Discovering the Narrator-Ideal in Postmodern Fiction

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Abstract
Girded with the belief that narrative is a driving force which guides our attraction to specific works of fiction and that some narrators are constructed in such a way that results in a greater or lesser attraction on the behalf of readers, I seek to deconstruct the narrator into its principal working components. First, I provide a brief overview of relevant twentieth century narrative theory; second, I identify what I have determined to be the principal components of the narrator-ideal; third, I apply my theoretical model to selected contemporary works of fiction by Elliot Perlman and Jhumpa Lahiri to demonstrate how these components work and where they may be found.

**ESTABLISHING THE IMPORTANCE OF THE NARRATOR-Ideal**
“The thing is, readers usually identify with one or other of the characters in a story so that they can the better escape from the problems and boredom of their own lives. That’s why most of them read fiction in the first place. They need to identify with some character in a story, or with different characters at different times if the story is true to life, in order to be drawn into it. And they need to be drawn into the story, to be pulled along by it, because they want a break from their own lives. This is a need, a need that is recognized at least unconsciously by every reader…”

– Elliot Perlman, *Seven Types of Ambiguity*

Humans have been aptly described as “narrative animals” or “homo fabulans – the tellers and interpreters of narrative.” Narratology, the study of narrative and an expression of human’s fascination with it, has been continually subjected to intense criticism and revision, especially in the last half century. As David Gorman notes, the version of narratology produced in “the heyday of French structuralism,” which stressed “formalized models to endow the study of narrative with systematic procedures and testable criteria,” has been abandoned; its structuralist tenets have been discarded in this “resolutely postmodern era.”

Instead, modern narratologists interest themselves in a spectrum of narrative issues much broader than those previously anticipated. This “next generation” of narratologists emphasizes “content and context” while disparaging the “idea of narrative as primarily or essentially a matter of form.” Likewise, the prevailing postmodern paradigm calls for energy to be refocused on redefining and reimagining previously accepted models.

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1 Elliot Perlman, *Seven Types of Ambiguity*, (New York: Berkley Publishing Group, 2003), 146.
4 Ibid.
5 Ibid.
In light of this theoretical (r)evolution and the cultural shift towards postmodernism, it is a propos to reconsider fundamental components of narratology, especially the construct of narrator: irrefutably “the most central concept in the analysis of narrative texts.” A diligent examination of this construct as it is discussed in scholarship throughout the last century demonstrates the importance of arriving at what constitutes the narrator-ideal in contemporary fiction. I will use the narrator's theoretical context drawn from twentieth century scholarship as a backdrop to argue that the postmodern narrator-ideal necessitates a relationship be established between the narrator and the reader based on a sense of identification, which stems from three key elements: autobiographicality, active engagement in identity construction, and role cohesion. Ideally, this formula for the narrator-ideal may be used by critics and writers alike as a heuristic device to analyze narrators more thoroughly and purposefully. Although the success and failure in striving toward the narrative-ideal outlined here can be widely observed, two prime examples may be found in Perlman’s *Seven Types of Ambiguity* and Jhumpa Lahiri’s *Interpreter of Maladies*. These works are fitting selections to demonstrate the narrator-ideal in practice not only because these authors are representative of our time and the subjects of great critical acclaim, but also because they embody some of the preeminent concerns of postmodernism, such as the East-West dialectic and the manufacture of meaning in a fragmented world.

Narratology’s Identity Crisis: A Transition into Postmodernity

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“On or about December, 1910, human character changed.” This statement, one of two major assertions Virginia Woolf used in her landmark essay “Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown,” described what has since become known as the modernist movement in English literature. According to Woolf, this change in human character, a term interchangeable with human identity, spawned a parallel change in literature, which required “discarding old prose writing habits and [adopting]…new methods for shaping original forms and styles.” Almost one-hundred years later, an analogous change has occurred. Although identity remains as privileged in fiction today as when Woolf preached that all works of fiction “deal with character, and that [fiction has evolved] to express character,” the manner in which authors construct and constitute human identity (or character) in their narrators is the topic of interest now, and is much different in contemporary, postmodern fiction than the modernist fiction Woolf wrote about.

Now-antiquated paradigms once argued that identity lay static beneath an individual’s skin. A massive cultural change towards postmodernism has presented a subsequent shift in perspective on this issue. As a result, contemporary fiction and non-fiction, almost without exception, explicitly or implicitly maintains that identity is not found within an individual, but is instead relational or narrative in nature. That is to say, identity “inheres in the relations between a person and others” or through the telling of a person’s own narrative and identifying with characters from external narratives. Students of fiction who subscribe to this view

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9 Ibid.
10 Currie, 17.
regarding identity will realize the importance of crafting an ideal narrator:\footnote{Throughout this thesis I frequently use two similar-appearing terms: the “ideal narrator,” and the “narrator-ideal.” It is important to note that these terms are not interchangeable. The former refers to that which writers are questing to find, while the latter represents a theoretical model I am proposing.}

postmodern readers seek out narrators within whom they find specific relational and narrative qualities. The concept of readers establishing relationships with narrators slowly emerged over the last half century as scholars became comfortable with viewing fiction as rhetoric, as the “art of communicating with readers.”\footnote{Wayne C. Booth, \textit{The Rhetoric of Fiction} (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1961), xiii.} Narratology made important advances in exploring the rhetoric of fiction in its analysis of point of view and the narrator, determining that these constructs possessed something beyond mere “descriptive power.” Throughout the last century, scholars have attempted to delimit and describe this relationship forged between readers and narrators. Four theories on the issue stand out from the rest and, although useful as separate perspectives, careful examination against the breadth of narratological advances in the last century proves these theories may yet be efficaciously revised.

