

The Emotional Plot in G. T. Farman's "The Palm Tree and the Neighbors": A Creative Writing Research

Islam Adil

Abstract

Emotion is an aspect in fiction that has traditionally been associated with language and fictional elements, such as characters. The present study takes emotion in relation to plot structure in "The Palm Tree and the Neighbors," by G.T. Farman, a novel acclaimed for its well-knitted plot and emotional impact. It is analyzed in terms of the "Emotional Plot" craft strategies proposed by Donald Maass in his book *The Emotional Craft of Fiction: How to Write the Story Beneath the Surface* (2016). The analysis determines a substantial authorly investment in sticking to the Three-Act structure, and in employing multiple strategies to ramp up the multitextured emotionality in the novel. To create the lasting impact, the author espoused traditional form-related elements, with emotion inducing strategies.

Key Words: The Palm Tree and the Neighbors, Three-Act plot, Emotional Plot, Creative Writing.

المستخلص

تمثل العاطفة إحدى مكونات الكتابة الروائية التي غالباً ما تكون بعلاقة مع اللغة أو عناصر الرواية مثل الشخصيات. تتناول هذه الدراسة العاطفة من خلال ارتباطها بالحبكة الروائية في "النخلة والجيران"، رواية احتفي بكونها ذات حبكة جيدة وتأثير عاطفي، تدرس في هذا البحث من منظار "الحبكة العاطفية" التي يتحدث عنها دونالد ماس في كتابه "الحرفة العاطفية للرواية: كتابة القصة تحت السطح" (٢٠١٦). بينت الدراسة إن الكاتب عمل على الحبكة الثلاثية والحبكة العاطفية من خلال اتباع استراتيجيات تكثيف العواطف.

ولخلق رواية ذات تأثير مزج الكاتب بين مستلزمات الكتابة العاطفية المتعارف عليها واستراتيجيات استدرار العواطف من خلال الحكمة.

كلمات مفتاحية: النخلة والجيران، الحكمة الثلاثية، الحكمة العاطفية، الكتابة الإبداعية.

1. Introduction

“Emotion” and “plot” are two apparently contrastive concepts when thinking about fiction writing. While an emotion is uncontainable, traditionally thought to channel through language, plot is an established element in fiction writing. The argument has always been about charging the writing with literary devices to evoke emotionality, such as metaphor and imagery, where emotions burgeon out on the level of sentence. There is also the long-overused advice of “showing” instead of “telling” as a narrative technique, where “showing” is famously advised by Chekov, saying , “don’t tell me the moon is shining, show me the glint of light on broken glass,” (quoted in Yang, 2023). Other means of conveying emotions are characters. Tondeur (2023) says that “contradictions make characters seem real and therefore relatable,” in reference to having “well-rounded” and “authentic” characters. Hence, emotionality is not new and has always been discussed in relation to language, themes, characters, and others.

The plot, as a more containable element in fiction writing, has also been discussed in a relation of opposition to emotionality. On one hand, books with less action and plot are perceived to have characters embroiled in emotionality, as in literary fiction. On the other hand, plot-driven novels are typically perceived in relation to being well-crafted, and less about emotionality. Objectively, in both cases, emotionality is relative and never set in stone. Cowgill (2020), in her discussion of the relatability of plot and emotion, says, “action carries us along; emotion adds dimension, ups the stakes, increases empathy and antipathy, and

creates meaning.” Although not new, the term “Emotional Plot” is put together by Donald Maass in his book “The Emotional Craft of Fiction: How to Write the Story Beneath the Surface” (2016), which he defines it in terms of “strategies”.

This paper is about when emotionality wedded to the plot in “The Palm Tree and the Neighbors” (2011) by G.T. Farman. It has always been praised for its well-knitted plot, but the novel has also stayed through generations of readers. This could be attributed to the well-fleshed characters, but the novel has also been adapted to the theatre and television, giving the impression its well-constructed plot and characters are not the sole reason for its unending appeal.

The analysis begins with examining the plot in terms of the Three-Act structure, which breaks down the novel into Structural Points. When it is dismantled to its elementary bare plot, then it is studied in relation to the Emotional Plot strategies proposed by Maass (2016) to explore how the author emotionally amplifies certain points in the novel. The analysis, when necessary, also looks into other devices used to magnify the emotionality, such as metaphor and syntax.

In general, the theoretical section of the paper reviews the plot structures known in craft and literary studies, such as the Five-Act and the Three-Act structures and then followed by the Emotional Plot. The practical part involves a breakdown of the novel in terms of the Three-Act structure, followed by a thorough analysis of the Emotional Plot strategies proposed by Maass (2016).

2. The Mainstream Plot Structures

Throughout the history of literary and narrative studies, there have been two plot structures that got unprecedented popularity. The most known one is the Five-Act structure which has been popularized by Shakespeare, and the Three Act structure, the one rediscovered by a genius screenwriter. Before diving into any of

these, let us examine the nature of “plot” itself and how it is different from “story”. Well, the distinction came into existence by Forster (1927: 57), who defines “story” as a “narrative of events arranged in their time sequence,” whilst a “plot” is “also a narrative of events, the emphasis falling on causality”. What makes a story then is “time”, but what makes a plot is “cause”. This distinction has led Herman and Vervaeck (2019: 12) to argue that “the distinction between temporal and causal connections is not always easy to make.” Their argument hinges on the fact that the mind is naturally cognizant of events to be “succeeding each other in time as events with a causal connection.”

