

**Liberal Journal of Language & Literature Review**

**Print ISSN: 3006-5887**

**Online ISSN: 3006-5895**

**<https://llrjournal.com/index.php/11>**

**WHO TELLS THE STORY? A NARRATOLOGICAL STUDY OF  
NARRATION IN PALACE WALK**

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### Abstract

*This paper analyzes the type of narrator and narration in Naguib Mahfouz's Palace Walk, the first part of his renowned Cairo Trilogy. Using the narrative analysis framework proposed by Herman and Vervaeck (2005), this qualitative, interpretative study examines four key aspects of narration: narrator level (extradiegetic vs. intradiegetic), narrator involvement (heterodiegetic vs. homodiegetic), temporal relations (subsequent, prior, simultaneous, or interpolated), and narrator visibility (covert vs. overt). The findings reveal that the narrator in Palace Walk is extradiegetic (standing outside the fictional world), heterodiegetic (not experiencing the events he narrates), subsequent (narration takes place after the events, predominantly in past tense), and covert (absent from the narrative and not presenting himself in the first person). The study concludes that Mahfouz employs a single, consistent narrative voice that makes the novel an accessible and enjoyable read, in contrast to the multiple, fragmented voices typical of postmodern fiction. This paper also recommends applying the same narratological model to other novels and short stories for comparative analysis.*

**Keywords:** *Narrator, Narratology, Extradiegetic, Intradiegetic, Heterodiegetic, Homodiegetic, Palace Walk, Naguib Mahfouz*

### Introduction

The notion of narration is one of the three layers into which a short story or a novel is divided. Narration refers to all the ways through which a story is told within the narrative. More precisely, narration concerns the means by which the events of a story are worded or narrated.

In the context of narration, the first important factor is the type of narrator. Narrator type refers to “the relationship between the narrator and that which he narrates” (Herman & Vervaeck, 2005, p. 81). In this regard, the relationship between the level of the narrator and the level on which the events are narrated is examined. With reference to the level of the narrator, there are two types. The first is the extradiegetic narrator, and the second is the intradiegetic narrator. The extradiegetic narrator stands outside the fictional world. This type of narrator can be found in Hardy’s *Tess of the d’Urbervilles* or Dickens’s *A Tale of Two Cities*, where the narrator remains outside the fictional world or hovers over it. The other type, the intradiegetic narrator, exists inside the fictional world. The intradiegetic narrator is most often a character in the story. This type can be found in Hemingway’s *A Farewell to Arms* or Bapsi Sidhwa’s *Ice-Candy Man*. Explaining the difference between these two types, Herman and Vervaeck (2005) state: “The difference between the two is a hierarchical one. The extradiegetic narrator occupies the highest place in the hierarchy, while the intradiegetic narrator sits one step below” (81).

In the analysis of the narrator, apart from the distinction between extradiegetic and intradiegetic narrators, the next important phase is the narrator’s involvement in the fictional world. In this regard, the narrator can be either homodiegetic or heterodiegetic. The homodiegetic narrator experiences what he narrates; if the narrator has not experienced what he narrates, then he is a heterodiegetic narrator. The homodiegetic narrator is further divided into two types. The first is autodiegetic, and the second is allodiegetic. If the homodiegetic narrator is the protagonist of the story, he is autodiegetic. This type can be found in Dickens’s *Great Expectations*. However, if the narrator is not the protagonist but has merely witnessed the events, he is an allodiegetic narrator.

Moreover, in narrator analysis, the next important phase concerns the properties of the narrator. The first consideration is “the temporal relation between the moment of narration and the moment at which the narrated events take place” (Herman & Vervaeck, 2005, p. 86). In this regard, there may be subsequent narration, in which the narration takes place after the events and is mostly delivered in the past tense, though the use of the present tense has also been noted. With reference to temporal relations, the next option is prior narration, in which the narrator predicts events and how they will end. This type of narration mainly involves the future tense or sometimes the present tense. The next type is simultaneous narration, in which the action and its narration take place at the same time. The last type is interpolated narration, in which the narration occurs through the use of letters that provide commentary on the actions.

The next phase in the context of narrator analysis is narrator visibility. In this regard, a narrator can be covert or overt. The difference between the covert and overt narrator lies in the fact that “a covert narrator quotes a lot, does not present himself in the first person, and tries to avoid evaluative descriptions as much as possible. An overt narrator resorts to paraphrase instead of quotation; he will definitely talk about himself and therefore use the first person; and he will often showcase his own opinions” (Herman & Vervaeck, 2005, p. 88).

