

Non-Linear Narrative Structures and Reader Empathy: A Comparative Literary Study of Toni Morrison's *Beloved* and Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things*

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Abstract

This paper examines the relationship between non-linear narrative structure and reader empathy through a comparative close reading of Toni Morrison's *Beloved* (1987) and Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* (1997). Drawing on Keen's theory of narrative empathy [1, 6], Genette's framework of narrative order [7], Caruth's trauma theory [2], and Iser's reader-response theory [8], the study analyses how temporal fragmentation, poly-vocal narration, and delayed revelation function as mechanisms for eliciting both affective and cognitive empathy. Three principal findings emerge. First, the deliberate disruption of chronological order in both novels compels readers into an active, reconstructive interpretive role that deepens psychological investment in characters' experiences. Second, poly-vocal narration and shifting focalisation position readers as co-witnesses to trauma rather than detached observers. Third, strategic withholding of traumatic disclosure sustains empathic engagement while preventing premature emotional resolution. It is argued that non-linear narrative form is not merely a stylistic device but the principal structural mechanism through which both novels achieve their most significant empathic and ethical effects. Implications for narrative theory and literary education are discussed.

Keywords: Narrative Empathy; Non-Linear Narrative; Reader-Response; Trauma Literature; Cognitive Literary Studies

1. Introduction

The relationship between narrative form and reader empathy is among the most consequential questions in contemporary literary theory. How stories are told, the order in which events are revealed, the perspectives through which characters are presented, and the degree to which chronological sequence is maintained or disrupted shapes not only the reader's comprehension of a text but the quality and depth of their emotional and ethical engagement with it. Narrative empathy, as defined by Keen (2006) [1, p. 208], is "a response to represented characters and situations in narrative fiction" that may encompass both affective resonance and cognitive perspective-taking. The mechanisms by which narrative structure

generates these responses, however, remain insufficiently theorised in relation to the formally experimental novels that constitute much of the most significant literary achievement of the late twentieth century.

Two novels that have attracted sustained critical attention for their non-linear formal strategies are Toni Morrison's *Beloved* (1987) [4] and Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* (1997) [5]. Both employ systematic disruption of chronological sequence, poly-vocal narration, and the strategic withholding of traumatic disclosure as central structural principles. Both are also concerned, thematically, with forms of suffering -- racial slavery and its psychological aftermath in Morrison's case, and caste discrimination, colonial history, and forbidden love in Roy's -- that require empathic engagement from readers who may have had no direct experience of the conditions depicted. The question of how the novels' formal structures facilitate or complicate that engagement is therefore both theoretically and ethically significant.

Existing scholarship on both novels has generated rich readings in the traditions of trauma studies (Caruth, 1996) [2], postcolonial criticism (Gilroy, 1993) [3], and feminist literary theory, but has been less systematic in its account of the specific narrative mechanisms through which empathy is produced. The present study addresses this gap by applying a theoretically integrated framework drawing on narrative theory, reader-response theory, and cognitive literary studies to a comparative close reading of both texts. The research is guided by three questions: (1) Through what specific structural mechanisms do the novels' non-linear narrative strategies generate reader empathy? (2) Do the two novels employ convergent or divergent empathic strategies, and with what effects? (3) How does the relationship between narrative structure and empathy in these texts illuminate the broader category of non-linear literary fiction?

2. Materials and Methods

2.1 Primary Textual Materials

The primary materials of this study are the complete texts of *Beloved* (Morrison, 1987) [4] and *The God of Small Things* (Roy, 1997) [5]. Both novels are canonical works of late-twentieth-century Anglophone fiction, written by non-Western women authors working in the aftermath of colonial literary cultures, and both have been the subject of extensive scholarly commentary that provides a rich critical context for the present analysis. Purposive textual sampling was employed, with passages selected on two criteria: (a) formal distinctiveness, wherein each selected passage exemplifies a specific narrative technique (temporal disjunction, poly-vocal narration, free indirect discourse, direct address, or fragmented syntax); and (b) critical salience, wherein each passage has been identified in existing scholarship as significant for the novel's empathic or aesthetic effects, providing a basis for critical dialogue.

