

WHEN CHILDREN LOOK AT US**OLIVIA ELEONRA BĂLĂNESCU**

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Abstract: *“Hideous Kinky” presents the story of an English mother travelling in Morocco with her two daughters. As expected, this exotic journey is about the woman’s pursuit of spiritual enlightenment. Less expected, the story is narrated by her youngest daughter who constantly denies the story to the reader. Starting from the issue of unreliable homodiegetic narration, this paper proposes to analyse the effects of missing information in the text, and the reader’s subsequent responsibility for filling the gaps and disambiguating the story. As a method, the essay establishes connections between its theoretical investigations and Esther Freud’s novel.*

Keywords: *gap, homodiegesis, interpretation, narrator, unreliability.*

1. Introduction

Great-granddaughter of Sigmund Freud and daughter of the painter Lucian Freud, Esther Freud wrote a remarkable debut novel, *Hideous Kinky*, published in 1992, and turned into a motion picture in 1998. Inspired by the author’s own experiences as a child, the book tells the story of two English girls – the five-year-old narrator and her seven-year-old sister, Bea – who leave England and start a new life on the road in Morocco with their young, hippie mother, in search of adventure, freedom and spiritual enlightenment.

The novel opens with the family’s journey to Morocco in a van, with a friend, Danny, a man named John and his wife, Marett, who seems ill, and consequently refuses to speak. The girls have heard her saying just two words: “hideous” and “kinky”, which soon become their favourite chant, uttered whenever they feel like playing. As readers, we do not know what kind of relationship there is between the young woman (“Mum” is the only name we know her by) and the other three people in the van, why they all left England for Morocco, or why they are travelling together. In fact, we never find out who Mum really is, what she used to do before coming to Marrakech, or what made her decide to leave England. Toward the end of the novel,

she goes out begging in the streets, showing people a letter written in Arabic by her boyfriend – “In the name of God I am a stranger in your town, fallen on a hard moment...” (Freud 1999:176) – with the aim of extracting small sums from the locals. An American tourist, however, stops to scrutinise the letter and question Mum:

Who was Mum? Where was she from? Why didn't she have any money? He said he wanted to help us, but until he was utterly convinced by our story he didn't feel he could. At first Mum tried to answer his questions. Then she became irritable. 'You are interrupting my begging time,' she said. 'Can't you see I'm working?'

(Freud 1999:177)

Just like the American, we too want to know the story, but this is constantly and consistently denied to us. Basic information is missing because the story is narrated by the unnamed five-year-old girl, who perceives events in her own, naive way. She tells her version of the adults' story from the perspective of her limited understanding and experience. In what follows, we are going to scrutinise the impact of the child narrator on the text, and the reader's ethical response to the story the child constructs.

2.Unreliable Homodiegetic Narration

In his 1961 study *The Rhetoric of Fiction*, Wayne C. Booth introduced the concepts of the reliable and unreliable narrator, offering the following definition:

For lack of better terms, I have called a narrator reliable when he speaks for or acts in accordance with the norms of the work (which is to say, the implied author's norms), unreliable when he does not.

(1983:158-159)

According to Booth, a narrator may be unreliable about facts or values, that is, the axes of events and that of ethics are directly affected. Since 1961, the term “unreliability” has been widely used, its initial meaning being distorted by various interpretations. For instance, there are critics who consider “unreliable” only narrators who are untrustworthy in their account of events. We intend to adopt the broadened definition proposed by Phelan and Martin who consider a homodiegetic narrator “unreliable” when “he or she offers an account of some event, person, thought, thing, or other object in the narrative world that deviate from the account the implied author would offer” (1999:94).