Naguib Mahfouz was considered one of the greatest writers in the Arab world. He was born in Egypt in 1911 and died in 2006. In his literary career, he wrote 34 novels and more than 300 short stories. At the same time, he wrote many movie scripts. He was awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1988.

*Palace Walk* is the first part of the trilogy titled *The Cairo Trilogy*, which was translated into English in 1990. This trilogy is considered one of the finest works of Naguib Mahfouz and has sold thousands of copies since its translation into English.

### **Literature Review**

A literature review is a critical overview of existing research on a specific topic. Rather than just a list of summaries, it synthesizes information to show the current state of knowledge, identify gaps, and provide a foundation for new research (Ahmad et al., 2022; Maitlo et al., 2023; Yousaf et al., 2025). Its function is to provide the foundation for new research (Ahmad et al., 2023; Maitlo et al., 2025). A literature review acts as a critical bridge between existing knowledge and your new research, ensuring your work is relevant and well-grounded (Jalbani et al., 2023; Maitlo et al., 2024; Shaheen et al., 2025). In a nutshell, its importance lies in its ability to justify, contextualize, and strengthen your academic efforts (Rao et al., 2023; Ansari et al., 2025).

Multiple studies have been conducted to analyze the type of narrator in short stories as well as in novels. In this context, John (2014) carried out a research study to analyze the type of narration in Salman Rushdie’s *Midnight’s Children*. The researcher found that this novel involves three layers of narration. The first layer is that of the fairy tale, which mostly involves expressions such as “once upon a time.” The second layer is that of autobiography, in which the character who is also the narrator of the story recounts his life. The third layer relates to the notion of history, where events concerning the independence of India are told.

Furthermore, according to John (2014), all three layers of narration intermingle with each other at various points in the novel. At the same time, the researcher determined that the protagonist of the novel is its narrator, who, while narrating various events, also refers to his own fantasies.

John (2014) further states that another narrative technique can be found in the novel, one related to the notion of memory. According to the researcher, this technique of memory makes the narrator of the novel unreliable, because the narrator, Salim Sinai, makes many claims and assertions that are not only dubious but also based on factual errors. In this context, he misrepresents the death of Gandhi and also acknowledges that he does not remember the date of an election well. Furthermore, the narrator confesses that his narration may not be accurate and that there is a possibility he might make more

mistakes in the future concerning his memory of events. However, at the same time, the narrator also asserts the importance of his story and considers it equal to a religious text.

In the context of narrator analysis, Jeremić (2014) also conducted a research study on Salman Rushdie's *The Ground Beneath Her Feet*. In this regard, the researcher concluded that this novel involves the technique of *katabasis*, a Greek word that refers to a journey toward the underworld. However, there is another connotation of *katabasis* that stands for the person who recounts his experience of the inner journey or events related to the underworld. Furthermore, the researcher stated that such stories mainly involve two perspectives, those of myth and history. At the same time, Jeremić (2014) acknowledges that the intermingling of these two perspectives is a rather difficult practice.

Jeremić (2014) further noted that the narrator of *The Ground Beneath Her Feet* tells the personal and private stories of the minor characters in order to allure the readers. The narrator has more knowledge about persons and places than the other characters. This is why he narrates secrets of other characters that are very shocking to the readers.

Jeremić (2014) provided further details about the narration in the novel and argued that Rai, who is actually a character in the novel, also performs the role of narrator. The main objective of his narration is to rewrite his own story. Furthermore, this narrator is not an objective narrator because he closely involves himself in the story. The researcher further determined that the mood of the narrator in this novel is rather nostalgic. This nostalgia increases when he narrates something about India. Regarding his emotions, the narrator displays them openly; yet at the same time, he is quite satirical about other characters. He does not hesitate to reveal the faults of other characters.

In reference to the search for narrators in short stories and novels, Jarandikar (2006) conducted an analysis of Makarand Paranjape's debut novel, *The Narrator*. In order to identify the narrator in this novel, the researcher used the method proposed by Genette (1983). Jarandikar (2006) found that this novel involves three layers of narration. The first layer is that of the extradiegetic narrator. In this layer, the narrator is Rahul, who tells of his personal experience. The second level is the intradiegetic layer, in which another character named Badri Dhanda recounts events from his personal experience. In the third layer, called metadiegetic, a play with the title *Manpasand* is narrated.

The researcher further explained that this type of narration involves a hierarchy of narratives. In this hierarchy, one narrative stands above another. At the same time, Jarandikar (2006) also stated that such narration makes reading the novel rather difficult because of the constant shift in narrative voices. Furthermore, it is difficult to maintain the balance among all the levels of narration. However, these narrations pave the way for new experiments.

