The Narrative Framework of the Arabian Nights in John Barth's The Last Voyage of Somebody the Sailor: A Critical Study

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Abstract:

The framework-story technique is a very old way of narration. Stories are embedded within stories in extended parallel lines. John Barth (b. 1930) takes up this technique in his novel, *The Last Voyage of Somebody the Sailor* (1991) in a creative way although he mainly depends on *The Arabian Nights* as a model. The aim of this study is to show the significance of using this technique and the way Barth uses it in the selected novel to accord with the postmodernist fiction. The narrator moves forward from the past to the present and from the East to the West in a labyrinth of frames and embedded stories.

Key Words: postmodernism; narrative framework; identity; story-telling; embedded story

إطار ألف ليلة و ليلة السردي في رواية جون بارث رحلة البحّار شخص ما الأخيرة: دراسة نقدية

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الملخص:-

يُعدّ أسلوب القصة ذات الإطار طريقةً قديمةً في السرد القصصي، حيث تُضَمّنُ القصصُ داخل قصص أُخَر بخطوط متوازية ممتدة. وقد تبَنى جون بارث (تولد ١٩٣٠) هذا الأسلوب في رواية (رحلة البحّار شخص ما الأخيرة) بطريقة إبداعية على الرغم من أنه اعتمد كتاب (ألف ليلة وليلة) كأنموذج. تهدف الدراسة إلى إيضاح طريقة بارث في استخدام هذا الأسلوب في الرواية المذكورة في أعلاه بما يلائم روايات ما بعد الحداثة، و كشف الغرض من هذا الاستخدام. يتنقل الراوي بين الماضي والحاضر والشرق والغرب في متاهة من الأطر والقصص المتَضمنة.

الكلمات المفتاحية

ما بعد الحداثة؛ الإطار السردي؛ الهوية؛ سرد القصص؛ القصص المتضمنة.

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To set a story within one comprehensive framework is a technique that gives a shape like a frame of a picture to the actions of the characters. Many writers have borrowed the narrative techniques of many stories and tales of different nations giving their own writings a peculiar form. Some of these stories and tales are: *Kalila wa-Dimna, The Arabian Nights*, Boccaccio's *Decameron* and Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales*. Karla Mallette (2015) states that in the nineteenth century, the "formal structure" of such tales "increasingly attracted readers' attention (3). She adds that this form "sewed together brief narratives by allowing fictional characters to narrate tales themselves" (4).

The Arabian Nights might be the most famous book of tales. It is the story of the beautiful young woman Scheherazade who tells stories to King Shahryar night after night in order to save her life. The narration of the tales helps in developing and transforming the characters. At the end of her tales, the whole situation is changed; the king becomes no more interested in the idea of killing women. Early at the beginning, the teller makes it clear that Scheherazade is going to be killed like all other previous women, and this creates an agony of suspense that continues to the end. The mystery of the tales makes the recipient excited and confused until Scheherazade gives the king an explanation through her valuable words, which makes

him understand that all human beings deserve to be loved and respected (Pyeatt, 2005: 44). In fact, what makes *The Arabian Nights* so interesting is that not only is there a comprehensive framework for all the tales, but also one story becomes a framework for another creating a hierarchal structure.

We can consider the use of the narrative framework as an aspect of postmodern fiction. William Gass (1971:25) studies a few novels by Flann O'Brien (1911-1966) and Jorge Lois Borges (1899-1986) considering them as metafiction. He sees that these novels as well as many others are a reaction to the exhaustion resulting from conventional novel writing; that reaction is then considered as a fundamental shift in novel writing (25).

Jean-Paul Sartre (1958:viii) is one of the first writers who used the term 'anti-novel' in the twentieth century to refer to the novels written in the 1950s in France. He believes that such writings defy the novel itself and destruct though seemingly construct it (viii). It is clear that the term 'anti-novel' includes all novels that are not firmly based on the well-established conventions of writing. The term anti-novel can adequately qualify so many novels that critics classified as metafiction. Patricia Waugh (1984:24) shows that novels like *Tom Jones* (1749) and *Tristram Shandy* (1760) have already used some aspects of the techniques of postmodern novels. Therefore, although the term 'anti-novel' has only recently come into use, it has been applied for a long time.

