external focalization occurs where the focalization is from an orientation outside the story’ (69). In internal focalization, narrative information is basically limited to data available to the narrating character’s perception (Manfred Jahn). Internal focalization often involves a character narrator whose eyes the actions are represented. It can be told in the first or third person, but the narrative is presented through the experience of the focal character.

Furthermore, narrators are classified by their relation to the main narrative (diegesis). The different perspectives result in narrative levels known as embedding. An embedding is the insertion of other short narratives within the main plot. These narratives are told by other narrative perspectives or point of view. The main narrative occurs at the extradiegetic level: a level that includes everybody and everything that determines how the story is told. The embedded narrative is told at the intradiegetic level. This is the level of the story itself. The narrator’s knowledge is limited to that of a particular character. An extradiegetic narrator therefore recounts a story which may have taken place on another level of reality from that which he or she exists. Genette uses the terms homodiegetic and heterodiegetic narrative respectively. For him, the narrative voice acquires two status in the narrative. The absence of the narrator in the story he tells makes him a heterodiegetic narrator while the presence of the narrator as a

character in the story he tells makes him a homodiegetic narrator (Genette, 244-255). A homodiegetic narrator describes his or her personal and subjective experience as a character in the story. Homodiegetic and heterodiegetic narrators are either intradiegetic or extradiegetic narrators.

Further studies by Shlomith Rimmon Kenan show that Genette's concept of focalization goes beyond the visual perception to include the perceptual, psychological and the ideological facets. The perceptual facet takes cognizance of the two coordinates of time and space; the point in time and space in which the focalizer is situated. The psychological facet involves the cognitive and the emotive where the cognitive covers the area of knowledge that deals with what the character believes, knows, conjectures, remembers, conceptualizes. The emotive emphasizes on the character's emotional involvement. Finally, the ideological facet includes the worldview of narrator-focalizer or the characters. This involves the system of values and norms according to which events and characters are evaluated. This paper analyses Isidore Okpewho's *Tides* using Genette's focalization theory and Rimmon Kenan's facets of focalization.

Synopsis of *Tides*

Isidore Okpewho's *Tides* is an epistolary novel that is centered on the environmental destruction propelled by the oil companies and the Nigerian Government which has created a hostile environment for the inhabitants. The exchange of letters between two Beniotu men, who were former colleagues at the Chronicle Newspaper before their forced retirement, started on the 28 August 1976 and ends on the 28 February 1978 covering a period of a year and seven months. The novel is set in two locations: Lagos and cities in the Niger Delta region like Benin, Warri and Port Harcourt. Their aim is to use their investigative skills to produce a document that would serve as an authoritative testimony on the plights of the Niger Delta people and their environment. In producing this piece of document, Tonwe Birisbe is to monitor the home front to note the growing unrest of the farmers and fishermen. This is possible as he had retired to his hometown at Sicama. Meanwhile, Piriye Dokumo, who stayed back in Lagos will cover the 'corridors of policy' (where decisions are taken by leaders concerning the affairs of the country) in Lagos and the agitation of the committee of concerned citizen (CCC), whose vibrant spokesman is the secretary nicknamed Bickerbug, a spirited revolutionary. Piriye's friend, Piriboye Omuma, a businessman who goes to Delta frequently for some business transactions becomes their courier, "a safe conduit for the rather delicate information for the mail" (p. 4).

The novel is divided into three sections. 'Ripples' introduces the conflicts between the fishing and farming communities and the oil companies in the Niger Delta region and the Committee of Concerned Citizens and the

government in Lagos. These conflicts arise because of the destruction of the traditional economy of the Niger Delta communities by the activities of the oil companies and the construction of the Kwarafa Dam. In the next section 'Billows', a task force is set up by the government to study the problems of the Niger Delta and make appropriate recommendations. Meanwhile, Bickerbug, the leader of the CCC feels that the committee has been compromised by the government and the oil companies and strikes out on his own to draw the attention of the government to the plights of the Niger Delta. His actions are seen to threaten the government and he is detained and brutalized by the national security agents, a part of the police force. In the last section 'Flood', Bickerbug after his release by the police swore to have his revenge. He rounds up a group of Deltans and destroyed five oil installations in the Delta region, a section of the Lugard Bridge which is a colonial monument in Lagos and the Kwarafa Dam.

