

The road to nowhere: Loer Kume's "Snowman"

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Abstract

Background: Ambitious narratives are being produced in Albanian literature usually by young writers who are making a name for themselves and are being honoured for their works by juries and the media alike. However, their ambition, being the drive behind their thematic works, is equally a challenge to rise to. Purpose: This article aims at analysing the reasons for failing to fulfil the literary ambition, as well as to clearly delineate the contribution of such works in their mission as literary narratives. Method: I have chosen to apply rhetorical analysis as developed principally by James Phelan on a tale by the young Albanian writer Loer Kume, for which he was honoured with a prestigious prize in literature, the "Kadare Prize" in 2019. Conclusion: Foregrounding of thematic interest in literature, such as that relating to our attitude to morality, fails to convince the readers when offered with too much guidance and becomes an aesthetic liability.

Key words: *rhetoric; progression; narrative; ethics; aesthetics*

Introduction

I have selected for rhetorical analysis the tale "Njериu i Dëborës" [Snowman] from the book *Amygdala Mandala* of the young Albanian writer Loer Kume for

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several reasons. First, it is a tale of immense ambition in terms of ethics and aesthetics; second, it represents a way of writing that is becoming fashionable; and third, from the first sentence, this tale claims attention like no other. These features make it not only an interesting object of analysis, but also a challenge for testing the limits of the theory I am relying on, the rhetorical poetics of narrative. This theory is developed by James Phelan and continues the tradition of Wayne Booth (Booth, 1983) and Kenneth Burke (Burke 1969; Burke 1953) in rhetorical studies. The conceptual tools of this theory, tools that Phelan confessed to have been working with, are twelve aspects of progression, five kinds of audience, three kinds of judgment, three components of character and of readerly interest, three kinds of rhetorical ethics, two kinds of dynamics in narrative progression, six types of unreliable narration, distinctions among unreliable, restricted and suppressed narration, and a distinction between disclosure functions and narrator functions (Phelan, 2007, pp. 86-7). According to Phelan, the test of their utility is not whether they apply to every real or conceivable narrative but whether they help us achieve an understanding of the experiences offered by a good range of existing ones (Phelan, 2007, p. 87).

The Material for Building a “Snowman”

In his second principle of rhetorical reading Phelan makes a difference between the raw material of a novel and its treatment. “Raw material” refers to the events, characters, setting, and other building blocks of the narrative – as well as the real people, places, and historical or autobiographical events upon which those building blocks may be based. “Treatment” refers to the author’s particular shaping of that raw material by means of her choices from the horizon of resources so that the novel accomplishes one set of purposes rather than another. This principle implies that the same material has the potential to be shaped in multiple ways (Phelan, 2013, p. 25).

“Snowman” is a combination of two stories. The first one tells about a father who is angry and violent towards his daughter for disobeying him. The characters in this story are the father, an Albanian migrant since a long time in New Jersey, his daughter, and the character narrator, another Albanian migrant that has come to the United States via Iceland. The scene between the father and the character narrator happens in 1964, since it is told that the daughter of the Albanian migrant father is punished by her father for wanting to go with her boyfriend to the first ever concert of The Rolling Stones in the US. We can call this the story of the character narrator.

In this scene the character narrator tells the father of the girl another story, which was told to him by a character named Eldur, from the time of the character

narrator's living in Iceland. This other story is about young Eldur who falls in love with a girl he was not supposed to, because it was a taboo in their community. The scene for this story is a small and isolated fishermen's countryside in Greenland.

