



Gender and Eventfulness in Zoya Pirzad's *I Turn off the Lights*: Towards a Comparative Narrative Theory

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Abstract

The present paper proposes to consider eventfulness as a category for developing feminist narratology. Feminist/gender-conscious models of narrative theory have already taken into account a few narratological categories for their project including narrative closure, engaging narrator, and narrative authority. Studying the relationship between narrative eventfulness and women's writing can be of great help for furthering the feminist narratology's agenda. Eventfulness is a scalar feature of narrative, attributed to the degree of existence of a change of state. An event can occur in story-world, narration, or in the reader's mind. The canonicity-breach aspect of an event, that is, the success or failure in transgressing boundaries, makes eventfulness ideologically significant. To show the applicability of gendering narrative eventfulness, Zoya Pirzad's *I Turn off the Lights* is used as an illustrative example. *I Turn off the Lights* (Persian: *Cheraq-ha ra Man Khamush Mikonam* 2001; English translation: *Things We Left Unsaid* 2012) is a contemporary Iranian novel which has been received very well by the readers. Choosing *I Turn off the Lights* as an example is expected to give my appropriation of feminist narrative theory a comparative quality. By situating *I Turn off the Lights* in the literary context of Iran, it is argued that the reduced form of eventfulness in the novel can be read as a sign of ossified normative orders that make border crossing for the main female character (Clarisse) almost impossible.

Keywords

Feminist Narrative Theory; Eventfulness; Comparative Narratology; Gender; Zoya Pirzad

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1. Introduction

Readers may complain that almost nothing happens in some works of fiction. Suppose that in reality *almost nothing* happens in a woman's life, no decisive change of state, and a writer takes a (hyper)-realist stance in representing the eventlessness itself. *I Turn off the Lights* is an unprecedented example of the eventless story of the daily life of a woman in Iran whose life has to comply with the norms set by the semantic-ideological field of the narrative. Ironically, Franklin Lewis's English rendering of the novel under the title of *Things We Left Unsaid* indicates the expectation of a specific kind of reader who may want events, points, and perhaps some melodrama, and fails to find it there. Rather than Lewis's translation, the literal translation of *Cheraq-ha ra Man Khamush Mikonam* into *I Turn off the Lights* is opted for in the present paper to especially emphasize the main female character's (Clarisse) act of turning the lights off every night before going to bed as one of the many repetitions in her life.

Despite the many discursive silences in the novel, there is not much of unsaid things if we read the novel as a realistic narrative of the daily life of a woman in Iran. One immediate question comes to the mind: Is there a relationship between narrative eventfulness and gender as such? In addressing this question, I will begin by discussing "eventfulness" as a potential category for doing feminist narratology. Since eventfulness is context-sensitive, I will then situate the case study, *I Turn off the Lights*, in the literary context of Iran, especially in relation to two canonical works written by Iranian women authors. Finally, I will discuss the consequences of the essay for a comparative feminist narrative theory.

2. Theoretical Framework

Without an event, there is no narrative. An event is a decisive change of state that must be real and have a result. Change presupposes canonicity. According to Jerome Bruner, one of the necessary conditions of narrativity is its canonicity-and-breach aspect (5). Similarly, Peter Hühn argues that eventfulness "involves departure from a schematic pattern or script activated in the text" ("Functions and Forms..." 145). In this regard, the intertextual nature of eventfulness is significant in that the activation of a specific textual script in the reader's mind depends on her/his



knowledge of other texts. To measure the degree of eventfulness, especially at the level of reception, a narrative text must be situated in its literary-historical context.

An event may be realized at different levels of narrative communication. Based on the level of the narrative text at which the agent or patient of an event is located, Hühn distinguishes three types of events: (1) story-world events, (2) presentation events, and (3) reception events. The latter is particularly relevant in the case of *I Turn off the Lights*. Reception events are

located at the level of reading, with the reader as agent; this type refers to cases where neither the protagonist [story-world event] nor the narrator [narration event] is able to undergo a decisive change, which the composition of the text (i.e. the implied author), however, signals as necessary or desirable and which the (ideal) reader is meant to perform vicariously in his or her own consciousness. (*Eventfulness*, 9-10)

The advantage of giving agency to readers is doubly important for feminist theorists. While in the narrative story-world women may conventionally be represented as passive, regardless of their real condition, the reader as an agent can become a site of resistance and action.