Glatch (2023) believes plot to be “the skeleton” of the story. In other words, when thoughts, characters, themes, language, motifs, and literary device are set aside, there is a universal structure underlying all stories. If the plot was the skeleton, then story is whatever the skeleton dressed up in. Abstractly speaking, the plot is a line with structural points dotted on it. These points, or rather turning points, are connected by cause and effect.

Even in a literary text as ancient as Gilgamesh, there is a plot structure. There is a beginning, a middle, and an end. They are the meeting with Enkidu, culturing him and going to war, and losing. There is an “Opening”, an “Inciting Event”, a “Midpoint”, and a “Climax”, as these terms will be explained below. This three phase argument of plot was presented by Aristotle (discussed in Miyamoto, 2023). Many plot structures were made known, for different medium of storytelling and genre, but there are two that have stuck around the most. For the longest, the Five-Acts was popular. But with the rise of filmmaking, the Three-Act caught up with producers and screenwriters.

Yorke (2022:33-5) traces the Five-Act structure to as far back as the Roman drama and Horace plays. This form however was rediscovered and made popular

in the renaissance by the first editors of Shakespeare. Bunting (n.d.) says that in modern ages, it was Freytag who repopularized the form with his famous triangle. The pyramid, and despite the controversy surrounding some of the definitions, is the most widely taught and learned. Based on both Yorke (2022) and Bunting (n.d.) this is a quick rundown of this structure.

The First Act is usually the shortest and it is where the Inciting Event takes place, which is the scene, or a couple, where the conflict comes out of. The Second Act is where more complication, character development, conflict, and clashes happen, it is usually the longest Act of all. The Third Act is on the shorter side, where the protagonist and the antagonist in a big confrontation at a very intense moment. The Fourth Act is basically the aftermath of the previous Climactic scene. It shows where the events are going. The Fifth Act is where it all is resolved.

For the sake of this paper, The Three-Act form is used to identify the structural points of the novel discussed; therefore, it is furthered in more details in the following section.

2.1 The Three-Act Structure

This form is based in the Aristotelian proposal of plot structure: a beginning, a middle, and an end. By the turn of the last century, it was rediscovered in the film industry. It was then remodeled by Syd Field in his renown book about screenwriting, which had become a huge reference in film writing workshops. The biggest contribution of Field was in locating and defining the structural points, the turning points, very meticulously. In this model, it is very calculated where each turning points happens, its implications, and how it serves the entire plotline up to the resolution. Yorke (2022: 25) says this form is “the cornerstone of drama” due to

the fact that it adheres to the natural laws, where every object created has a beginning, a middle, and an end.

K.M. Weiland has taken this structure from the world of film writing to the expanding realm of literary writing; namely, novel writing, in her book *Structuring your Novel: Essential Keys for Writing an Outstanding Story* (2013).

The First Act is called the “Setup”, and it is introductory, where the characters and setting are presented. It begins with a “hook” which Weiland (2013: 90) defines as “nothing more or less than a question.” The First Act contains by the end of it the First Plot Point which is “the point of no return for your characters,” (Weiland, 2013: 78). But at some point before it the Inciting Event takes place. Weiland, 2013: 82) says it is “the moment the story officially begins”.

The Second Act is called the “Confrontation” and it is where most of the story occurs. The First Half of it is where the characters responds to the Inciting Event or the First Plot Point. It ends with a Pinch Point, which is defined by Weiland (2013: 91) as “a scene in which the antagonist is given a chance to flex his muscles and impress the reader with his scary might.” She goes on to say it is a “reminder” of what the antagonistic forces is capable of. Halfway between the First and Second Halves, the Midpoint happens. Yorke (2022: 37-8) defines the Midpoint as “the moment something profoundly significant occurs. In Titanic, the ship hits an iceberg . . .” and “there can be no return to how life was before.” Weiland (2013: 95) emphasizes that while the Midpoint follows from what has come previously, it must too be big and different from anything else. The Second Half of the Second Act is where the characters begin to act out of their own sensibilities, instead of just reacting. A Second Pinch Point occurs and this one “foreshadowing the final battle between the protagonist and the antagonist,” (Weiland, 2013: 106).

The Third Act, or the “Resolution”, begins with a turning point called the Third Plot Point. Weiland (2013: 121) defines it as “an upheaval of the gains the character thought he made.” The Climax is next to occur at the end of the Act, where the protagonist and the antagonist come in a big confrontational scene. Finally, the Resolution takes places, and it is “where everything is resolved,” (Weiland, 2013: 138).

Now this model, and the former one too, is the structure for archetypal stories. Although, this structure demarks key points, structural points, which are often associated with excessive tension and emotional impact, it does not concern itself with creating emotionality; hence, the emotional plot.

