

## Investigating Narratological view of Focalization in Amy Tan's *The Kitchen God's Wife*

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### Abstract

Genette believes that 'point of view' is inadequate to expound the differences between the person who sees and the person who narrates. After years of controversy, he proposes the term 'focalization' to clarify this difference. Focalization focuses on the person who sees as a subjective moment of perception. Perceiving can take every character of a novel, to a higher level of subjectivity. Later, Meike Bal added new dimensions to his term. The present study, focuses on Amy Tan's *The Kitchen God's Wife*. Two main characters of the novel are focalizers inside of the story whose insights are revealed through the narrative processes of the events. The internal focalization changeably shifts from mother to daughter and vice versa. This study aims to investigate the concept of character focalizer and narrator focalizer in the light of Gerard Genette's and Mieke Bal's narratological theory of focalization. Further, it explores the moments of focalizations of the two characters, Winnie, the mother, and Pearl, the daughter. Focalizing the moment of understanding through the improvement of the complex story is discussed, which helps the two characters reach a higher level of subjectivity to overcome their gap.

### Keywords

Focalization; Inner Thought; Relationship; Perception.

### 1. Introduction

The traditional structuralists' classical category of first-person or third person point of view in a diegetic world is inadequate to respond Genette's two questions of who speaks and who sees? Speaking refers to a narrator and seeing depends on the focalizer. In fact, the narrator is not necessarily a focalizer. A narrative can be narrated by a first-person, in which the narrator and the focalizer correspond, or a third-person in which the narrator is outside of a narrative. Thus, the narrator differs from the focalizer.

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In those events, the narrations of the narrator are embedded in primary action, which the author chooses with a certain vision. From Bal's view "whenever events are presented, they are always presented within a certain vision" (144). A focalizer focuses on the moment of the events' perception. Thus, a focalization occurs from specific perspective. From Genette's narratological theory, the world of narrator-character, in first-person narrative is internal and homodiegetic. While in third-person narrative, the narrator is outside of the story and heterodiegetic.

By inventing the term 'focalization,' Genette steps forward the discussion of narratology. Focalization is an abstract term and the constituent part of relation between vision and text. Focalization can produce sense making and reshapes reader's mind. It is a worthwhile enterprise to make audiences feel, as though they are part of another world. An author designs main characters who perceive something in a specific moment of the story's event. However, there are many parts of events in a story detached from the entire discourse that author may assign to readers.

The story opens with Pearl, the daughter who purposefully excluded her mother from many scenes of her life. She states, "whenever my mother talks to me, she begins the conversation as if we were already in the middle of an argument" (*The Kitchen* 1). This statement is the emblem of their miscommunication. Everyone deliberately lives in her own world, far from the other. The miscommunication has started from early time of Pearl's childhood until present time of her forty-one.

When her mother obliges her to return to her childhood house for attending her cousin's engagement party and the funeral of her elderly Auntie Du, she confronts an uncomfortable situation with her mother. Winnie, the mother decides to reveal her stories of fifty years, after the death of her ex-husband. Her story is a dreamy journey from when she was an inexperienced Weili who wished to be a good wife in China, to become Winnie, an experienced brave woman who immigrated to America. Through representing the previous life, Winnie interacts with her beloved daughter. Through narrating, she perceives something she did not notice before.

Additionally, the research is concerned with exploring Gerard Genette's and Meike Bal's narratological theory of focalization, to the study of a narrative text, namely Amy Tan's *The Kitchen God's Wife*. Rhetorically, the present research concentrates on the following questions: Who sees? Who is the focalizer? Who is the object of focalization? Consequently, the aim of this research is to follow up an approach for new insight of narrative by noticing indicators of subjectivity and narrative techniques in this novel, which remained unexplored.

