

Identifying Character Presentation and Motherhood Issue Through the Technique of Focalization in *The Witch of Portobello* by Paulo Coelho

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ABSTRACT:

The present research investigated the narrative perspective or focalization and motherhood issue inside the novel entitled the *Witch of Portobello* by Paulo Coelho. The discussion focused on the main character in the story to reveal the character's traits and her motherhood portrayal through focalization technique. The research utilized qualitative method particularly textual analysis framed by Genette's (1983) and Culler's (1997) focalization as the major theory. The result of the present research showed that Athena, the main character in the novel, that were presented to be a strong, independent woman with paranormal abilities who was brave enough to take dangerous risks and difficult paths to satisfy her curiosity. It was also revealed that the focalizations presented Athena to portray the traditional myth of motherhood.

Keywords: *Character Presentation, Motherhood, Narrative Perspective, Focalization, Literature*

INTRODUCTION

As novel has become the dominant literary work since the twentieth century, narrative studies and theory play an important role in literary education (Culler, 1997). Following that notion, narrative theorists have been improving narrative related studies rather significantly in the last decades. It has been constantly refined and has gained new developments adopted in the contemporary fiction writing and it also has been improved with new insights into older works (Nieragden, 2002).

In narrative, focalization has a great role in settling the overall effects of the story (Culler, 1997). By referencing Genette (1983), Culler (1997) argues that focalization is a major revision of the theory of point of view that leads to its own interesting problem which is the concept of internal and external focalization. Focalization or voice(s) can set up the mood of the story, the feelings or the motivations about how the events flow. Voices, analyzed from focalization,

will determine the perspective of the story.

Regarding focalization and voice in narrative, the novel entitled *the Witch of Portobello* (2007) by Paulo Coelho shows some aspects that make it appropriate to be the corpus of a research based on the topic. In the case of this Coelho's novel, all the voices from different perspectives tell events concerning on the main character named Athena. In this novel, Coelho tries to piece together a series of events concerning the main character into a story, while the main character does not share a thing. So, here, Coelho leaves many viewpoints that are possible to be analyzed.

Through these many perspectives in the novel, some issues arise. The perspectives generate feminist issues portrayed by Athena. One of them is motherhood. Therefore, besides analyzing the character presentation, this research also takes a lead on analyzing the gender performance which is also based on the descriptions from the focalizers.

By connecting focalization to characterization and surfaced issues in the novel, this research is expected to enrich and expand the study of narrative theory in literature especially in the context of narrative perspective. This research digs up deeply on narrative perspective which is expected to give a different view on a technique of focalization.

FINDING AND DISCUSSION

1. Focalizers' View on the Main Character

This section covers some things that present Athena's characteristic taken from the view of fourteen focalizers. These focalizers include the people who took a large or little part in the journey that Athena experienced. The depictions these focalizers provide are both positive and negative or only positive depending on their own views and their relation proximity towards Athena as the main character.

a. Heron Ryan

Heron Ryan is a 44-year-old journalist. Heron implied that Athena was a brave,

confident woman who was unpredictable, independent, and wise. Athena, in Heron's view was someone who "*would have battled on to the end, wasting her energy and her joy on trying to prove something that no one, absolutely no one, was prepared to believe.*" (p.93). The line suggests that Athena was brave and adamant. From the way Heron shared the story, Athena was someone who was brave enough to try to resurrect an ancient tradition which was hardly acceptable by society. The tradition involved worshipping a female god called the Great Mother. Not only was it against the church, but also she lived in the twenty-first century where most people do not believe in such tradition any more. Therefore, demonstrating that she was regularly doing a ritual was quite a risk, let alone trying to resurrect it. Heron also mentioned that Athena's thinking was not ordinary and it made her unpredictable. Athena thought of things differently from most people but in a good way.

a. Andrea McCain

Andrea McCain is a 32-year-old actress. Andrea never liked Athena since the first time they met and vice versa. Apart from the fact that Andrea had learnt so much from Athena, enough for her to respect Athena, her dislike of Athena never changed. She thought that Athena was a charmer who was mysterious and unreliable. Athena was a charmer in a way that she enchanted many men.