2.2 The Emotional Plot

Creating an emotional impact has always been an argument in the literature of craft and creative writing. Many would argue that emotions are conveyed through character development, thoughts, figurative language, and in many other elements. In his book, Donald Maass tackles every elements in fiction writing as a means to convey emotionality, such as mode of telling, characters, the world, and the emotional plot. He (2016: 112) argues that even “airtight plots can fail to keep us emotionally engaged.” This is how he presents the concept of “stakes” and their two types. But before going into this, let us have a look into the emotions usually generated whilst engaging with fiction.

Maass (2016: 7) distinguishes between what the reader feels, what the writer feels, and what the character feels. He writes that “what the novelist is doing, though, is not causing readers to feel as the novelist does, or as his characters do, but rather inducing for each reader a unique emotional journey through a story.” This means that there are certain choices that novelist can make to heighten the

emotionality of the text. These are tangible steps he proposes for his coined term “the emotional plot.”

It is not a structure, or a form, perse, in the traditional sense of the word, but it is rather the “strategies” to maximize the emotional impact. In particular, Maass (2016: 116) suggests playing on the Plot Points on the novel which can be “treated as emotional opportunities” or “emotion generating moments.” In the opening of his chapter “the emotional plot”, Maass (2016: 116) considers “the public stakes” or when life treats the character badly and it is tried in many ways outside its control. The opposite is the “personal stakes” and that is when the character falls into troubles as an outcome of its own decision, desires, and ideas. What Maass is at is that emotionality is always brought out of personal stakes, because the incentives of the character are at the core of it. How does it tie into the Plot Points? Well, when the Plot Points, which highly tense, happen as a result of the character’s incentives, they boost the emotionality even higher.

Maass raises six points to amplify the emotional impact of the novel, and these are the following.

1. The **Emotional Hook**: the opening is the threshold scene of the novel. It contains the “hook” or the “intrigue” as mentioned in 2.1. To capitalize on the emotional intensity of the beginning, Maass (2016: 123) suggests coupling the intrigue with “involvement” which he sets it out to be when readers “feel something about themselves”, and it is usually when basic human emotions are involved, such as love or sacrificing. He calls the traditional hook “the plot hook” and the latter “the emotional hook.”
2. **Reader-Character Bonding**: readers can bond with the protagonist for a variety of reasons, such as appearance, age, and situations. Sympathy arises when the readers identify with the hardships the protagonist is

going through (Maass, 2016: 128). But, readers can bond with the protagonist even when these commonalities are absent. Maass stresses out the point that across cultures, generation, and likeness of troubles, readers can bond with the protagonist. He brings up the example of some young adult fiction, where he bonds with their protagonists, on the basis of their human “yearning” for things, even when the object desired is unknown. Maass (2016: 130) says “they have a heart and they yearn. They both feel deeply. They both want things, and we feel the ache of that yearning before we even know what they are yearning for.” In other words, when there is a state of emotion a character, or characters, is having, especially a universal type of state, such as aspiring, yearning, sacrificing, and even bonding, which inspires more bonding between the character and the reader.

3. The **Midpoint**: the Midpoint was touched upon above as well, as an essential turning point in fiction. It is already a Plot Point recognized for its emotional potency. Maass (2016: 133) defines it as “a moment of despair from which a new direction will emerge.” It is vital to the emotionality of a book because what follows is entirely different from what precedes it.
4. **Loss and Defeat**: instances of loss, defeat, death, and falling are acute and can change the compass of any story. As much as they are crippling in life, they too cause the story to take a halt. At such moments, the protagonist is plunged in emotions. Maass (2016: 139) says that at such moments “the past is erased. The future is void. What a character feels is not only insecurity, loss, or grief. It is the end of identity.” Therefore, it is up to the writer to double on such instances to engender emotional effect.

5. **Moments of Catalyst and Catharsis:** a Catalyst is when an event occurs that brings out a response in the protagonist. The Inciting Event, discussed above, is a Catalyst. The Climax is traditionally associated with the Cathartic feeling ensuing from it. Maass (2016: 148) believes moments of Catalyst and of Catharsis reoccur throughout a book of fiction. And it is this recurrence that reestablishes emotionality in it.
6. **The Ending:** In a general sense, Maass associated it with the feeling of transformation the character has caused and felt after he or she done what was done in the fictional world. On one hand, Maass (2016: 206) associates the outer transformation which has been caused by the story problem the protagonist solved with his or her inner journey. On the other hand, what good has it had on others is crucial too. He (2016: 207) writes “the job is not ended at happily ever after, the happiness of your protagonist, but when we know that everyone in your protagonist’s world will be ok, too.”

3.1 The Three-Act Structure in “The Palm Tree and the Neighbors”

The opening in the Palm Tree and the Neighbors is packed with conflict at its first sentence, which bears witness to it. Selimah and her stepson, Hussein, have an altercation over some missing money, a recurring one as can be summoned from the witness statement. The stepson swears up and down that he has nothing to do with any robbery, but apparently it is not the first time her hard-earned money is robbed. The Intrigue is set right at the beginning of it, and a few pages later, the Inciting Even takes place. Mustafa, the dealer, comes back from the begone days to give her a tirade on the changes happening outside Selimah’s fort.