## 2. Literature Review

All the former researchers concentrate on different aspects of Amy Tan's novels, by considering different critical literary theories. Judith Caesar in her essay, "Patriarchy, Imperialism, and Knowledge in *The Kitchen God's Wife*," discussed about how Tan chose "the popular American assumption in the formula of the popular novel and then undermining that every narrative in a complex political allegory that questions the basic American (indeed Western) concepts of truth and rationality" (38). In this essay, Caesar believes that the protagonist, Winnie could not tolerate her Chinese culture, and Jimmy Louie saved and took her to America. Therefore, America was a place of freedom for them and for Tans.

Yuan Yuan's essay is "The Semiotics of China Narratives in the Contexts of Kitchen and Tan." Yuan argued that although Chinese thoughts are seen in Tan's novels, but they are interrelated to the American thoughts and situations. The mothers and daughters could not understand each other's language and they must always translate what they mean for each other. The mothers mostly live with their memories, while their daughters could not understand them.

Harold Bloom wrote two collections about Amy Tan's works, one of them is *Modern Critical Interpretations*, and the other one is *Modern Critical View*. In both of them, there are different essays that are written by different authors. Melanie McAlister, Marina Heung, Judith Caesar, M. Marie Booth Foster, Lina Unali, Patricia L. Hamilton, Yuan Yuan, and Sheng-Mei Ma are the essayists whose essays are inserted in these collections.

Susan Muaddi explains Amy Tan's method of writing through her real life as well as fictional world of the narratives: *Asian American of Achievement: Amy Tan*. In her book, she believes that Amy Tan's novels are interrelated with her mother's memory and her method of teaching their daughters in China. As an example, Muaddi explains about Tan's mother's traditional idea, and how she considers in her novels: "The yin and yang is the ancient Chinese theory of opposites, which Amy Tan uses as a structural device in her fiction" (31). Muaddi believes that Tan concentrates on the memory of others, especially her mother. Tan's mother memory, a talk story as a way of teaching children, in China.

E. D. Huntley's book, *Amy Tan: A Critical Companion*, is a description of Tan's style of writing and tradition, that "incorporates or echoes other genres including nonfiction and poetry" (19). Effectively, Huntley believes that, although Tan consciously presents different genres, but they are mainly focused on her mother's memory. Amy Tan writes *The Opposite of Fate*, an autobiography, which is about her real life and her interaction with her mother through different periods of life. Scrutinizing her previous life creates a possible

situation to understand her mother's difficult life in China that helped her successful writing.

### **3. Theoretical Approach**

For centuries, a restrictive 'point of view' has been frequently used in stories. In the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, critics have discussed it from various dimensions. As a matter of fact, they confused between point of view and voice. Genette pursues the former research of some scholars about a point a view, in his book, *Narrative Discourse: An Essay in Method*. Cleanth Brooks and Robert Penn Warren propose the term 'focus on narration' as equivalent to this point of view. Their typology is based on two folds namely point of view and voice. They elaborate point of view as vertical demarcation and voice as horizontal one (186).

In 1955, F. K. Stanzel determines three narrative situations; omniscient author (who knows everything), first-person (a character within the story narrates) and third-person (a narrator outside of the narrative narrates). However, they could not distinguish the relationship between the person who narrates and the person who sees. Considering different theories, Genette concludes that "the difference between the second and third situations is not in 'point of view'" (187). Because, in first-person narrative, the focal character is the narrator while in third-person narrative, the narrator is an author and outside of the story, thus, no focalizer is present in the story."

Norman Friedman introduces more complex classification with eight terms: two types of omniscient narrating, two types of first-person narrating namely witness or protagonist; two types of selective-omniscient narrating namely single and multiple, and two types of objective narrating namely the dramatic mode and a camera. The difference between the first two depends on voice and narration which is not related to the point of view. In the rest of six forms, Friedman confuses between point of view and voice, "between focal character and narrator" (188).

In 1961, Wayne Booth writes his opinion in the form of an essay, "Distance and Point of View," but he also confuses between voice and perspective. Jean Pouillon and Tzvetan Todorov introduce "vision" or "aspect," instead of point of view. Todorov proposes three forms of narrative situation, once the narrator knows more than the character, the narrator knows everything that the character knows, and the narrator knows less than the character. Genette believes that "this is the 'objective' or 'behaviorist' narrative, what Pouillon calls "vision from without'" (189).

