



LABOV'S NATURAL NARRATIVE- A READING OF ROHINTON MISTRY'S "AUSPICIOUS OCCASION"

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ABSTRACT

A traditional method of literary analysis deals with theme, story, plot, characterization, imagery and so on. Even though these tools of literary analysis are comprehensive in their own right and can offer valid insights into the interpretation of the story, it is possible to have an alternative scheme of analysis which can also offer equally valuable insights as to what kind of language is used, how it is used and why it is used. This is the framework developed by William Labov, a sociolinguist, while he was working on oral narratives. This oral/natural narrative framework has six key categories, each fulfilling a function in the narrative.

In the present paper, Rohinton Mistry's short story *Auspicious Occasion* is analyzed in the light of William Labov's Natural Narrative framework.

Key Words: Literary Analysis – Sociolinguistics – William Labov – Natural Narrative framework.

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In a critical study of short story, a researcher specializing in literature usually focuses on the traditional tools of literary analysis like theme, story, plot, characterization, imagery, didactic element, if any, and so on. Though time-honored, these tools of literary analysis need not necessarily be the only way to analyze literature and appreciate it. Linguistics, particularly sociolinguistics, offers valuable insights not only into the structure of the language but also how and why an utterance is used and what function it performs in a given context and in a given social network. Granting that literature, on a realistic plane, is a replica of the world and a short story is the characterization of real life events between real life characters in a

manner that is as realistic as possible, sociolinguistics certainly provides useful tools and insights in the form of narrative analysis

In 1972 Labov developed the framework of natural narrative with six key categories, each fulfilling a function in the narrative. Labov says in his 1967 framework "All sequential clauses are independent clauses". This is indeed the case wherever a character in a story gets into a reflective mode.

All the six components are summarized as under, followed by a short summary of the story, followed by an analysis of the story in the light of the Theory of Natural Narrative proposed by Labov.

1. **Abstract:** Often the title of the story itself is the abstract. Sometimes there may be a short introductory statement just before the actual story commences. This may be a philosophical statement by the author indicating the final outcome of the story. In some cases this may approximate the coda. In other words, abstract invites the readers to go into the story to know what happened.

2. **Orientation:** Orientation creates the scene and setting of the story by indicating the spatio-temporal setting of the story. The readers are oriented towards the story by being introduced the location of the story, some of the characters and the time of happening. Grammatically this may be characterized by the past continuous or past perfect verbs as these tenses enable to look back, while standing at the present moment. Orientation builds the base for the story to take off by introducing the reader to the setting and the necessary environment of the story.

3. **Complicating Action:** Often the part indicating the complicating action is the longest section of the story. It is the core narrative indicating what happened and how it happened. The verbs are usually in the simple past tense or simple present tense to indicate the immediacy of the action. The events are generally narrated in temporally ordered sentences leading to the climax.

4. **Resolution:** Resolution reveals what happened finally after the climax is reached.

The key event is described in this part. How the conflict is resolved, how the crisis is overcome, how the challenge is met, are all described in this part. After the intense action of the previous section, in this section the narration gradually leads to the resolution.

5. **Evaluation:** If the events of the story are considered 'concrete', evaluation is the 'abstract' side of the story. In Labov's terms 'So what' can be understood to be the quintessence of the story or the message from the author, if any, or the author's reflections relating to the happenings of the story presented in a generalized tone, or the author's world view. 'So what' is the author's conclusive comment.

As previously noted, it is not necessary for all the components to be present in a single narrative.

Evaluation is more frequently found in stories depicting psychological conflict rather than a physical combat.

6. **Coda:** Coda captures how the conflict or crisis ends. It signals the end of the story. It may be explicitly stated or implicitly suggested.