2.2 Theoretical Framework

The study integrates four complementary theoretical frameworks. Keen's theory of narrative empathy (Keen, 2006, 2007) [1, 6] provides the primary analytical vocabulary, distinguishing between bounded empathy (directed at a specific character), broadcast empathy (extended across a wide readership), and ambassadorial empathy (deployed in service of social change). Genette's structuralist narratology (Genette, 1980) [7], specifically his concepts of order (the relationship between story chronology and narrative presentation), focalisation (the perspective through which events are filtered), and duration (the ratio of narrative time to story time), provides the formal analytical tools for describing the structural

features under analysis. Caruth's trauma theory (Caruth, 1996) [2] illuminates the relationship between the novels' formal choices and their thematic treatment of traumatic memory, explaining why fragmentation and repetition function as both psychological and aesthetic principles in both texts. Iser's reader-response theory (Iser, 1978) [8], specifically his concept of the implied reader and the role of textual gaps in activating reader participation, explains how formal incompleteness functions as an empathic mechanism.

2.3 Analytical Method

The method of the study is qualitative close reading, augmented by comparative analysis across the two primary texts. For each text, the procedure comprised three analytical steps: (a) identification of the specific narrative technique employed in each selected passage, using Genette's (1980) [7] formal vocabulary; (b) application of the theoretical frameworks to explain the empathic mechanism activated by that technique; and (c) assessment of how the mechanism functions within the novel's broader pattern of empathic effects and its relationship to the text's thematic concerns. The comparative analysis then identified convergences and divergences between the empathic strategies of the two novels. In accordance with established practice in qualitative literary studies (Herman, 2011) [9], the study does not make claims about actual reader responses, which would require empirical investigation, but about the response structures constructed by the texts for what Iser (1978) [8] terms the implied reader.

3. Results

3.1 Temporal Fragmentation as Empathic Mechanism in *Beloved*

The most striking formal feature of *Beloved* is its systematic refusal of chronological sequence. The novel opens in 1873, fourteen years after the central traumatic event of Sethe's killing of her infant daughter to prevent her recapture into slavery, and moves associatively between present-tense narrative and involuntary memory without the transitional scaffolding that realist fiction typically supplies. This structure is not arbitrary. As argued by Caruth (1996) [2, p. 4], trauma "is not simply an effect of destruction but also, fundamentally, an enigma of survival" that speaks through gaps and repetitions in the traumatised subject's discourse. Morrison's fragmented chronology enacts this argument formally: the temporal disruption of the narrative performs the psychological disruption of the characters' experience, aligning the reader's interpretive effort with the characters' attempts to integrate unbearable memory.

This alignment constitutes a powerful empathic mechanism. It is argued by Iser (1978) [8, p. 168] that meaning in literary texts is produced not by the text alone but in the dynamic interaction between textual structure and reader activity. The gaps in Morrison's narrative are not absences but invitations: they require readers to reconstruct events actively, to fill temporal blanks with imaginative engagement, and to experience the disorientation of traumatic recall as a reading condition rather than merely a described state. The empathic effect is what Keen (2007) [6, p. 93] terms situational empathy: the reader is drawn not only into sympathy with a character's emotional state but into the experiential logic of the world the character inhabits. The opening sentence -- "124 was spiteful. Full of a baby's venom" [4, p. 1] -- enacts this immediately: its declarative presentation of the supernatural as self-evident asks readers to adopt, without explanation, an interpretive framework in which haunting is a natural consequence of unresolved historical violence.