Phelan and Martin go on to argue that there are three axes along which a narrator may deviate from the implied author's view. Thus, he or she may be an unreliable reporter on the axis of facts/events; an unreliable evaluator on the axis of ethics/evaluation; and an unreliable reader or interpreter on the axis of knowledge/perception. Starting from this identification of axes, they further distinguish six kinds of unreliability: misreporting, misevaluating/misregarding, and misreading, which occur when the narrator offers the wrong report, evaluation or interpretation of an event; and underreporting, when the narrator tells us less than he or she knows, underreading, when the narrator offers an insufficient interpretation of a situation or character, and underregarding when the narrator's ethical judgement does not go far enough. Multifaceted as it is, the unreliability is rarely of one kind only, being usually accompanied by another kind of unreliability. Moreover, the border between different types is often blurred and hard to trace. The point of recognising these types is to raise the reader's awareness of the fact that reliability and unreliability are not a binary pair, and an instance of unreliability does not render the whole narration suspect. A narrator can be unreliable on different axes at certain points along his or her narration, just as he or she can be totally reliable at other points, on all axes (Phelan and Martin 1999:94-96).

The story in *Hideous Kinky* is told by a child and thus, classical narratology's account of unreliability cannot do either the young narrator or Esther Freud justice. The reader is faced with the naive narration of a little girl who is unreliable for the simple fact that she is inexperienced and innocent. Therefore, she is mostly unreliable along the axis of knowledge/perception and can be "accused" of misreading and underreading. The narrator's lack of knowledge, sophistication or perceptiveness leads to incorrect or insufficient interpretation of events and characters. Because of her tender age, the girl is not culturally literate enough to be able to grasp the less obvious meanings of adults' acts, words or gestures.

An instance of misreading occurs when Bilal, Mum's Moroccan boyfriend, introduces her to a stranger, Charlie, as his English wife. The narrator is immediately startled by the "news":

I'd never heard him say 'wife' before. I wondered if they'd got married and forgotten to say.
 'Bee-lal,' I said, drawing out the sound of his name. We were walking home hand in hand.
 'Yes?'
 'Am I your little girl?'
 There was a long pause.
 'Yes,' he said finally and he squeezed my hand very tight.

(Freud 1999:74-75)

Later that day, the narrator informs her sister Bea that their mother got married to Bilal, because that was what Bilal told Charlie. Bea does not believe her and calls her a “liar”, either because she understands more than her sister, or because she rejects this possibility, being convinced that her mum would not marry anyone because “she wants to have adventures” (Freud 1999:22). The “liar” label renders the narrator unreliable on the axis of facts/events, yet the reader can infer that the unreliability occurs as a result of the little girl’s naive, literal perception of Bilal’s words. She does not lie; on the contrary, her account of what she heard is accurate and sincere. She is convinced that she is right, and throughout the story she repeatedly states that she is Bilal’s daughter: “Bilal was my Dad. No one denied it when I said so.” (Freud 1999:168) If no one contradicted her, then she was right. As simple as that, and things work this way in children’s world.

At other times, the reasons she finds for certain actions are also instances of misreading. Thus, she believes that Bea does all the shopping “because she’s got brown eyes and mine and Mum’s are green” (Freud 1999:56). In fact, Bea has learnt to speak good Arabic and Mum offers the reader the right explanation of Bea’s doing all the bargaining in shops: “They think she’s a little Moroccan girl” (Freud 1999:56). The narrator’s unreliability is a consequence of a mistaken value system.

Once readers understand that a narrator’s words cannot be fully trusted, they have two options: either to “reject those words and, if possible, reconstruct a more satisfactory account”, or to “accept what the narrator says but then supplement the account” with other information provided by the text (Phelan and Martin 1999:94). In Freud’s novel, the narrator’s words cannot be rejected, since the little girl is genuinely sincere due to her age, but the reader has to search for additional information and clues in order to get the right account of events. The trouble with *Hideous Kinky* is that much of this additional information is missing.