In his *Dictionary of Narratology* (1987), Gerald Prince defines the frame narrative as a "narrative functioning as a frame for another narrative" (25), while M. M. Bakhtin (1981) presents what is called 'heteroglossia' to show that the novel is a diversity of individual voices. He states that

> The speeches of narrators, inserted genres, the speech of characters are merely those fundamental compositional unities with whose help heteroglossia can enter the novel; each of them permits a multiplicity of social voices and a wide variety of their links and interrelationships (262).

The variety of voices and their interrelations in the novel that are presented through different stories integrated into one another can be regarded as a mutual conversation. Waugh (1984: 28) considers the use of the frame in postmodern novels as a way to understand art and life. She seems to believe that life is constructed of frames that are interrelated, so it is so hard to know where one frame begins and another ends. In postmodern novel, the boundaries among the different frames are erased. John Barth has widely made use of this complicated technique in the selected novel, *The Last Voyage of Somebody the Sailor* (1991), which is henceforth abbreviated to LVSS.

In his essay "John Barth," Ian Bickford (2003:135) discusses John Barth's technique of the narrative fiction though he does not entirely agree with Barth because he believes that Barth's use of this way of writing might eventually lead to the death of the novel. Bickford indicates that Barth calls writers to

recycle old stories without repeating the same ideas (136). Brian McHale (1992) mentions that Barth replenishes literature by "reviving the traditional pre-modernist values of fiction" (26). Nevertheless, Barth's frameworks connect modernism to postmodernism by adopting James Joyce' forms on one side and departing from them to postmodernist forms on the other (26).

When he was working in John Hopkins Library, Barth read the seventeen volumes of Richard Burton's translation of *The Arabian Nights*. In *The Friday Book* (1984), Barth mentions that his love for *The Arabian Nights* is "old and continuing (47). He adds, "if anything ever makes a writer out of me, it will be the digestion of that enormous, slightly surreptitious feast of narrative" (47). It seems that one cannot fully appreciate Barth's writings without knowing his infatuation with the spellbinding tales of *The Arabian Nights*. Barth also states:

> It was never Scheherazade's stories that seduced and beguiled me, but their teller and the extraordinary circumstances of their telling: in other words, the character and the situation of Scheherazade, and the narrative convention of the framing story (153).

Barth points out that such tales have attracted many cultures because of their ontological, metaphysical and aesthetic associations (164). He thinks that such tales suggest "the next frame out of the fiction of our own lives" (164). He agrees with Tzvetan Todorov (b.1939) that tales within tales reflect a deep linguistic structure and even suggest the "syntactical property of subordination" (165). For Barth, the open-ended structure

framework helps in showing how people experience the complexities of life; hence, it allows the writer to add more and more details along a series of suspension stations. It unifies an unlimited number of stories in a harmonious structure. Barth states:

> To cease to narrate, as the capital example of Scheherazade reminds us, is to die— literally for her, figuratively for the rest of us. One might add that if this is true, then not only is all fiction, but all fiction about fiction is, in fact, fiction about life (165).

Barth is conscious of postmodernist trends of his time; the self-awareness and self-portrayal, which mark postmodernism are implicitly present in his framework tales. His celebrated novel *The Last Voyage of Somebody the Sailor* (1991) is a postmodernist commentary on a few controversial topics like storytelling and reality. The narrative framework, the characters and the cultural atmosphere of the novel are almost modelled on Sindbad's voyages. Barth does not only use the framework of Sindbad's voyages but he adds more frames in order to give more space to new versions of the narrated story and provide an incentive for more reflection on the themes of the novel. The novel presents a complex chain of stories within stories reflecting the structure of *The Arabian Nights*. Unlike in *The Arabian Nights*, the narrator stays unknown in LVSS. Barth titles him "The Familiar Stranger", and this name will be the title of the first and the last chapters of the novel. The reader

will recognize later that this narrator is also a storyteller who has other different titles.