3.2 Poly-vocal Narration and Co-witnessing in *Beloved*

The second principal empathic mechanism in *Beloved* is poly-vocal narration: the distribution of the nar-

rative's point of view across multiple characters' consciousnesses, including, most radically, the ghost Beloved herself. The section of the novel narrated in Beloved's voice [4, pp. 248-252] dissolves the syntactical conventions of individual consciousness, presenting a stream of unmediated, unpunctuated language in which the boundaries between self and other, past and present, and the living and the dead become indistinct. Genette (1980) [7, p. 189] defines focalisation as the restriction of narrative information to the perceptual and cognitive field of a specific character; Morrison's poly-vocal narration exploits focalisation not to restrict perspective but to multiply it, placing readers inside experiences they cannot otherwise access.

The empathic effect of this technique is of the kind Keen (2006) [1, p. 218] terms ambassadorial empathy: Morrison is deliberately extending her narrative's empathic reach toward readers who have had no lived experience of slavery or its psychological aftermath, constructing for them an imaginative access to that experience through formal means. As Mar and Oatley (2008) [10, p. 173] argue, "fiction is a simulation of social worlds" that exercises precisely the social-cognitive capacities required for empathy in actual social relationships; poly-vocal narration in *Beloved* exploits this simulation function by placing readers inside radically different consciousnesses without the mediation of external description. The reader who has moved through Beloved's fragmented stream of consciousness cannot approach slavery's aftermath as an external, historical phenomenon; Morrison's formal choices make detachment structurally impossible.

3.3 Delayed Revelation and Sustained Empathic Investment in *The God of Small Things*

Roy's *The God of Small Things* deploys a complementary but formally distinct empathic strategy. The central traumatic event -- the death of Sophie Mol, the arrest and death of Velutha, and the severing of the twins' childhood -- is known to the reader in outline from the novel's early pages, but its full circumstances are withheld until near the end. This strategy of delayed revelation has a precise empathic function. Genette (1980) [7, p. 40] distinguishes between the story through the chronological sequence of events and the narrative, which is the order in which they are presented; Roy exploits this distinction to generate sustained reader investment in events whose outcome is already, in broad terms, known. The effect is structurally analogous to classical tragedy: the reader experiences the narrative equivalent of dramatic irony, watching events unfold whose consequences they partially foresee, and investing emotionally not in uncertainty about what will happen but in the accumulation of understanding about how and why.

This structure generates a specific form of empathy that is neither affective identification (feeling what the characters feel in the moment) nor purely cognitive perspective-taking, but what Keen (2007) [6, p. 97] calls anticipatory empathy: emotional investment in the future suffering of characters whose vulnerability has been established in advance of its full expression. The reader's knowledge that Velutha will be destroyed, that the twins' childhood world will be shattered, and that love -- in Roy's phrase, "the inward curve of a human back" [5, p. 1] -- will be punished, creates an emotional orientation toward the narrative that conventional linear storytelling cannot produce: a kind of sustained, dread-saturated empathic attention.

3.4 Focalisation, Language, and Empathic Identification in Roy's Novel

Roy's management of focalisation throughout the novel is the second major empathic mechanism in *The God of Small Things*. The narrative's primary focalisers are the twins, Estha and Rahel, and the novel's language -- including its invented compound words, its rhythmic repetitions, and its movement between English and Malayalam -- enacts their childhood perceptual world rather than describing it from outside.

The technique is consistent with what Zunshine (2006) [11, p. 23] identifies as the mind-reading function of fiction: the capacity of literary narrative to represent mental states in ways that activate readers' theory-of-mind capacities. By presenting the adult world of caste discrimination, colonial legacies, and sexual prohibition through the focalising consciousness of children who only partially understand what they perceive, Roy places the reader in a position of interpretive co-labour -- understanding more than the children do while experiencing their confusion and vulnerability from the inside.

