

## THE PLACE OF THE NARRATOR IN HIS NARRATIVE: A CASE STUDY OF THE WORK OF ALIOUM FANTOURE

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### Abstract

This paper seeks to explore the question of the absence of the author/narrator in his work, with particular reference to *Le Récit du Cirque...*, of Alioum Fantouré. Fantouré in this text, as with his subsequent texts, parodies cruelly the long-held notion that the author should be absent from his work and that as the writing ends, the author ceases to be: dies. The view that the work of art is a heterocosm that must be detached from anything external to it is not upheld by Alioum Fantoure. To him the work of art has a functional purpose: the transformation of society. In *Le Recit du Cirqu*, he does not any distinction between the dialectically opposed instances of author/reader (in real life) and the narrator/virtual reader in the fictional. In *Le Recit du Cirque....*he adopts a form of writing that makes the writer/author figure in the fictional world in which he controls all that goes on. He effectively merges the creative work of a novel with factual real life activities such as documentary, film, theatre and telecast of contemporary issues, thus making the writer not only alive, but very much involved in his artistic work.

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**Keywords:** Author manipulator, death of author, avatars, aliases, pseudonyms, poly-genre novel

### Theoretical Underpinnings Of Study

The debate of the place/role of the writer continues to be an issue in the theory of narration. Nieragden, ("Poetics Today, 2002, 685-695) thinks that there are a lot of logical inconsistencies in the terminologies brought to the narratological analysis of texts which he seeks to rectify. Shimith Rimmon-Kaenan ( 1983, ©2003:88) talking about the relationship between the real author and the implied author, who in our text is Saibil-Ti, and his various avatars, states, in consonance with the analysis of the two levels of narration by Booth (1961)

and Chatman (1968), that the relationship is a psychologically complex one which has barely been analysed except for the suggestion by Booth (ibid; 75) that the implied authors are often far superior in intelligence and moral standards to the actual men and women who are real authors. He also sees the narrator, distinct from the implied author and different from the author (ibid, 88). The writer is classically perceived as an uninvolved spectator of events that are recounted to him by a narrator who may or may not be part of the events he/she is narrating.

This study takes a contrary view to this position. It seeks to elicit from the complex novel of Alioum Fantouré *Le Récit du cirque de la vallée des morts...*, the forceful point of the unity that exists between the author, “the narrator-focalizer” (Rimmon-Kenan: 2003,80), (the extradiegetic narrator with a zero-focalisation) in his work and his characters, who are all, mere avatars of him/herself. Fantouré’s fictional author, “implied author” (Rimmon-Kenan: 2003, 86), (Saibil-Ti, his alter ego) descends, much like the Hindu deities, into the world of humans, to reorder things. Unlike his Chatman (Rimmon-Kenan, 88) counterpart, this implied author has a voice and is very much, in consonance with the concept of Booth, an anthropomorphic entity (Rimmon-Kenan, 87) who in addition to giving voice to his ideas, also participates actively in world of the novel he narrates. In this way he seeks to show that a new concept of the narrator, quite different from the one envisaged by the structuralists is as valid, if not more so, a theoretical and practical approach to the narrative as that propounded by the purists, who conceive the idea of the author and his narrator as divorced from one another.

Unlike Chatman who proposes the elimination of the narrator/narratee agencies from the equation of the narrative, Rimmon-Kenan (2003, 90) defines “the narrator minimally, as the agent which at the very least narrates or engages in some activity serving the needs of narration...the narratee is the agent which is at the very least implicitly addressed by the narrator.” The thesis of this study is that the author and his narrator(s), (at least in Fantouré’s *Le Récit du cirque...*), are conjoined and different sides of the same coin. His voice is the predominant one in the story. We do not agree with Bakhtin that the character(s) of the narrative or the narrator(s) in it are in anyway free from the hegemony of the author (Leena, N. chapter 4 Narrative Strategies, 147) and that they do not serve in any way as “mouth piece(s) of the author.”