The novel begins with a narrative framework describing a dying middle-aged man in a hospital at twentieth century Maryland. It is astonishing that the man succeeds in escaping death by narrating a story of Somebody who afterwards tells another story about a person named Simon Behler who turns up to be Somebody himself. Rather than narrating the life of Scheherazade, the narrator tells us about her death, which opens a new framework that covers the details of the life and death of Simon Behler. The latter is a sailor who has been shipwrecked at the coast of Sri Lanka to discover that he is at Sindbad's house. Jack Zipes (2015: 47) states that Behler who is so far away from his homeland should find a way out of this crisis, so he has to narrate stories to Sindbad. In *The Arabian Nights*, Sindbad was a sailor and a porter, while Barth presents Somebody only as a Sailor.

In the first frame, the sick man wants to narrate a story to his doctor who does not look to pay heed to him. He tells her that he can tell her a story about Scheherazade's death and she replies, "I've heard it, I've heard them all"(LVSS: 3). Then he has to try again with a new thing in order to attract her attention. This attempt of newness is where the intention of postmodernism lies; postmodernist literature deals with stories from the past and transforms them into something almost different and new. Just like Scheherazade who delays her death by suspending her stories in a moment filled with enthusiasm,

the narrator in LVSS keeps the doctor listening to him in order to save his life. The relationship between the narrator and his listener becomes like that of life and death. In both cases, if they fail in their attempts, they might face death. The previous reply of the doctor involves danger since new stories and adventures are to be told if there is a desire to listen on the part of the doctor, thus a mutually dependent relationship is established between the related stories and the frame. The narrator starts his voyage with a series of a story-within-a story that reproduces the structure of *The Arabian Nights*.

Arete Dragas(2014: 201) explains that death is referred to in the beginning so as to be in accord with the title of the novel. He states that the novel begins at a hospital and proceeds to other different frames like old Baghdad and Maryland(201). These frames are present inside and outside the narrated stories up to the last one.

In the second chapter, the novelist begins the second frame wherein Scheherazade is a lonely old woman who improvises narration in order to die. Death here is called "The Destroyer of Delights" and "The Familiar Stranger". This Destroyer of Delights requested a "virgin story" from Scheherazade (LVSS: 9) as a price for her death. She agrees to tell him a story about Somebody the Sailor. She starts to tell him the story of Sindbad, in particular, his last voyage. Then, the novel leads us through several frames and narrators until lastly we are told that "it wasn't Sindbad the sailor who made that final voyage,"(LVSS: 13) and Sindbad had "never before set sail

with any motive nobler than restless greed"(13). He tells his companions that one does not have to plan a course for any voyage, but has to "set out in good faith for elsewhere and lose your bearings". This demonstrates the identity of Somebody that changes throughout his several voyages. In this regard, the novel becomes a story of identity that changes through the process of storytelling.

Somebody, who is also named, Simon William Behler, as well as Sindbad will tell many stories within new frames. After many misfortunes in his previous six voyages, Sindbad is ready now to start a seventh voyage when suddenly Somebody visits him. He seems like a beggar and is introduced to Sindbad as "Somebody the Nobody"(LVSS: 14). He announces that he has come to be a rival to Sindbad in storytelling. The competition starts and they narrate their voyages, one piece per night. Both compete in interknitting and finishing their stories at the starting point. The guests decide who the best teller is. Behler tells seven stories, equivalent to those of Sindbad. The narrated stories include further embedded ones.

In this narration, the Eastern and the Western worlds collide creating a narrative incongruity. The two worlds intermix and the narrative voices converge and diverge (Al-Madani, 1999). Behler finishes narrating one voyage every night to start again with interludes in which the guests pass their comments, questions and retelling of new stories. The voyages and interludes move in a spiral where no center can be located, and

where what Gordon Slethaug (1993:136) calls "the outside and inside of the frame" are not clear.