3. Suppressed Information

What information we get in the novel seems dropped incidentally. As we mentioned in the introduction, the reason why Mum brought her girls to Morocco is never made clear. It is obvious that the mother and the girls’ father are no longer together, and we do not know whether they were once married or not. It is not clear whether they left England to take distance from the father, or for other reasons. One of the mother’s main activities is to go to the bank to enquire if money has arrived, but where money comes from is never explained. Presumably from the father, who sends them a Christmas parcel of sweets and children’s books. “‘Your Daddy,’ she

said. 'From England.'” (Freud 1999:110) and this is all we hear about him. The book abounds in unexplained things, which makes it both difficult and interesting to read.

Analysing the effects of deferred and suppressed information in narrative, Emma Kafalenos argues that:

Missing information matters because we interpret and reinterpret events, from moment to moment, on the basis of the information that is available to us at that moment. We understand events [...] by viewing them as elements in chronological and casual chains of events. First we organize the events we know about in a chronological sequence, and then we look for possible casual relations among the chronologically ordered events.

(1999:35)

This cause and effect chain of events is broken when important information is missing. The absence of information may affect readers' interpretation of events. This is the case of *Hideous Kinky*, where much information is either deferred or suppressed, leading to temporary or permanent gaps. Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan points out that: “the distinction between permanent and temporary gaps can be made only in retrospect.” (2005:129) This means that, while reading, the reader does not know whether some missing information will occur later in the text or not at all, and this uncertainty constitutes “the basis of the dynamics of reading” (Rimmon-Kenan 2005:129). He or she reads in the hope of filling the supposedly temporary gaps.

In Esther Freud's novel, an example of a temporary gap is the age of the narrator. Late in the story, an Indian guru tells the unnamed girl a secret mantra and advises her to repeat it every day one hundred times. “I wanted to tell him I could only count to four which was how old I was” (Freud 1999:125) she says, thus revealing her age at the time. Just before the novel ends, she celebrates her birthday and we presume she is five, although the precise age is never specified. By contrast, who sends Mum money, her age, and the reason of her taking two small children to Morocco remain permanent gaps in the story.

The prose style that Freud employs in her novel is carefully simplified to suit a child's speech. As a result, the narrator's statements are devoid of speculation, and avoid the explanations that readers would usually expect from a narrator. The little girl does not interpret the signs of the adult world around, but merely reports what she sees: the whispers around, the trembling of her mother's hand when she offered some soup to Maretta, the men who once burst into their room, making obscene gestures to her mother, etc. There are times when she asks for explanations, but the others are either too busy to answer, or they consider the answer inappropriate for a little girl, as it is the case when she enquires about the intentions of the men

who came to Mum at night: “‘What did they want?’ I asked, but Mum couldn’t stop laughing long enough to tell me. Bea ‘crossed her heart and hoped to die’ she didn’t know.” (Freud 1999:118-119) On the other hand, it is common for parents not to give their children much information, a point underlined several times by the narrator: “Mum didn’t offer any explanation” (Freud 1999:153), or “Mum wouldn’t say where we were going.” (Freud 1999:181)

Common rules of character composition are also suspended. There are characters who are introduced briefly and never seen again, like Dave, a man whom the family meet briefly at the Spanish port of embarkation for Morocco. Although he soon “vanishes” from the story, he has some influence on the events: because of him, the family’s van was turned back to Spain. Other characters appear suddenly, without any context, such as Linda and her baby Mob, who share the same room with Mum and the girls for quite a long time, before deciding to return to England.

Much information related to human motivation or character composition is missing, as the narrator does not pay attention to it or does not have access to it. In exchange, she shares with us the things which fascinate her, such as colours, smells, and tastes. Thus, we are given thorough information about the taste of *majoun*:

It tasted delicious, like crystallized sugar with soft honey-comb that hid something sharp that made you want more to cover the trace of bitterness. [...] It seemed to me the most delicious taste in the world. Sand mixed with honey and fried in a vat of doughnuts.