Perhaps the earliest scholars to address the issue of the relationship formed between readers and the text are H.W. Leggett and Paul Goodman, who established two opposing camps with subtle, but important differences. On the one side, H.W. Leggett asserted “it is indeed true that the reader of fiction identifies himself with the \textit{author} of a story rather than with the characters” (italics mine).\footnote{Quoted in Booth} Shortly after Leggett advanced his opinion, Goodman declared that readers are more likely to “identify with the omniscient \textit{narrator}” (italics mine).\footnote{Quoted in Booth}

Juxtaposing these perspectives proves useful in observing the budding importance
of the narrator for, while Leggett wrote that readers identify with the author, Goodman focused solely on the narrator, which has since been definitively proven a different entity altogether.

In *The Rhetoric of Fiction*, Wayne C. Booth condemns as “extreme” both Goodman and Leggett’s descriptions of the relationship between author and reader as a form of “identification.” Criticism since *The Rhetoric of Fiction’s* publication enables modern scholars to recognize that Booth erred in conflating Goodman and Leggett, for they were not speaking of the same construct. Regardless, Booth set about revising his predecessors’ perspectives and opts instead to describe this relationship as a type of admiration, writing “the writer should worry less about whether his narrators are realistic than about whether the image he creates … is one that his most intelligent and perceptive readers can admire.”

Subsequently, Mark Currie weighs in on the topic. In describing how authors construct the identity of their narrators, Currie notes that critics became aware that:

> sympathy for characters [or narrators] was not a question of clear-cut moral judgment. It was manufactured and controlled by newly describable techniques in fictional point of view. It was the beginning of a systematic narratology which seemed to assert that stories could control us, could manufacture our moral personalities in ways that had not previously been understood.

One may safely extract from Currie’s thoughts that, for Currie, the ideal postmodern narrator is one with whom readers may sympathize. Currie advances two basic propositions for how the requisite sympathy is reached, noting first that “we are more likely to sympathize with people when we have a lot of information

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15 Booth, 213.
16 Booth, 395.
17 Currie, 18.
about their inner lives, motivations, fears, etc.” and second that “we sympathize with people when we see other people who do not share our access to their inner lives judging them harshly or incorrectly.”

It is clear that Leggett and Goodman’s theories simply were not enough. Although they did well in emphasizing the relationship readers make with a text, they failed to describe how this would happen, or even precisely with what (or whom). Booth’s idea of admiration and Currie’s idea of sympathy go further in suggesting how this relationship comes about, but both suffer from a limiting narrow focus; that is, they do not account appropriately for all possible relationships which may be established between reader and narrator. A breakthrough in understanding this relationship may be made by returning to a statement of Booth’s, and refuting it. In considering Leggett and Goodman, Booth criticizes the term “identification,” finding it to be “extreme,” or inappropriate in describing the relationship readers form with narrators. I propose that Leggett, Goodman, Booth, and Currie’s theories may be refined by drawing on the identification which Booth eschewed, but doing so with a Burkean perspective. Kenneth Burke, who wrote extensively on the topic, suggested that identification is best understood as an act of consubstantiality; that is, people establishing a relationship with other people on the basis of being constituted of similar “stuff.”

The value and practicality of this adjustment may be subjected to a litmus-test in Currie’s critical writing. In discussing the fundamental flaw embedded in his own theoretical propositions, Currie notes that some critics may object to the idea that access to narrators with a sick, twisted, or evil mind would result in sympathy

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18 Currie, 19.

19 Kenneth Burke, *A Rhetoric of Motives*. 
on behalf of the reader, despite this occurring in his examples of Truman Capote’s
*In Cold Blood*, Brett Easton Ellis’s *American Psycho*, and Irvine Welsh’s
*Trainspotting*, among others. Revising Currie’s sympathy as identification corrects
this limitation, as it becomes clearly possible for readers to discover some elements
of identity that coexist in themselves and in the narrator. Ultimately, what is being
accounted for in this adjustment is that the *how* of sympathy (information about
inner lives, problems of access) is not as important as the *what* of identification
(that a character is made up of similar material as the reader: are consubstantial).
What constitutes the substance which both readers and narrators share is now the
issue, and can be accounted for in establishing a formula for the narrator-ideal.

**DISSECTING & DISCOVERING THE NARRATOR-Ideal**

The narrator-ideal in postmodern fiction is one with whom readers may
experience identification. But how is the narrator-ideal constructed so that this
identification occurs? I maintain that the narrator-ideal is the result of an author
adhering to three basic principles in the narrator she constructs:
autobiographicality, active engagement in identity construction, and role cohesion.
Obedience to these three principles in constructing the narrator-ideal results in
establishing a narrator’s authentic postmodern identity, which provides
postmodern readers an entity with whom they can identify.

Having established the importance of constructing a narrator who
demonstrates the qualities of the postmodern narrator-ideal, I am now prepared to
examine contemporary fiction with an aim to highlight the success of
implementing the narrator-ideal. Adherence to the narrator-ideal is demonstrated clearly in the selected fiction of Jhumpa Lahiri and Elliot Perlman – two authors who are working on the front lines of contemporary fiction and are noted for their ability to cultivate a relationship of identification between the reader and the narrator.