Our reading of Fantouré’s *Le Récit du Cirque*, is that the narrator still occupies the traditional omniscient position in this narrative, albeit his personality is fragmented into various avatars. In this wise, Fantouré satisfies the postcolonial practice of decentring the

narrative voice such that peripheral ideologies and histories would be centred. But in doing so, Saibil-Ti still has the last word, unlike with the Bakhtin assertion that in a polyphonic cosmos, everything “is still in the future and always will be in the future” (Leena, N. *ibid*, 186). He (Saibil-Ti) guides the interpretation of the text and concludes that as long as citizenry remains indifferent to the goings-on in This-Country, they will continue to live under the unacceptable regime of the Spotted-Rhinoceros. We therefore agree with Nieragden (2002, 686) that there is “an authorial narrator” who may be within or without the story (homodiegetic or heterodiegetic narrator) and who controls the perspectives of characters in the narrative (688). Fantouré seems to have written his *Le Récit...*, applying the theoretical inconsistency displayed in the theorisation of Mieke Bal, which according to Nieragden creates the situation where “characters, which by definition exist only on the story level, would then focalize the actions of the narrator on the discourse level, that is the act of narrating itself” (690). He does not seem to agree with the typologies of Bal which permit characters to “take linguistic decisions” or receive “paralinguistic competence” (691), features normally, according to him reserved for the narrator. Fantouré’s characters are couched in this mold and are therefore able, to the probable displeasure of Nieragden, “to perceive the narrator of their own ‘lives’ and to reflect on the act of narrating by which they themselves are ‘brought into being’ in the first place” (691). For Nieragden a personal “identity of *charater-focalizer* and *narrator-focalizer* is impossible in the case of a heterodiegetic narrative situation. This impossibility is what Fantoure, in our opinion has accomplished, probably inspired by the theory of Mieke Bal.

To the structuralist, the writer is a separate persona from the narrator. However, in practical terms everyone knows that it is the writer who creates and we dare say embodies the roles of the diverse narrators that are in his work: s/he or the narrator (his alter ego) is the first person that gets into the skin of the characters to interpret their roles. He gives them voice and space to act. There always remains a lingering influence of the writer or the virtual narrator in his/her work. Wayne C. Booth in *The Rhetoric of Fiction* (Wikipedia.org) belies the independence of the work of art from the influences of the author/writer by alluding to the use of the narrative mode by “which an author” manipulates the narrative for a number of reasons, and “usually to deceive the reader or audience”. He concedes that meaning is mediated through an individual living in a historical context, which context influences his “parole”—speech act: the individual moment of language use, particular utterances or messages, whether spoken or written. Roland Barthes however states that in certain cultures text is considered as without an individual owner: without an author and is the product of the

society as a whole. The moment the text is produced, according to Barthes, the author dies: every voice and every point of origin is destroyed. The text therefore calls for an analysis of its writing structure. This is so because the author is not the one speaking but language. The speaking person is not the focus of the narrative here: the text becomes sufficient to itself. As soon as a fact is narrated, the voice loses its origin, and the writer “enters into his own death” and the writing begins, or so believes Roland Barthes.

Theorists of narratology make a distinction between real human characters, such as the author and the reader, and fictitious characters in the work representing them, such as the narrator and his virtual reader (Jouve: 1997, 24; Rimmon-Kenan: 2003,87-89). Granted that not every action and stance taken by characters in a novel, play, poem or any type of literary work, are attributable to the real author in the sense of they being his/her personal position or praxis, it is inconceivable to have an author who does not use some of his characters to express his own ideas or to act in ways that are akin to his/her own ideological beliefs.

In contrast to this view, objectivists, much like the structuralists, see the literary work as a heterocosm that must be observed from a detached impersonal and non-involved position. According to Oscar Wilde (1981) the work of art “is the unique result of a unique temperament” the beauty of which depends on the nature of the artist and has nothing with anything external; and Clement Greenberg (1965) posits that art work has “achieved a self-referential autonomy”. However, there can be nothing as untrue as such a view. Walter J. Ong (1976) gives a very apt description of the relationship between the work of art and nature:

[T]he art-nature distinction is as real and necessary as it is elusive... But if we must distinguish art and nature-as we must- we must also remember that the relationship between art and nature is a dialectical one, and that each is involved in the other. This leaves the quest for ultimately “pure” literature in an untenable position for good (p. 22).

For Chinua Achebe (1975, 19), “art-for-art’s sake is yet another piece of deodorised dog shit”. Leopold Sedar Senghor considers it as inadmissible in Black African Aesthetics. In his mind, to the African “art is functional [...and] art for art’s sake does not exist.”

It is obvious from the on-going that what is termed objectivism is nothing but individual perspectives that are subject to transformation and revision when brought under the lenses of other individuals. For all it stands for, objectivism is nothing but a license for individuals to bring to bear on creative art and its criticism varied perspectives contingent upon the different lenses and life experiences they have. It is in this respect that it is close to

reader-response analysis which views literature as a performing art in which each reader brings his/her own possible unique, text-related performance to bear on a text.