The Inciting Even in the novel is when two different world collide in one scene of extreme contrast. Mustafa is a scammer, a man of the world, and at the

opposite extreme is a woman, naïve and secluded. This scamming scene gets the ball rolling for an entire story, in which money and the lack of it is the prime incentive for the characters. Selimah is chiseled out of money, which makes Hussein have less to steal, and eventually to his big loss and moral decline.

The First Plot Point arises way ahead of the Inciting Event. A scene off the page is recalled with some as the change in the destiny happens in real time. Hussein has stumbled upon a runaway girl, Tamadher, and took responsibility over her livelihood and safety, in promise to marry her. The young couple rent a room at Nashmiah's, an old acquaintance, irreputable, and strong-willed woman. This change of residency will put more financial burdens on the boy, whose life is never the same again. The appearance of Tamadher will later cause a money-related friction between Hussein and Mustafa, his contender on Selimah's limited resources.

Halfway through the first half of the Second Act, the First Pinch Point occurs. It is when Hussein is reminded by Nashmiah of his financial incapacibilities. Given the circumstances of his unemployment, it sets him on a delirious quest to get money, which culminates at the Midpoint.

The Midpoint is when the two forces feeding off Selimah meet at night in a fanatic scene, driven by an intermingling direct interior monologues in one lengthened paragraph. On this night, Mustafa has gone into his rented chamber in Selimah's house where he hoards the goods he gets from the British Troops; in turn, she has been praying in secret for him to just leave before nightfall, lest it stains her reputation to be alone with a man. Hussein has been eyeing the hoarded goods and wants to steal as much as he can to relieve some of his financial pressures. Each one of them is desperate for something, and their different routes of desperation, collide in one grand moment.

The Second Pinch Point is a moment where Hussein is taken a jab at his manhood again. Mahmood, the thug who larks about with a combative knife to the horror of the neighborhood, humbles him by dragging Selimah's reputation through the mud, in the teashop, in front of every customer there. To his absolute mortification, Hussen has nothing in defense. This moments foreshadows the Climax, which will have him determined to defeat his foe for one last time.

The Third Plot Point is a long one on the cusp between reality and hallucination. After he has risked it all for her, he comes back to the rented room, with Tamadher, his girl, nowhere to be. His hero instinct get crushed by her leaving, with no word, no closure, just when he was finally able to buy her all she wanted.

The Climax occurs a scene away from the ending. The thug has killed Hussein's friend and neighbor, and it is the final stroke. He tracks the thug down to a hotel, stabs him in the restroom, and he avenges not only his friend but his wounded dignity.

The Resolution is just a few sentences long where the protagonist walks out the steps of the hotel after the murder, which has not been noticed by anyone.

It is obvious that the author was meticulous about sticking to the traditional form of storytelling. The Plot Points are clear, foregrounded, and timed almost perfectly for the Three Acts of the novel. In literary criticism, Farman has always been praised for having written a solid structure for this debut novel. (2020) غانم brings up a couple of critical sayings on this aspect, such as being described as "a complete technical structure". By the end of the article, he attributes this painstaking adherence to structure to the author having had a long experience with international literature.

3.2 The Emotional Plot in “The Palm Tree and the Neighbors”

After identifying the structural points, let us examine how each is distended to achieve the maximum emotional impact. From the opening up to the ending, what are the strategies adopted by the author to engender and further the emotionality throughout his novel? This analysis includes picking out the strategy, examining it in the context of the story, the plot structure, and the style of writing if relevant.

3.2.1 The Emotional Hook

The opening scene is a reactive one where “the neighbors” respond to a recurring fight. They exude in their reaction a lot of resentment and judgement.

Before the sun sets, the neighbors heard her say:

“The gypsy is the lady of the neighborhood,” the lame Assuma said.

“A khan is not a khan,” said Hammadi, the coachman in the stable, which was next to her house. (Farman, 2001: 13).

It is a brawl that is conveyed through dialogue which puts the readers right into the psyches of the characters, into their perceptions of one another, and their intricate relationship. This is the “hook” or “trigger” as explained in 2.2.

“Where has the money gone, my dear? Where?” She said, as she was taking off the black garment of baking.

“I don’t know. This is my trousers. Come and search them.”

Before the reader has any idea of who those fighting characters are, mistrust arises, sets the building block to the general perception of this wacky relationship. The two characters before us have a huge money problem and probably, both thievery and stinginess, that drives one party to sneak and the other party to doubt. Right off the bat, there is a lot to unpack, a question, a confused relationship, and snoopy neighbors.

In order for the trigger to be emotional, it has to cause the readerly “emotional involvement” to transpire, as explained in 2.2. This novel sparks a filial trouble, misunderstanding and incertitude, within the first three pages. Hussein is a fatherless man who has been provided for by his stepmother, Selimah, for a couple of years since adolescence. Apparently, he is a prodigal who pays off with wrongdoing. What is tempting is the complication. There is connection and disconnection between the two. On one hand, they are family. They go back to better days. But there is, on the other hand, a fissure, mistrust. It is this juxtaposition that would entice any readerly encounter.