The empathic consequence is the production of what might be called layered empathy: the reader experiences simultaneously the children's emotional reality and an adult understanding of its structural causes that the children cannot access. This double perspective intensifies rather than dilutes empathic engagement: knowing why the children's world is being destroyed while sharing their experience of its destruction is more emotionally demanding than either perspective alone. As argued by Iser (1978) [8, p. 154], the implied reader is always constructed by the text's internal structures; Roy's novel constructs an implied reader who is simultaneously inside and outside the children's world, and this structural position is the source of the novel's most powerful affective effects.

3.5 Comparative Analysis: Convergences and Divergences

Comparative analysis of the two novels reveals both significant convergences and meaningful divergences in their empathic strategies. The primary convergence is structural: both novels use narrative disorder -- specifically the disruption of chronological sequence -- as a formal enactment of the psychological disorder generated by historical and personal trauma. In both texts, the fragmentation of the narrative surface performs the fragmentation of the characters' psychological worlds, aligning the reader's interpretive experience with the characters' experiential reality. Both novels also refuse the emotional closure that linear narratives typically provide: Morrison's paradoxical closing refrain ("This is not a story to pass on") and Roy's final scene of reunion and loss leave readers in a state of unresolved empathic engagement that extends beyond the reading encounter.

The principal divergence lies in the specific empathic mode each novel privileges. *Beloved* prioritises affective empathy: its formal strategies -- poly-vocal narration, temporal fragmentation, and the radical interiority of *Beloved*'s stream of consciousness -- are designed to produce felt, somatic empathic responses in readers. *The God of Small Things* privileges cognitive empathy: its strategies of delayed revelation, layered focalisation, and anticipatory irony produce a more intellectually mediated, though no less emotionally engaged, form of reader response. Keen's (2007) [6] distinction between affective and cognitive empathy maps closely onto this divergence, and suggests that the two novels' formal strategies are optimised for different, though complementary, dimensions of the empathic response that literary fiction can generate.

4. Discussion

The findings reported above have several implications for narrative theory, trauma studies, and literary education. The central theoretical implication concerns the relationship between narrative form and empathic mechanism. Both novels demonstrate, through formal means, that non-linear narrative structure is not an aesthetic complication superimposed on content but the primary vehicle through which empathy is generated. Morrison's and Roy's formal choices are inseparable from their political and ethical purposes: the disruption of chronological sequence, the multiplication of perspectives, and the refusal of closure are the means by which both authors make it formally impossible for readers to

approach the subjects of their novels -- racial slavery and caste discrimination -- as external historical phenomena. This finding supports and extends Keen's (2006) [1] argument that broadcast narrative empathy is a deliberate authorial strategy, demonstrating that its mechanisms are embedded in the deepest formal structures of the texts rather than in surface-level appeals to reader sympathy.

The study's comparative dimension reveals that non-linear narrative empathy is not a single technique but a family of related strategies that can be differently configured to produce differently inflected empathic responses. The distinction between *Beloved's* primarily affective empathic mode and *The God of Small Things'* primarily cognitive mode suggests that the taxonomy of narrative empathy requires more differentiated formal analysis than existing scholarship has generally provided. Future research should attend more precisely to the relationship between specific formal features -- the mode of focalisation, the degree of temporal disruption, the management of disclosure timing -- and the specific empathic dimensions (affective, cognitive, moral) that each feature preferentially activates.

The study has two principal limitations. First, as a qualitative textual analysis, it addresses the empathic structures constructed by the texts for an implied reader rather than the actual responses of empirical readers; the relationship between these structures and the diversity of real reader responses requires empirical investigation combining literary analysis with reader-response measurement. Second, the comparative scope of the study, while enabling generalisable claims about non-linear narrative empathy, necessarily limits the depth of analysis that can be devoted to either novel individually. The present analysis provides a framework rather than an exhaustive account; extended single-novel studies applying the same framework would be a valuable supplement. For literary education, the study's findings suggest that the teaching of formally complex texts benefits from explicit attention to the empathic mechanisms embedded in narrative structure, enabling students to develop not only interpretive competence but awareness of the ethical dimensions of literary form.

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