The power of the three principles of the narrator-ideal is demonstrated to great effect in Elliot Perlman’s *Seven Types of Ambiguity*. A relatively recent voice in contemporary fiction, *Seven Types* is only accompanied in Perlman’s repertoire by his debut novel *Three Dollars* and a collection of short stories entitled *The Reasons I Won’t Be Coming*. Despite the author’s brief publication history, *Seven Types* has won critical acclaim and has “attracted comparisons to Jonathan Franzen’s *The Corrections* and Philip Roth’s *American Pastoral*” as well as the prose of Thomas Hardy and DH Lawrence. Perhaps the most stimulating aspect of Perlman’s novel stems from his use of seven narrators, each of which speaks from a separate chapter. Since the book consists of conflicting interpretations presented by seven different narrators, the seductive energy of the book hinges on pitting reader’s feelings regarding the authenticity of one narration against the authenticity of another.

In my work here, I draw on the first three narrators presented by Perlman in *Seven Types*: Alex, Joe, and Angelique. On the surface, *Seven Types* relates the story of Simon Heywood, an Australian man who suffered a devastating below when his girlfriend, Anna, abruptly ended their relationship. The story of *Seven Types* takes place ten years later, after Simon abducts Anna’s young son, despite not having had contact with her since their relationship ended. *Seven Types* opens

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with Alex’s narrative, who identifies himself as Simon’s psychiatrist. He seems to be addressing Anna directly, and explains Simon’s mental condition as well as his history since the break-up. Joe, who is Anna’s husband, is the narrator of the second chapter. The subject weighing him down is his and Anna’s rapidly decaying marriage, as Anna realizes he has been cheating on her with Angelique, and he suspects (falsely) that she has been cheating on him with Simon. Finally, the third chapter of the book presents Angelique’s perspective who works as a prostitute, but has fallen deeply in love with Simon. Perlman relies on his ability to construct narrators who fit the postmodern mould of the narrator-ideal in order to make his entire story, stitched from seven different perspectives, compelling and demanding of readers’ investment.

An exemplar of success in fiction writing, Jhumpa Lahiri has been honored with a slew of prestigious awards, from the Pen/Hemingway to the Pulitzer Prize in Fiction. Though still young in her career as a writer, Lahiri has carved a niche for herself in representing characters torn between two cultures. In her novel and short stories, she toys with various elements of form. Perhaps her most successful and most popular stories, however, depict narrators who display an engagement in the construction of their own identity.

I will draw on two examples of Lahiri’s work from her debut collection The Interpreter of Maladies. One of Lahiri’s best known and most commented-on short stories, “The Third and Final Continent,” rests at the end of this short-story cycle, and features an unnamed Bengali male narrator who, around 1969, arrives in America to work at a Massachusetts Institute of Technology library. Alongside his professional advancement, the narrator is also subjected to an arranged marriage manufactured on his behalf by an older brother. The other Lahiri story I refer to,
entitled “When Mr. Pirzada Came to Dine,” is told from the perspective of a young Indian girl, Lilia, living in America in 1971, during the India-Pakistan War. Through Lilia’s eyes, readers see the effects of the War in her homeland branching effortlessly across the Atlantic, affecting even those who live on American soil. During the course of her narrative, the girl processes information regarding Mr. Pirzada, a Muslim Bengali who frequently eats dinner at her house for the companionship her family offers, as well as to watch the news to see if he can gain any information about his family, who remained behind. In addition to her critically acclaimed style, Lahiri encouragers postmodern readers’ investment in her stories by constructing a narrator who adheres closely to the three principles of the narrator-ideal.

**Autobiographicality**

By autobiographicality, I refer to a narrator existing in a state of being autobiographical in its communication with the reader. My inspiration for the idea of autobiographicality stems from the work of cultural theorists and narratologists Wallace Martin and Mieke Bal. While the former comments on autobiography and the latter discusses types of narrators, provocative connections can be made between them. Wallace observes that where autobiography exists, “we find first hand evidence” about a person’s life which is inherently “less speculative” than other forms and that “the unity of a person” appears to be “neither hypothetical nor fictional.”21 In considering the construct of narrator, Bal describes two different types: an external narrator (“EN”), which occurs when a narrator does not refer to

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itself as a character, and a character-bound narrator (“CN”), which does identify itself as a character in the story being recounted.\textsuperscript{22} The fundamental difference between these two narrator types is that the EN speaks of others, while a CN speaks of others and herself; that is, after a fashion she communicates autobiographically, as Wallace had conceived of the idea. When a CN communicates autobiographically – that is, demonstrates autobiographicality – what is both important and attractive is that she “usually proclaims that [she] recounts true facts” about herself. In contrast to this, the EN must sometimes describe her perception of other characters or events and jeopardize the sense of rhetorical “truth,” as those characters and events exist beyond what is knowable, and are subject to more speculation than what is personally felt, thought, or observed. The most attractive elements to autobiographicality, as observed by Currie, is that readers are more likely to identify with narrators when they “have a lot of information about their inner lives, motivations, fears etc.” and when readers encounter other characters who do not share the same access to the narrator.\textsuperscript{23}

\textbf{Autobiographicality in \textit{Seven Types of Ambiguity}}

Readers will immediately recognize the autobiographicality demonstrated by Perlman’s narrators in \textit{Seven Types}. While each narrator tends to address a specific person and tends to focus on another individual in the narrative, autobiographical commentary underpins the entire text, and as a result each chapter at times reads like a kind of testimony in which the narrator states

\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{22} Bal, 22. \textsuperscript{23} Currie, 19.}
something to the effect of “I acted this way because of my past. Allow me to explain.” Embedded in the self-referential commentary of these narrators is a personal history and a cataloguing of fears, loves, hopes, dreams, and nightmares.

