

Research Article

Story-Narrative Relation: A Narratological Study of Distance in *Sūrah Yūsuf*

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Abstract

This study examined narrative distance in *Sūrah Yūsuf* – surah (chapter) 12th of the Quran, which contains a well told biography of Prophet Yusuf (Biblical Joseph). It analyzed this narrative nonfiction to determine how fully and directly the story information is presented to the reader. The study applied Gerard Genette's linguistic subcategory of narrative distance – with supportive insights from other structuralist narratological critics - to this analysis to aid in appreciating how distance enhances the quality and quantity of story information presented to the reader. The analysis focused on the narration of both events and speech as prescribed in Genette's approach to determine the range of distance between the narrative text with its narrator-agent and the story with its characters as well as between the story and the readers. The study revealed through this qualitative analysis that though the text – unlike the modern novel - less vividly presents the story's setting, plot, character and conflict as well as the characters' speech due to its non-storytelling mission of giving moral lessons to worshipers and enabling them to concentrate on that specific detail, it serves as a precursor which anticipated the emergence of the dramatic modern novel. Future researches about the mode of presentation of this narrative, especially its focalization, will shed more light on how awareness of the relationship between the story and this narrative text may enhance readers' comprehension and appreciation of the text as well as their feeling of involvement in the story events.

Keywords

Narrative Distance, Narrative of Events, Narrative of Words, Quranic Narrative, *Sūrah Yūsuf*

1. Introduction

Narrative research, which studies narrative structure, content and context, holds the structural study as primary [1, 2]. And in considering important aspects of narrative structure, we also have to look at how the action is rendered. The choice in this consideration of how is between two basic techniques: use of a narrator to tell the story explicitly or avoidance of narrator as mediator [3]. The notion of narrative mood is proposed to refer to the distance and perspective of the narrator from which the story is related, and which regulates the

narrative information [4].

Structuralist narratologists' (or discourse narratologists') study of texts has had a remarkable influence on literary criticism, including making Quranic stories amenable to the application of the methods of narrative criticism. Quranic narrative is a "creative" nonfiction, a term which, according to Lee Gutkind, refers to a factually accurate prose about real people and events presented in a compelling, vivid and dramatic manner [5]. Generally, a nonfiction text is appreciated

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as a form of writing because people assume it to be factually correct and not a figment of the writer's fantasy. This element of believability in the writing allows readers to view the book through a very different lens than they would have if it were fictional [6]. Although Quranic stories appear to be focused more on the moral importance of events than their logical order, narrative structure, and historical details [7], the study of how these stories are told (distance and perspective) enhances their understanding and makes them suitable for further research.

Narratological works which may be mentioned as previous studies on *Sūrah Yūsuf* include Alowaimiri's (2020/2021) Aesthetics of slowness in the narration of the holy Quran; *sūrah Yūsuf* as a sample [8], which examined the techniques of pause and dialogue and their use in an artistic and semantic way in the surah; Yunus, Salman A., T. M. Yaqub and Sekinat O. Arimiyau's (2022) Time Manipulation in the Qur'anic Text: A Genettean Narratological Study of Narrative Speed in the Story of Prophet Yusuf [9], which examined the efficacy of narrative speed in *Sūrah Yūsuf* as a narrative technique; Kianii, Hussein, Saeed HessamPoor and Nadia DadPoor's (1392/2013) *Dirāsah naqdiyyah fī tawẓīf al- 'istirjā' āt fī qīṣṣah al-nabiyy yūsuf (alayhi al-salām) (dirāsah 'alā 'asāsi namūdḥajī jīrāri janīt)* [10], which focused on flashback and its functions in *Sūrah Yūsuf*; Amraei, Mohammad Hassan and Mohammed Taghi Zand Vakili's (2019) The Aesthetic of the Deleted Narrative and its Rhetorical Implications in *Sūrah Yūsuf (AS)* [11], which concentrated on the aesthetic of deletion in the narrative of *Sūrah Yūsuf* and its impact on configuring the story of Prophet Yusuf and Shaqrūsh, Shādiyah's (2015) *Al- 'awāmil fī al-sīmiyā' iyyāt al-sardiyyah* [12], which focused on a semiotic structuralist study of the content of *Sūrah Yūsuf*.