The two caveats for an emotional opening are there, but there is one more touch that creates an emotional impact on the third page of the novel as well. In her solitude and quagmire, the author likens Selimah to her “cretinous palm tree”.

“She sighed and opened her eyes seeing her cretinous palm tree kneeling down near the wall in the middle of a black circle; a deserted barren palm tree like her living with her in this big house deaf and dumb enduring all the dirty water she threw in its bed. Summer and winter passed and it did not bear a spadix or a green leaf,” (Farman, 2011: 15).

This metaphor has two effects. On one hand, it shapes up the character of Selimah in light of the palm tree. On the surface, the character is lonely and infertile which mirror “deserted barren palm tree”. But on a deeper level, Selimah, there is a semiotic relationship between the tree and her. It lives off of “the dirty water she threw in its bed”. الخزاعي (2016) comments on this saying that the author wants to this palm tree to have “a sensual and a material significance to Selimah, the baker, and the Baghdadi society at the beginning of the forties and the war II.” This has the effect of grounding the story in a place and in a thing. The tree is a fulcrum to a complex story, a spindle on which the story is threaded.

The palm tree foreshadows Selimah in her one sided relationships. It stands for an image of desertion and of futile efforts. The “dirty water” does not bloom “did not bear a spadix”, the same way her hard-earned money is scammed and stolen throughout the novel. The opening in the novel has an everlasting effect pulling back and forth between tension and groundedness. Hence, the novel starts with emotionality on high tone, on both the levels of the plot and the devices.

3.2.2 Reader-Character Bonding

In “The Palm Tree and the Neighbors”, the characters are in destitute, squashed by a depleting war in the background of their story, and tangled up with it. They often adopt manipulation tactics to gain what they want, such as Mustafa with his social climbing endeavors. And they project their frustrations on one another, squabbling, gloating, and backbiting. Under the thumb of the British Troops, they all struggle both socially and financially. In his eternal dislike of his stepmother, there seems to be a lot of harsh interactions, fueled by misconducts and misjudgments. But there are tender scenes where Hussein lets go of hatred and bonds with her. These are significantly emotional in the novel and they are strategically placed by the author. Such scene are often an opportunity to take a breath and reflect; meaning, they come after a long sequence of action-packed scenes to give a moment of relief. They happen when the action is on halt and the characters are finally internalizing the result of what they have done. Often in such scenes there is an undercurrent emotion in them. In the two scenes below, the protagonist is regretful. In the first one, he regrets scheming to rob his stepmother. In the second, he regrets selling the house and losing her as family.

Right after the First Pinch Point in the Second Act, Hussein has made his mind to steal from Selimah on Eid Eve. His scheming to steal however falls short when he hears her sobbing.

“She was a black round heap like dough bowls when she covered them on the days of winter to be leavened. He entered the room and came closer to the bed, he heard her faint crying and her heavy breathing,” (Farman, 2011: 144).

In this scene, it is the first time in the novel where they soften up to each other. Earlier, she has had a lot of judgement coming his way concening his refraining from fasting and reading the Koran. And mixed up with his intentions to rob her of her hard-earned money, such a moments has a more impactful tone.

When she turned her face a little to him, he saw her red wet nose and her sticky shell-like eyes. He heard her answering in an unclear voice:

“Thus! I feel depressed.”

“It is okay, everything can be corrected.. happy days.”

“Many happy returns,” (Farman, 2011: 145).

Bonding is reciprocated. When he no longer wants to steal anything, she lets down her guard.

She was crying bitterly like a woman stabbed in her heart... He looked at his pale face in the mirror. Then he heard her calling him:

“Hussein.”

He answered her.

“I thought you went out,” she said.

She stretched her hand with a red note.

“Mami, I don’t need any money.”

For the first time in his life, he said that to her. And for the first time in her life, she answered him.

“Take it, my dear ... Where will you get money for the feast?”(Farman, 2011: 146).

Instead of stealing her money as he has planned, it becomes a moment of huge empathy. This time, he restrains his desire to snatch the much-needed money, and she gives it away willingly. Stylistically, there is an emphasis on metaphorically shaping the scene. Externally, she is likened to “a black heap like dough bowls,” and internally as “a woman stabbed in her heart.” These metaphors forces the image of a defeated woman, fragile as dough bowls, and broken like as if she was stabbed in the heart.

After making his mind up to kill Mahmoud, he goes back again to his stepmother, an attempt at reconciliation. Although he has gotten all the money he needed out of selling the house, he gives up, he tracks his stepmother down to her new rental, and offers to take back the house, and return the downpayment. It is a big moment of bonding because he no longer needs what he has been striving to gain the entire book if it was sacrificing her, the one he hated with passion.

“Come back for my father’s sake. These days, I have a lot of dreams about him,” he said passionately.

She burst out crying, bitter crying which would wash every bit of hatred in his heart.

“Do not cry. People will hear you. Keep silent,” he embraced her and kissed her headdress. “I have no one in life but you.”