The transactional nature of meaning-construction is doubly important from a feminist literary perspective. For example, while at the story-world level in *I Turn off the Lights*, the main female character remains passive throughout the novel, the reader can vicariously experience the change that could have happened in the narrative but did not because of the social and religious restraints of the represented world. In other worlds, a possible world – imagination, wishes, etc. – is implied by the silences and gaps of the narrative. As the authors in *Gender in Contemporary Iran: Pushing the Boundaries* argue, it is an overgeneralization to give passive and victimized roles to the Iranian women as a whole. Although almost nothing happens for the female-narrator-protagonist in *I Turn off the Lights*, the in-group empathy that the novel seems to ask for from the readers by representing the possible eventful life they *could* have had makes the novel an event on the reception side of literary communication.

Eventfulness is scalar and context-sensitive. A narrative can be more or less eventful depending on context. However, context is too broad a concept encompassing a wide range of social, cultural, political, and historical factors; “One particularly important type of context consists of other literary texts which may serve



as a frame of reference for the constitution of eventfulness in narrative” (“Functions and Forms...” 143). The latter type of context is adopted in the present study because of the simple fact of providing some delimitation and more importantly because the literary context is assumed to contain within itself the socio-political and cultural contexts. Therefore, two canonical works by women authors are chosen from the Iranian literary tradition of fiction writing as a frame of reference for analyzing eventfulness in *I Turn off the Lights*.

Three out of the fifteen essays in *Eventfulness in British Fiction* are on women writers: Aphra Behn's *Oroonoko* (1688), Virginia Woolf's “An Unwritten Novel” (1921), and Katherine Mansfield's “At the Bay” (1922). Despite the fact that questions of gender are not reckoned with in the book, the analysis on Mansfield's short story has many implications for the present analysis of *I Turn off the Lights*. In a section titled “The Eventless Daily Life Structured by Rudimentary Frames and Scripts,” Hühn writes that Mansfield's short story

differs from all others in this volume in that it seems to lack the two fundamental features of any successful narrative with respect to sequentiality: coherence and eventfulness, for the individual incidents refer to a large number of characters and appear to be basically unconnected with each other as well as trivial and inconclusive in themselves and in their combinations. (*Eventfulness* 146)

I would like to use Hühn's argument to develop my own with regard to Pirzad's novel by adding that *I Turn off the Lights* differs from most other narrative works of fiction written by women in Iran in terms of its eventfulness, but would also like to highlight the “trivial” events and the prosaic nature of narrative in the novel as a turning point – not as an unsuccessful move – in the tradition of women's writing in Iran. In another illuminating comment on Mansfield's “At the Bay,” Hühn writes that

Morally (and rationally), [the] refusal to transgress has to be interpreted as the avoidance of a mistake, the obedience to the norms, the rejection of a change for the worse, the preservation of personal self-control and therefore fundamentally positive (in the eyes of the contemporary society). (171)

Interestingly, this latter comment applies to *I Turn off the Lights* too especially in light of the fact that “writing under censorship is so crucial a factor” in Iran (Gheytauchi 183). In such a condition, an author needs to write on the thin borderlines of what is socially – and institutionally – acceptable and the changes that she desires to bring



about. A projecting “positive” authorial image thus interferes with the aesthetics of literature as an autonomous entity in *I Turn off the Lights*.

The aim of mentioning *Eventfulness in British Fiction* is to locate a gap in considering gender as a variable in studying eventfulness, and thus to initiate ways in which gender-conscious narratology can use “eventfulness” as a category for its project. The compensation for hitherto ignored variable of gender in constructing narrative theory is made by feminist narrative theorists. Feminist/gender-conscious/queer narrative theory is an offshoot of postclassical narratology which takes the structuralist gender-and-context-blind models of narrative with a grain of salt. One must give feminist narrative theorists full credit given the fact that almost all classical models of narrative are constructed by male theorists working on texts written by male authors – i.e., Bakhtin on Dostoyevsky, Barthes on Balzac, and Genette on Proust. Even such a narratologist as Vladimir Propp whose functionalist approach is purported to be gender neutral has a “gendered plot” in its deep scheme (see Lanser 2015).

Obviously, the idea of incorporating gender into narrative theory may be welcomed, especially by those sympathetic to a feminist cause, and not perhaps by a “masculinist academic culture” (Warhol 9). However, an idea is something and coming up with tenable analytical tools to refine the existing models and suggest new methods of reading a literary text is something else. Among the vast arsenal of narratological categories, feminist narrative theorists have already integrated a few into a gender-conscious view of narrative; i.e., Rachel Blau DuPlessis on closure, Roby R. Warhol on engaging/distancing narrator, and Susan S. Lanser on narrative authority. However, the “toward” in Lanser’s 1986 article, “Toward a Feminist Narratology” is yet to be realized.