Modes of Representation in *Tides* (Diegesis)

Okpewho's use of the epistolary narrative allows different internal focalizers to present the event from their different perspectives thereby dispensing with an omniscient narrator. Tonwe is a character-narrator and one of the internal focalizers in the narrative. Toolan states: 'Internal focalization occurs inside the represented events or, perhaps better, inside the setting, and almost always involves a character-focalizer' (69). That is to say, whatever is narrated is the result of what characters see, hear and in general, their sensory perception. According to Genette and Rimmon-Keman's facets of focalization, he is a character focalizer. At the level of perception, he is bound in time and space to the events as they unfold. His perception is evaluated from the fact that he '... will monitor the home front, as regards the growing resentment of the farmers and fishermen, ...' (p. 3) since he has become one of them after his retirement and relocation to Seama to settle down to 'rural occupation' (p.1). This is further strengthened by his psychological disposition towards his object of contemplation. Tonwe's relationship with the focalized is seen in his reply to Piriye's third letter.

It may come as a surprise to you when I say that I feel better disposed to your project now than I did at first. Something happened here recently which has shaken me from my complacency and inspired me with a concern not much below the zeal that you require from me (p. 11).

Tonwe Birisbe becomes focalizer one, whose spatial distance to the focalized, that is, the land and the people (p. 82) and the effects of the oil spill to the community is near. This we see during his different conversations with Piriye.

... I think also that coming home to the village, living and mixing with the simple, honest folk of our fishing communities and encountering life, as it were, at its most basic level, has disposed me readily now to seek a more intuitive grasp of things(p.67).

Also, during Tonwe's meeting with the Commissioner for Health and Environmental Affairs, he points out to him that the object of contemplation is not as farfetched or far away from them as they feel.

You ask how this oil business has affected my life and what is in it for me. Let me put it this way, I have come home for a peaceful retirement. But if things continue the way they are going, there may be nothing peaceful about it ... I am home, there is nowhere to run to ... Now how would you like it if this whole oil palaver got out of control (p. 80).

His concern towards his focalized is subjective as he has a personal stake on what happens to his environment because of the activities of the oil exploration companies. He firmly believes that the government has a duty to guarantee the lives of the citizens of her country and the sources of their livelihood (p. 70).

Moreover, Tonwe's ideology is anchored on the fact that the unchecked activities of the oil companies by the government will escalate into a serious problem for the country (p. 81).His participation at the augural meeting of the Task Force on Pollution in the Oil Producing Areas confirms the unwillingness of the concerned parties to look into the problems associated with oil exploration. This confirmation reflects the dominant ideology that subordinates the voices of the Niger Delta communities.Here is an instance in which Tonwe's perception conveys the ideology of other characters in the narrative:

Excuse me! It was the voice of Chief Zuokumor, booming from the end of the table, his hands up. 'Excuse me, Honorable Minister!'He had obviously been tolerating me for some time but could not take it any longer. He even rose from his seat... adjusting his garb, rapping his knuckles on the table... Who is he representing? Who sent him here? Everybody in this room is representing one organization or community. So who is the man representing?(p. 131)

Tonwe's recount shows the dominant ideology that runs through the narrative.This second sentence conveys Chief Zuokumor's displeasure by his presence at the meeting. In recounting the incident that took place at the meeting to Piriye, he observed that his continuous questioning of the methods used by the oil companies as explained by their representative at the meeting, Mr Frank Segal, to curtail and treat oil spillage earned him a rebuff:

I resent the ease with which everyone there seemed – seemed, mark you, for I have no way of knowing how the rest of my group felt – I resent the way in which I was made to stand so helplessly alone by the rest of the Task Force ... (p. 134).