"Somebody's First Voyage" is about hard times in Behler's life beginning from his birth. He says that he rocks himself before he goes to bed and "it was not long before [he] reached that state between two worlds where distances go strange" (LVSS: 59). In the subsequent interludes, characters like Yasmin, Awad, Jayda and others relate their own stories. Almost all the interludes of this voyage and of "Somebody's Second Voyage" are about Yasmin's defloration and Jayda's miserable life. The narration of events in each interlude has the same succession: the guests start their speeches, and Somebody makes love with Yasmin, then Jayda relates her story and finally Sindbad relates his voyage.

When Somebody is forty-two years old, his third voyage begins. Behler is named here Baylor, his wife is Jane and his children are Andrew and Juliette. He narrates incidents that occurred to him when he was twenty-one year old. In this voyage, he sails in the Virgin Islands, and in order to dispense with the world of water, he rocks himself and goes to the market to buy a watch, which will be a recurrent symbol in almost all the subsequent voyages. Dragas mentions that the watches refer to the transiency of time and to the alterable stories and tellers (204). Before Baylor starts his speech, he looks at his watch as though he were transforming in time from the present to the past. Baylor receives his first watch when he is seven years old, the second when he was fourteen and the

third at his twenty-one birthday. His watches show that he is keen on time and truth, and the watches might relate his own story. Al-Madani remarks that when Baylor sends one of his watches for repairing, he wears another one, and that is like retelling his story in order to know his time and location; and if he loses any watch, he will be astray, helpless and far away from all the stories that have hitherto established his identity. Baylor's confused identity is clearly shown in the market of Marrakesh where he feels lost and dazed in an exotic world. The otherness of the Arabic world seems to be plotting against his convictions and ideas. This otherness "conspired to overwhelm so easily his stateside values, loyalties, inhibitions" (LVSS: 199). It is clear that he could not appreciate the otherness of the Arabic world. The presence of a charming woman at the end of his story brings him back to his true state of affairs. The woman repairs the links of his watch to adjust it to his hand. This might symbolically represent the cut up links of his narrative. Throughout this voyage, Baylor proceeds forward attempting to discover his real identity that is divided between Behler, Baylor and Somebody.

In "Somebody's Fourth Voyage," Somebody confesses, "things have gone about as problematically as we expected" (LVSS: 304). In fact, he is now misplaced in Old Baghdad. In this voyage, Julia Moore (a famous photographer) asks Baylor, "Can't I call you just B?" (LVSS; 309). B describes to Julia some incidents that took place in his second and third voyages. He passes through place and time in the Arabic world of Sindbad. He also goes back in his memory to the days of

Marakesh, which resemble the nights of The Arabian Nights, but in this world of Baghdad, he cannot go back to any earlier days, and instead he stays lost at the brink of death. B and Julia decline Tim Severin's anti-plot that aims at frustrating beforehand the reminders of "Here and Now"(LVSS: 325). They believe that the "Here and Now" are "inside our head as much as out there" (LVSS: 326). Barth attaches considerable importance to the "inside" and the "outside," and they become interdependent inasmuch as they are responsible for organizing the "self". In this regard, Taimi Olsen (2000:112) clarifies that by the categories of the "Here and Now" and the "Inside and Outside," Barth cancels the demarcating lines of reality and imagination.

On their way to Serendib, B tries to confess his love to Julia but fails. Moreover, he loses a precious stone, and lastly, they face a devastating storm and end in shipwreck that leaves them astray. Barth states:

> Simon William Behler remained […] conscious of himself swimming, swamping, struggling not to go under, to the boundaries of his strength and breath and beyond, refinding and relosing both, and himself as well, as often under and upon the surface, wave after wave breaking over a mind mindless of everything […] and then perhaps quite, for the next thing I knew, I knew nothing (LVSS:337).