The central question for feminist narrative theory is whether narratives created by women are in terms of their language, style, and/or narrative form different from those created by men. However, *difference* must not be equated with essentialism, that is, one must not attribute essential ahistorical or universal qualities to women and their writings. It is more theoretically and historically sound to assume that socio-cultural and literary factors make women write – consciously or unconsciously – different in relation and/or in reaction to men’s as well as other women’s writings. In short,



difference is a cultural product. This approach is in line with the constructivist notion of gender and identity with which the present essay aligns itself. As in the case of *I Turn off the Lights*, its lack of eventfulness should be understood in relation to the literary, cultural, and socio-political context of Iran. Thus, the novel is read as a performative act in an intertextual network of relations whereby its weak degree of eventfulness is shown to be an unprecedented phenomenon, say, a generic innovation. By using the notion of “performative act,” I am directly drawing on Judith Butler’s view on identity in general and gender identity in particular. Let us give Butler’s theory a turn of the interpretive screw and suggest that the identity of a text, here *I Turn off the Lights*, is determined by its performance in relation to other texts in a spatio-temporal context.

In addition to gendering narratology, the need has been also felt to transnationalize it. In “Towards a Transnational Turn in Narrative Theory,” Susan Stanford Friedman raises some thought-provoking questions:

Is it possible to develop a transnational narrative theory that can incorporate the many forms that literary narrative has taken across space and through time [...], [a] theory that navigates between the Scylla of universalism and Charybdis of particularism, between exclusively global/theoretical approaches to narrative studies and local/empirical ones? (25)

To put the above question in another way, one wonders how narrative theory would have changed if the “lopsided corpus” upon which it is constructed had changed (Lanser 6). Developing “narrative theory out of a purely Western literary archive” is to confirm certain forms as “dominant, universal” (756). Therefore, further research is needed to explore the ways in which narratology can contribute to an understanding of the various narrative forms from around the world and in turn how narratology can be contributed by the newly expanded archive. As Biwu Shang notes, “At issue is how to do justice to all narratives and narrative theories despite their national, historical, and cultural differences? A comparative approach seems to be a timely option” (“Toward a Comparative Narratology...” 53).

Narratology as a practice has found its way into Iranian literary criticism a decade ago. A large number of articles carry the name of narratology in their titles. However, this practice remains a one-way street, that is, the theory is always assumed to be applicable to the corpus from Persian literature. As Friedman points out, “To simply



read non-Western narratives [in light of a pre-constructed theory] is not enough; we need to think about their implications for narrative theory” (“Why Not Compare?” 24). This is the reason why my proposal on using narrative eventfulness as a category for doing feminist narratology is based on an Iranian novel case study. Bringing together these two paradigm shifts, one feminist and the other transnational, I study narrative eventfulness in *I Turn off the Lights* by Zoya Pirzad in order to propose a comparative feminist narrative theory which takes into account gender, corpus, and context, leading, hopefully, to a sense of “hybrid narartologies” (Gymnich 706).

3. The Literary Context

Women fiction writers dominate the literary scene of Iran in terms of their readership, social impact, and their preoccupation with urgent issues such as gender relations and female identity (Talattof “Post-revolutionary Persian Literature...” 147). Two tropes have been conventionally used in representing the image of women in Persian literature: the angel-demon dichotomy, and the private-public spheres. The prototype of modern Iranian novel, *The Blind Owl* (*Buf-e Kur*, 1937) by Sadeq Hedayat, best exemplifies the angel-demon (*asiri-lakateh*) opposition. Most pre-1979-revolutionary works of fiction written by women were oriented towards social realism, thus, highlighting the public sphere (Talattof “Iranian Women’s Literature...” 1997). In such narratives, there is a high degree of eventfulness. Among the women fiction writers whose works have spanned from pre to post-revolutionary Iran, two works possess a canonical status: Simin Daneshvar’s *Savashun*, and Shahrnous Parsipour’s *Tuba and the Meaning of Night*.