Narrative Purposes

In this tale Kume makes it clear that he wants to thematise the oppressive burden of morality, indeed, to condemn morality and liberate us from its burden. The symbol of morality is the snowman honoured from time immemorial in that Greenland community. That snowman, who for the villagers is a god, fittingly is given by the author the name of *Moorali i Madh* [Big Mooraality]. This naming confirms the ironic stance of the author towards morality. This symbol, *Moorali i Madh*, appears at almost every page of the tale, providing, as Kenneth Burke would say, manner to the work (Burke, 1953, p.166). However, we know that the risk of manner is monotony (Burke, 1953, p.167). Thus, in terms of aesthetics, Kume had the problem of writing a powerful tale about morality and, simultaneously, finding a way to avoid monotony. In light of this challenge one can understand the strangeness and number of settings, the peculiarity of characters (for example we have a character that is unable to speak, another one who is a kind of adventurer, and some other characters that come from a time of heroes and heroism), and the number of stories narrated in the tale. These are means to keep at bay monotony. But, on the other hand, these resources make it more difficult for the author to manage and coordinate such diverse material in the service of his purpose.

Progression of “Snowman”

An analysis of progression is better positioned for giving us a clear view of treatment of material by the author. In terms of narrative progression, I will follow here the model provided by Phelan (Phelan, 2017; Phelan, 2022), while keeping also in mind the conception of progression given by Burke. The latter distinguishes two ways for the progression of narrative, syllogistic progression that proceeds logically from certain premisses to a forced conclusion, and qualitative progression where the presence of a quality prepares us for the introduction of another (Burke, 1953, pp.124-5). This twofold progression is somehow captured by Phelan his notions of instabilities and tensions that serve to move the plot forward. Thus, instabilities, being unstable situations within the story, i.e. between characters, between a character and his world, or within

a single character, are the logical side of progression; whereas tensions, being unstable situations within the discourse, consisting typically of a discrepancy in knowledge, judgements, values, or beliefs between narrator and authorial audience or between implied author and authorial audience, represent the qualitative side of progression.

Phelan's model of narrative progression is preferable to Burke's since it gives us the means to conceptualise progression more fully as three kinds of dynamics that interrelate, combine and influence one another. These are plot dynamics, narratorial dynamics and readerly dynamics. Thus, to give an account of the beginning of "Snowman" we need to analyse it in terms of exposition and launch (plot dynamics), initiation (narratorial dynamics), and entrance (readerly dynamics).

The Beginning

The exposition of the beginning part of the tale is given mainly through a dialogue scene (which is a pseudo-dialogue, since only one of the characters speaks). There we learn about the characters of the first story (the character narrator's story about the angry father), setting, and past history. We learn about two Albanian migrants, their friendship and certain adventures of one of them, the character narrator's. Also, we learn about the current situation of the angry father and the attitude of the character narrator towards him. We see a narrator that does all the talking and a father who, despite being furious, says nothing. However, exposition in the beginning does not cover only the first, but also the second, story, that of Eldur. In the tale it is named "the story of stories." The exposing part gives information about the way of life, customs and norms of the tribe from which Eldur comes in the faraway village in Greenland. Also importantly, in this part we are given first description of *Mooraali*, the villagers' original God of water and ice, to whom they prayed.

The narrative is launched rather late, towards the end of the beginning and into the middle part of the tale. This launch concerns Eldur's story, which takes central position in the tale (the "story of stories") and is given the burden to provide a formula that transcends the morality of the angry father. In that story the launch is provided by the meeting of young Eldur with the beautiful priestess, who it was prohibited to get near to, and the priestess's request that Eldur come to ask for her father for her hand in marriage. We get some other exposition to give us context, such as the priestess being the daughter of Tomori, the high priest of the community. This meeting launches the narrative since in the mind of the young man enters the idea of marrying the priestess, thus establishing a global instability in the story. From this we get a clear direction of the narrative and can be certain that it is not a "false start."