Concerning the stated discussion, Genette invents a new term named focalization. In this respect, he argues about point of view that expands the reader's knowledge by frequency of speech and behavior of characters or

narrators. From this perspective, there is a confusion about “who is the character whose point of view orients with the narrative perspective and who the narrator is? (Genette 186). Nevertheless, focalization is a term extracted from film, because it is closely associated with matters of vision (Horstkotte, 171).

Linguistically, in a story, focalization can be a concept of bridging a text and a vision. Genette argues perspective as the restrictive traditional first-person and third-person point of view, both are not sufficient to express all aspects of a narrative. From the notion of perspective, the one who sees is not necessarily the one who speaks. Therefore, there are two folds within the point of view namely focalizer and narrator.

Further, perspective is the word which cannot explain the situation of the action, so no noun can be derived from ‘perspective’ which can indicate the subject of the action nor a verb to perspectivize customary. In a subject-oriented theory such as this one, “in order to describe the focalization of a story we must have terms from which subject and verb can be derived” (Bal, 147). However, ‘focus’, in its word formation is a very comprehensive verb to explain subject, object, and the action.

Focalization occurs when a person can see and think about what he sees, and can elaborate it through illegibility over a story. Moreover, a character chooses an especial action of object focalization while ignores the other features. See is a verb of perception to indicate an activity of focalization. The act of seeing relies on the one who sees and the one that is seen, “focalization is the relationship between the vision, the agent that sees, and that which is seen” (Bal 148).

Moreover, Bal argues that “seeing, taken in the widest sense, constitutes the object of narrating” (18). Thus, the subject of focalization or the narrator perceives the object of focalization via seeing in a special situation. Narrative situation is significant, as “it is based on a combination of the narratorial and focalizing positions” (Horstkotte 177). However, sometimes the agent who sees and the agent who speaks are similar, particularly in first-person point of view. In this situation, the agent who sees coincides with the person who narrates.

Sometimes the narrator of the story speaks externally which is a focal position and outside of the story is external focalization. In both cases, the identity and the action of focalizer are important. As a matter of fact, in a story, the focalizer is “the holder of the point of view” (Bal 18), but s/he may switch from internal to external. Moreover, a first person narrator uses pronoun ‘I’ inside of the story, while s/he might concentrates on third-person narrator.

Furthermore, memory has an important role in focalization, because “memory is an act of vision of the past but as an act, situated in the present of the memory” (Bal 150). Therefore, an author who writes at present time usually has

a functional memory to produce a special fictional world. From the notion of ideology, in every society, "one's vision approaches" (Bal 159) to create politics and its ideology. Fictions similar to real society, controls this perspective. This situation produces a focalizer whose perspective corresponds the controller of a fictional society.

### **3.1. Types of Focalization**

Gerard Genette, according to the position of a focalizer and the degree of its persistence, discusses nonfocalized, external, and internal as three types of focalization. Nonfocalized is in the position of zero focalization. For example, a little girl, in an adult story can be in a position of zero focalization. Internal focalization happens once a narrator and a character coincide, similar to the first person narrator that a character personally focalizes through the story by inner thought. Interior monologue is an instrument of revealing inner thought. In these kinds of stories, the narrator-focalizer knows more than the other characters of the story. In this regard, internal focalization has three types namely fixed, where the focalizer is one of the characters of the story from beginning until end, and everything happens through his (her) limited eyes; variable, where focalizer alters from one character to another, causing momentary infractions; multiple, where some characters are focalizers like multiple letter-writing stories. External focalization is the third type, in which a narrator impersonally narrates from outside of a story, similar to third person narrator. In this case, the author has much information but the narrator or the author does not say everything s/he knows. It might be a mystery inside of the story that is revealed little by little by an especial narrator outside of the story like a detective story.

