NARRATIVE CONSTRUCTION AND ITS SOCIAL VITALITY

Qasim Ali Shah, Bahadar Nawab and Arifullah Khan[*]

Abstract

Resilient narrative construction confines to the prevalence and function of Ideolog-based conflicts. While robust coordination and substantial enforcement strategies enhance the social vitality of narrative to bring about the desired social change. This article seeks to explore the narrative construction and its social vitality in the context of conflict and societal development. New narrative theoretical discourse reveals that deliberate narrative construction concentrates on individuals and society to redirect them in accordance with the wishes of narrative mentors. The conflict engendering elements like containment, self-identification of the individuals, and social positioning are, thus, subordinated to the narrative. This paper while using the narratological framework is looking at the phenomenon of socio-anthropological change from the perspective of narratology. The study could be of importance to students of low-intensity conflicts and militancy, especially corresponding to terrorism. The paper concludes that this new outlook of narrative has enlarged its scope beyond the corridors of literature into the renewed field of social narratology with an immense bearing on human behavior and attitudes.

Keywords: Narrative Construction, Identity, Social Change, Narrative Binalization, Hermeneutic.

Introduction

Human interactions within the social framework remained a subject of prime importance for social scientists. How do humans interact with each other? Why do they act in a specific way in a situation? Can human behavior be predicted? Furthermore, how human behavior might be channeled in a specific direction, both individually and communally. These and many other questions have baffled the human mind for long. In the recent past, the study of narrative further expanded the list of such questions, incorporating a variety of social science disciplines. The present-day interest in the narrative study is mostly due to the belief that narrative identifies an overwhelming way of human understandings of self and society that can be helpful in finding answers to many such queries.[1] This has increased the level of attention towards narratives in past decades, not only in the field of literature studies but also in many other branches of social studies encompassing sociology, legal studies, rhetoric and

[*]Qasim Ali Shah is a PhD Scholar at the Department of Development Studies, COMSATS University, Islamabad (Abbottabad Campus). Dr Bahadar Nawab is an Associate Professor at the Department of Development Studies, COMSATS University, Islamabad (Abbottabad Campus). Arifullah Khan is a PhD Scholar at the Department of Education, National University of Modern Languages, Islamabad.

anthropology.[2] The importance given to narrative can be judged from the fact that even the scholars of human discourse seem inspired by Kenneth Burke's (1897-1993) concept of "dramatism"[3] as a foundation when looking at the narrative dimensions of social life.[4] This new beginning ended the old concept of narrative as a mere representational form and narratology became a conceptual part of social epistemology and ontology.[5] This conceptualization has realized that people perceive their surroundings through narratives and it is narrativity through which people form, direct, and redirect their identities in social environments.[6] Hayden White further elaborates on the idea by using an umbrella term "Metacode" for a narrative that results in the transcultural permeability of "messages about a shared reality."[7]

Precisely, narratives are compelling storylines that can explain events convincingly and from which inferences can be drawn."[8] Labov and Waletzky (1967) define narrative as a particular way of reporting past events with intended interpretations excluding the actual sequence of the happenings. Narratives are not dependent on the placement of a particular event to attain certain meanings or ascertain the meaning of a single specific occurrence rather narratives follow the path of historical outlook and make events related to each other for deriving a logical meaning.[9] Narratives are important as they give a conceptualized form to human society.[10] However, this does not restrict narrative just to the ontological level as no social change can be attributed solely to this level or even to a popular narrative. By incorporating all the essential social forces, factors and realities, narratives attain the shape of an overwhelming entity that encompasses all aspects of society.[11] Keeping in view this new stature of narrative, Corinne Squire in his study considers narrative central to the process of social change in the modern world.[12]

The 9/11 incident, besides others, changed the outlook of narrative approach and made it an important field of socio-cultural study that can mobilize people and decide issues concerning peace and conflict simultaneously. This triggered a vigorous scholarly pursuit to understand the inherent mechanism of narrative in the context of its social applicability. In 2005, a clergy named Fazlullah appeared in Swat with an outwardly religious agenda. By 2007, he had the support of an overwhelming majority of people in the area. For almost two years, until the success of military operations against him, he had turned the area into a conflict zone. This conflict might seemingly be a minor incident if looked at from a global perspective but contextually, this phenomenon raised many important questions for sociologists and anthropologists.[13] The people in Swat were guided in a specific direction through a narrative so powerful and appealing that they not only accepted it but also considered it as their only way to achieve a better life.[14] The Swat conflict, thus, raised many theoretical questions about the understanding of social narratives that could lead to more conflicts on one hand and social change and redirection of mass and individual thinking on the other.