Andrea sharing the way Athena hid her real motives in sacred deeds implies that Andrea saw her to be unreliable. Andrea kept describing Athena to be one who was capable to induce people, including Andrea who although hated her, to follow her path. Enigmatically, Athena was also told to be religious. She went to church regularly until she was not welcome anymore. She also admired St. Therese of Lisieux which Andrea thought to be contradicting what Athena had been teaching. It suggests the idea that Andrea saw Athena as unreliable.

Furthermore, Andrea described Athena to be a mysterious woman. No one, including Andrea, could read

Athena's unusual mind or predict what she planned to do. For instance, Andrea was confused when she first met Athena and the first thing Athena did was sitting in silence. This makes Athena to be unexpected and odd. Athena was also mysterious in a way that she never showed her emotion. Andrea depicted that Athena always seemed calm. It was difficult to know whether she was angry, ashamed, or sad.

b. Deidre O'Neill

Deidre O'Neill who is also known as Edda is a doctor and Athena's teacher who taught Athena about soul, magic and the concept of female god called the Mother. Athena respected and trusted Edda with her heart. She would share to Edda her emotions and insecurities that she never showed anyone else.

Edda viewed Athena as a strong young woman with thoughts that were ahead of her time. Athena's tendency to think ahead of her time refers to the idea that, first, Athena was searching of spirituality in a new direction by returning to a primitive religion from

the past when religions were not “contaminated by the structures of power.” Second, Athena did what she thought was right regardless what other people believed. She is different from today’s people whose thoughts are still influenced by what other people think.

Nevertheless, Edda confessed that Athena was indiscreet in some ways. As described by Edda, Athena was too fascinated by what she had discovered that she took the risk to come out even though there was a possibility that some people were not ready to accept what she had been practicing.

c. Samira R. Khalil

Samira R. Khalil is 47 years old. She is Athena’s adoptive mother and a housewife. The mother-daughter relationship between Samira and Athena was positive. Samira was supportive of Athena, she could accept her for what she was, and she would do anything for her daughter even though she was adopted and was a daughter of a gypsy.

In Samira’s perspective, Athena was a very stubborn daughter who

always chose difficult paths. She tried to advise Athena to live her life normally but Athena was adamant. Athena was always determined about what she thought was right to do and no one could change her mind, as Samira put it: “*Knowing my daughter as I did, I realized that there was no point in arguing with her about this.*” (p. 85)

d. Lukas Jessen-Petersen

Lukas is an engineer and Athena’s ex-husband. Lukas’ depiction on Athena not only confirms about her audacity, but also her independence, her protective instinct, and her support towards him. During his time together with Athena, Athena always encouraged him. He said she was his “light”. Furthermore, Lukas shared that Athena had an instinct to protect the people that she loved. Lukas also shared that Athena herself told him that she did not need protection from men. This implies that Athena was indeed an independent woman.

However, Athena was not perfect. Lukas’ perspective suggests that

Athena was egocentric. He thought that Athena might never love him and she never cared about him. He felt a lack of attention from her. The day he talked to her about getting a divorce, Lukas mentioned that Athena was so calm and did not even ask him to stay although he wished her to. Athena's emotion was a mystery to him. Later on, Lukas revealed that it was not that she did not love him. It was because she kept the pain to herself until one day she let it all out which implies Athena to be stoic.

e. Father Giancarlo Fontana

Father Giancarlo Fontana was a 72-year-old minister who wedded Athena and Lukas. Father Giancarlo viewed Athena as a woman who had a strong soul and whose ambition was to be a saint. Athena was a very good woman, she would not break a bond with anyone in her life no matter how upset she was with them because “...for Athena, breaking family ties was possibly the gravest sin anyone could commit” (p. 43). Meanwhile, Father Giancarlo stated Athena having

a strong soul by referring to the way Athena did not let herself be controlled by her feelings. She controlled them instead. Father Giancarlo explained that only a human with a strong soul who was capable of doing that.