### **3.2. Focalization and the Text**

Necessarily, focalization does not happen over the whole text, usually a moment in a text is significant and the focalizer perceives a special idea. As Genette believes, "focalization is not necessarily steady over the whole length of a narrative and variable internal focalization, a formula already very flexible" (191). It may not "bear on an entire work, but rather on a definite narrative section which can be very short" (Genette 191).

In addition, from the facet of cognition and emotion, a perception "is a psychosomatic process which strongly depends on the position of the perceiving body" (Bal 145). Psychologically, perceiving relies on the position, information, experience of the focalizer, and the perceived object in a special time and space. This is the particular picture, a storyteller forms to tell different layers of events. Finally, focalization is a visual information and one of the most important and meaningful factors of every literary text. Recognizing internal, external, or

nonfocalized focalization, or their restriction is difficult to establish, “the focal character never can be described or even referred to from the outside, and that his thoughts or perceptions never can be analyzed objectively by the narrator” (Genette 192).

In other words, a reader could not reveal the characteristics of the narrator-focalizer or could not analyze them unless reading discovers through actions and thought. The character of internal focalization never considers outside except in the narrative of “interior monologue,” (Genette 193). A first-person-narrator would focalize the events outside itself and “the image a focalizer presents an object to says something about focalizer itself” (Onega 24). Therefore, a reader via interpretation of events, understands the position and the characteristics of the character-narrator. Following Genette’s and Bal’s theory of narrative, this paper explores paradigmatic focalizations of the two main characters regarding the first-person narrative of *the Kitchen God’s Wife* to clarify the miscommunication between mother/daughter through their internal focalization and inner thoughts, and how their illegibility helps them for a better relationship.

#### **4. Investigating Narratological View of Focalization in *the Kitchen God’s Wife***

*The Kitchen God’s Wife* is a representation of a mother and a daughter, in America. They are living in America while Winnie, the mother has emigrated from China many years ago. The story begins by Pearl’s statement who complains metaphorically about miscommunication with her mother, “Whenever my mother talks to me, she begins the conversation as if we were already in the middle of an argument” (*the Kitchen* 1).

As she has excluded her mother from all scenes of her life until present time, she feels a sense of vacancy, and thus she cannot tell her about her disease and Winnie. Her mother is upset because of the gap between them. Although Winnie feels this vacancy, she does not want to oblige her daughter to communicate her. Both characters tend to overcome this lack of communication. However, through a long “interior monologue” (Genette 193), Winnie reveals her past and secrecy with conscious remembrance to shorten the gap, and modified Pearl tries to accompany her. Of course, Winnie in this first-person narrator story is an auctorial narrator that her “interior monologue” constructs most events of the story.

Additionally, all of these characters’ observation relies on their association and situation. Both characters use pronoun “I” as a narrator-character or focalizer. The focalizer is very significant, because a reader can see the events through her or his eyes, and consciousness of a story. The events, the situations, or the interpretations of the character’s dialogue are all filtered through this focalizer. Amy Tan plays with variable internal focalizer as in some episodes, the

point of view shifts from daughter to mother and vice versa. The substitution of Winnie and Pearl in the point of view depends on their perception and focalization. Therefore, what Pearl focalizes? What Winnie focalizes? How do their focalizations happen? What is the result of their focalizations?

Pearl, as the narrator-focalizer, directly reports from her mother, in a party of engagement. She struggles to compensate her life errors, therefore, she looks at her mother differently; “mostly I see my mother sitting one table away, and I feel as lonely as I imagine her to be. I think of the enormous distance that separates us and makes us unable to share the most important matters of our life” (Tan 33). Pearl is the subject of focalization and her mother is at present time, the object of it. The verbs ‘see’ and ‘feel’ reveal the fact that Pearl reports what she perceives in especial time and spaces. By observing, she could discover how lonely her mother was and how Pearl herself has never noticed her loneliness. Maybe, observing precisely from a certain angle plus her sense of emptiness assist her to understand a reality about her mother. After many years of living together, adult Pearl psychologically perceives it. However, “perception depends on so many factors, one’s position with respect to the perceived object, the fall of the light, the distance, previous knowledge, and psychological attitudes towards the object” (Bal 145). Pearl represents her modified thought and feeling that gradually internalized in her mind. Her new perception of her mother takes her to a higher level of understanding that she is somehow her American version of her mother.