In contrast to a normal plot dynamic in the beginning, we get an unusual narratorial dynamics. According to Phelan, the combination of plot and narratorial dynamics gives us textual dynamics, which indicate internal processes by which the narratives move from beginning through the middle to ending (Phelan, 2017, p. 10). In the “Snowman” we get initiated from the first sentence which reads: “Nuk do të pranoj më pak se kaq” [I will not accept less than this] (Kume, 2019, p. 49). This sentence introduces an asymmetry in knowledge between the narrator and us as readers. The narrator seems to know it all, from the beginning, while we know nothing. Therefore, we get a kind of narrator that is not only reliable, but also very authoritative and who speaks with a solemn voice. This last remark is important, since voice is a fusion of style, tone and values (Phelan, 1996, p.45). The rest of the beginning continues to give us the same reliable narrator that guides us through reporting, interpreting and evaluating reliably. But we notice that apart from serving as guide to the narrative audience, the (pseudo)dialogue of the character narrator with the father of the girl is addressed to the authorial audience, which is a means of authorial disclosure. The father of the girl in the (pseudo)dialogue is the narratee, but the character narrator tells him certain facts that we understand he knows beforehand, and, because of that, we may infer that those facts have not told him, but us, the rhetorical readers in the authorial audience. Thus, the beginning of the tale introduces us not only to the narrator and his story about morality, but also introduces us to the implied author (Booth, 1983, p.264), while making it clear for the rhetorical readers that the narrator, the more he tells his story, the more will align itself with the values of the author.

Therefore, in terms of readerly dynamics, we enter the authorial audience as readers that lack all knowledge and that need to be guided interpretatively and ethically by the author. Also, from the exposition and launch we expect the two stories to be linked somehow, the Eldur’s story to inform and illuminate the character narrator’s story, and both of them to confirm Kume’s story about morality.

The middle

The middle of the tale starts with some exposition of the psychological state in which young Eldur finds himself the night before meeting priestess’s father. From there plot dynamics gets complicated in the voyage stage, where we see Eldur’s meeting and dialogue with Tomori, the priestess’s father and the high priest and guardian of morality, serving *Mooraali i Madh*. Tomori refuses to give Eldur his daughter in marriage because it is against the rules of their community which *Mooraali i Madh* has stipulated very clearly: she would be a future priestess, while Eldur is not a priest. Tomori gets animated and very angry at Eldur’s request, while we get some other exposition via which we come

to learn that the priestess's name is Siara. Eldur's plan to marry Siara suffers a blow not only from the high priest, but also from his mother: “-Kurrw vajzwn e kryepriftit! Kurrw njw vajzw priftwreshw! Do tw prishet bota jonw. Kurrw!” [-Never the daughter of the high priest! Never a priestess girl! Our world will be destroyed. Never!] (Kume, 2019, p. 64).

The interaction phase of narratorial dynamics continues to use authorial disclosure such as in the following passage of dialogue between Eldur and Siara on the occasion of their hiding place being found by their community members:

Ç'do të bësh? – e pyeta.

Ç'do të bëjmë? – më pyeti.

Moorali i Madh? Priftëria? Bab...

Mjaft! Mjaft me këto! Ti je babai, priftëria, Moorali.

[- What do you want to do? – I asked her.

- What do you want us to do? – she asked me.

- The Big Mooraality? Priesthood? Your fath...

- Enough! Enough of this! You are my father, my priesthood, my Mooraality.]

More than words directed to the narratee (young Eldur), Siara's words are spoken to the narrative and authorial audience, which means that they come from the implied author, Kume. It is indeed doubtful whether Siara, socialised her entire life with the values and norms of her community, could think and say such things about her parent, her profession and her God. On the other hand, the narrator, although continuing to report reliably, shows instances of unreliable interpretation when describing the Big Mooraality. He calls it an ice monument, a monolith of ice, which is not in line with the beliefs he, Siara and all other members of their community entertained about their God.

While at the entrance we had some expectation about the influence of Eldur's story in the character narrator's story, in the intermediate configuration phase of readerly dynamics we are able to form and have more concrete expectations about the direction of the narrative. Thus we now expect to have a final clash between the two challengers of the tradition (the fugitives Eldur and Siara) on the one hand, and their community on the other, under the watch of *Moorali i Madh*. This expectation, however, is made once again unclear because the narrator says: “Plaku tregoi më tutje, e unë e dëgjova me ankth, por as që e imagjinoja atë që vinte më pas...” [The old man continued his tale, and I listened anxiously, but could never imagine what would come later...] (Kume, 2019, p. 69).