This paper stems from the research study conducted in the Swat area, where the narrative of militancy played its role in originating a violent conflict. Similarly, peace was restored by floating a counternarrative along with the use of force.[15] In the context of recent global urge for narratological explanations, this paper is an effort to

understand the construction mechanism of social narratives in correlation to human identification ranging from self to society and equate its standing with the socio-cultural basis of conflict situations and peace.

Theory of Narrative

The narrative paradigm suggests that all human activities ranging from family to social interactions are at least in part the result of many related stories in which individuals as social beings place or locate themselves.[16] A few decades ago, many historians were skeptical about the narrative explanations of such activities.[17] But at the same time, unintentionally, the concept of narrative permeated into the epistemological frameworks of many disciplines.[18] After introducing the term 'narratologie' (narratology) in the late 1960s by Tzvetan Todorov, many scholars have ventured into the field to understand its role in social understanding, social behavior, and social interactions, both at theoretical and practical levels.[19] Many social scientists like Todorov (1969) reflected that ultimately narratology would move a step ahead from a GUFTON (Grand Unified Field Theory of Narrative) to a GUFTOL (Grand Unified Field Theory of Literature). But post-classical narratologists did not stop there and boldly ventured beyond literature toward an interdisciplinary GUNTOC (Grand Unified Narrative Theory of Culture).[20] The inherent shortcoming of the sociological theories has always been its tilt towards the study of observable behavior of the society.[21] It precludes the debates of social beings, self or social identity and the ontological foundlings from its sphere of research. This has taken a rather simplistic turn by categorizing the society based on interests, logical or practical preferences that captivate people, who are then driven in the society through societal norms and values.[22] Narratology, on the other hand, concentrates on the development of human personality embedded in a socio-cultural environment with a significant impact on the behavior of an individual and society as a whole. These developments may not necessarily be observable in an individual but may come out in the form of mass observable behavior stretched over time.[23]

Narrative Construction and Its Application

The production of narrative and counternarrative (in the shape of propaganda, strategic communication, and public diplomacy) has been a process used by different people and states to achieve their political objectives. The Europeans constructed narratives to justify their empirical designs and colonial rule that existed for more than 500 years. The main justifications were given in the form of religious duty to "take up the white man's burden."[24] Similarly, at the beginning of the communist revolution in the USSR, Stalin's narrative was to free the world from imperialism.[25]

The recent framework that provides guidelines to understand the narrative construction mechanism was developed by Labov and Waletzky (1967). In this framework, Robert Scholes and Robert Kellogg (1966) consider four basic elements essential for narrative in the context of social sciences. These elements include relationality of parts, causal emplotment, selective appropriation, and temporality

(sequence and place)."[26] Combining these parts gives narrative a shape, making it a combination of related parts, set in a specific time period as a logical result of the causal emplotment.[27] In narrative world, the meaning of a single event only intensifies itself when it is seen in connection with the other parts of the sequence. Therefore, the connectivity of parts gets importance in a narrative that gives complete circumstantial and spatial relevance with the audiences.[28] The Cold War narrative of the US which was popularized by connecting the events like Cuban Missile Crises with otherwise different events like the USSR's policy at home to make the USSR guilty of totalitarian and anti-democratic behavior.[29] It must be kept in mind that narratives are intentional and not unsponsored texts, which are coined to direct the audiences towards the desired aim.[30] Narratives are derived from a range of conditions prevailing in a society. The existing deprivation is manipulated to make narrative relevant and attractive in a, somehow, deprived society.[31] Narratives are more effective socially because contrary to other scientific claims, narratives cannot be falsified through verifications as they never claim to be true or false rather it only attains verisimilitude.[32] This verisimilitude gives narratives the sanctions of audiences without its verifiability. In this connotation, the difference between narrative fiction and narrative truth gets blurred.[33] This trait of narratives played a vital role in Al Qaeda's anti-American narrative, which branded the US as an anti-Muslim state and West as an arch-enemy of the Islamic world as a whole.