An artist creating under the influence of mimetic theory or any other theory only reflects aspects of the universe and this is indicative of the fact that something is left out. This is what Roland Barthes terms focalisation: a restriction in narrative perspective. This brings into strong focus the place of the writer (narrator) in his/her literary product. As the handler of the mirror, he/she chooses what is to be reflected. The artist is active in deciding what to reflect. The subject matter, plot, story line, themes and manner of representation are all functions of choice. The narrator, and to us the author, is definitely at work in the realisation of these choices and the effect to which they are put. It is our view therefore that it is pretentious to postulate that the writer is removed from his text. We therefore want to find out in this study how the personal choices, idiosyncrasies and interventions of Alioum Fantouré are mediated in his work with particular reference to *Le Récit du Cirque...*

### **Fantouré's Unique Style**

Alioum Fantouré, circumventing the thesis of the death of the author as postulated by Roland Barthes, invents a form of writing that makes the author a living contemporary of the reader, the audience and the dramatist; and he (author), plays sometimes several of these roles. In *Le Récit du Cirque...*, Fantouré makes the author at once a character, a narrator, and a dramatist. To Barthes, ("The Death of the Author"), the author is never more than the instance of writing: the "I" in a text is a single instance of saying "I"; it denotes a subject (a syntactic position) rather than an individual, a person. Its referent is irrelevant (as well as inaccessible) to comprehending its function and meaning in writing. Writing is considered as a performance and not documentation. The writer is seen as always living in the past of the text. To him the death of the writer begins with the birth of reader. Alioum Fantouré proceeds from a different aesthetics in which the writer is always alive and present throughout his/work, and mediating its content and form (structure).

Fantouré's writer (Saibil-Ti) lives in the text and is co-terminus with it. Any time the text is read, the author/writer comes alive alongside: he refuses to die, go silent. For Barthes and his colleague French theorist Marcel Proust, the two entities (the writer and the narrator) are vastly different from the characters the writer creates. Each reader, according to these theorists, is said to engage in a rewriting of the text: at the point of reading the text, enunciating it, unpacking its structure, writing always occurs. This creates "a multidimensional space in which a variety of writings blend and clash." A tissue of

ambiguous meanings, puns, paradoxes, contradictory quotations are detected rather than solved.

Teasing most probably this position by Barthes and Proust, Fantouré creates a narrator that is ubiquitous. One that incorporates several faces and characters, and therefore various blends of writing forms: theatre, drama, film, documentary and novel. In this way, Fantouré, rather than regard the author as imposing a limit, an anchor or a closure to the mesh of the multiple writings that the various readings produced, undermines this thesis by assigning to his novel an author, called Saibil-Ti, who opens up the narrative in such a way as to preclude any limits to the multiplicity of meanings produced within the narrative. Indeed within the text, the concept of multiplicity of meaning is explored by Saibil-Ti who gives different versions of the same story [51-56, where he gives two possible ways in which to eliminate Vice-I-Mille and 75-78 where again he gives different renditions of the genesis of the Community of Intolerance] and leaves room for the reader to speculate on what meaning the author, or “manipulator” [apt description of the author] as he is called in the text, is giving to the story told. (Every author is actually a manipulator of the issues he presents in his work of art). To complicate matters, Fantouré makes use of several commentators who, from a close reading of the book, prove to be the aliases of Saibil-Ti, the author-manipulator mentioned in the first pages of the book. Each of these commentators makes several amendments to the story being told. On page 50 of the novel for instance, we read the following revealing statements from one of the narrators (commentators):

*La voix du nouveau commentateur est d'une grande sérénité. Il commence par faire une mise au point en disant que le prétendu fleuve souterrain qui charrie les morts [...] n'existe pas [...]: je crois que notre manipulateur dont le nom se trouve inscrit au début du texte de notre spectacle devrait se surveiller un peu. En me passant la parole Saibil-Ti me donne le droit absolu de m'exprimer comme je l'entends et de mener cette partie du Film à ma guise et en toute liberté (Our emphasis *Le Récit...*, 50).*

This manipulator is revealed to be Saibil-Ti himself, who is described in that first page as the author of the work: « Quand à l'auteur, on affirme que l'un de ses pseudonyms est Saibil-Ti et qu'il a écrit trois versions différentes de la seconde partie...Il y tient un rôle » (10). By stating that the name Saibil-Ti is only one of the many pseudonyms of the author written at the beginning of the novel, a direct reference and connection is made to the real author, whose name normally appears at the beginning of every book s/he writes. This also adequately foreshadows the multiple roles that Saibil-Ti is going to play in the texts by adopting different avatars.