This view is reiterated during the meeting between the Ebirima delegates and the White Engineer. A group of fishermen had gone to appeal that the oil company switch off their search lights during the day. The lights they claim disrupt the activities of the fishes. They believed switching off the light during the day will enable them to engage in their fishing activities. The white man in charge called a speed-boat of armed soldiers and they beat up, humiliated and chased the fishermen away from the oil-rig.

The reply of the white engineer was uncompromising. He was fed up, he said, with these agitations and representations from illiterate natives who knew nothing about what the oil industry was trying for them. what, he asked, did the inconveniences suffered by a few scruffy fishermen matter to the general prosperity which oil brought to Nigeria? (p. 12)

The belief held by the oil companies and the government is that Mr Tonwe and the fisher men are the trouble makers and saboteurs whose intentions are to sabotage the economy of the country.

Piriye Dokumo, focalizer two, is also a character focalizer whose perception is bound in time and space to the marginalization of the Beniotu ethnic group. His narrative takes its perception from the policy making in Lagos and the agitations of the Committee of Concerned Citizens (CCC) over the plight of the Beniotu ethnic group. The Beniotu ethnic group is a minority riverine community in the Niger Delta region, whose means of livelihood and culture are in danger of extinction because of the activities of the oil companies in their community and the construction of the Kwarafa dam. Piriye's involvement with his focalized brings him in close contact with the radical leader of the CCC, Noble Ebika Harrison, nicknamed Bickerbug.

Although Bickerbug is a little crazy – crazier than I am, I must admit – there's something (beside my desire to get a story out of him) that draws me to him ... Bickerbug is the classic revolutionary ... he is the true guerilla type ... (p. 38).

Furthermore, Piriye's perception is anchored on his bitterness toward the unfair treatment of the Beniotu people by the government and the oil companies. His

tone and mood reflect his ideology as confined to the salvation of his homeland and the preservation of their heritage. Like Tonwe, he hails from a riverine community but while Tonwe sees Nigeria as a nation, Piriye plays the ethnicity card as observed by Tonwe:

... I am a little worried at the stridently ethnic character of your project. It seems to me a noble enough undertaking to investigate ... but why must the result of such an enquiry be directed towards justifying an ethnic group? (p. 3)

He further reinforces this ideology during his first meeting with Bickerbug:

I lost my job for no other reason than I am a Beniotu man. Right now I'm doing the best I can to survive, in Lagos for that matter. I can assure you of one thing – I feel as deeply concerned about the plight of our people as you do. Perhaps I should also say that I will be as deeply committed as anyone else may be to whatever steps can be taken to improve the situation in our homeland (p. 37)

This informs his decision to partner with Bickerbug whom he sees as his fellow Beniotu man, which attracts the attention of the National Security Service (NSS): his arrest, detention and release from their custody. His relationship and close proximity to his focalized eventually causes the disappearance of his pregnant fiancée Lati during the bombing of the Kwarafa Dam by Bickerbug.

Bickerbug, is an internal focaliser. Most of the activities and information given to us in the novel is as a result of Bickerbug. This is because focalization is not always consistently located. Even the most fixed focalization, where the whole story only offers narrative information through one character, often include moments where information outside the focalizing characters' perception/knowledge is available. His narrative of his torture at the hands of the security agents to Piriye gives us an example:

They took me at the back of the building, and there they worked me over ... when I woke up I found I was lying on the floor of a narrow, windowless room. I could tell the shape of the room by a faint light that seeped through the cracks in the door. I noticed my handcuffs were gone ... and I was aching all over. I could not get up, however hard I tried. Mind you, I could barely see (p. 152).