### **1 Research Questions**

1. Who is the narrator in *Palace Walk*?
2. What type of narration is used in *Palace Walk*?

### **3. Methodology**

Research methodology is the systematic plan or "blueprint" used to conduct a study, ensuring that results are valid, reliable, and address specific research objectives (Ahmad et al., 2021; Khokhar et al., 2025). While research methods are the specific tools (e.g., surveys, interviews), research methodology provides the logical framework and justification for choosing those tools (Cheema et al., 2023; Ahmad et al., 2025; Murtaza et al., 2025).

#### **1. Nature of the Study**

This research study is qualitative in nature, which is considered the appropriate approach for the study of literary texts. In this regard, Gay (2009) states that "qualitative research data is collected on many variables in a natural setting, and in this study, ideas and things are examined in their natural being and existence."

## **2. Interpretative Method**

There are various methods involved in qualitative research; however, I have employed the interpretative method, which is considered a reliable method for studying literary texts. In this regard, Barryman (2004) and Silverman (2005) recommend this method because it is more closely related to the interpretation of literary texts.

## **3. Data Collection**

The data has been collected from secondary sources using books, journals, and online resources.

## **4. Theoretical Framework**

This research study is qualitative in nature and involves the analysis of the type of narrator and narration in *Palace Walk*. Various methods of narrator analysis have been proposed, but for this study the method had been adopted from Herman and Vervaeck's (2005) book *Handbook of Narrative Analysis*. This method involves the following factors of narrator analysis.

The first level in this method is that of narrator type, which determines the relationship between the narrator and what is being narrated. In this regard, the level of the narrator is determined, whereby a narrator can be either extradiegetic or intradiegetic. The extradiegetic narrator remains outside the fictional world; however, the intradiegetic narrator belongs to the fictional world. The next phase in narrator level is that of involvement, in which a narrator may be heterodiegetic or homodiegetic. The homodiegetic narrator is the one who experiences what he narrates, whereas the heterodiegetic narrator is the one who does not experience what he narrates. Furthermore, the homodiegetic narrator is further divided into autodiegetic and allodiegetic narrators. The autodiegetic narrator is the protagonist of the story; however, the allodiegetic narrator deals with things that he has only witnessed.

The next phase in the analysis of narration is the properties of narration. In this regard, the first stage concerns the temporal relations between the moment of narration and the moment when the event takes place. In this regard, narration may be subsequent, prior, simultaneous, or interpolated. Subsequent narration takes place after the events, whereas prior narration predicts future events. Simultaneous narration occurs at the same time as the event; however, interpolated narration involves the use of letters for narration.

The next property of narration is the visibility of the narrator. In this context, a narrator may be covert or overt. An overt narrator is visible, whereas a covert narrator is not visible in the narration.

## **4. Data Analysis and Interpretations.**

The concept of narration refers to the entire set of methods through which a story is told. In the analysis of narration, the first phase concerns the type of narrator. In this regard, a narrator can be either extradiegetic or intradiegetic. The extradiegetic narrator remains outside the fictional world, whereas the intradiegetic narrator remains inside it.

“She woke at midnight. She always woke up then without having to rely on an alarm clock. A wish that had taken root in her awoke her with great accuracy. For a few moments she was not sure she was awake. Images from her dreams and perceptions mixed together in her mind. She was troubled by anxiety before opening her eyes, afraid sleep had deceived her. Shaking her head gently, she gazed at the total darkness of the room.” (p. 1)

“The balcony overlooked the ancient building housing a cistern downstairs and a school upstairs which was situated in the middle of Palace Walk, or Bayn al-Qasrayn. Two roads met there: ai-Nahhasin, or Coppersmiths Street, going south and Palace Walk, which went north. To her left, the street appeared narrow and twisting. It was enveloped in a gloom that was thicker overhead where the windows of the sleeping houses looked down, and less noticeable at street level, because of the light coming from the handcarts and from the vapor lamps of the coffeehouses and the shops that stayed open until dawn.” (p. 2)

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Print ISSN: 3006-5887

Online ISSN: 3006-5895

The two passages clearly show that the narrator of this novel is extradiegetic, meaning he stands outside the story world. He uses third-person pronouns such as "she" and never uses "I" or "we." The narrator does not enter the fictional world, does not claim to be close to the events, and does not appear as a character. He is an invisible observer.

The narrator also has omniscient knowledge of the setting. He knows the streets, alleys, buildings, and sources of light in the area. A character standing in that street would not be able to know all these things at once. The narrator does not use phrases like "people said" or "she believed." He remains completely outside the story and provides an external perspective.