Part Three of *Seven Types* is dedicated to Angelique, a high-class prostitute who has fallen in love with the brilliant, but crazed ex-high school English teacher, Simon. Simon is rooted in a deep depression which stems from his continued love for and obsession with Anna, who broke up with him ten years previously. Since that break-up, Anna appears to have moved on in her life without much difficulty, having married and had a child with a stockbroker named Joe. Although on the surface Anna and Joe's marriage appears calm, this is but a gild. Beneath a thin layer of modern, white-collar contentedness, both Anna and Joe are seeking something more, and are falling out of love. As a result of their deteriorating sex-life, Joe has taken up the habit of soliciting Angelique on a weekly basis for more than a year.

In the first two chapters of Part Three, stability is fleeting and Joe visits Angelique in a fit of drunken rage. He roughhouses her and makes obscene use of her body. As a result, Angelique calls security to have Joe thrown off the premises. Her call to security comes slowly, however, as she feels guilt and responsibility for Joe's anger. Her telling of the action is made less seamless than it could have been due to her compulsion to narrate not just the action, but the reason for it, which she evidently sees as her own personal history. Thus, she begins explaining her reluctance to call security by saying, “I would have reacted faster if I hadn't felt guilty. The way he looked at it, I had breached a code...My pity and my guilt blinded me to the menace in his eyes, in his voice, and in the way he stood there,
naked to the waist.” This commentary is standard of first-person narration, but gives way to something different:

“There are plenty of men, one-hit wonders, Christmas-party goers, teenage premature ejaculators, and, of course, regulars, whom you could imagine hurting or harming in some way. These are the men whose grotesque or just stupid faces, insensate faces, you see when you wake in a sweat, the men whose putrid breath lodges in your nostrils for hours, for days, whose skin smell stays with you no matter how much you shower or how vigorously you scrub, the men that make you dry-retch till even the viscera you thought they could not touch are bruised. Of course, after all those showers, the soaps, the shampoos, conditioners, moisturizers and deodorants, body sprays or perfumes, the physical basis for the smell of these men has gone. But the scent is lodged in your memory and the soap and water can’t get there, not to your memory. Nothing is as evocative as smell, nothing can as quickly or as certainly take you back somewhere. But Joe was not one of those men whose scent was material for a nightmare. I didn’t dislike him at all…”

Rather than have Angelique launch into this experiential monologue, Perlman could have had her simply state: “There are many men in my business who repulse me, but Joe wasn’t like that, and I didn’t dislike him at all.” Instead, he uses the scene as a springboard into her experiencing of the world. In this powerful passage, and subsequent chapters in which Angelique reflects on her own life, Perlman uses autobiographicality as a way of cultivating identification between the reader and Angelique on the basis of sympathy for her as she describes her misfortune in falling into the life of a prostitute.

**Autobiographicality in “The Third and Final Continent”**

24 Perlman, 143.
25 Perlman, 144.
26 Here again we see how sympathy may be subsumed by the idea of identification, where the reverse is not also possible.
Similar to Perlman, Lahiri demonstrates autobiographicality in “The Third and Final Continent” by having her narrator trace his journey from leaving India in 1964 to the undisclosed present time amidst relating the current happenings in his life. In relating the content pertaining to his present life, the narrator is also performing a sort of autobiography. However, the autobiographicality in this piece runs much deeper, and elements of it can be found resonating quietly in the way the narrator describes his acculturation to the West.

In discussing his initial adjustment, the narrator addresses his hardships in a way that contrasts the life he knew with the life he was starting to know: “Even the simple chore of buying milk was new to me; in London we’d had bottles delivered each morning to our door.” At the end of the piece, he summarizes his journey in saying, “Still, there are times I am bewildered by each mile I have traveled, each meal I have eaten, each person I have known, and each room in which I have slept. As ordinary as it all appears, there are times when it is beyond my imagination.” Statements like these, which reflect on former qualities in his life in the context of how they have changed, constitute autobiographicality.

Furthermore, the narrator uses these comparisons and contrasts to make meaning of his life as he is discovering it. In his interaction with Mrs. Croft, he finds himself made uncomfortable by her straightforward manner, describing that her way of speaking

reminded me of the way I was taught multiplication tables as a child, repeating after the master, sitting cross-legged, without shoes or pencils, on the floor of my one-room Tollygunge school. It also reminded me of my wedding, when I had repeated endless Sanskrit

28 Lahiri, 198.
verses after the priest, verses I barely understood, which joined me to my wife.29

The autobiographicality in this passage encourages readers to connect with the narrator through increased access to his identity; especially his past and his feelings about his past. In the first portion, the narrator invokes an analogy which will be familiar in some way to every reader: the sense of powerlessness in being mindlessly taught. In the second portion, the narrator seems to express distaste over perfunctory aspects of his culture which “joined” him to his wife; that is, changed his life in a way that he might not have approved of.

Role Cohesion

In addition to narrator, Bal identifies two other roles: the focalizor and the actor. In brief, the “narrator” refers to the entity uttering language which constitutes the text;30 the “focalizer” refers to the entity whose vision is being narrated31; while the “actor” performs an action.32 A character may hold any one or combination of these three roles, and these roles may shift among characters throughout a story. Bal appropriately displays this through parsing a narrative into a formula: (X narrate: (Y invent: (Z focalize: ))), where each letter represents a different character and the role they perform. When each of these roles belongs to a different entity, however, they also belong to separate identities. Thus, when

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29 Lahiri, 180.
30 Bal, 19
31 Ibid., 143.
32 Ibid., 5.
each role is performed by a different character, three separate identities must be maintained.\textsuperscript{33}

Bal uses as an example of this formula a passage from Louis Couperus’ novel \textit{Of Old People}, which I shall replicate here for the purpose of clarity. The passage Bal excises from Couperus’ novel is:

Steyn’s deep bass [voice] resounded in the vestibule.
- Come Jack, come dog, come along with your boss! Are you coming? The happy bark of the terrier resounded. Up and down on the stairs stormed his enthusiastic speed, as if tripping over his own paws.
- Oh, that voice of Steyn’s! mama Ottilie hissed between her teeth, and she angrily turned the pages in her book.