Coining a narrative is beyond a simple selection of happenings from people's lives, histories, or fictional fantasies and giving them suitable order. Rather the events themselves are to be constructed keeping in view the particular narrative. The events go hand in hand with the narratives, as Propp (2010) would call them functions of the story. Similarly, it also has to come up with a difference between good and bad according to the taste of its audiences.[34] However, narrative must be planned to have uncanniness and not to give solutions. It is seldom supposed to be on right or wrong side, rather it is the prerogative of the people who assimilate it according to their perception.[35]

The popularization of a narrative is the main focus after its construction. Narratives are fundamentally constructed to direct masses towards a specific direction and achieve the targeted goals. Many social scientists argue that the desired interpretation of narrative is achieved amidst the confusions of human minds, which narratives clarify.[36] Some scholars consider that narrative banalization mostly functions in the success and popularity of a narrative.[37] In this case, a narrative is socially so obvious, so familiar, and so normative that it can be given some popular and well-known interpretation.[38] This kind of narrative construction and automatic interpretation are always obvious in religion-based indoctrinations. The initial popularization of anti-Army and anti-state narrative of the Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) used the same to gain grounds in Swat and tribal-belt of Pakistan.

The narrative construction and popularization mechanism at some stage concentrate on the hermeneutic theory, where the hermeneutics of the audience plays a vital role. According to Burner (1996), hermeneutics is communication or textual imagery, where one party is conveying a meaning and the other party is deducting a

meaning from a discourse. It is important to note that the expression of words might be different from the meaning deducted by the reader or listener.[39] Another important prerequisite for a successful narrative is the background knowledge of both the narrator and the listener and how each interprets the past knowledge of the other party.[40] The background knowledge of the teller differs from the knowledge of the person who is receiving and perceiving it.[41] Again, this aspect of narrative worked well for the religious based terrorist organizations across the world, where seemingly simple peaceful religious narrations urged many to become violent militants. A successful narrative does not rely only on the value system, interests or hatreds of its targets[42] rather it holds a firm historical and cultural ground, where it is not threatened from any falsification or any future reliability test.[43]

In the narrative domain, both script and normative breaches provide rich grounds for innovation within the contents of narrative. This room for innovation makes storyteller a powerful figure in a culture with power to divert and direct the populace according to his/her whims.[44] The tellability of a narrative is dependent upon the breach in social norms and traditions which rallies people around it, ready to accept it, therefore, the very construct of narrative is normative in nature.[45] The importance of narrative in a society ranges from self-identity to social conflict (both violent and non-violent) and conflict transformation that lead to intended social change. Narrative in such role manifests itself in ideology-based conflicts enormously. Historically, narrative has been used by different entities in the same context. The theoretical explanation for social vitality of narrative is discussed in succeeding paragraphs.

Narrative and Self-identity

The modern-day need for attainment of identity has become an issue of rights related to expression and legitimacy that brought in new theoretical explanations.[46] Majority of the theories related to identity-politics has transformed social activities into a new frame of identities and solidarities rather than interests and norms and from the idea of globalized social activism to particular group of real individuals.[47] Social life for every individual emanates from his/her understanding of the social environment where he/ she lives. The important questions are: How does an individual develop his or her perception about the social happenings? What is the role of this perception in the process of interpreting and understanding an unfamiliar situation? To determine these social realities, first an individual must locate and identify himself mentally and physically in his social environment. Interestingly, the understanding about identity and the aim of identity are not stagnant rather they are built and rebuilt in the perspective of interior and exterior relationship of time, place and social power structure, which are also continuously changing.[48] In narratology, at ontological level, individuals use stories to perceive and incorporate their surroundings to play their part in social life. It is this perception that ontological narratives help in self-identification which proves decisive in undertaking any social responsibility. The narrative and ontology, thus, supplement each other as ontological standings produce new narratives, triggering new actions and producing further new narratives. Thus, the mutual reinforcing relationship between ontology and narrative goes on uninterrupted.[49] It

gives an urge towards conflict, choosing sides in conflict, its resolution and social change in human society.