Furthermore, the narrator is heterodiegetic, meaning he does not experience the events he narrates. He reports the woman's internal states—her anxiety, her fear, her confusion between dreams and reality—but these are her experiences, not his. He never says, "I felt her anxiety" or "I saw that she was afraid." He tells another person's story, not his own. If the narrator were homodiegetic (a character who experiences what he narrates), he would have used first-person pronouns and described his own participation, for example, "I saw her wake at midnight" or "I watched as she gazed at the darkness." No such language appears. The narrator remains entirely detached from the action and has omniscient access to the character's mind without any personal involvement.

The narrator is also heterodiegetic because he does not experience the events he describes. Notice the phrasing: "To her left, the street appeared narrow and twisting." The narrator does not say "to my left" or "I saw that the street appeared narrow." He anchors the description in the character's physical position and sensory perception, not his own. The word "appeared" is significant because it reports the character's subjective experience rather than the narrator's objective observation. Throughout the passage, the narrator never uses first-person pronouns, never describes his own feelings or reactions, and never inserts himself into the scene. He remains completely invisible and uninvolved. If the narrator were homodiegetic, he would have written something like, "From where I stood on the balcony, I saw the street below" or "To my left, the street appeared narrow." The complete absence of such language confirms that the narrator is heterodiegetic.

The next level in the analysis of narration concerns the properties of narration. Regarding these properties, the first concept is that of temporal relation. In this context, narration may be subsequent, prior, simultaneous, or interpolated.

In *Palace Walk*, the narration is subsequent, as it takes place after the events. This can be observed in the following examples.

"The night before, he had been unable to attend a party to which one of his friends had invited him. Immediately after he had taken his seat in the store this morning, the man who had invited him and some comrades who were guests at the party had come to see him. They had reprimanded him for missing it and held him responsible for diminishing their delight and enjoyment.." (p. 83).

"He became even more agitated, and his voice trembled as he spat out the final phrase like a fish bone. His feeling of disgust and aversion passed over to his father, who began repeating to himself: "In his thirties . . . What a disgrace! It's adultery disguised as marriage." The man was angry because his son was and for his own sake too. He always got angry when news of her private affairs reached him. It appeared to reawaken his sense of responsibility for what she did, since she had once been his wife." (p. 106)

The first passage provides clear evidence of subsequent narration through its extensive use of the past perfect tense, which indicates that the narrator is looking back at events from a later point in time. The repeated use of phrases such as "had been," "had invited," "had taken," "had come," and "had reprimanded" places the narrator in a temporal position that is doubly removed from the present moment of the story. The narrator does not describe events as they unfold but rather recounts them after their completion. The past perfect tense specifically indicates that these actions occurred even before the main past tense frame of the narrative. Furthermore, the phrase "the night before" explicitly

## Liberal Journal of Language & Literature Review

Print ISSN: 3006-5887

Online ISSN: 3006-5895

signals a backward-looking temporal orientation, as does "this morning," which refers to a morning that has already passed from the narrator's perspective. The narrator knows how the events ended because he is reporting them after they have concluded. There is no use of the future tense, no predictive language, and no sense that the narration is keeping pace with the action in real time.

The second passage provides further confirmation of subsequent narration, again through the predominance of past tense verbs and the narrator's retrospective stance. Every verb in this passage is in the past tense ("became," "trembled," "spat," "passed," "began," "was," "got," "reached," "appeared," "did"), and the single past perfect construction ("had once been") again indicates an event that occurred even earlier relative to the main narrative past. The narrator is not predicting what will happen, nor is he narrating simultaneously with the action. He is looking back from a temporal distance. The phrase "He always got angry when news of her private affairs reached him" is particularly revealing because the use of "always" indicates a habitual action in the past. Such a pattern can only be known and reported by a narrator who has observed it over time and is now summarizing it after the fact. A narrator who was narrating simultaneously with the events could not yet know that the character "always" reacted in a certain way because the full pattern would not yet be visible. Similarly, the narrator's statement that her affair "appeared to reawaken his sense of responsibility" involves a judgment that requires temporal distance; the narrator has seen the consequence and is now interpreting the cause.

None of the four types of non-subsequent narration are present in these passages. There is no prior narration (prediction of future events using the future tense), no simultaneous narration (action and narration occurring at the same time, as in a live broadcast or a diary written in the present tense), and no interpolated narration (narration through letters or documents that interrupt the main narrative flow). Instead, the consistent use of the past tense and past perfect tense, combined with the retrospective summaries of habitual behavior and causal relationships, confirms that the narration in *Palace Walk* is entirely subsequent.