He sat down on the bed behind her.

“Whom do you have in life other than me?” she asked, as she swallowed her tears (Farman, 2011: 285-6).

The scene above marks a significant shift from “Want”, “Desire”, “Goal”, to “Need”. A Want is defined by Weiland (2023) as the “thing your character want,” and as “a desire arising from a limited perspective.” Hussein, and since the start wants money. He has always wanted money, to sustain his basic need, and to win the approval of others, such as Tamadher. A Desire is defined as “what your

character wants withing the context of the story.” By this definition, he desires to be a man, a provider, a competent partner. A Goal is “the practical manifestation of the desire.” In this case, Hussein’s goal is to stay with and marry Tamadher. However, in the two scenes above, getting in terms with his stepmother is neither Want nor Desire and Goal, it is something far more emotional, it is Need. Weiland (2023) again defined it as “the truth,” or “the viewpoint that is necessary to bring wholeness to the character’s inner self, to heal the pertinent wounds of the past.” It is Selimah that he truly needs to come to terms with, so as to heal.

This shift and ripple in his character development would resonate with the readerly, because it is the inner journey that is the truest to people, reveals itself at these moments, it is not the show of and virility that he performs to keep up and maintain a façade, it is what he truly is as a man.

3.2.3 The Clashing Midpoint

Three urgent desires crash in the middle of the novel, a steaming point, at the Midpoint. It is a conduit where the novel takes a big turn in an entirely different direction.

Many obstacles, ranging from joblessness to the urgent need of money has Hussein under an insurmountable financial pressure. He plans to steal from the goods the dealer has been hoarding in the empty chamber in the house. Mustafa, the dealer, on the other hand, has been hiding his true secular identity from Selimah, to swindle and deceive her by appealing to her religiosity. One night, he goes into the chamber and drinks himself to oblivion. Deep into the night, he has not left yet, and in her bed, Selimah prays for his departure, to stave off any suspicions. What if any of the neighbors knows a stranger is in her house at night? What if Hussein is home before Mustafa has left?

He returns home with the intention to finally break in and steal. He takes off his dishdasha off the hook and ties it into a sack; meanwhile, Selimah, in her bed, is interpreting every sound coming her way from downstairs. When he finally goes in, the dark comes between them. He shuffles into the darkness, turns down the lever, and the door opens. On his drunken side, Mustafa thinks its Selimah walking in to give herself up to him.

Now in order to study the intensity of emotions at this pivotal moment, there are interesting plot and style related points to make. From the moment of the Inciting Event, the stakes shoot higher the further it progresses. Due to the war, the country is in a huge depression and the scant job opportunities that comes from the British troops seem to never find its way to Hussein. Tamadher whom he takes for a partner is incentivized by Nashmiah to demand more. It leaves him with one option and it is to steal again. Mustafa is scamming Selimah in a lot of ways. He scammed her out of money and place, wearing his godly man persona to trap her even more.

Maass think of the Midpoint as a “mirror moment,” and it perfectly is in this novel. Hussein is possessed by money, the money she has, or she is guarding. Mustafa desires the feminine in her that he has yet to scam. Both men have their desires in collision at the point that is the gullible Selimah.

Stylistically, Farman writes it distinctively, by braiding the interior monologues of the three characters into one chunky piece. For four long pages, the monologues of the characters amass in one long paragraph. It makes the narrative turgid with details and information as many points of view are coming at once. It forces the reading process to slow down, to disintegrate the inner speech of the three characters, and to comprehend the extent to which their fears and desires are caused to and aimed at each other. Basically, the author here is infringing a cardinal

writing rule and that is to “start a new paragraph when you switch speakers” (Ellis, 2015). This is an excerpt from the Midpoint:

“Mustafa held his breath waiting for the next step. It came at last. Hussein asked himself: “maybe he has moved. Today? Not reasonable!” He pushed the door by his hand. The door sent squeaking that Selimah heard. “Oh, my dear, he may go out.” She said. Mustafa heard it. He constrained himself and moved his weight on the other rump. He stayed alert. Hussein decided to enter. He pushed the door again. Mustafa became attentive and happy. “This is she. She is impatient. Is there a woman who can stay patient?” He waited for her voice. He found it slow,” (Farman, 2011:180).

There is one other quality to the style of the Midpoint and it is the use of short sentences. It is common knowledge in craft that intense action, packed conflict, and quickness come in short sentences. An emotional Midpoint would have required all of that. Hence, the sentence structure here is less draggy and less complicated than anywhere else in the novel, besides the Climax. There is one more benefit to this style of writing and it is to show rather than tell the inner conflict. Harnby (2021) says “because the lines are short, the breaths come quickly, and it is there that the author can show rather than tell a character’s internal experience in a way that is rich in mood and voice.”

As much as it is an emotional point, due to the nature of the Midpoint, the author amplifies the emotional hit by removing paragraph splits and having it in short sentences.