Considering the scope of these studies, it appears no work has described how the story of Prophet Yusuf is told, the distance mode of story presentation the text adopts: whether it is less of Narrator, more of story information or vice versa and the implication thereof. To make up for this oversight, this study attempts to examine narrative distance in the Surah with the main objective of examining the story-narrative relationship of distance which manifests in the mode of presentation the text adopts to make the story accessible to the reader.

Significantly, the study makes the prospective reader aware of the quality and quantity of the story content available in the text – a discovery which is bound to have an impact on his confidence on and opinion of the text even before reading. Moreover, it partially addresses some of the possible misconceptions about the religious text [13] and opens it to further research.

This essentially qualitative, descriptive narratological study, which applies Genette's linguistic category of mode (distance precisely) to examine *Sūrah Yūsuf*, is non-experimental as it manipulates no part of the text's narration of events and speech. Genette's category has the capacity to elucidate the features of distance contained in this text, which is sourced

secondarily and obtained from the Quranic document. The study will determine the vividness of the text's description of characters' actions and the degree of dominance of its reported speech section seeking to provide an answer to the main question: what is the relationship between the story of Prophet Yusuf and the narrative text of *Sūrah Yūsuf* in terms of the accessibility of the story content to the reader? To arrive at a convincing answer, this investigation will briefly describe the text under study and the theoretical framework of narrative distance, examine the text's mode of narration of events and of characters' speech in the light of the theory, discuss the implication of the findings therefrom and then conclude.

2. Methodology

Prophet Yusuf A. S is the eleventh Messenger of Allah from among the twenty-five well-known Prophets mentioned in the Quran. He descended from the line of the Prophets, precisely from Ya'qub (Jacob), son of Ishaq (Isaac), son of Ibrahim (Abraham). One of twelve siblings from four mothers, Yusuf has the same mother, Racheal, with his younger brother, Benjamin. His proverbial good conduct and charming natural beauty made him beloved so much (himself and his full brother, Benjamin) by his father, compared to his other brothers. Besides, the sign of prophethood appearing on him earned him extra care and attention from his father. However, to become a Prophet, his life was tested with lots of challenges and tribulations, starting from having a dream which he had narrated to his father. He was victim of a plot arranged towards him by his ten half-brothers which brought him to be thrown into a well and later sold as a slave. Given sojourn in his master's palace in Egypt, Yusuf faced seduction from his master's wife and was later imprisoned for his innocence. Eventually, he became the Minister of Egypt and was reunited with his family, whom he brought from Can'an to live with him in Egypt [14]

2.1. Method of Data Collection

The story is found in the twelfth chapter of the Quran [15]. And having surveyed the surah as a whole and discovered that it embodies some phenomena of narrative distance, we dissected it into narrative units which are capable of manifesting the story-narrative relationship of distance. And for effective exploration, we regrouped these units into the two broad divisions of distance, namely: narration of events and narration of speech. Instances of the two are drawn from the surah with evidence of conformity. The study adopts Abdullah Yusuf Ali's *The Holy Quran (Koran) - English Translation of the Meanings* as its main source text.

2.2. Narrative Distance

For Genette mood refers to the distance and perspective of the narrator from which the story is related, and which regu-

lates the narrative information [4, 16–17], ([18] p36). The story is the chronological sequence of events, which is not readily available to the reader. Instead, it amounts to an abstract construct [19].