Narrative maintains a main position in attaining cohesiveness and continuity among different dimensions of the inner being. In the context of identity formation, narrative performs two functions, i.e., descriptive and constructive. The descriptive functioning of narrative removes the incoherencies in social experiences and provides a causal coherency to the individual life as a whole. The constructive function of narrative provides a direction in hapless or unusual situations through an external intervention.[50] Narratives act as a route to find identities and after the consolidation of these identities, narrative points out social problems along with an advisable way to deal with them (Figure-1).

Figure-1: Construction of Narrative Identity

| Individual | Narrative | Sense of Identity and Goal |

Source: Autor's own Compilation

Sociocultural Basis of Narratives

As mentioned, the post-classical narratologists consider narratives as the basic sociological phenomenon, which initiates social conflicts, resolves social conflicts, and plays a deep-rooted role in social change and yet beyond. Vygotsky is considered as the pioneer of the idea that in any social and cultural environment, the cultural symbols and language along with other specific values reflect themselves in the representations of reality. Brown and Collins (1989) categorized it as distributed intelligence that refers to the same identity formulation process.[51] No human can think in solo when it comes to his or her interaction with society. Resultantly, no individual can then be understood without knowing his social and cultural past, his interactions, environments, and companions.

Human society develops stories that originally represent the life records of people in the form of narration, composed of subjective versions, myths, and causal explanations of their realities for their actions.[52] Narratologists see culture as local strength for accumulating the record of past events in the form of stories into some kind of diachronic configuration. While everybody from Aristotle to the recent narratologists agrees that a story always bases itself on a violation of the value system, however, breaches are conceived differently in different cultures, denoting the variations in cultures.[53] After the 1950s, the absoluteness of social reality was challenged through skepticism and even the ways and means of reaching or constructing realities in social life were questioned that changed the outlook towards the normative program of narrative (both literary and popular). The view is based on the assumption that narrativity and relationship of events contribute more than anything else towards social

identities, social awareness, social activism, institution building, social structural blueprints, and even society in totality.[54]

Narratologists believe that social realities ranging from individual identity, group identities, social networking, social interactions, and social way of perceiving and acting all emanates from narrativity. This idea gives a room for accepting the constant existence of particular social identities, which are heterogeneous.[55] In the narrative identity view, individuals or groups are parts of relationships and stories that go beyond the limits of time and space and are never static. In this context, the narrative-based identity theory seems similar to White's relational epistemologies.[56] The narrative approach stresses that social activity can only be understood if it is accepted that people do not act in isolation, but they are directed by social structures and cultural-based identity. Thus, identity construction occurs in the relational settings of complicated but intelligible dealing between narratives, individuals, and social structures.[57] There is always a defined and small stock of symbols and stories available in each society to be utilized for the construction of a narrative. All narratives which a society accepts in any form are specific in nature and scope, both historically and culturally, but a certain situation that utilizes these narratives is abrupt and cannot be predicted in advance.[58]

Conflict and Narratives

The study of narratives in the context of conflict is not new. Scholars have mentioned the presence of master-narratives in the communicative strategies both at theoretical and practical levels, for example, the narrative of Capitalism and Communism.[59] They are also known as meta-narratives, which are dominant and in line with an ontological position of a group. Down the ladder, social theories and ideas are developed keeping these master-narratives at the center, dominating all spheres of life. These narratives can be the major conflicts of the era like Capitalism vs. Communism, the Individual vs. Society, and Barbarism vs. Civility.[60] The narratives of this nature also proved historically teleological, as Marxism explained itself in the form of a victorious working class, Liberalism unfolded itself in the form of social liberty, western culture in the shape of democracy and the rise of nationalism in the form of state system. In these narratives, people are embedded as contemporary actors in history and as social scientists at the same time.[61] The American narrative of the war against despotic rulers in the Middle East arrayed the world opinion in its favor by using the historical happenings of World Wars, where dictators were given unchecked space.