Analysis of this sentence in its narrative context reveals that three identities are embodied within it. The character performing the action, the actor, is Steyn; the character hearing Steyn and framing his action with irritation, the focalizer, is his wife Ottilie; the narrator is EN. Represented in the formula Bal provides, the first sentence would be replicated as (I narrate: (I invent: (Ottilie focalizes:))).

“Steyn’s deep bass resounded in the vestibule,” or EN[CF (Ottilie)—Steyn].\textsuperscript{34}

In a postmodern era steeped in fragmentation, readers quickly grow weary of so much division. In contemporary fiction, readers identify most readily with fewer entities. That is, they prefer a cohesive identity, such as occurs when a single entity executes two or all of the aforementioned roles – (X narrates/invents/focalizes: ) or (X narrates/invents: (Y focalizes: ) – which are much simpler, less frustrating equations. This may be called role cohesion. An example of how the above passage could be restructured with this in mind might look something like this: (Ottilie narrates/invents/focalizes:) “I heard Steyn’s deep

\textsuperscript{33} Ibid, 26.
\textsuperscript{34} Bal, 26. CF is an acronym for Character focalizer.
bass resounding in the vestibule, making it nearly impossible to read! How annoying!"

Role Cohesion in *Seven Types of Ambiguity*

Perlman emphasizes readers’ proximity to the characters of *Seven Types* and reduces the sense of fragmentation by using narrative voices which demonstrate role cohesion. The book is opened from the perspective of Alex, Simon’s psychiatrist. Alex frames the narrative by providing readers with insight into Simon’s obsession. As a result of many discussions with Simon, Alex is well-positioned to describe his history, personality, neuroses, and the interrelationships among those aspects. In Part One, Alex also relates that Simon acted on the obsession which had been brewing for a decade by kidnapping Anna’s son, Sam. At the point in the narrative when Alex is narrating Simon’s imprisonment, he states:

> They really do get one phone call, like on television or in the movies. He was scared. He called me. He said didn’t know whether they were going to keep him in the lockup or send him to the Melbourne Assessment Prison, so I don’t know exactly where he is going to be after today. I don’t know how they knew where to find Sam so quickly either. There’s a lot I don’t know.  

The role cohesion in this passage may be best observed by utilizing Bal’s formula. Here, Alex acts as the narrator and focalizer, as he both relates the action and frames it with his own perspective, while the actor is, arguably, Simon. Thus, this passage may be interpreted as (Alex narrates/invents/focalizes:) or CN|CF (Alex)---

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35 Perlman, 50.
Simon. This structure is much more desirable to the postmodern reader than an alternative, such as the use of an EN. Such a passage might read:

Alex was surprised to note that they really do get one phone call, like on television or in the movies. Alex regretted knowing that Simon was scared, which he learned when Simon called him. Simon told Alex that he didn’t know whether they were going to keep him in the lockup or send him to the Melbourne Assessment Prison. This left Alex unsure as to where Simon would be located after today. He was also unsure as to how they knew where to find Sam so quickly. There was a lot he didn’t know.

Formulaically, this passage would be represented as (I narrate: (I invent: (Alex focalizes))) or EN[CF(Alex)—Simon].

Role Cohesion in “When Mr. Pirzada Came to Dine”

Lahiri also constructed the narrative of “When Mr. Pirzada Came to Dine,” in a way that strictly adheres with the principle of role cohesion. In her story one entity (Lilia) always simultaneously executes the roles of narrator and focalizer. Most often, Lilia is also the actor in the story, while occasionally that role falls to other agents. And yet, Lahiri’s use of role cohesion goes so far as to bring that action as close to Lilia as possible without letting it actually become her own.

Where action is concerned, critical readers will note that with few exceptions, the only action which takes place within the current flow of time in the story is in physical relation to the narrator, such as “My father rapped his knuckles on top of my head.” The actor here is most likely to be read as her father, who raps his knuckles on her head, which would leave us to interpret the scene as (Lilia narrates/invents/focalizes:) or CN[CF (Lilia)—Father]. However, an argument could also be made that the role of actor is shared by both Lilia and her

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36 Lahiri, “When Mr. Pirzada,” 27.
father, since they both partake in the action. As Mieke Bal explains, actors are “agents that perform actions,” but to act is defined as “to cause or experience an event.” Thus, the father causes the action, while Lilia experiences it, and both could be considered an actor. This would leave us to interpret the scene as CN[CF(Lilia)—Lilia/Father].

Only rarely does Lilia recount events which she does not partake in at all, such as, “I asked my mother to hand me a fourth glass from a cupboard still out of my reach. She was busy at the stove, presiding over a skillet of fried spinach with radishes, and could not hear me because of the drone of the exhaust fan and the fierce scrapes of her spatula.” In this scenario, there are three actors: Lilia, who calls for her mother; her mother, who is cooking; and the exhaust fan, which is making too much noise for Lilia’s mother to hear (CN[CF(Lilia)—Lilia/mother/fan]). After the first sentence in the selected passage, Lilia is no longer an actor, as she isn’t causing or experiencing any action. However, the action taking place is nevertheless closely related to her, as it follows on the heels of an action she made (calling for her mother), and precedes yet another action, as she consequently turns to her father to ask him to get the glass.