The Ending

We get to the closure of the tale at a moment of revelation, when Eldur's mother reveals that Eldur and Siara are siblings, born from the same father and mother. This serves as a signal that the narrative is coming to an end. At least this holds true for Eldur's story. Another closure we get is related to the character narrator's story and is given in the last passages of the tale. This other closure describes, conclusively, the two main characters: the narrator and the Albanian migrant.

Miku im nuk merr vesh kurrë. Por në fund të fundit jemi kaq të ndryshëm unë dhe ai. Unë flisja shumë, ai s'fliste dot nga memecëria e tij e shkaktuar nga plaga në luftë. Unë aventurier në jetë, ai njeri stoik. Unë shkrimtar, ai historian, unë dredharak, ai i drejtpërdrejtë, e këto veti i kishin sjellë më shumë telashe atij se mua të këqijat e mia.

[My friend never listens. But in the end, we are so different, I and he. I used to speak a lot, he couldn't speak because of his mutism caused by a war wound. I an adventurer, he a stoic man. I a writer, he an historian, I slippery, he direct, and these qualities had brought more trouble to him than my bad habits had brought to me.]

In terms of plot dynamics, the arrival is constituted by the resolution first of the tensions in knowledge between the narrator and us, and then of the instability between the attitude of the two fugitives, Eldur and Siara, and the norms of their community. Now that we know the nature of relationship between Eldur and Siara, we can reconfigure the whole narrative. We finally understand why Siara's father, the head priest Tomori, and Eldur's mother were both vehemently against their children's marriage. We also see the end of their adventurous voyage and conflict with their community's norms resolve in favour of changing the norms that they would live by in the future. Additionally, we now see that the narrator of the tale is much more linked to Eldur's story than we supposed at first; the narrator is actually living with one of the descendants of Eldur and Siara's family, his niece Samruna. Incidentally, we learn that "Samruna" means "The Melted One", therefore taking us back to the crucial event of melting *Mooraalin e Madh*.

The farewell phase of the narratorial dynamics, as Phelan states, refers to the concluding exchanges among implied author, narrator, and audiences. In the case of "Snowman" the farewell involves a direct address to the narratee. Eldur speaks to the crowd after the revelation of his sibling relation with Siara and the melting of Big Mooraality:

Njerëz, nuk ka asgjë të përjetshme mbi këtë tokë, akulli shkrin, bëhet ujë, uji ikën e bëhet re në qiell, pastaj bie shi, gjithçka është cikël. Sot jemi këtu, nesër mbytemi në det, na hanë bishat, humbim e vdesim në akull, kur jeta është kaq e brishtë, asgjë

tjetër nuk është më e fortë se jeta.

Janë besimi. Janë idealet që trashëgojmë brez pas brezi. Sigurojnë vazhdimësinë, - ulëriti dikush.

Ku i keni idealet tani? Sot? Çfarë idealesh? Di t'u vësh një emër? Mooraalin e shkrimë! Cila është vazhdimësia?

Nga turma s'erdhi asnjë zë.

[- People, there is nothing eternal on this soil, ice melts, becomes water, water vanishes and becomes clouds in the sky, then it rains, everything is a cycle. Today we are here, tomorrow we drown in the sea, get eaten by beasts, get lost and die in the ice, when life is so fragile, nothing else is stronger than life.

- There is belief. There are the ideals we inherit over generations. They ensure continuity, - screamed someone.

- Where are your ideals now? Today? What ideals? Can you name them? We melted Mooraality! What continuity is there?

The crowd was silent.]

However, these last lines do not bring us closer to the implied author and the narrator. We, as rhetorical readers, keep our critical distance from the norms of the narrator, behind which we can now clearly see the implied Kume. In the next section we will see why there is no bond, but only estrangement between us and the narrator and author.

The completion phase of readerly dynamics in the case of “Snowman” involves a total reconfiguration of the narrative after all the tensions are resolved and so we know as much as the narrator does. But we feel estranged, we cannot adopt the attitude of the narrator, we cannot sympathise with the implied author's norms. Ethically, we respond by rejecting as premature, or as simplified the account of the narrator. We even reject the position given to us in the authorial audience, we opt out of it because we feel too much guided, too much used and even manipulated.