The next level in the analysis of narration concerns the visibility of the narrator. In this context, a narrator may be overt or covert. In *Palace Walk*, the narrator is consistently covert, meaning that he remains invisible, does not present himself in the first person, avoids evaluative language, and allows the story to unfold as if without a mediating consciousness.

"Yet it remained exactly the way it had been when he was growing up. Nothing had changed. The street was still so narrow a handcart would almost block it when passing by. The protruding balconies of the houses almost touched each other overhead. The small shops resembled the cells of a beehive, they were so close together and crowded with patrons, so noisy and humming. The street was unpaved, with gaping holes full of mud. The boys who swarmed along the sides of the street made footprints in the dirt with their bare feet.." (p. 111)

"All the same, he did not consider what he had heard concerning Fahmy that afternoon to be a minor error. He discerned in it an unseemly turbulence that should not be agitating the soul of a schoolboy from his family. He could not imagine that the world of the emotions had infiltrated the atmosphere of his home, which he vigilantly strove to keep one of stern purity and immaculate innocence. (p. 130)

The first passage provides clear evidence of a covert narrator. The narrator never uses the first-person pronoun "I" or "we." He does not say, "I remember that it remained exactly the way it had been" or "In my opinion, nothing had changed." He does not introduce himself with phrases such as "let me tell you" or "as I observed." The narrator is completely absent as a personality. Furthermore, the narrator avoids evaluative or judgmental language. He does not say, "The street was depressingly narrow" or "the shops were wonderfully crowded." Instead, he presents objective descriptions: the handcart "would almost block" the street, the balconies "almost touched each other," and the shops "resembled the cells of a beehive." The simile "resembled the cells of a beehive" is a poetic device, but

# Liberal Journal of Language & Literature Review

Print ISSN: 3006-5887

Online ISSN: 3006-5895

it is presented as a neutral observation rather than as the narrator's personal emotional reaction. The narrator also uses direct quotation of sensory details—the shops are "noisy and humming," the holes are "gaping," and the boys make footprints "with their bare feet"—without adding commentary such as "it was a charming sight" or "it was a dirty street." This avoidance of evaluative adjectives and personal opinions is a hallmark of a covert narrator, who, according to Herman and Vervaeck (2005), "quotes a lot, does not present himself in the first person, and tries to avoid evaluative descriptions as much as possible." The narrator of *Palace Walk* does exactly this: he presents the scene as if it is simply there, without a storyteller interposing himself between the reader and the fictional world. The effect is that the reader seems to see the street directly, without the filter of a narrator's personality or judgment.

The second passage further confirms the covert nature of the narrator. Once again, there is no first-person pronoun. The narrator does not say, "I think that he did not consider it a minor error" or "In my view, he discerned an unseemly turbulence." The narrator remains invisible and unnamed. More importantly, the narrator refrains from evaluating the character's thoughts or actions. He does not say, "He was wrong to think this way" or "His concern for purity was excessive." He simply reports what the character thinks and feels. The words "unseemly turbulence," "stern purity," and "immaculate innocence" are the character's own internal categories, not the narrator's imposed judgments. The narrator uses a technique called free indirect discourse, in which the narrator reports a character's thoughts without using quotation marks or explicit tags such as "he thought." The phrase "should not be agitating the soul of a schoolboy from his family" reflects the father's own moral standards, not the narrator's. The narrator does not interrupt to agree or disagree with the father. He does not say, "The father was overly strict" or "The father was right to be concerned." He simply transmits the character's mental content without commentary. This is the mark of a covert narrator: he acts as a transparent medium through which the story and the characters' consciousnesses are revealed, rather than as an overt personality who interprets, judges, and draws attention to his own act of telling.

## Findings

This research study has produced findings that the narrator is absent from the fictional world in *Palace Walk*; therefore, the narrator is extradiegetic. With reference to the involvement of the narrator, the narrator does not experience what he is narrating; consequently, he is a heterodiegetic narrator. In the context of the temporal relation of narration, the narration in *Palace Walk* is subsequent, as the narration takes place after the events. Regarding the visibility of the narrator, the narrator is covert, as he does not present himself in the first person.

## Conclusion

This research study concludes that, through the use of an extradiegetic narrator and other properties of narration, Naguib Mahfouz has given this novel an entirely enjoyable form. Furthermore, the narration is subsequent, taking place only in the past tense. This gives the novel a single voice, which is quite unlike typical postmodern novels that create multiple voices and make the novels difficult to read. However, the narration in this novel is quite easy; therefore, this novel creates not only an easy but also an enjoyable read.

This research study further recommends applying this model to other novels and short stories in order to analyze their narrator types.

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