3.2.4 Loss and Defeat

In the novel, there are many moments of defeat, small and big ones. Almost all the characters, main and subsidiary, lose something, either of themselves, their belongings, or loved ones. Selimah loses her money, reputation and house, Mustafa

loses his deceitfully earned money. The coachman and the other neighbors lose the stable, Hussein loses his beloved, the house, his stepmother and innocence, Sahib loses his life, and almost all the characters lose their security and sense of living due to the war.

But there are profound instances of defeat as well, not only changes direction and perspectives, but marks a big loss of innocence, which makes it this much impactful. In order to save his relationship, Hussein has settled on selling the house and leaving his stepmother. For the protagonist in “The Palm Tree and the Neighbors”, there are two moments of big losses, losing Tamadher, and then losing Sahib. These two are significant because something has been altered forever, his “sense of self” as Maass (2016: 168) puts it.

One day, he returns to her with clothes and jewelry, all she has asked for, all he fantasized about getting her, to find his beloved nowhere to be. Structurally, this is the Third Plot Point before the stakes increase to an unsurpassable level anywhere else in the book. He has lost her, and love is replaced by despair and frustration.

“Hence he knew that the way to her was closed by a thousand doors and he had no hope to get anything. He felt a wave of shivering and anger carrying his body in the current of unconscious movement like a fish shaking for the last time on a dry ground,” (Farman,2011: 254).

Life has changed forever. The world spins. He throws a tantrum. There is no way his plan has been skewed, until he gets a blow on the head. For such a profound moment of loss, Maass (2016: 165-6) would describe it as “the past is erased. The future is void. What a character feels is not only insecurity, loss, and grief. It is the end of an identity. Not just a moment of reckoning but a hurtling over a cliff.”

“His consciousness crept to him through that opening of light which was made by the whispering. He could open his eyes and saw himself sitting on the ground. When he raised his head, he saw aunt Nashmiah and another person who seemed huge, long legs,” (Farman, 2011: 255).

In the following chapter, the author displays the protagonist shock and reaction to the loss. To further hone the impact, the author shifts to the close third person point of view. O’Callaghan (2023) defines close third person as when the author “moves the point of view from outside the characters to inside one character’s head. The reader has access to that character’s emotions, thoughts and assumptions.” In other words, the protagonist is still referred to as by third person pronouns but his inner conflict, feelings and thoughts are fully revealed. Here is how it is with Hussein:

“How was he cheated by this way? He did not find a reasonable excuse to leave her . . . he prepared in his mind what he would say to her even if she was angry with him because he was late. .. he would make her happy and prosperous like any film star,” (Farman, 2011: 258-9).

The author turns to interior monologue, a technique used in the Climax as well.

“I will marry her. Why not? Who knows she is . . . let her come. Hurry Tamadher, my dear . . . my soul,” (Farman, 2011, p. 260).

One other salient feature of the style is the fact that thoughts, conflict, and inner struggle, are all presented in long chunky paragraphs, that would otherwise have been disintegrated. Emotionality runs in long bulks and so it is written to stream.

The other enormous loss is of Sahib, which as will be seen below, is one in a nexus of Catalysts.

The teacup shook in Hussein's hand:

"Sahib's funeral.. Sahib died?"

"Died? They killed him."

"Who killed him?"

"The son of the crossed-eyed woman killed him."

A burning numbness crossed against his neck and up his back. His knees became so weak that he sat again, putting the shaking cup on the sleazy reed mat," (Farman, 2011: 269).

With these big losses, there is something to notice as well. It is not only the shift in the "sense of self" but in the way the protagonist expresses the intensity of his emotions, taking a route significantly different to the Climax.

3.2.5 The Catalyst and the Catharsis

It was clarified in 2.2.5 that the Catalyst is a moment of change when the normal conditions of the characters is flipped over at something new or "something happens that changes their status quo," (Barsby, 2024). Maass (2016: 171) describes the Catalyst as the "match that lights the fuse." In other words, it is an upsetting occurrence that charges the protagonist with emotions. It is necessarily followed by a Cathartic moment. Maass (2016: 171) describes it as the "the consequence," and "the freedom following the bang."

In "The Palm Tree and the Neighbors", there are many Catalysts that culminate at the releasing point of the Climax. To start, the Inciting Event in it, the first Catalyst, is when the secluded world of Selimah is rocked by the disrupting visit of the dealer, Mustafa. On this event, (كاظم, 2018: 61) says that the dealer is the "messenger of change" who reports to her the changes she has obviously missed on and the one who entices her to step up to. This main Catalyst in her life is surrounded by other Catalysts as well, such as the selling of the stable, which

rocks the world of the other neighbors on the same economic status. Down the line, other Catalysts burgeon out of the story, such as the murder of Sahib, the runaway of Tamadher, and the degrading scene in the tea shop. The further the journey into the novel, more such incentivizing instances turn up. It is clear that the Inciting Event is not the only Catalyst, but a nexus of other ones follow in, heating up the story, to ensue more actions and emotional connectivity.

The culmination of all the Catalysts occur in the penultimate scene when the protagonist kills Mahmood in a hotel restroom. Before going into the Cathartic moment, let us examine a significant Catalyst, the coffee shop humiliation scene, the Second Pinch Point in the Second Act.