Genette's discussion of distance entails an extended contrast between diegesis and mimesis ([20] p. 68). The first term, according to Plato refers to the story constructed by the narrator and the second, speech and dialogue as a mimetic record of someone's thoughts and opinions [21]. Genette marks the contrast between the two terms with a formula: information + informer = C, which implies that the quantity of information and the presence of the informer are in inverse ratio: mimesis = a maximum of information and a minimum of informer, diegesis = a minimum of information and a maximum of informer [22]. But narrative, being linguistic, can imitate directly nothing but language. Genette therefore splits narrative into two modes of distance: narrative of events and narrative of words [23–26].

2.2.1. Narrative of Events

A narrative of events tells what the character is doing [21]. Whatever its mode, it is always narrative, that is, a transcription of the (supposed) nonverbal into the verbal. Its mimesis will thus never be anything more than an illusion of mimesis ([22] p. 165), [27]. In it, the emphasis is on telling—presenting the act of telling more than what is told. It is diegesis ([16] p. 39). According to Genette, all narratives are necessarily diegesis (telling). They can never attain the illusion of mimesis (showing) by making the story real [28].

2.2.2. Narrative of Words

Narrative of words tells what the character is saying or thinking [21], ([22] p. 171). Genette advances three types of speech presentation according to the narrator's increasing distance to the story, namely, narratized speech, transposed speech, and reported speech [4, 21].

3. Analysis of Narrative Distance in Sūrah Yūsuf

Expectedly, the narrator, to balance between story and narration, should be vivid and exhaustive in describing the story plot, setting, characters' speech and action as well as conflict. And while the protagonist's report to his father in Quran verse 4 (v4)

Behold! Joseph said to his father: "O my father! I did see eleven stars and the sun and the moon: I saw them prostrate themselves to me! [29]" constitutes the basis of the prevailing consciousness of all the characters throughout the narrative, the Narrator's introductory comment in (v7).

Verily in Joseph and his brethren are signs [or symbols] for seekers [after Truth, 29] sets the pace for the narration of the story.

3.1. Narration of Events in Sūrah Yūsuf

Narrative units which seem to conform to rules of narration of events, which is about what the characters did [21] include: *So they did take him away* in v15 ([29] p. 108), *Then they came to their father in the early part of the night, weeping* in v16 ([29] p. 108), *they stained his shirt with false blood* in v18 ([29] p. 108), *the (Brethren) sold him for a miserable price -- for a few dirhams counted out* in v20–21 ([29] p. 108), *sought to seduce him from his (true) self: she fastened the doors* in v23 ([29] p. 108), *but that he saw the evidence of his Lord* in v24 ([29] p. 108), *they both raced each other to the door, and she tore his shirt from the back they both found her lord near the door* in v25 ([29] p. 108), *When she heard of their malicious talk, she sent for them and prepared a banquet for them* in v31 ([29] p. 109), *after they had seen the Signs, ... to imprison him for a time* in v35 ([29] p. 109), *and (Joseph) lingered in prison a few (more) years* in v42 ([29] p. 109), *they found their stock in trade had been returned to them* in v65 ([29] p. 112), *And when they entered in the manner their father had enjoined* in v68 ([29] p. 112), *he put the drinking cup into his brother's saddlebag* in v70 ([29] p. 112), *And he raised his parents high on the throne (of dignity)* in v100 ([29] p. 113).

Gathered above are what can be regarded as instances of narrative of events in this text. A keen look at them shows that in them setting, actions, characters and conflicts are mentioned rather than described. Elements of setting are mentioned without a vivid depiction nor sketching not to talk of their panoramic view. In the presentation of the characters, there is no introduction describing their roles, habits, mental or emotional state nor physical appearance; personal names of some of them are skipped. Characters' actions and events are not given a graphic description which can detail their extent and manner of occurrence. And although events move on fairly logically, readers' minds are not adequately prepared at the end of one episode for the next by way of descriptions which can raise their imagination in anticipation of the coming event.

The Narrator consistently sustains this abridged manner of narration, which rather than vividly describe things in a way that appeal to readers' sense of sight and make them see much, presents a filtered minimum of story information to them probably because telling (or more appropriately, mentioning) rather than showing is intended.