Summary of *Auspicious Occasion*

The story is about a Parsi couple getting ready to visit the Fire Temple, the prayer place of the Parsi community, on Behram roje, the New Year day of the Parsis. Ironically the story opens on an inauspicious note with Rustomji, the husband-a chronic sufferer of constipation- screaming from the leaking toilet. Deeply frustrated and irritated, he emerges from the toilet cursing the apartment management for the poor maintenance of the complex. In the mean time, Mehroo, a deeply religious and a quiet woman, leaves for the Fire Temple. After a while, Rustomji, dressed in impeccable white, boards the city bus and gets off at the destination. Then suddenly somebody spits out a spurt of pan and tobacco juice that catches him between the shoulder blades, creating a blood red patch on the sparkling white *dugli*. He loses control and mouths obscenities that result in a ripple of tension. People jostle him from every side, his *pheytoe* plucked from his head, *dugli* tugged at the bows. He somehow escapes further ignominy by pleading helplessness and hails a taxi and reaches home. Meanwhile, Mehroo, upon reaching the Fire Temple, comes to know of the ghastly murder of the *dustoor* of the Fire Temple. Thoroughly depressed and deeply agonized, she returns home to find her husband at home. Both of them feel sad that a Parsi killed another Parsi. The writer ends the story on a lighter note with Mehroo offering a cup of tea to Rustomji to help ease bowels.

The story is about decay in more than one sense – the decay of Firozsha Baag with which the story starts and the ageing of Rustomji and the dwindling number of younger generation of Parsis that reflects the communal decay and a Parsi killing a Parsi priest, reflecting moral decay.

The title of the story can only be understood as an ironic indication of the events that follow in the story. Rustomji, like many other Parsis, identifies himself with the colonizer and lives in past glory and

looks down on the natives. Mistry is probably critical of the idiosyncrasies of the Parsis in India and their failure to accept reality and adapt to it willingly. In trying to isolate the native Indians, Parsis only isolate themselves. They can neither create an identity for themselves nor can successfully and willingly merge their identity in the larger identity of their homeland i.e, India.

Analysis of narrative structure

In this section the Labovian framework of natural narrative with six categories is employed to analyze the narrative structure of *Auspicious Occasion*.

a. Abstract

The title *Auspicious Occasion* refers to the Parsi New Year's Day, *Behram roje*, which is also the birthday of Mehroo and her *Navjote*, when she was confirmed as Zoroastrian, and finally her marriage day also. Obviously all auspicious things happened to Mehroo on the same day and so she was particularly elated on this day. Ironically, the day turns out to be inauspicious and mars her jubilation. In the Labovian terms, the abstract is indicative of what the story is about.

b. Orientation

As the story begins, the two characters, Rustomji and Mehroo, are introduced and the spatio-temporal setting is indicated. The time is *Behram roje* and the setting is Rustomji's flat in Firozsha Baag. Though the setting is the same, the psychological scene for the two characters seems to be different. Rustomji is preoccupied with his constipating adventures on the New Year's Day, while Mehroo is in a great hurry to complete the routine work at home and leave for the Fire Temple. The contrast between these characters, both in their attitudes and in their use of language is brought out very well. Thus the readers are introduced to the scene and setting and the characters and so the readers are psychologically prepared to look forward to see what happens on the auspicious day. This 'Orientation' leads to 'Complicating Action'.

c. Complicating Action

In the present story the Orientation depicts Rustomji in a difficult predicament and Mehroo enters the scene. This builds curiosity in the minds of the readers and now complicating action begins.

In this part the author draws vivid character sketches of Rustomji and Mehroo, bringing to light the psychological contrast between them. The author also presents two aspects of Rustomji -- one physical and the other psychological. On a physical plane, he is a chronic sufferer of constipation, which maybe a result of his irritable and irascible nature. On a psychological plane Rustomji is presented as a lewd character in contrast to his devout wife Mehroo. He is cynical and ill-tempered.