Simin Daneshvar (1921-2012) published *Savashun* (*Requiem for Siavash*) in 1969. *Savashun* is Daneshvar’s first novel and there is a consensus that it is the first novel by an Iranian woman novelist. The novel is a homodiegetic story of a young couple, Zari and Yosef, living in the time of World War II, and the occupation of southern Iran by the British army. As the narrative progresses, Zari changes from a passive figure to an active character. At first, she hides behind her husband but after Yosef’s death, she takes up the front stage of the events in the narrative. She moves from the private sphere of wifhood to the public sphere of politics, notwithstanding the problematic nature of this dichotomy.



Savashun is an eventful narrative. The novel begins with the engagement of the city mayor's daughter and the invitation of Zari and Yosef to the wedding. The royal families and the British military people are also invited to the party. Sergeant Zinger tries to convince Yosef to sell his crops to the British army so that the British do not fall short of supplies in the war. Yosef does not accept and decides to give his crops away to the poor in Shiraz. Against Yosef's decision, his brother intends to talk him into the British's request. Zari is worried by Yosef's resistance to the British. She tries to arbitrate between Yosef and others but to no avail. In less than three weeks, Yosef is killed. Zari undergoes an epiphany and becomes the protagonist of the novel. Ignoring the dictum of the local authorities that no burial procession is allowed for Yosef, Zari holds a large public one for Yosef. With the dispersion of the people, Zari is forced to bury Yosef unceremoniously at night. With this, Zari becomes a heroine. With allusions to the mythological story of Siavash, Rostam, Sudabeh, and Khosrow, *Savashun* takes an epic dimension on a grand scale. At the end of the novel, there is another eventful turn. Khosrow (Zari and Yosef's son) vows to take up his father's cause. Throughout the novel, Zari transforms from a housewife supporting her children and family to a defiant woman capable of brave decisions, and determined in carrying out a social cause. *Savashun* is an eventful narrative oriented towards representing the political public sphere with a female character as its central figure.

Shahrnous Parsipour (b.1946) published *Tuba and the Meaning of Light (Tuba va Ma'nay-e Shab)* in 1987. This 500-page novel is the heterodiegetic story of a long historical period from the Constitutional revolution in early twentieth century to the Islamic revolution in 1979. With Tuba as its main character, the novel narrates an eventful historical period and its inflections on a female character's life. Early in the novel Tuba is forced into a marriage. Later another marriage pursues. The second marriage failing, Tuba retreats to the corner of her house. Meanwhile, as mentioned above, two revolutions are at work. *Touba and the Meaning of Night* is fraught with many stock characters, stories of rape and murder, hunger, and social conflicts. As Tuba experiences these events, she begins to reflect on the meaning of darkness in human beings.

As the brief summary of *Savashun* and *Touba and the Meaning of Night* indicates, these narratives are highly eventful. Such eventfulness may give the illusion



to the reader that women have had a highly active role in the public sphere in Iran, something which seems hard to imagine. I agree with Azar Nafisi that “The “real” woman – body, soul, and mind – has not as yet been created” in these works, however, I emphasize that there is no such a thing as “the real” *per se* (999). Rather, works of fiction perform acts in a spatio-temporal contexts whereby certain performances come to gain special significance or a more realistic aura.

4. *I Turn off the Lights*: A Comparative and Gender-Based Treatment

Eventfulness is not the same with reading a swashbuckling tale of adventure and action. There are narrative texts that despite their adventurous turns and twists conform so closely to a generic schema that in the final analysis they acquire a low level of eventfulness and are hardly a prototype of narrative. A change of state to be counted as an event requires resultativity, realness, unexpectedness and departure from a norm (see also Schmid).

I Turn off the Lights changed the feminist literary scene of Iran when it was first published in 2001. By 2010, it had reached its thirtieth-six publication, and according to statistics, had ranked second in the three best-selling novels in the last fourteen years in Iran, in addition to gleaning some prestigious Iranian literary awards. In contrast to the backdrop of a rapidly urbanizing city, much of the story takes place in private spheres, particularly in kitchens, and revolves around Clarisse’s uneventful daily life as she struggles to keep the peace between members of her family and ensure that there will a meal on the table to everybody’s taste. The book’s title is taken from a phrase Clarisse repeats every night at the end of her daily chores and before falling asleep, which alludes to social, cultural and religious restraints that turn off the lights on the private lives of women in Iran. Let us consider the following extract from the beginning of *I Turn off the Lights* to give a sense of its story-world:

The sound of the school bus braking. Then the squeaking of the metal gate and the sound of footsteps running up the narrow path across the grass yard. I didn’t need to look at the kitchen clock. It was 4:15 p.m.