(Freud 1999:51)

In a similar manner we are introduced to the different colours and styles of dresses, caftans, and shoes, a whole feminine world full of “treasures” which literally enchant the narrator. She generally pays attention to, and describes in detail the things, events and circumstances which arouse children’s interest, such as a family of spiders, the acrobats, the dancers, the tambourine players in the main square of Marrakech, or a pair of dogs full of ticks.

Having to deal with much detail concerning a little girl’s world while being deprived of access to essential information, the reader is left to his/her own devices to understand the depth of Mum’s experience. The homodiegesis blocks access to information, and so transfers the responsibility for disambiguating the story to the reader. Phelan and Martin point out that: “the deciding factor in how we each carry out that responsibility is our individual ethical beliefs as they interact with our understanding of [...] a particular character in a particular situation”

(1999:103). This brings our analysis to the issue of the ethical positioning of the reader in relation to the text.

4. The Ethics of Reading

Discussing the concept of “position” that implies “being placed in and acting from an ethical location” (1999:100), Phelan and Martin distinguish between four ethical situations: that of the characters, that of the narrator, that of the implied author, and that of the reader. The ethical position of the reader results from the interaction of the signals a text sends, with his/her own set of values and beliefs (Phelan and Martin 1999:89). In other words, we, as readers, filter and interpret the events in a story according to our own ethical standards.

In *Hideous Kinky* we may choose either to look down on Mum or to sympathise with her, as the text offers numerous signals which invite both ethical responses. Thus, a conservative reader would perceive Mum as a typical middle-class hippie, dishonest and self-indulgent. She can be judged for irresponsibly dragging her daughters along to Morocco, and for selfishly following her own path. Once she sets her mind on becoming a Sufi, nothing can stop her. She abides by the rules of Ramadan, fasts and prays seven times per day, much to the distress and embarrassment of the girls:

Bea and I were eager to arrive at the hotel before Mum’s next prayers were due. A few days before [...] Mum had stopped abruptly, looked up at the sun and, unperturbed by the fact that she had forgotten her prayer mat, knelt down in the street to pray. She mimed her intricate washing procedures and stretched out her arms to Mecca. Without a word we hid ourselves behind a wall. We agreed firmly that, if asked, we’d never seen or heard of her before.

(Freud 1999:103)

In order to become a Sufi, she needs to make a pilgrimage to the Zaouia, a monastery in Algiers, far away from Marrakesh. Bea refuses to go on the trip as she resents the idea of having to live “in a mosque with lots of sheiks who sat all day in the lotus position” (Freud 1999:135). Besides, Bea does not want to abandon school, and is consequently left behind in Marrakech with some people whom Mum has only just met. The narrator sets out with her mother on a long, tiring journey, and they end up spending so many weeks at the Zaouia, that the little girl is worried they might never leave and see Bea again. Busy with prayers and spiritual conversations, Mum does not make any attempt to contact her elder daughter and seems incapable to make any connection between the anxiety of the situation and the fact that her younger daughter wets the bed every night. When at last they return to Marrakesh for Bea’s birthday, the girl has

disappeared. Mum later finds her in a polio school, helping a missionary lady to look after polio children. As expected, Bea is not happy to encounter her mother, but eventually she has to follow her, mainly because of the special bond she has with her sister, the narrator.

The relationship between the girls, unlike other aspects of the story, is very well rounded. They construct their own world, spiced with games, mockery, awkwardness, and private jokes, despite the unusual lifestyle that Mum imposes on them. The year they spent in Morocco, mostly in Marrakech, is marked by poverty and restlessness: they start by living in a rented house, but then, as money from England does not arrive regularly, they have to move out and get a room in a cheap hostel, crowded with poor people and prostitutes who steal Mum's clothes. The financial situation worsens to the point that Mum is literally forced to go out and beg on the streets in order to get money to pay the rent. As events are narrated by the youngest girl, everything, including this begging episode, is perceived as an interesting adventure. Bea and her sister face all hardships with an incredible lightness of being.