In his work Fantouré seems to consciously expose the fallacy of the separation of the writer from his narrative. He parodies of the classical theory of the narrative and pretends to separate the narrator from the writer, while at the same time leaves no doubt in the mind of the reader that he, the ubiquitous writer is the same voice that engenders all the other narratives in the novel. To make this possible, Fantouré blurs the boundaries between himself and his work (what Gerard Genette terms metalepsis (Guillemette L. and Lévesque C, 2006), by presenting his novel as an admixture of cinematography, dramaturgy, narrative and documentary. He does it in such a way that all characters in the work: spectators, actors, narrators and readers of the work are seen as playing roles in the unfolding story that is told and lived at the same time.

Fantouré's narrative implicates him fully in his work, especially when all his works are studied in the light of a continuum: characters reappear in subsequent works or are slightly modified; but the attentive reader easily notices that the work is the product of the same personality (Fantouré). Parodying the structuralists' stance of alienating the writer (author) from his work, Fantouré camouflages himself by never putting his picture on the blurb of his books and yet takes advantage of that to intrude his work under various guises, most eloquently depicted in *Le Reçit du Cirque....* A careful study of motifs, themes, iterative narrative elements, social status and intellectual competence of the various narrators (which study shall be done in another work) helps to determine with some exactitude, the encroachment that the author makes into the world of his imagination. Taking advantage of his narrative functions of commentary, explanation and of control, the author hardly succeeds in hiding his meddlesome involvement in the narrative that he produces.

As mentioned above, Fantouré adopts various aliases that permit him to enter the world of his fiction with glee and with tongue in cheek, as if to taunt the purists of the narrative. When he “concedes” independence of action to his characters, one finds out that he ends up interfering in the activities of these characters. A typical example is the case of Mihi-Moho. Indeed Mihi-Moho accedes to this fact when he states that Saibil-Ti had placed in the theatre projectors that will help him project the documentaries that he has collected from around the world. But more significantly, Saibil-Ti jumps on stage every now and then to put one thing or the other in order. When Mihi-Moho's intervention becomes too virulent for the liking of the other participants-audience, Saibil-Ti “monte sur la scène pour parler à l'inconnu” (18-19). He again mounts the stage to congratulate Mihi-Moho on his excellent depiction of the occurrences of modern times by shaking his hand. The status of Saibil-Ti in the narrative therefore bestrides the two worlds: the fictive and the real, much as the narrative

itself does. He juggles between the narrative modes of an intra-diegetic homo-diegetic narrator (a narrator within a story that narrates events in which he takes part, Guillemette L. and Lévesque C 2006) and that of an intra-diegetic hetero-diegetic narrator (a narrator within a story narrating events in which he does not take part, but of which he has considerable knowledge Guillemette L. and Lévesque *ibid*).

There appears however to be, above all these narrative positions of Saibil-Ti, an omniscient narrator (an extra-diegetic, hetero-diegetic narrator) who seems to command greater influence than Saibil-Ti. This however seems to be a ruse adopted by Saibil-Ti (or should we say Fantouré) to parody and undermine the position of the narrative theorists who seem to believe that the author cannot, and must not, be part of his narrative. From time to time, the voice of this narrator seems to merge with those of the intra-diegetic homo-diegetic and intra-diegetic-hetero-diegetic narrators. It is at this point that the real author (Saibil-Ti/Fantouré?) meddles with the narrative for particular effects. In this narrative the distinction between the various narrators is also very blurred. At this point he adopts the zero focalisation that permits him to oversee all and to influence all that goes on around him. Take the case in point of the passage spanning pages 32-36, where the narrative of Vice-Inquisitor-Thousand runs into that of the omniscient narrator seamlessly. We are then told by this narrator who takes over from Vice-Inquisitor-Thousand that the latter's voice "se perd peu à peu dans les bruits des moteurs" (36). In the passage referred to above, a transition is made from a narrative perspective of an intra-diegetic narrator to that of a narrator who appears to have come out of the blue. His identity is difficult to establish.

The distinguishing quality this particular narrator is that he often makes general comments and remarks which exceed the competence of any other character in the narrative. He superimposes himself even on Saibil-Ti, or so it appears. He makes value judgements on Saibil-Ti's assertion about le Mount Dounouya. It is not clear whether he is not the same one who cautions Saibil-Ti to be wary of his declarations that are questionable. Curiously this narrative perspective exchanges words with the ascribe author of the novel (Saibil-Ti). This may qualify for a hypothetical case of internal monologue within the mind of the author (used here in a generic sense) as s/he writes. This development is most unexpected of a genre that is supposed to be a novel. This admixture of literary genres, to produce a potpourri of a novel-theatre-drama-film, allows for a collapsing of every boundary between the real world and the fictional world: allowing the narrator/author freedom to navigate between the two worlds seamlessly.