f. Pavel Podbielski

Pavel described about Athena's belief in old traditions with dancing, her stoicism, and her instability. Athena and Pavel both shared an opinion that extinct traditions were not actually gone. They continued to exist through communities that kept trying to make them alive. However, he was careful in delivering his knowledge about dancing to Athena because he saw Athena to be unstable and ‘easily influenced’ by things that she heard. In addition, he explained that Athena was a stoic. She could conceal her anger or emotion in silence. It was seen when Athena told him about the priest who refused her communion and how she cursed in the church because of that. Pavel said that she talked about all of it ‘without a flicker of emotion’.

g. Peter Sherney

Peter Sherney was a bank manager for a branch in Holland Park, London. Since the first time Athena worked in the office, Peter saw her to be a hardworking, restless woman. Peter found out that Athena was a good fortune to his office. Athena changed from someone who was reserved to very communicative. He was very grateful with that change because she did not only change herself but also other employees. She shared with others about her dancing which they followed. It turned out that the ritual gave them passion in working which made their productivity increase. That being said, Athena was actually benevolent for contributing a success to the place she was working in.

h. Nabil Alaihi

Nabil Alaihi was a Bedouin who had an expertise of doing calligraphy. Nabil learned Athena's personality through her writing. Nabil explained that Athena was quite aware that she was surrounded by people who loved her and he also could see right away the magical gifts she

possessed. Nabil knew her gifts might end up being a disaster for her. Another thing he learned about Athena's personality was that she found difficulties in trying to be patient while learning calligraphy. Patience was an essential element in writing calligraphy. Hence, Nabil shared that Athena learned very hard to control herself to be calm which suggests that Athena was determined and was willing to work hard.

i. Vosho "Bushalo"

Vosho was a Rom Baro, a gipsy tribal leader, who owned a restaurant in Transylvania. After Athena decided to search for her birth mother who was a gipsy, she visited Vosho at his restaurant.

Vosho kept repeating the word "intellectual" to describe Athena. It implies his impression towards her even though that did not make her look any good to him. It was described that Athena came wearing a skirt which was not long enough and she was dressed in red, the color which, in the gipsy tradition, was only used for a

wedding. In this matter, Athena could be considered slightly indifferent.

j. Liliana

Liliana was a gipsy seamstress who was Athena's birth mother. Since the first time Liliana saw Athena when she had already been an adult, her impression was that her daughter had become an independent woman. It could be based on the fact that Athena came looking for her birth mother on her own. Apart from her independence, Athena was straightforward. During their reconciliation, Liliana felt wounded twice for some things that Athena said to her. Despite that, Athena was actually a forgiving person. Athena found Liliana's act for abandoning her was irresponsible but from Liliana's perspective, Athena never resented her.

k. Lella Zainab

Lella Zainab is a 64-year-old numerologist. Lella's intervention of the story line was not much. She was simply asked to describe Athena through the numbers provided. She

read Athena through the numbers of her day, month, and year of birth.

Lella explained in numerology that Athena had a maximum number of nine and a minimum number of eleven. Nine determined that Athena was uncommon, optimistic, sociable, generous, and popular. While eleven signified Athena's longing of leadership and her enthusiasm on magic through what she creates positive energy for the people around her. It made her "*subject to envy, sadness, introversion, and impulsive decision.*" (p. 13).

l. Antoine Locadour

Antoine Locadour was a 74-year-old historian from France. In fact, Antoine was an indirect relation to Athena because he knew her from Heron and followed her story from the news.

Antoine learned that Athena was a paranormal with a big audacity. By touching the topic of religion, Athena had provoked such a reaction. As if it did not cause enough of a chaos, she went on talking about diet which was an important topic for almost all kinds

of people which implies that Athena was not afraid of challenging life risks.

m. Unnamed Narrator

This narrator is different from other focalizers because his name was not even mentioned in the novel. He took a great part in Athena's life, yet he did not witness much Athena's journey of being a "witch". Athena's independence was told to be the reason why he did not accompany her much even though he had offered to. Athena was not dependent on her boyfriend and she wanted to do everything freely. Other than that, he also implied that Athena was thoughtful. She understood how people thought and she made it a consideration in deciding what to act.