The use of the verbs 'tell', 'aching' and 'see' express feelings known only to him as a character. He is concerned about the plight of his people and this concern

is reflected in his actions. In his perception, oil exploration is the biggest problem of their people down in the Delta (p. 143). Bickerbug is known for declaring war on the government and giving inflammatory public speeches: denouncing the activities of the oil companies and the government. We are given a glimpse of his ideological orientation throughout the text. In one of these instances, Bickerbug reveals his misgivings towards the activities of the oil companies and the government:

When Frank Segal says that the detergent chemicals aren't going to be there long enough to do any harm to the fishes and the farms, he's simply talking bullshit. He knows it but he'll never tell the truth, and he's got enough people in the country to help him keep up the lie. Man, our people down there are in an awful mess, and there's no one prepared to do anything to help them. I tell you, Piriye, something has got to be done! (p. 148)

His ideology of taking a stand leads to blowing up five oil installations in the Delta and the Kwarafa dam.

Levels of Diegesis and Diegetic Narrators in *Tides*

Narrators are classified by their relation to the main narrative (diegesis) and can also be categorized in relation to the story. In most cases, narrators and focalisers are not always different characters. Gholamreza and Atefeh (62) also advocates 'the merging of the notions of focalization and narration'. In the text, TonweBirisbeoccupies the position of a homodiegetic narrator. He is a homodiegetic narrator by virtue of him being also a character and participates in the story he is telling. His perception of the situation and surrounding are communicated to us in his choice of words. An example of such in the text is:

I did not say anything. Not because I had nothing to say. But because I was struck by how little information I had about an environment in which I had chosen to spend the rest of my life. I was equally struck by the depth of concern shown by a man whose simplicity you would easily be inclined to equate with ignorance. I sighed, and nodded at him (p. 27)

He is a participant in the world he narrates. Also, there are instances in which the narrator tells us about issues that he did not witness. He/she narrates views, thoughts and perceptions of a focal character. In recounting the discourse between a group of fishermen from Ebirima and the oil company, Tonwe becomes an extradiegetic narrator. Since he did not witness the events, he

narrates to us as a mediator presenting the thoughts, feelings and actions of other characters, analyzing and interpreting their actions.

Here is an example:

The delegation has sought audience with the white engineer. According to Mr Opene, they have gone in a canoe to the off-shore rig but were not allowed to moor the canoe so as to get onto the rig. The white men simply sat way off from them, cross-legged and pipe in mouth, while the mission of the group as well as the Whiteman's response were relayed through an interpreter... The reply of the white engineer was uncompromising(p. 11).

Mr Opene's perception guides the narration of the story. The thoughts and feelings of the fishermen are conveyed by Tonwe to Piriye and the readers. Tonwe is an internal focaliser who reports the events from the perspective of another character.

PiriyeDokumo is a homodiegetic narrator who is also an internal focalizer. From his perspective we see the events as they unfold in Lagos. Moreover, Bickerbug's perspective and orientation are conveyed by Piriye as an extradiegetic narrator.

Conclusion

The study analyses Okpewho's use of focalization to tell a narrative of destruction wrought in the country as a result of negligence of the government and revenge by a group of youths who believe they are fighting for their rights and that of the Niger Delta region. Genette's focalization using various narrative perspectives allows a new way to identify different ideological representations as manifested in the thoughts, words and actions of the characters. The study further uses Rimón-Kenan's facets of focalization to examine the different perceptual, psychological and ideological orientations of the various localizers in the text. The dominant ideology is centered on the belief that there are saboteurs and trouble makers whose intentions are to sabotage the economy of the country. This view is represented by the oil companies, the government and the leaders of the riverine communities. This ideology is in sharp contrast with the ideology put forward by Piriye, Tonwe, Bickerbug, together with the fishing and farming people. The alternate view is that the government and the oil companies should proffer solutions to the effects of oil drilling on the Niger Delta environment.

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