### **Deliberate fusion of the real and imaginary worlds.**

In this narrative, where deliberate effort is made to inform people of the facts of their daily living, consciously both worlds are made to co-exist and merge. Similarly, the identities of Saibil-Ti and Afrikou, who also at a point appears to be playing the role of the extra-diegetic hetero-diegetic narrator, seem to roll up in one. There appears to be no distinction between the narrative rendered by Saibil-Ti and Afrikou. Their narratives flow unobtrusively into each other. After leaving the narration to Afrikou, Saibil-Ti announces that if he does not expressly tell us that he is resuming the narrative, we should take it that it is Afrikou still doing the telling (p. 71-72). But as the narration continues, another voice comes to tell us that the voice of Afrikou had faded off (p. 75).

The question arises as to who was in charge of the narrative all the while that the voice of Afrikou was not audible. It must be pointed out that Saibil-Ti has not as yet announced his resumption of the narrative. The narrator at this point takes the perspective of an extra-diegetic hetero-diegetic narrator with a zero focalisation. He has the ability to read the minds of the other characters. This omniscient narrator who is neither Afrikou nor Saibil-Ti says this of the former:

Afrikou paraît lire les pensées de ses compagnons, notamment de Saibil-Ti qui...ne songe qu'à une chose pour l'instant—RETABLIR LE CHAINON MANQUANT DE LA

### **Legende de la communauté des intolérances (78)**

In ascribing to Afrikou the ability to read the minds of the other actors and characters in the story this narrator brings him at par with himself. Interestingly this narrator is succeeded by Saibil-Ti without any warning either. The latter is introduced to continue the story this way: "Ils n'entendent plus que la voix de Saibil-Ti qui commente les extraordinaires images qui défilent sur l'écran." (76). From this point onward one assumes that the narrative is moderated by Saibil-Ti. However, nothing shows that it is not still the extra-diegetic hetero-diegetic narrator who is doing the telling. For, on page 78 we read from the omniscient narrator that Saibil-Ti tries to find different possibilities to continue his story: "DES ANNEES PASSERENT, LES ANIMAUX NE RENONCAIENT PAS...Trop simpliste se dit Saibil-Ti. Puis de recommencer" (78). [YEARS LAPSED, THE ANIMALS DID NOT GIVE UP...Too simplistic, Saibil-Ti told himself. Then he starts all over again. (78).

It seems in adopting this strategy Fantouré wants to drive home the point that the author of the narrative (personified by Saibil-Ti) is at the centre of all that goes on in his work. And that a significant part of the work of art stems from his experiences. He seems to

want to say that the narrator, who is here identified as the manipulator and author, does a lot of reworking, editing of his work before it comes out. In *Le Récit du Cirque ...* therefore, it is clear that Fantouré makes no attempt at dissociating himself from his work. He deliberately merges the narrative voices of Saibil-Ti (the author/manipulator) with that of Afrikou (the omniscient narrator-character who knows what goes on even in the mind of Saibil-Ti (his creator in the novel) and that of an unidentified third person narrator who tells us that Afrikou knows what goes on in the minds of all the other characters. Putting these bits and pieces together, one can come to only one conclusion: Saibil-Ti, Afrikou and the omniscient third person narrator, the auctorial extra-diegetic-hetero-diegetic narrator, are only different representations of the same personality—the real author Fantouré.

In *Le Récit du Cirque de la vallée des morts...*, Fantouré demystifies and deconstructs the formalists and structuralists notion of the independence of a work of art of its creator. By inscribing in the narrative of his complex poly-genre novel the name of its “author”, who is said to have several avatars; and by allowing this author play an active role in the narrative structure of the story, Fantouré makes of his creative work an organic component of the real society in which he lives. Acting as a lobbyist for more interest to be shown by the people in the day-to-day happenings of their lives in the narrative world he has created, Saibil-Ti, after forcing them to watch the documentaries collected all over the continents by Mihi-Moho, the screening of which is interpolated with horrifying images telecast on the television, stands at the exit of the theatre, where all the action takes place, and hands over to each spectator-participant-actor an envelope on which he inscribes the message: GO BACK TO YOUR INDIFFERENCE. Fantouré, by effectively eliminating every boundary between the fictive and real world in this book, succeeds in subverting the notion of the distinctiveness that there is supposed to be between the world of a creative work and that of its author.

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