From these fourteen focalizations, it can be concluded that Athena's characteristics are mostly brave, strong, independent, attractive, and determined. On the other hand, Athena is also adamant, manipulative, indiscreet, and mysterious. The portrayals are reflected by the focalizers' proximity to Athena.

Proximity makes a more comprehensive portrayal. The closer a focalizer to the character, the more explored the characterization is. This supports Sandefur's (2003) ideas that states that narrator proximity is an important factor in exploring the effects of narrative voice.

2. Portrayal of Motherhood

This section focuses on the motherhood presentation of the main female character named Athena in *the Witch of Portobello* based on perspectives from a number of characters. The notion of motherhood itself is derived from a feminist concept which posits that the nature of mothers is to give love and take care of their children.

There are two approaches in studying motherhood which are motherhood as experience and motherhood as social institution. According to Rich (1976), motherhood as experience means that the study is looked under the perspective of the mother to the children, not the children to the mother. In the case of this novel,

Paulo Coelho presents motherhood as experience through the main character, Athena. This is because the novel involves a story of Athena as the mother and how she manages to raise her son, Viorel, on her own. Although here, the voice does not come from Athena. It comes from the perspectives of other characters involved in the story. These characters are called focalizers.

There are fourteen focalizers who take part in telling the story of Athena, but only nine of them mention Athena's relationship with her son. They are Father Giancarlo Fontana, Lukas Jessen-Petersen, Pavel Podbielski, Peter Sherney, Nabil Alaihi, Heron Ryan, Andrea McCain, Deidre O'Neill (Edda), and Samira R. Khalil. Generally, all of them share a common depiction of Athena as a mother which says that Athena is a strong mother figure will do anything for her son to have a better life.

All of the focalizers have the same voice. They depicted Athena and made her look like an ideal caretaker of her son who sacrificed for him as a

proof of love. In this case, it can be concluded that the main character, Athena, portray the traditional myth of motherhood. Traditional myth of motherhood, according to Tweed (2008), emphasizes on women's role to sacrifice and give caretaker to their children. It fits Athena's presentation as a mother.

CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTION

This study aims to reveal how the main character in Paulo Coelho's *the Witch of Portobello* is focalized through other characters' perspectives. It answers two questions formulated to discover focalization on the way the main character's traits are presented and the way it presents the main character's portrayal of motherhood. Answering the questions, it is found that Athena, the main character in the novel, is a strong, independent woman with paranormal abilities who was brave enough to take dangerous risks and difficult paths to satisfy her curiosity. It is also revealed that Athena is described to be a strong

mother figure who loves her son and takes care of him very well.

Through the perspectives of the people who are directly and indirectly related to her, Athena is described both positively and negatively or only positively depending on their own views and their relation proximity towards Athena. She is depicted to be a woman who is strong, brave, independent, attractive, and determined. On the other side, Athena is also depicted to be adamant and mysterious. In short, Athena is a woman with a gift of witchcraft who is also a human with some good personalities and is motherly too.

Focalization can also help revealing the issues surfaced in a novel. In this case, *the Witch of Portobello* raises the issue of motherhood due to Athena's role as a single parent to a son named Viorel. The focalizers, cohesively voiced, depict Athena to be a mother who gives sincere love and care to her son. It is described that Viorel is the most important thing for Athena which explains why he has always been her priority. This

character of Athena fits the traditional myth of motherhood, a concept which puts mothers to naturally give care and love to their children.

In conclusion, Paulo Coelho's *the Witch of Portobello* captures the idea that character presentation can be revealed through narrative perspective with more than one focalizer. Additionally, this study confirms the concept that says that focalization can also settle the literary effects including the themes and issues surfaced in a novel which is suggested by Culler (1997), Nieragden (2002), and Firth (2011).

There are several suggestions that can be proposed for further research on related topics. First, it is suggested that other researchers should go wider on the themes surfaced in *the Witch of Portobello* beside motherhood. There is an interesting feminine divinity issue portrayed by the main female character that can be taken up for further studies. A deeper look on other themes will provide different knowledge or views towards the novel. Second, it will be better for further

study with the topic of focalization and character presentation to include theories on characterization too. The study can be richer because it is built with both the concepts of focalization and characterization.

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