Big Morality and Ethics of the Telling

“Snowman” is a tale of morality, as the symbol of Big Mooraality shows. But this is only the symbol of the narratees, as the ironic use of it by the author makes it clear. For us in the authorial audience the implied author has created a counter-symbol which, although not named, is effectuated throughout the tale. It is the symbol of anti-morality. “Ti shkrive Mooraalin, ti ke emrin Eldur, ti ndryshove rrjedhën e rregullave tona mijëvjeçare.” [You melted Mooraality, your name is Eldur, you changed the flow of our thousand years rules.] (Kume, 2019, p. 77). This anti-symbol is presented by the author so that we accept the situation

we find ourselves in the narrative, the inability of morality to solve complex situations. But the alternative presented as the solution, by being simply the denying of the worth of morality, is one that we have strong motives for denying, thus, as Burke would say in these cases, we get a revulsion against the (anti) symbol (Burke, 1953, p.155). We simply cannot accept nothing, no rules at all, no norms and laws and institutions in the place left empty from the event of “melting morality”.

Ethics of the telling, in Phelan’s theory, observes the narrator and the implied author in their dealings with the audiences they address. Leaving aside many aspects of the tale, we may focus on the fact of surprise ending in the “Snowman”. The surprise does not only refer to Eldur’s story, but also to the character narrator’s story. In the latter we find out that the girl’s father, who was angry all the time, did not speak a word because of a war wound that left him mute. For this surprise ending to ethically and aesthetically appropriate Kume should have included material in the progression that could retrospectively be understood as preparing us for the surprise. Clearly, he has not done it, and has opted for keeping total mystery about it, as it would be appropriate in a detective novel. Secondly, the surprise ending we get in the character narrator’s story should have deepened our emotional and cognitive investment in the character narrator and the girl’s father, but this surprise only undermines this investment, for example by making the girl’s father look less realistic a character than before the surprise is revealed.

As to the surprise ending in Eldur’s story, it is justified and appropriate in both above counts. We get prepared for it and can recognise that the necessary reconfiguration caused by the surprise of Siara and Eldur being siblings fits well with the beginning and the middle of the progression.

Aesthetic Achievement

To discuss the aesthetic achievement of this tale we need to put it in the right frame. Is it a case of narrativity, lyricality, or portraiture? In Phelan’s words, if narrativity can be reduced to somebody telling that something happened, and lyricality can be reduced to somebody telling that something is, portraiture can be reduced to somebody telling that someone is (Phelan, 2007, p. 153). Kume has provided us with two stories in the tale, one containing the other, and by doing so he has given the tale the marks of lyricality. Although there are enough events in “Snowman” and although we are told “the story of stories”, all these belong to Eldur’s story, which, as it were, belongs to and informs the character narrator’s story. This means that the events of the tale primarily serve the purpose of expressing the speaker’s (narrator’s) thought, attitude and emotion

towards morality, they are not put in the tale for aiding the progression of the narrative. We are told a lyrical tale about morality, and as is the case in lyricality, we are invited to participate, to see what morality is, how oppressive it is upon the people, what an obstructive force it is for human life, how simplistic and naïve and rigid it is for addressing complex human situations, and finally, how better we would be without it.

But we, the rhetorical readers, are neither convinced by the participation, nor are we touched deeply in our emotions by the story we are presented. Therefore, although in this lyricality we are given a verdict that morality is not worth it, we do not agree to this verdict. The implied author guides us too much to let our feelings take hold of the characters' desperate situation and feel sympathy for them.

Another problem is the choice of interest to foreground in the tale. On the one hand we are given very many details of the stories, and on the other hand there is so much thematic stressing. The latter has undermined the former, which is noticeable in the fact that Eldur and the character narrator are indistinguishable, they have the same voice.

Overall, this tale represents an ambitious attempt to enter the debate on morality, but this thematic interest has not managed to move the authorial audience in the direction desired by the author, since aesthetically it has created more problems than it has managed to solve.

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