Switching the point of view from daughter to mother happens via some of the episodes, but, in the sixth episode, Winnie starts her previous life story until the twenty fifth one. The letter that her old friend Helen gives her contains information about her ex-husband, Wen Fu’s death. It takes Winnie to the preceding images of how she released from every convention, every commitment, and every horrified situation of her ex-husband. Moreover, Helen threatens her to reveal the secrecy of her former life, unless she reveals it for Pearl. Wen Fu was dead and Winnie hopes to tell her daughter this horrified man is her real father. Helen also threatens Pearl to tell her secrecy of disease. Thus, Helen operates as a mediator of the mother/daughter relationship.

Winnie’s traumatic remembrance of events “recur in bits and pieces, nightmare and the events can be so incongruous that no fabula can be recognized as logical enough to make sense, at the moment of occurrence” (Bal 150). The person who has tried to forget about her past remembrance for fifty years endeavors to constitute her painful dispersed flashback into coherence now to shorten the gap between herself and her daughter. Being silent most of the time and lack of relationship with her daughter deprives Winnie from enjoying communication and she begins from when she was six years old.



Although, she completely describes events of her life in details, her experiences are limited to what the other characters do to her, particularly Wen Fu's action. She tells about her marriage at the age of eighteen when she felt fortunate, in her self-analysis, she practices, "because I had been married to Wen Fu for only one month, I was still thinking I was lucky too, proud to be married to a future hero" (Tan 202). She thought, "A woman always had to feel pain, suffer and cry, before she could feel love" (Tan 207). 'Thinking' and 'feel' are two words in these two sentences that show narrative of thoughts and feelings, "thoughts and feelings are not different from speech" (Genette 170) that take the reader to the world of Winnie's 'interior monologue.' Besides, 'thinking' and 'thought' are the narrator's, Winnie's internal focalization that indicate her restriction of thought about the specific subject matter. The world in which her memory is refers to "an act of vision of the past" (Bal 150). In fact, Winnie's remembrance of Wen Fu is not the same as real story because "the story the person remembers is not identical to the one she experienced" (Bal 150).

Winnie recalls Wen Fu's cruel behavior gradually makes her to change from a naïve person into a mature adult. Winnie, as the subject of focalization observes the object of focalization and Wen Fu's behavior towards his friends, "He also scared them, made them feel his danger. I saw this too. One time he leapt up from the table, so angry, and everyone became alarmed" (Tan 223). Wen Fu's frenetic activity makes his friends 'feel his danger' that Winnie experienced before. This discovering helps her to think profoundly about his premeditated behavior.

Demonstrating his frenetic behavior, she continues the events of the story and in the tenth episode she says I saw how his boldness, his recklessness, and made other men want to be the same way. He acted as if he were already a hero; never can lose, no matter how dangerous. Others believed that by being in his company, by laughing his big laugh, this feeling could swell in their lungs as well. I saw that my husband did this laughing-scaring game not just with me, but also with his friends. In addition, I began to see that what he did was wrong, cruel, but no one else seemed to see this, but did not see what I could see: he accused and tormented, shouted and threatened (Tan 223).

