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NARRATIVE STRATEGIES IN CHICK LIT: A STUDY OF AMY SOHN'S *RUN CATCH KISS*

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ABSTRACT

This paper focuses on the narrative techniques employed in the chick lit texts. The narrative techniques that the writers of these texts adopt have a direct bearing on the characters. They deconstruct the conventional narrative styles by presenting the content of their novels in a different way. Amy Sohn in her text *Run Catch Kiss* (1999), experiments with a unique style of narration. She empowers her female characters by giving them a language that breaks the parochial boundaries related to gender. The female characters in her text use bold language to voice their opinions. The novel has numerous colloquial expressions and the use of informal language connects the readers to the text. Amy Sohn uses the first-person narration and deftly employs 'memory' and 'flashback' techniques to give a peep into her characters' minds. The paper highlights the narrative style of the chick lit writers with special reference to *Run Catch Kiss*.

Keywords: Chick lit, colloquial, memory, flashback

Narratology is an important area in the field of literary studies. Over the years, its scope has widened with the emergence of fresh insights and new heuristic tools entering its realm. In *A Dictionary of Stylistics* (2001) compiled by Katie Wales, it is defined as "a term that has come into favour since the 1960s from French under the influence of structuralism referring to the theoretical study and analysis of narrative and its structures" (315-16). The term was coined by Tzvetan Todorov in 1969 "to designate a systematic study of narrative firmly anchored in the tradition of the Russian and Czech formalism of the early twentieth century and French structuralism and semiotics of the sixties" (Patrick 174). Todorov highlighted the need to explore the structural properties of a narrative and to introduce a rational theory that could be applied to all domains of narrative. Gerald Prince in the book *Narratology: The Form and Function of Narrative* (1982), remarks that narratology is "the study of form and functioning of narrative" (184). A close scrutiny of these definitions shows that the term has its roots in structuralism. Since narratology involves the study of narrative, it is important to be cognizant of what a narrative is and what its components are and how they lend uniqueness to a narrative.

The term 'narrative' has been derived from the Latin verb 'narrare' which means 'to tell'. It signifies the rendering of events from a perspective that may vary from author to author. It focuses not only on recounting

the story, but also lays emphasis on its presentation. It has been an integral part of our lives since the beginning of civilization. In fact, it is a cord that is necessary for the survival of human race. Roland Barthes writes that a narrative encompasses a wide array of topics like "... articulated language, spoken or written, fixed or moving images, gestures, and the ordered mixture of all these substances" (79). Tracing the universality of narrative, he expounds that "narrative is present in myth, legend, fable, tale, novella, epic, history, tragedy, drama, comedy, mime, painting ... stained glass windows, cinema, comics, news items, conversation" (79). He puts forward the idea that narrative is omnipresent and an inseparable part of human life.

It is pertinent to note that the aesthetic thrust of a narrative depends largely upon the mode and technique of narration employed by the author. Narrative technique is a vital element which lends distinctiveness to a text by pinpointing the stylistic devices and features used by the author. Mark Schorer in his essay "Technique as Discovery" (2003), remarks that "When we speak of technique, we speak of nearly everything. Because, technique is the tool or means by which the writer's experience, which is his subject matter, compels him to attend to it; technique is the only means he has of discovering, exploring, developing his subject, of conveying its meaning and finally of evaluating it" (249-50). It is important for a writer to make use of certain narrative techniques to provide meaning to the text. He further says, "Narrative technique is actually the means by which he (the author) discovers, objectifies, explores, and evaluates his subject and his dexterity determines his success" (251). The skill with which the author uses a particular technique defines how effective his/her narrative is. Furthermore, it is the technique that helps the writer in translating his experiences, ideas, thoughts and feelings and in establishing communication with society in general and readers in particular.