3.2. Narration of Words in Sūrah Yūsuf

Rather than employing transposed speech type (See:[22] pp. 170–172), the means of speech presentation in *Sūrah Yūsuf* according to the prominence of the Narrator or degree of His involvement are – in our opinion - narratized and reported [4, 21, 30]. By way of clarification, it should be noted that what is intended here is narrator's involvement as narrator, not as a character in the story. However, conspicuous in the surah is

the phenomenon of Narrator's involvement as a participating character in the story manifested by the following obvious divine intrusion in v15: "... and We put into his heart (this Message): 'Of a surety thou shalt (one day) tell them the truth of this their affair while they know (thee) not' ([29] p. 108)," "... Thus did We establish Joseph in the land, that We might teach him the interpretation of stories [and events]" in v21 ([29] p. 108), "... thus [did We order] that We might turn away from him [all] evil and shameful deeds: for he was one of Our servants, sincere and purified" in v24 ([29] p. 108), "Thus did We give established power to Joseph in the land, to take possession therein as, when, or where he pleased" in v56 ([29] p. 110), "... it did not profit them in the least against [the plan of] Allah: It was but a necessity of Jacob's soul, which he discharged. For he was, by our instruction, full of knowledge [and experience]: but most men know not" in v68 ([29] p. 111) and "... Thus did We plan for Joseph. He could not take his brother by the law of the king except that Allah willed it [so]" in v76 ([29] p. 112).

The instances above show God as a character in the story actively participating mostly to render supportive hand to the embattled hero, Prophet Yusuf. They are reported in the first-person plural and provide germane story information to the reader, which the characters themselves might be unaware of.

A clear exception to this phenomenon is "So his Lord heard him (in his prayer), and turned away from him their snare" in v34 ([29] p. 109). Here, the Narrator, who is also the Lord, though now not a character in the story, has narrated His response in the third person to a distress call in verse 33 made to Him by the oppressed Yusuf "O my Lord! The prison is more to my liking than that to which they invite me ... ([29] p. 109)". This conforms to the novelistic convention of seeking spiritual assistance from an idol or shrine by its about-to-be-overpowered devotee story character.

Back now to the intended Narrator's involvement as narrator. Here we observe:

3.2.1. Narratized Speech in Sūrah Yūsuf

In this surah there are assumed instances of narratized speech (cf: [22] p. 170), ([16] p. 39) [67, 4, 30], in which the Narrator fully mediates by presenting only His interpretation of characters' speech and filtering out what He considers unnecessary. These include: "And (with passion) did she desire him" in v24 ([29] p. 108), "When he had spoken to him" in v54 ([29] p. 110), "And (Joseph) told his servants to put their stock in trade (with which they had bartered) into their saddlebags" in v62 ([29] p. 111) and "Now when they saw no hope of his (yielding)" in v80 ([29] p. 112).

The above are the Narrator's understanding of the characters' speech, not their exact utterances. In all these instances, story content only, not its details, is related [31]. Their summarizing manner gives us essential information as efficiently as possible, without trying to create the illusion that the events are taking place before our eyes - the narrator just says what

happens, without trying to show it as it happens [23]. They are instances in which the Narrator is not only an information giver but also a narrative organizer, analyst, commentator and stylist [27], mirroring Fludernik's notion: "Traditionally, stories are told, and a person tells them to us, so that we actually see before us a teller who mediates the story to the reader or audience ([3] pp. 35-36), [23]" - a practical demonstration of Genette's "less of story information and more of narrator's dominance (cf: [22] p. 170)." However, in this religious context the Narrator dominates to ensure the presentation of only the story information necessary for the lessons meant to be learnt.