The previous two scenarios which I recounted demonstrate Lilia’s ubiquity in the narrative which readers are exposed to, even when she is not the principal actor. For the most part, however, she is the principal actor, while also focalizing and narrating her own action. The majority of the story is similar to this passage:

Eventually I took a square of white chocolate out of the box, and unwrapped it, and then I did something I had never done before. I put the chocolate in my mouth, letting it soften until the last possible moment, and then as I chewed it slowly, I prayed that Mr. Pirzada’s

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37 Bal, 5.
38 Lahiri, “When Mr. Prizada,” 25.
family was safe and sound. I had never prayed for anything before, had never been taught or told to, but I decided, given the circumstances, that it was something I should do. That night when I went to the bathroom, I only pretended to brush my teeth, for I feared that I would somehow rinse the prayer out as well. I wet the brush and rearranged the tube of paste to prevent my parents from asking any questions, and fell asleep with sugar on my tongue.\(^{39}\)

In the passage above and throughout “When Mr. Pirzada Came to Dine,” Lilia embodies the roles of narrator, focalizer, and actor simultaneously. Readers thus gain full access to a wider spectrum of the world that the narrator unfolds than they might otherwise receive, as they are concurrently immersed within the experience of the entity who is speaking about the action, who is seeing the action, and who is doing the action. This has the effect of filtering the world through her perspective as she processes incoming information and formulates ideas of her own about how the world should be regarded.

In utilizing role cohesion, as demonstrated above, Lahiri increases the attractiveness of this narrator to postmodern readers because she avoids the fragmented alternative. If Lahiri did not use role cohesion, the first scenario I referred to might look something like this: “Her father rapped his knuckles on top of her head.” In such a brief sentence, the effects might ostensibly appear to be negligible – but they are not. In this alternative, the number of entities represented increase from two to three (Lilia, her father, and the EN). However, this also decreases the number of actors from two to one. While before an argument could be made that both Lilia and her father share the role of actor because one causes the action while another experiences it, here the narrative only reflects the action being caused: Lilia’s point of view is elided. Such an apparently subtle change

\(^{39}\) Lahiri, “When Mr. Pirzada,” 33.
begins to divorce readers from Lilia and stunts the attachment they might otherwise have had for her.

Furthermore, the negative effects of increasing fragmentation would only be wholly realized in an instance like the scenario I represent in the above block quotation, when Lilia prays for Mr. Pirzada’s family. The way it is currently written, Lahiri uses the scene to cultivate a sense of identification with readers, and her use of role cohesion helps her to do this, because readers are intimately close to Lilia. As they read on, they become familiar with her quirks and idiosyncrasies, and in the block quotation above, they are prone to connect on an emotional level with Lilia’s feelings for Mr. Pirzada. If Lahiri had further fragmented her story by using an EN, she would have had to work harder to get readers to feel intimate with Lilia, if that would have been at all possible.

**Active Engagement in Identity Construction**

As Currie notes, a hallmark of postmodernity is the manufacture of identity. This forms another basis on which readers may identify with narrators: the need to access a narrator who is actively engaged in constructing her own identity. In her essay entitled “Reconsidering Omniscience in Contemporary Fiction Writing,” Jenny Dunning touches upon this same issue. In brief, Dunning criticizes instances of omniscience in which the narrator tells too much, while endorsing instances of omniscience which she refers to as “close-to-character narration.” This form of narration “has the advantage of insuring that a writer render the fictional world

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from the consciousness of the point-of-view character so that the character’s encounter with the world becomes part of how the world comes into being.”41 At best, a fictional world constructed this way “models the contemporary perception of the multiplicity of experience.”42 Dunning praises the fiction of Eudora Welty, who she claims to have had a “deft touch with her narrator” who “knows when to speak and when to allow the characters’ interactions speak for themselves.”43 At best, the narrator “‘tells’ – but not in such a way as to close down the reader's involvement in the story.”44 Dunning phrases it best when she observes that the “all-knowing” narrator has become outmoded, and that the optimal narrator for enhancing reader's involvement in a story is one which is “all-seeking’ – a narrator who attempts to discover something about human existence in the telling of a particular story.”45

Dunning and my theory intersect at the understanding that readers are attracted to narrators who are in the process of discovering, as opposed to narrators who are overbearing in their all-knowingness. I contest that the all-seeking narrator is best used in postmodern fiction when what she is seeking is herself. That is, she is trying to establish meaning in the world and in herself, for herself. As a result, this narrator is actively engaged in constructing her own identity, and is inherently attractive to readers who are caught up in the same process: the quest for self-explanation and self-understanding.

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41 Ibid., 19.
42 Ibid.
43 Dunning, 22.
44 Ibid.
45 Ibid.
Active Engagement in Identity Construction in *Seven Types of Ambiguity*

Every narrator in *Seven Types* displays active engagement in identity construction in some way or another. Primarily, this is shown in the manner in which they interpret events. In their interpretations, they make and discover meaning by constantly evaluating what other characters mean and establish personal values. Joe, who narrates Part Two, speaks well to this principle in a scene with his wife, Anna, and another scene in which he encounters a waitress.