Rustomji often gets lost in wild sexual fantasies. His lewd mind is reflected in the way he objectifies and ogles at the servant surreptitiously and his cynical mind is shown in his comments on the Baag management, "Those scoundrels sitting with piles of trust money hidden under their arses should pay for it!". Even in the way he calls his wife, "You are deaf or what? Must I scream till my lungs burst?" his domineering and male chauvinistic attitude finds expression.

A careful study of the character of Rustomji offers a possible cause for his chronic constipation as Irritable Bowel Syndrome. From the way he speaks to everyone, the readers visualize him as having a scowling expression perpetually fixed on his face. He even earns the title 'Rustomji the Curmudgeon' for his attitude and language.

He even parodies religious prayers with his obsessively lewd mindset. His understanding of the seventy five year old *Dustoor* Dhunjisha is also informed by his obsession, "Loves to touch and feel women, the old goat- the younger and the fleshier, the more fun he has hugging and squeezing them".

After Mehroo left for the Fire Temple, Rustomji, clad in full white, takes the bus to the Fire Temple. As proud as a peacock, he ignores the queue at the bus stop and boards the bus. All the time he looks down upon everyone else, thinking of his 'resplendence' and 'invincibility'.

In the meantime, Mehroo reaches the Fire Temple, and to her horror, finds police vehicles and a big crowd there. A sense of fear and suspense grip her mind. This is further intensified by the announcement of *Dustoor Kotwal* that all prayers were cancelled for that day. Thus the complicating action is intensified and the suspense is at its peak. As Mehroo advances towards the crowd, she picks

up some words from which she tries to piece together what happened inside the Fire Temple. She gathers from the words that a ghastly murder took place inside the holy Fire Temple on the Parsi New Year Day, which is particularly dear to Mehroo. This is exactly what Labov calls 'complicating action'. At this stage the author shifts the focus back to Rustomji, thus leaving the readers in suspense. The complicating action is not yet resolved.

When the bus arrives at his destination, and as he alights the bus, someone spits out a squirt of pan and tobacco juice that catches him between the shoulder blades, blood red and sparkling white. The crowd on the platform starts making fun of Rustomji, adding insult to injury. He starts mouthing obscenities that result in a ripple of tension displacing the earlier light hearted teasing. People jostle him from every side, his *pheytoe* plucked from his head, *dugli* tugged at the bows. Realizing that he is a serious trouble, he shows his toothless mouth and starts pleading. Left with no other option, he plays the role of a clown to escape further ignominy and hails a taxi for home.

d. Resolution

Now the author shifts the scene to Mehroo once again to resolve the crisis. Mehroo finds out that *Dustoor Dhunjisha* was murdered by a fellow Parsi and is crestfallen. Dejectedly she heads home. All the suspense that has been built up and the conflict of the story have been resolved. Mehroo feels dejected that such a sinful thing as *Dustoor Dhunjisha's* murder took place inside the Fire Temple and on the Parsi New Year Day, which happens to be her birthday and marriage day too. On the other hand, Rustomji feels defeated as his self pride and feelings of superiority and invincibility come to a naught.

Mehroo reaches home and finds Rustomji at home already. She catches a glimpse of his *dugli* with scarlet red patches on the sparkling white and mistakenly connects it to *Dunjisha's* murder and is horrified.

Rustomji, already frustrated and dejected, is further incensed at Mehroo's expression and wild conjecture. This provides a comic relief to all the intensifying action.

e. Coda

Having resolved the misunderstanding and having painfully overcome the effect of the murder, both the wife and the husband sit together and share their grief that a Parsi priest is killed by a fellow Parsi on an auspicious occasion like Parsi New Year Day. In order to overcome the grief and the distress, they provide themselves with a cup of tea. Thus the title 'auspicious occasion' is ironically justified.

In the present analysis, it has been shown that a short story is also amenable to critical analysis using Labov's Natural Narrative framework. We want to show that both the traditional literary analysis and natural narrative analysis are not mutually exclusive but are supplementary to each other and together they yield a far more comprehensive analysis than would otherwise.

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