3.2.2. Reported Speech in Sūrah Yūsuf

A striking instance of presumably immediate speech in the narration is that of Yusuf speaking not to a fellow in-story character but to God in v101 - albeit a post story remark:

"O my Lord! Thou hast indeed bestowed on me some power, and taught me something of the interpretation of dreams and events, O Thou Creator of the heavens and the earth! Thou art my Protector in this world and in the Hereafter, take thou my soul (at death) as one submitting to Thy Will (as a Muslim), and unite me with the righteous ([29] p. 113)."

The fact that this post-story remark came right at the completion of the story and even probably in the presence of other characters in the story makes reasonable its inclusion in our analysis. Obviously, Yusuf directed it to the Lord as thanksgiving for having made his dream come true and even to - like Oliver Twist - solicit for further grace and favour. Concerning its distance to the reader, this externalized monologue is probably an immediate speech from the character which reaches the reader without any narrator's mediation.

However, dominant in this narrative text is non-immediate dialogic reported speech (See: [16] p. 39), [4, 30, 23]. An instance of this is the artful opening of the story in v4-6 with:

Behold, Joseph said to his father: "O my father! I did see eleven stars and the sun and the moon: I saw them prostrate themselves to me!" Said (the father): "My (dear) little son! Relate not thy vision to thy brothers, lest they concoct a plot against thee: for Satan is to man an avowed enemy! "Thus, will thy Lord choose thee and teach thee the interpretation of stories (and events) and perfect His favor to thee and to the posterity of Jacob -- even as He perfected it to thy fathers Abraham and Isaac aforetime! For Allah is full of knowledge and wisdom ([29] p. 109)."

In the verses above, the Narrator has only imitated the speech of the characters ([16] p. 39) - a form Genette found most superior in the view of Aristotle ([22] pp. 172-173) in which characters' words and probably their way of projecting those words to the listener are used ([31] p. 224) [32].

In this speech type also is the narration in v8-10:

They (Joseph's brethren) said: "Truly Joseph and his brother are loved more by our father than we: but we are a goodly body! Really our father is obviously wandering (in

his mind)! "Slay ye Joseph or cast him out to some (unknown) land, that so the favor of your father may be given to you alone: (There will be time enough) for you to be righteous after that!" Said one of them: "Slay not Joseph, but if ye must do something, throw him down to the bottom of the well: he will be picked up by some caravan of travellers ([29] p. 109)."

For want of space, we rely on our reader's ability to find other instances of this nature in the following verses of the surah: 11-14, 17-18, 23-24, 25-29, 30, 31-33, 36-42, 43-49, 50-53, 54-55, 59-62, 63-64, 65-67, 69, 70-75, 77-79, 80-87, 88-93, 94-95, 96-98, 99-100.

In each of these instances, there is discourse reported as it supposedly was uttered by the character ([22] p. 170) almost the same manner a dramatized story is represented in a 'scenic' way, with a specified setting, and making use of dialogue which contains direct speech [23]. Thus, these instances should represent the minimum distance between this surah and the story of Prophet Yusuf.

However, these verses – though fairly direct to the reader making the story information to be received with remarkable degree of fulness and precision – are limited in their directness by their non-immediacy for they contain the reporting clause and quotation marks - two signs of the interference of the narrator. This interference disallows the character to interact "immediately" with readers ([31] p. 224) and causes breaks in the free flow of characters' thoughts, speech and actions making impossible "staging" of the story, which produces lively interaction and reduces "the distance between story world and participant world and creates a common context to evaluate the present events ([31] p. 229)." This can only occur in conversational exchanges which a novel quote verbatim or in the context of drama or film ([3] pp. 35-36).

Given this limitation, these verses are not like modern novel (although anticipated it through their closeness to immediate speech), some of which attain the highest level of directness in the form of immediate speech, in which the floor is given to the characters from the beginning to the end like stage performance ([22] pp. 173-174) without showing traces of the narrating instance.