When readers first gain access to Joe, he is being consumed by misery over his loveless marriage and the hate he feels toward Simon, who kidnapped his son. At the start of his narration, Joe is processing his feelings regarding his wife Anna:

> I am irritating her. Again. I can sense it. Without even seeing her face I can sense it. Over time I have learned to register the signals. It is there in the slow exhale of sulfurous breath in the morning as she lies beside me in bed staring at the ceiling, or else in the way she turns away to one side. It is there in the way she stays and stays on the same page of a book or a magazine, pretending to be reading. Anyone could do this but not the way she does it. I cannot prove it, but there is no need to prove it anymore. To whom am I trying to prove anything? The jig is up. I suspect it is up for both of us now. This is what we suddenly have in common. After years of drifting apart, suddenly, we have this in common – this and our son. Everything will come out now.⁴⁶

Throughout Joe’s narration, readers can observe clues to a shift in his identity as a result of recent events and his reactions to them. When he says, “To whom am I trying to prove anything?” Joe expresses that his audience consists only of himself, and that in that dialogue he is making new meaning of his life and of himself. Here, Joe suggests that he is locked in a marriage neither he nor his wife feel any longer and comes to realize his existential loneliness, which is a new facet to his identity.

⁴⁶ Perlman, 53.
In addition to, and perhaps as a result of his loneliness, Joe is also coming
to terms with his age and waning desirability: “I’m too old for the music they play
here…Every year they bring out a new model. I’m depreciating, done too many
miles.” At a café, he encounters an attractive waitress and reads into his interaction
with her:

I hear myself ask that question. It doesn't actually make sense. It
doesn't mean anything except that I have already begun rehearsing.
I have begun rehearsing for a role as one of those middle-aged
assholes who saunter into trendy coffee shops and cafes alone on
weekends wearing veined brown leather jackets, with a recalcitrant
newspaper tucked under one arm and ostentatious car keys tossed
and caught and tossed and caught in the other hand, calling too
loudly to a girl, ‘What juice seems to hit the spot today?’ which
doesn't actually mean anything. It doesn't mean anything except that
I'm a god-awful lonely prick whose very being or way of being has
ultimately put off anybody I've ever gotten close to, leaving me
alone with a nice new smart-ass haircut and the weekend paper, all
alone to talk too loudly in a café, reeking of aftershave and divorce."}

Here, an immediate clue to his engagement in reconstructing his identity is his
extreme self-awareness. In this passage, Joe describes and evaluates his every
move. He describes himself as adopting a role, a metaphor which is extremely
fitting in light of my analysis. He sees this role negatively, and as a consequence of
something he is still coming to terms with. Moreover, this passage ends with a
bitter recrimination in which he interprets himself and a nascent identity.

Active Engagement in Identity Construction in “The Third and Final Continent”

Distinct from Perlman’s Joe, Lahiri’s narrator in “The Third and Final
Continent,” embarks on an identity quest primarily through the reconcilement of
his “otherness” as concerns his cultural barriers and his sex. Early in the story the

47 Perlman, 73.
narrator illustrates his existence in the social margin by describing the common plight of “Bengali bachelors like myself…all struggling to educate and establish ourselves abroad.”

Readers are introduced to the narrator as a young Bengali male living in impoverished conditions in London, and follow him to America. Within weeks of arriving, the narrator meets his foil in the form of Mrs. Croft, the one-hundred and three year-old woman from whom he rents a room. Initially, a world of difference seems to separate the narrator and Mrs. Croft. By all appearances, the narrator’s youthfulness, “soft-spoken” tones, and intellectual facility stand in stark contrast to Mrs. Croft’s agedness, imperious exclamations, and apparent cerebral density. As the story progresses, however, clues emerge which testify to the fact that the narrator and Mrs. Croft share a stronger bond than what divides them: specifically, they are both strangers and outsiders to the mainstream culture. By seeking clues which testify to the narrator’s engagement in constructing his identity, readers become aware that he constructing himself primarily through Mrs. Croft as a foil – understanding himself in reflection to another human being’s narrative. This is supported by Mark Currie’s observation, quoted in the previous chapter, that identity is sometimes constructed relationally.

Throughout this story, readers cannot help but to sense the narrator has not led his own life, but that it has been largely determined for him: his family determined the course of his life and arranged his wedding, which he merely “attended,” as though he were in the audience and not one of the two people who would be most affected by the union. When he meets Mrs. Croft, however, he is granted, for the first time it seems, a decision of his own. After having describing the premises, her rules regarding payment, and allowing him to view the room he

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48 Lahiri, 173.
could rent from her, Mrs. Croft asks “What is your decision?” Since that juncture, the relationship between the narrator and Mrs. Croft become much more important.

Since he had moved in, the narrator had grown accustomed to a routine with Mrs. Croft. Each evening he would enter the house and she would urge him to sit beside her on the piano bench while marveling about the man who landed on the moon. As the narrator observes:

> each evening when I returned the same thing happened: she slapped the bench, ordered me to sit down, declared that there was a flag on the moon, and declared that it was splendid. I said it was splendid too, and then we sat in silence. As awkward as it was, and as endless as it felt to me then, the nightly encounter lasted only about ten minute; inevitably she would drift off to sleep, her head falling abruptly toward her chest, leaving me free to retire to my room. By then, of course, there was no flag on the moon. The astronauts, I had read in the paper, had taken it down before flying back to Earth. But I did not have the heart to tell her.

One of Mrs. Croft’s rules regarding payment is that on the due date, an envelope with the money be placed on the ledge above the keys of a piano. Mrs. Croft habitually sits on the piano’s bench, which has been relocated in a room adjacent to the piano. When the narrator goes to make his first payment, he sees her sitting on the bench. Rather than place the money on the piano, he goes to pay her by hand. When he approached her, she demanded

> “What is your business?”
> “The rent, madame.”
> “On the ledge above the piano keys!”
> “I have it here.” I extended the envelope toward her, but her fingers, folded together in her lap, did not budge. I bowed slightly and lowered the envelope, so that it hovered just above her hands. After a moment she accepted, and nodded her head.