When focalization happens, a reader usually focuses on what the character focalizes. Winnie as a focalizer focalizes on her husband's stupid behavior; perhaps her purpose is to elaborate her irreproachability as opposed to Wen Fu's eligibility. In fact, "The way in which an object is presented gives information about that object itself and about the focalizer" (Bal 156). At a time of Wen Fu's death, her cruel perspective towards him culminates in a place of revenge. Winnie could observe her husband's anger that torments not only her but

also his friends. Therefore, the act of focusing on this object could be very important; Winnie perceives information that is more subjective and shows what her situation was. The words 'boldness' and 'reckless' depict her feelings toward her husband that as a 'hero,' he frightened his friends. Wen Fu was similar to the Kitchen God, according to a Chinese myth, a man who abused her wife because of two reasons, ignoring his wife's sacrifice and his capriciousness.

By focalizing on his behaviors, Winnie could take the reader towards her meaningless life and she confronted his 'wrong and cruel' manners for a long time. The memory might continue from her images of this object that depended on his traumatic action and in the moment of focalization it comes to her mind. However, she feels powerful in the absence of Wen Fu. Winnie says Wen Fu's quotation directly, "Don't you have eyes? My husband shouted. Then he walked over to speak to a man in a truck. He lit a cigarette, smoked two puffs, then looked at his watch and stamped the cigarette out before lighting another. So, that's how I knew he was scared too" (Tan 276). By representing her memory in these words, for the first time she discovered something about Wen Fu, the hero who frightened everybody and he scared himself. In such a condition, he often lit a cigarette to hide his fear. This perception powerfully helps Winnie to reconstruct her understanding that increases her motivation to endeavor to get rid of his torments. Ultimately, Winnie was a witness of Wen Fu's brutality toward herself and "witnesses can convey compassion, irony or other effective responses to the reader" (Bal 28).

Shifting the perspective, Pearl asks her mother, why she did not say these secrets, yet. Running away from a direct answer, she understates herself to reconstruct a better relationship with Pearl. However, Pearl thought that "She had kept it a secret only so I would not think bad things about her" (Tan 511). Pearl's focalization on her mother is different from her mother's perception of herself, because she could judge her mother based on her behavior and words. Winnie feels strengthful enough to escape from responding Pearl's question, but Pearl thinks about her will of reconciliation.

When Pearl sees her mother as she says, "She was smiling, glad to prove she was right after all these years" (Tan 513). Her observation assists her to evaporate all tensions of their relationship turns into reconciliation. Her perception modifies after listening to her mother's story. She thought how easy it would be to communicate. After revealing her disease, Pearl looks at her mother, "The pitch of her voice rose higher and higher. I was watching her arms flailing at an enemy she could not see but was determined to find. I was hearing her rant about everything I had tried to hide about my illness" (Tan 514). Pearl sees how Winnie feels free from every restriction because narrating helps her to calm herself and

narrating is a remedy. Releasing from Wen Fu, made her to reconstruct a stronger relationship with her daughter forever. Both mother and daughter step forward to close to each other by understanding and experiencing different aspects of life.

### 5. Conclusion

This study investigates narratological view of focalization in Amy Tan's *the Kitchen God's Wife*, which focused on displaying Winnie's and Pearl's moments of focalization. Searching characters' variable internal focalizations, in this first-person-narrative story depends on especial moments of characters' perception and feeling across the events. Psychologically, perceiving relies on the position, information and experience of the focalizer, and the perceived object in a special time and space. First-person narrator is an auctorial narrator, and Tan represents a narrative of Winnie's "interior monologue" (*Narrative* 193), that constructs most of events regarding novel through the relationship between a mother and a daughter. In addition, a literary text usually has layers to fulfil the author's intention and a reader externally enters the story to experience and interact the text. The story begins by Pearl's focalization, variably of focalization shifts to Winnie until the end of Tan's 'talk story' in twenty- fifth episode of the narrative. Amy Tan endeavors to demonstrate characters' experiences, in which everyone has a unique perspective of life. Focalization occurs in their fragmented memories of events, brought understanding, convenience, and enjoyment. This criticism is in line with Genette's and Bal's narratology that shows different aspects of artistic angles of the story that ignored in the classical criticism. Nonetheless, this theory of focalization discovers how meaning is formed inside a story.

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