4. How Narrative Distance Occurs in *Sūrah Yūsuf*

The Genettean modal notion "much of narrator's presence = less of story information and less of narrator's dominance = much of story content" comes to bear on this surah. That the Narrator mediates greatly in the narration of events and lightly in the narration of characters' speech creates a mixed reaction. In areas of great mediation, the surah did not present much of the story to the reader, who consequently feels pushed back while in areas of less involvement it presents almost everything in that part of story to the reader making him up close with the characters, feeling as if he is experiencing the events

himself or watching from inside the same room or inside the characters [33], ([17] p. 50).

On the whole, notwithstanding the dominating reported speech type, narration in this surah is essentially diegetic, not mimetic: story events are narratized and characters' speech is not immediate but reported with the Narrator conspicuously present. This implies that the relationship between the story of Prophet Yusuf and the Surah is one of a whole and a part since the Narrator is found to have effectively mediated between the two selecting in the text only part of the story content that suits His purpose thereby distancing the readers from the story and rationing it out to them. This mediation (less of the story and more of the Narrator's wish) may, however, be reasonably justified by the fact that the story is told mainly to teach adherents of the Islamic faith moral lessons from the story. To achieve this – it can be argued - the narration must be effectively regulated by way of filtering out certain story information considered irrelevant to the goal of narration, that is, moral orientation. Ikhwan noted that Kalner had argued that the fewer details found in the *Qur'an*'s narratives is because it conveys only the information essential to make the point rather than telling a story and avoiding discussion of seemingly unrelated points [34].

If this argument finds acceptance, one may then agree with Mieke Bal's conclusion noted in Ikhwan that while the Bible proceeds with linearity the Quran is point-based ([34] pp. 406-407). That is, the Quran aims at message giving, not storytelling per se ([14] p. 65). Thus, some of the Quranic narratives are concerned with only the episodes that have to do with the religious purpose for which the narrative is employed ([15] p. 174), [7].

While these omissions – craftily alluded to – are tacitly understood by the reader and are designed to make the story straight-to-the-point, less boring, thought-provoking and sufficient enough for the target audience to derive a lesson from the past people; they narratologically make the story distant from this reader, who is made to read not the untainted story per se but Narrator's interpretation of it. An assessment guided by this discovery will invariably consider *Sūrah Yūsuf* as a narrative text (a literary genre) which makes the story information distant from the prospective reader. Hence, its reading has to be performed in relation to examining the Qur'anic discourse in order to grasp its particular meaning ([34] p. 402) a discourse whose philosophy is to tell not the whole of any story but only the part most germane for the targeted moral lessons, on which the reader is expected to concentrate.

5. Conclusion

In conclusion, so far, we have demonstrated that Genette's narratological insights - though came much later - validly reflect not only in earlier texts but also in religious scriptures such as the Quran. Instances of his distance mode are seen in the narratological structure of the narrative text of *Sūrah*

Yūsuf, making it suitable for analysis using these insights. Our exploration reveals that the kernel of the narratological relationship between the story of Prophet Yusuf and the Quranic narrative text of *Sūrah Yūsuf*, which presents it to the reader, is that the text's narration (purely indirect in some part and slightly direct in the other) is – on the whole – essentially diegetic, not mimetic, since it is not allowed to come freely direct from the story. The reader, who is at the mercy of the information regulatory function of the Narrator, receives at a distance not all story information about Prophet Yusuf but some salient part of it. This deliberate mediation allows the Narrator to effectively measure the information according to need releasing only the much necessary for the narratee to grasp the moral lessons, the cornerstone of or purpose at the heart of this narration. The religious context of the narrative makes the mediation apt and easy for introducing the reader to and making him to concentrate on the specific detail which brings to limelight human instinct and character traits – its crude outlook which is indirectly characterized to be contiguous with Yusuf's brethren and its refined aspect as epitomized by Prophet Yusuf – implicitly encouraging him to imbibe good conduct as done by Prophet Yusuf and dissuading him from negative human tendencies manifested and regretted by Yusuf's brethren.

6. Recommendation

Future research about mood in this surah may investigate focalization to discover from which point of view the Narrator speaks for a more robust understanding of the text.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interests.

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