In "Somebody's Fifth Voyage," Baylor wakens after the shipwreck to find himself in another place with people whom

he has not known before, and then suddenly he discovers that he is in Old Baghdad among the sailors of Sindbad. He meets Mustafa, the leader of the sailors who tells him a few things about Sindbad, Sahim al-Layl and Yasmin. In this voyage, Somebody's name becomes Simon Bey el-Loor and his narration goes along to "Somebody's Sixth Voyage". This narration mixes with that of Sindbad. In these two voyages, the real world intertwines with fantasy and all incidents, the fates of characters and their identities are ambiguous and bewildering as if they were in a dream world. All the action in the fifth and sixth voyages centers on the "Tub Night" (LVSS: 501) and Yasmin's defloration. The narrative framework of these two voyages is established by the narration of Sindbad, Jayda, Yasmin and Sahim al-Layl through five interludes. The two voyages reflect Sindbad and Somebody's conceptions about the exploration of bizarre worlds. Sindbad believes that if he has the "tub of last resort' with him and if he learns lessons from his previous voyages, he will return home safe in every new voyage even if he faces difficulties or he is shipwrecked (Olsen:113). Travelling and going back home is infatuating to Sindbad, while somebody finds this idea embedded in the word "serendipity" (LVSS: 13). Somebody discusses this idea with Sindbad and shows that it is a transcendental voyage outside the limits of time and place, or as he states, it is to "sail sidewise" (LVSS: 13) aiming at arriving at Serendib. Sindbad might have partially succeeded in transcending the limits of time and place for he could not do away with the requirements of daily life

(Olsen: 113). He rebuilds his house and creates a garden in an attempt to transcend his wilderness.

In the sixth voyage, Somebody refers to a debate between Caliph Haroun Al-Rashid who is called here "the Dispenser of Denouement" on one side and a few other characters on the other side. The debate ends in a deadlock of confusion. It becomes clear that no interlocutor can grasp the truth because it is "as varied and self-contradictory as narrative itself" (Al-Madani). Barth adds the issue of the tub to Somebody's story. It might be a means to add more ambiguity to the action and the characters. In this novel, the tub has various functions, so in Sindbad's house, there are "a tub of sleeping", "a tub of eating", "a tub of sex", "a tub of last resort' and "a tub of truth". The tub then has a metaphorical connotation in addition to its physical and social meanings. The bedroom, for instance, is a tub of telling the truth, so we notice that Jayda narrates her pathetic story to Sindbad in a bedroom. From another point of view, the tub functions as a throne where Haroun Al-Rashid issues his decrees. In "the tub of truth," not all the truth is revealed and Barth seems to leave things vague. Although there is a tub of lies and secrets, Somebody's tub lets him "climb in and out at will," (Olsen: 115) putting Sindbad in a state of disorder.

Kennedy and Warner (2013) mentions that Barth borrowed the word "Zahir," which means "manifest," from the well-known Argentine author, Jorge Luis Borges (1899-1986) who used this word in his short story "The Zahir" (258). On his part, Borges might have taken the word from *The Arabian Nights*,

which he read with genuine admiration. Somebody calls his three ships by the name "Zahir". He uses this word with rapt attention because it suggests any "unexpectedly obsessive image or memory" (LVSS: 328). The ships muster the worlds of reality and fantasy; the narrator states that the skeleton of the third ship is "quixotic" (LVSS: 567). Nevertheless, the ship is wrecked but Somebody is saved, and when he wakes up, he discovers that he is in Maryland. This incident suggests that Zahir, the ship is behind the transcendence of time and place.

In "Somebody's Next Voyage," Yasmin who is considered by Somebody as the epitome of all women encourages him to accompany her on a trip to the magical island which she has dreamt of. They marry and spend their honeymoon there. The ship sinks again in this voyage and Somebody wakes up to discover that he is in a hospital in Maryland. In this last voyage, we sadly observe Somebody's serious loss of identity when he returns homeland "a mere voice muttering in the void" (Dragas: 207).

In the hospital, the novel is brought to a climax where the action takes us to Somebody's story that will lead to Scheherazade's tale and to the main framework of the novel. At this very end of the book, Somebody comes close to death, and begins to realize that the final story of one narrator is the initial story of another. This notion is highly pertinent to all the characters of the novel.