**“She got married to a second husband and her hair is grey.”
He laughed with rancour. Being stabbed, Hussein kept silent.
How would he answer him.**

“They say she was on intimate terms with him before marriage.”

“Mahmood, do not bear people’s sin.” (Farman, 2011: 229).

Of course, the excerpt above demonstrates the huge indignity Hussein goes through by bringing up the subject of Selimah being an unhonorable woman. This scene is public, the humiliation is public, all the goers of the tea shop witness it, and the Catharsis in the Third Act directly comes from it. There is a second Catalyst in it and it is when Hussein learns about the murder. The feud between Sahib and Mahmood dates back to earlier in the book. As much as Mahmood is the thug in the neighborhood, Sahib is, on the opposite end, the philanthropist. Here is an earlier tension:

“Nearly since three o’clock.”

“The bicycle was parked in the café,” The son of the cross-eyed woman said.

“It is not my fault. The bicycle was hired.”

“Is this because of your many hired bicycles? They are all lined up the wall all the time,” (Farman, 2011: 54).

The one above causes friction, which will lead to the murder, which stands for another Catalyst. One of the best emotion generating strategies is to foreshadow the Climax in the first quarter of the book. This instance does not only foreshadow the murder, but the Climax itself, the second murder in the novel.

In addition to the nerve wracking fact that the thug has murdered his friend and humiliated him in the teashop, Mahmood embodies a lot of his disappointments.

“He sat straight and said to himself, “this will be mine if I kill Mahmood ... she will be instead of Tamadher”. He remember the girl who wrapped the dress in the general store and he remembered the gentle smile in her eyes... and one day I will go to Nashmiah and pull the knife at her... she .. all of you are sheep ... but first I must pull the knife at Mahmood .. I will stab him to revenge at Sahib .. it is possible when Sahib knows he will be happy in his grave ... the dead know everything ...,” (Farman, 2011: 297).

In the culmination of Catalysts throughout the novel, there is something significant about Hussein’s way of expressing himself, and it is his “emotional range”, a term referenced in Ackerman and Puglisi (2019: 4) concerning the degree of responsiveness a character may have to a situation. In the Cathartic moment, it is killing , a very intense response. But going back a bit earlier, the author has prepared the readerly for it. The first scene is a row, a recurring one, where he openly defends himself. Before he is left and the murder of his friend, Hussein and Mustafa go in a big brawl where the former threatens with a knife. This is another way of showing, before it actually happens at the Climax, the length to which the protagonist can go in his outrage.

3.2.6 The Morality of the Ending

In his reflection of ending, Maass (2016: 206) attributes happy endings to if the protagonist has created peace in the fictional world. And peace is only partly achieved when “inner struggle is complete, and a new person steps forward. Not only plot problems solved, but when a protagonist achieves wholeness, too.” How whole is the protagonist of *The Palm Tree and the Neighbors* after murdering the thug? From his direct interior monologue, Husseins articulates the fact that it is revenge he is after. He is after the girl the thug was with, he looks down at them all as “sheep”, and he promises it will be Nashmiah to “pull the knife at” next. He is revenging his loss of Tamadher and Sahib, as well as his dignity. As nefarious as murder is, there seems to be satisfaction he is looking forward too, the ecstasy of being able to kill those who hurt him. It is a form of transformation, even if it was not “wholeness”.

The other side of a great ending is how good the protagonist has made the fictional world for other characters. Maass (2016: 207) puts it like this “the job is not finished at the happiness of your protagonist, but when we know that everyone else in your protagonist’s world will be okay, too.” By killing the thug, how this murder has changed the world for the other characters? On the face of it, yes, by killing the thug, no more innocent people are going to be killed by the thug. But does it completely morally sit with everyone reading the novel? It is obvious that there is a very thin line between morality and immorality in a world governed by war and chaos, like this fictional world.

The moral question is central to the ending as much as it is to the other ideas and actions of the protagonist. Was it immoral to rob his stepmother when all his attempt to get a job were futile in the midst of war? It is obvious it was the need to provide for another poor woman when he robbed his poor stepmother. It is well-

justified throughout the novel why murdering Mahmood is well-deserved. It is when the end is moral, but the means is not.

4. Conclusions

1. Farman doubles up on the emotion-generating strategies in the opening of the novel, by stressing on a filial conflict as a way to draw in the readers, in addition to the traditional “trigger” which starts off novels.
2. There are pitiful moments of loss and defeat, as well as heart-warming instances of bonding, which create an emotional contrast throughout the novel. Such moments are often carried out through a literary device, metaphor.
3. The Midpoint is a knot of emotional intertwining between the major characters. Narrative techniques, such as the woven interior monologues, magnify the tension and anticipation, in addition to hopping in point of view.
4. The Climax is where the author has taken the protagonist to the farthest point possible, achieving a bedazzling Cathartic moment, long after building up so many Catalysts throughout.
5. In addition to writing a well-knitted plot in the form of the Three-Act and, and employing emotion-generating strategies, Farman takes literary devices, such as metaphor, and linguistic means such as shorting of sentences at pivotal moments to heighten the emotionality.

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