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49 Lahiri, 180.
50 Lahiri, 183.
51 Lahiri, 183.
Although at first this exchange might portray Mrs. Croft to be a cold and unfeeling land-lady, this later turns out not to be the case. After having handed her the rent, the narrator left for the day. When he returned in the evening, he encounters a surprise: she appeared not to have moved since he left, and her first words were regarding his kindness:

“It was very kind of you!”
“I beg your pardon, madame?”
“Very kind of you!”
She was still holding the envelope in her hands.\(^{52}\)

In the two scenes just discussed, readers may begin to note that despite her harsh demeanor, the narrator seems to have grown fond of her. Likewise, careful examination of the story reveals that Mrs. Croft, too, grows fond of the narrator. The question then becomes: on what basis do they attract? In addressing this question, readers may realize that the narrator and Mrs. Croft have more in common than not. Although on the surface it may appear that there is only difference between them, moments like this reveal that it is this difference which is their strongest bond: both exist along the margins of the culture outside Mrs. Croft’s home, and both finds a degree of comfort in the other.

Although the narrator’s difference from the mainstream is obvious, two examples may better illustrate Mrs. Croft’s. One day, Mrs. Croft’s daughter Helen visits the home. In speaking with the narrator, she reveals that she is sixty-eight years old, “old enough to be [his] mother.”\(^{53}\) At the beginning of this conversation, the narrator and her are alone in his room upstairs, with Mrs. Croft in the parlor

\(^{52}\) Lahiri, 184.
\(^{53}\) Lahiri, 186.
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on the first floor. Their conversation is interrupted by Mrs. Croft shouting “You are to come downstairs immediately!” They retreat downstairs, assuming that Mrs. Croft has fallen and hurt herself. Instead, they find her angered by their supposed impropriety. Mrs. Croft exclaims that it is inappropriate for a man and a woman to be alone who are not married. Helen tried to reason with her mother by describing how preposterous it would be for a woman of her age to act inappropriately with a man of the narrator's age, but Mrs. Croft is unyielding. Helen makes one last attempt to reason with her by invoking the world outside: “For your information, Mother, it's 1969. What would you do if you actually left the house one day and saw a girl in a miniskirt?” Mrs. Croft's response, though humorous, is spoken seriously: “I'd have her arrested.”

As a result of their shared Otherness, and perhaps as a testament to it, the narrator fell into a pattern with Mrs. Croft that he found to be comfortable:

I came home each evening, after my hours at the library, and spent a few minutes on the piano bench with Mrs. Croft. I gave her a bit of my company, and assured her that I had checked the lock, and told her that the flag on the moon was splendid. Some evenings I sat beside her long after she had drifted off to sleep, still in aware of how many years she had spent on this earth.

Shortly thereafter, the narrator's wife joined him in the states and he moved away from Mrs. Croft, with some regret. Years later, he stumbled across her obituary in the newspaper and was overcome with grief. As he notes, “Mrs. Croft's life was the first death I mourned in America, for hers was the first life I had admired.” In subsequent paragraphs, the narrator discusses his life and portrays Mrs. Croft as a

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54 Ibid., 185.
55 Ibid., 186.
56 Ibid.
57 Ibid., 189.
58 Ibid., 196.
sort of touchstone. When he first met her, a world of difference seemed to separate them. Gradually that world of difference narrowed until became the world they shared. The narrator identified with Mrs. Croft through his admiration of her age and her life, and seems to have constructed his own identity largely in relation to her own. It was through her, as an object, that the narrator engaged himself in constructing his own identity, causing her story to become part of his own.

**CONCLUSION: A NEW TOOL FOR THE TRADE**

This project arose out of the knowledge that for more than a century scholars have been aware of the need for a connection to occur between narrators and readers, but they have yet to agree on what that relationship is and how it is constituted. In the preceding pages, I sought to locate my argument within that larger conversation and then to provide a formula or rubric for analyzing a narrator and determining how well or poorly they will attract a postmodern audience. Based on existing scholarship and my own fiction reading, I determined first that “identification” was the most appropriate term to account for the relationship which occurs between a narrator and a reader. Subsequently, I sought to establish what would encourage that identification to take place, and discovered that ultimately an author would have to construct an entity who adhered to the “narrator-ideal.” By synthesizing preexisting scholarship and my own theory, I
found that the narrator-ideal for a postmodern audience occurs when the author holds fast to three elements: autobiographicality, role cohesion, and active engagement in identity construction. I then turned to contemporary fiction and found examples of where the narrator-ideal was successfully utilized.

My theory of the narrator-ideal fulfills a need for authors, critics, and readers. Authors may consider this formula when constructing narrators of their own, critics can analyze literature and, in addition to being able to more specifically account for elements which do or not exist in a text, can also predict how a given story will appeal to an audience as far as its narrator is concerned. By keeping this formula in mind, dedicated readers will be able to read more consciously and be more self-aware in how they are becoming engaged with a text.

Ultimately, however, this theory constitutes a single model which may yet be revised to account for different worldviews or as times change. If one thing can be learned from tracing the construct of narrator through the ages, it is that the manner it is viewed can change quickly and radically. Nevertheless, we hold a responsibility to bring theory to bear on practice, discovering new and more efficient models which allows for us to more heuristically examine texts and understand what draws us to them. After all, theory without practice is dead.
REFERENCES