In his narrative framework, Barth implements Tzvetan Todorov's technique of frame tale. Barth clarifies that even if

the characters in a voyage are not well interrelated to the characters of its interludes because of the difference in identity, characters will move from one story to another (Cited in Dragas: 203). Todorov clarifies that when a new character appears, the action of the story is interrupted, so there should be a new story in order to adapt to the requirements of the new character (Todorov, 1977: 204). If the new character is a storyteller, the following action inevitably entails narrating a new story (Dragas: 204). Therefore, one story and one storyteller engender more stories and storytellers; and one new character initiates a new action. Thus, we find so many characters and embedded stories in this novel.

Somebody's speech is embedded in Behler's narrative framework as well as in Sheherazade's. The latter is in turn embedded in Baylor's tale about Scheherazade's meeting with the "Destroyer of Delights". This narrative is also placed in Behler's discussion with the doctor, which is part of the general framework of the novel (Clavier, 2007: 247).

The issue of the diversity in Somebody's identity, which is reflected in his various names that mask his real character, recalls Sindbad's voyages that reflect the ambiguity of his own life. In this regard, Barth intertwines two narratives allowing contrasting themes such as life/death and sea/land overlap (Benson, 2003: 143). Moreover, this technique helps reveal Behler's life and his own reality since the change of names permits the overlapping of identities. Barth's technique that presents contradictory issues enables him to see matters from

different angles, and to challenge ideas and literary conventions. Various titles, narrative frames and ideas are introduced. Judit Friedrich (1996) sees that LVSS is an extension of Barth's earlier works in which he manifests the different and contradictory aspects of reality (164). She states that the narrative moves on in parallel lines, which join in many points (164). This helps in making the action and characters move from one world to another. It also helps make the identities overlap. In so doing, as well as by introducing different ideas, Barth undermines the extravagant claims of the superiority of Western literary conventions and forms.

In his analysis of the structure of this novel, Olsen comes out with the following layout of the layers of narrative.

Turning on itself like a snake swallow its tail. Barth writes from the point of view of "'Baylor' the Taler of Behler the Failer" who tells Scheherazade's story (to Death her "Familiar Stranger" of somebody's last voyage. Within this narration, somebody the Sailor … relates stories of his life as Simon William Behler. Somebody tells these tales of his voyages in public to the guests of Sindbad …. Within this narration, Simon B … mentally narrates his life to his twin sister, deceased at birth. He alternately narrates … to an undetermined readership via his travel log. Lodged in between Somebody's narration are Sindbad's narrative of voyages …, Yasmin's retelling of Simon's stories through sexual games…, and Jayda's narrations of her own "story' which she claims to be the central part of "Allah's great story" (111)

Almost all the characters of the novel strive to gain mastery on impressive storytelling through a complicated narrative framework that relies on embedding. Ulrich Marzalph, ed. (2006: 232) says that for Todorov, "the embedding narrative is the narrative of narrative". He adds that the embedded narrative is "the image of that great abstract narrative of which all the others are merely infinitesimal parts as well as the image of the embedding narrative which directly precedes it" (232).

To conclude, Barth renders life in narrated tales. Narration becomes the main theme of this novel. He acknowledges, "man is merely a narrative (234). The role of a narrator is to renew life or to recreate it. In order to do this, the author resorts to put embedded stories within a larger framework. Once and again, Barth uses various narrators to relate one tale. He definitely intends for impressing his audience through this technique of narrating and re-narrating. Again, with this technique, Barth has decidedly initiated a new start in postmodern literature.

Barth turns to the frame-tale of *The Arabian Nights* in his novels, in particular, *The Last Voyage of Somebody the Sailor*. This technique has given a peculiar structure to this novel. The author himself becomes one of the characters of the novel. The diversity of characters and narrators helps diversify the interpretations of the novel. The overall spiral framework of the novel as well as the embedded smaller frameworks through which the tales and stories are narrated blur the boarders between reality and imagination on one side and the past, present and future on the other side.

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