Narratives and counternarratives are being used for centuries as conflict-promoting and conflict-resolving tools. Retrospectively, Hitler used the narrative of Nazism by incorporating the concept of racism and religion. Italian fascism evolved its narrative by giving a pivotal role to the state. Seemingly, the Soviet anti-colonial stance, Hitler's anti-Darwinist, and Mussolini's mixed approach of socialism and capitalism were counternarrative strategies to the narrative floated by colonial West.[62]

The new outlook of narratology has given it an outreach from self to society and then to conflict, peace, and social change. The narratives or stories, which are told

in times of conflict and war, are very important both for the conflict intensification and its resolution. The narratives of conflict instigate, direct, and redirect the parties involved; according to Thornton, this is a special sociocultural job that narratives perform in such situations.[63] Narratives provide a structural framework for brutal actions during the conflict by connecting different happenings chronologically or by keeping in view the mental trends of the people. This helps narrators to portray the most violent events in an acceptable way on one hand and make them logical and eminent on the other. According to Ben Okri, "when we have made experience or chaos into a story, we have transformed it, made sense of it, transmuted experience, domesticated the chaos."[64] Feldman sums up the conflict's relationship with the narrative. According to him, it is the narrative that decides during a conflict situation that which happening can be categorized as an event and that will certainly decide the fate of people linked with conflict.[65]

Social conflicts whether violent or non-violent are fundamentally driven by narratives. The pace of conflict, the vigor of the parties, and changing positions are all handled by a narrative. Peter Bruck says: "Crises are specific forms of discourse which build on specific codes of significance that allow the exercise of authority, the establishment of failures and the attribution of guilt and responsibility with ensuing sanctions."[66] In conflict situations, groups predominantly close their understandings to the opposing methodological or factual historical explanation. This results in adamant attitudes that can hardly be changed through normal contradictions. One of the main reasons in this regard is the inflexible narrative position leading to a strictly predetermined set of attitudes, perceptions and opinions on the narration of conflict, entertained by the opposing parties.[67] Interestingly, the more we contradict the narrative, the more opposition we get which could be quite opposite to what is expected.[68]

Conflict Transformation and Narratives

Narratives perform a vital role in conflict transformation by introducing counter or new narratives. They are essential to transform or divert the conflict or achieve new goals. Appropriate narratives for befitting situations can achieve the complex goals of political and social consciousness.[69] In a conflict situation, the ideological base of a conflicting group directly predicts the construction of new narratives, which take a practical shape only after the depicted stages with certain external variables. For example, after World War-II, an agenda of intense narrative intrusion was introduced in Western Europe and this program was enormously important in the upbringing of new generations of Germans, French, and other Westerners, who were liberated from the oppressive prejudices and traumas of World War-II.[70] The Europeans instead of digging for deep-rooted explanations developed a catchy and understandable basic narrative – blaming Germans – for World War-II destruction. At the later stage, they developed a particular kind of narrative in which all were portrayed as victims, "never again can we do this to ourselves."[71] To re-enforce the narrative and make it more attractive, the common-victims narrative was connected with a common-future narrative of the European Union.[72] It was the strength of these

narratives that convinced the Europeans to forget about the destructions of World War-II and directed them towards the achievement of a unified goal of prosperity and development.

Thinking of narratives without conflicts, of conflicts and their resolutions without narratives seems odd. However, the absence of an agreeable narrative for conflict resolution may lead to complications. The study of Azerbaijan's narratives on the Karabakh conflict shows the difficulty in finding an appropriate narrative, which could have paved the way towards a compromise between opposing parties. [73] Sonenshein (2010) derives a new kind of narrative approach from the Karabakh conflict, termed as the method of progressive narrative transformations.[74] As conflicts breed many competing narratives, this method finds the ways to converge different narratives themselves into a new common narrative to attain the satisfaction of competing parties. This common narrative can be used to attain a common ground for shared interests at present and in the future avoiding violent conflict.[75]

Conclusion

The concept of narrative is not new in literature but the new orientation of narratology has taken impetus on the pretext that they are well-defined storylines which are deliberately floated to direct or prevent a specific social action. The recent standing of narratology is that narratives conceptualize society. Narratives are developed and constructed with certain goals and attain social acceptability only when they propose an alternative to the existing situation that has historical and normative sanctions of an existing cultural entity. Narratives play important role in matters ranging from self-identity to social identity, conflict and conflict transformation which increases its social vitality in the context of social change. In light of this and other similar studies, it can safely be said that narrative has gained impetus to attain the desired level of social change in comparison to the grand theory of Sociology. However, further research is needed to ascertain the hidden factors that might accompany the narratives in the process of social change and identity politics.

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