As the front door opened, I wiped my hands on my apron and called out, ‘School uniforms, off; hands and faces, washed! And we don’t dump our satchels in the middle of the hallway.’ I slid the tissue box to the middle of the table and turned around to get the milk from the fridge, which is when I saw that there were four people standing in the kitchen doorway. (1)



The narrator is Clarisse, a female character trapped in domesticity and routines of daily life. Her life beckons no hope of change. The semantic field of the narrative is constituted to a large extent by her role as mother and wife. To depart from that semantic field the one and only option for Clarisse would be to enter into a strong relationship with her newly arrived neighbor, Mr. Simonian. Given the social and religious restraints, establishing such a relationship would be transgressing the boundaries. Now, to be counted an event, such a departure must have a result, that is, if her relationship is aborted at one stage it cannot be considered an event. It must also be real; Clarisse's monologues and imagination are not events in themselves. Finally, if such a relationship is expected to happen by Clarisse, and by the readers of the novel, due to for example Clarisse's freedom to have a relationship with a man, or the reader's knowledge of genre conventions, it cannot be counted as an event. Although Clarisse fails in transgressing the above mentioned boundaries, her liminal state implies the possibility of change in the reader's imagination; as one critic notes with regard to *I Turn off the Lights*, "Consciousness itself and not the "real" events, as much as a novel can represent real events, is the object of scrutiny in the text. [Thus], the reader's active imagination is very much in need when writing under censorship is so crucial a factor" (Gheytaichi 183). Censorship is not only an important aspect of writing in Iran, but also a site of studying the ways in which certain narrative strategies are used to both implicate censorship and circumvent it.

Given the history of women's writing in Iran, *I Turn off the Lights* is a turning point for its scrupulous attention to the details of the private life of a woman from a woman's perspective. Pirzad's representation of the domestic life becomes a stylistic feature of her narrative. Warhol's description of Jane Austen's writing is also applicable to Pirzad's: "Granting ample narrative space, for example, to the minute and seemingly trivial details of women's conversations in domestic settings adds up to a literary form quite different from what Austen's male contemporaries like Sir Walter Scott were writing" (Warhol 12).

I Turn off the Lights describes the routine daily chores of a woman. The novel is more oriented to description rather than narration, that is, a narrativized description. The significance of this strategy is in the fact that the writer of the novel is a woman who is situated in a literary tradition which has produced highly (unreal) eventful



narratives of the life of women so much so that the “eventfulness” itself has become a canonical script. Pirzad is able to breach this script and to represent the liminal state of eventfulness in her novel to which the reader is expected to react vicariously. Not that gender and eventfulness have a negative relationship in all literature, but it is clear that in the case of *I Turn off the Lights* gender has played a pivotal role in producing a reduced form of eventfulness. Failed narrative eventfulness becomes a stylistic feature of women’s writing in this novel.

5. Conclusion

This study has tried to bring together two paradigm shifts in narrative theory: feminist/gender-conscious narratology, and comparative studies. While classical narratology was universalist in its aims, postclassical narratology, of which feminist narratology is a branch, takes issue with universalism and emphasizes particularism and (cultural) difference. Feminist narrative theory studies the inflections that gender makes in writing fiction and constructing narrative theories. The comparative shift on the other hand, emphasizes the necessity of expanding the archive upon which narrative theory is constructed. To demonstrate how this can lead to a comparative feminist narrative theory, I have tried to incorporate narrative eventfulness into feminist narratology with a case study coming from a non-Western literary tradition.

Zoya Pirzad’s *I Turn off the Lights* is an important novel in contemporary women’s literature in Iran. By placing the novel in relation to two canonical works by women, I have tried to show how eventfulness can be used as a category for doing feminist narratology. The reduced form of eventfulness in *I Turn off the Lights* implies hard-and-fast normative borders which make transgression almost impossible. However, the reader is expected to experience vicariously the event that could have happened in the novel. Therefore, *I Turn off the Lights* breaches both the canon of previous works by women writers and the passive readership that may lead to further normalizing forces.

Comparative narratology can give “narratologists of marginalized areas an equal opportunity to import and to share the narratological scholarship as well as narratives of their own traditions, which will help subvert the hegemony of Western narratives and narrative theories” (Shang 57). This essay has tried to show ways in which a constructive dialogue between narrative theory and the various narrative



forms coming from culturally different contexts is possible. As there are *feminisms* and *narratologies*, it is not unimaginable to have a comparative feminist narrative theory.



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