In the face of anarchy, the girls look for a sense of stability, of coherence. Consequently, Bea insists on being allowed to go to school. She clearly states that she does not need any more adventures; all she needs is a white uniform and a satchel. Mum disregards the girl's interest in studying and, soon after she has started going to school, takes her on a holiday by a lake. What started as a holiday turns into a whole summer spent by the lake shore. The narrator, in her turn, is much preoccupied with growing up, looking like a boy, and spending time with Mum's boyfriend, Bilal, who embodies the father figure that is missing from her life. Nevertheless, the girls are very attached to their mother, in spite of her not offering them much in terms of security. On their journey back to England, the narrator is very cautious of her behaviour "in case Mum changed her mind about going home and decided at the last minute to jump off at one of the stations along the way" (Freud 1999:186).

But other elements in the story point to another reading of Mum. She may be regarded, from a different ethical perspective, as a strong, fearless character who values freedom above anything else. Coming to Morocco she is free to live the kind of life she wants, without any social or family constraints. The same standard applies to the girls; she gives them a longer leash to play, to explore, to wonder the streets of Marrakech, to befriend beggar girls, to buy and sell things at the market, etc. At some point, a Canadian lady, whom they meet during a trip to the countryside, warns Mum that "Children need discipline", but Mum firmly disagrees: "I had plenty of discipline, and it didn't do me any good." (Freud 1999:132) The reader, as mentioned earlier, may choose either to share the Canadian's point of view, and thus to see

Mum as careless and irresponsible, or to sympathise with her and admire her parenting approach.

We have already seen that the mother does not represent much of a haven of safety for her daughters; yet, the story sends numerous signals as to how skilfully she handles all the girls' issues, managing to dispel their worries and soothe their sorrows. For instance, when the narrator gets anxious thinking that Santa will not come because there are no chimneys in the hotel where they are staying, Mum assures her that "Father Christmas will think of something" (Freud 1999:95). Similarly, when Bea asks for a school uniform and their money has not arrived, Mum promises her that "We'll think of something" (Freud 1999:55), and indeed she borrows some money, buys material, and sews a shirt and a pleated skirt. Whenever the girls, especially the younger one, feel sad or scared, they find comfort on their mother's lap.

Living hand-to-mouth in North Africa, Mum always has to think of something in order to provide food and pay the rent. Therefore, she sews dresses and sells them, makes dolls which everybody admires but nobody buys, and even goes begging. When their money does arrive, she takes her daughters to restaurants, orders them lavish food and loads of Fanta. She proves to be an honest person who, in spite of her stringent financial difficulties, always pays off her debts, and a generous person at the same time. Just before leaving for England, she thinks of some presents for her daughters' friends, three beggar girls. She buys each of them a new caftan and takes them to be washed at the Hammam before dressing them up.

Whether we see Mum as appalling or admirable depends, as we have mentioned, on our own ethical beliefs. In both situations the text invites us to desire a certain course of events. Despite their differences, both readings lead to the conclusion that Mum should leave Morocco. She takes this decision when Bea gets very sick. Extremely worried that the girl's teeth are going to fall out because of a mouth infection, she promises that, as soon as they have enough money, they will go back to England. Bea gets better, but Mum is true to her word, and they do go back.

5. Conclusion

Esther Freud's book, by virtue of its many veils and concealed information, relies on a deep trust in the readers' ability to engage with the story and fill the gaps left behind by a charmingly naive five-year-old narrator. Just as Mum gives free rein to her daughters to explore the streets of Marrakech, so too the writer grants us the freedom to interpret the events in the novel, according to our own set of ethical beliefs.

No doubt the most fascinating aspect of the novel is the girl narrator who, due to her unusual viewpoint, brings an air of adventure and excitement that renders the story truly delightful. At the same time, *Hideous Kinky* makes us a serious offer: to see the adult world from the perspective of a child, in other words, to look at ourselves with the eyes of children.

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