The chick lit writers present the journey of a woman narrator who is also the protagonist in the story by employing the first-person narrative technique that has become one of the preferred styles of narration in postfeminist fiction, especially in the chick lit fiction as it allows freedom to the woman narrator to justify her position. This kind of narrative voice has become the "signature voice of our time" (Miller 2004). It foregrounds the emerging voice of the contemporary women who wish to have control over their lives. The use of 'I' further frees them from the clutches of the patriarchal power and offers them a space of their own. A. Rochelle Mabry writes:

The move towards first-person voice in most contemporary chick lit novels not only strengthens the heroine's voice and increases the reader's opportunities to identify with her but also offers at least a temporary escape from the feeling of being constantly watched or controlled by a male dominated society. (196)

It is clear from the above excerpt that the chick lit writers present everyday experiences of women of today by using first-person narration which confirms Gamble's claim that the postfeminist novels "are beginning to consider aspects of modern female" (77). The first-person narrative technique used by them enables the characters to tell their readers an account of their personal affairs. Dilating upon the relationship between the chick lit texts and readers, Rian Montgomery comments: "Chick lit is told in a more confiding, personal tone. It's like having a best friend tell you about her life. Or watching various characters go through things that you have gone through yourself, or witnessed others going through" ("What is Chick Lit?"). It is important to note that the chick lit writers' casual conversational style of narration not only strengthens the female characters but also fills the distance between the reader and the text as Kirsner & Mandell write in the chapter "Style, Tone, and Language" (1994): "A first-person narrator may use informal style, or characters may speak informally; in either case, informal style tends to narrow the distance between reader and text" (214).

The use of focalization as a narrative device is commonly explored in the chick lit novels. While quoting H. Porter Abbott, Kent Puckette writes in the book *Narrative Theory* (2016), that focalization "refers specifically to the lens through which we see characters and events in the narrative" (129). It was Gerard Genette who used the term 'focalization' in place of perspective or point of view. Focalization is mainly of two types – external and internal focalization. External focalization is related to the narrative agent and it works on the premise of narrator-focalizer, whereas internal focalization takes the form of a character-focalizer by using the first-person narrative. The texts in which the narrator is also a character in the story and exists within the narrative make use

of internal focalization. However, it is not fixed; some texts make a shift from external to internal and from internal to external focalization. Focalization has different facets – the perceptual, the psychological, the ideological etc. Chick lit narratives engage in different facets by presenting the perceptions through space and time (the perceptual facet), inner dialogues, minds, emotions, feelings (the psychological facet) and behavioral disposition (the ideological facet) of the characters. In a way, it is an intermingling of these facets that gives variety to a narrative.

The chick lit novels introduce the readers to a homodiegetic narrator. As Gerard Genette would say that the homodiegetic narrator is a narrator who delineates his or her subjective experiences as a character in the story. The story is presented through his/her perspective. Such kind of narrative style includes self-introspections and interior monologues. However, this style of narration has its own limitations. The readers become aware of the events and characters of story through the narrator's perspective only. They do not get a fair idea of the characters as it is the narrator who dominates the entire plot and withholds information as per his/her views of the occurring events.

In her text *Run Catch Kiss* (1999), Amy Sohn has used focalization in such a way that the events recorded in the characters' minds make their vivid appearance which further helps in understanding their minds. The protagonist indulges in self-introspection many times in the novel. She becomes a focaliser who presents the images of her mind from her perspective. Ariel's mistake in choosing her career as a sex columnist costs her a heavy price. As a homodiegetic narrator, she expresses: "I felt like I'd been born at the wrong time. Deep down, I was really a shtetl girl. I didn't want the pogroms, I just wanted the certainty" (53). The narration depicts her mind which is not ready to accept the downfall in her career. She vocalizes her state of mind by pondering over her reputation which has brought nothing but negativity in her life. She does not want to carry on the same reputation throughout her life. She broods over her present state and introspects how her life has been and whether it is all what she wants from life. She wishes to be acknowledged by the people around her with positive comments on her personality. She contemplates:

I was a hopeless romantic trapped in the body of a seething hussy. I missed intimacy. I wanted passion and companionship and deep discussion and lots of compliments delivered to me regularly without any misgivings or posturing. I wanted sidewalk embraces and hand holding and hair caressing and eight-hour lovemaking and dozens of phone calls... I turned off the computer and looked out the window at the lights on the expressway. (133)

It shows that Ariel's contemplations and meditations are her constant companions which not only pose a problem in front of her but offer a solution as well. She expresses her desire to gain something worthwhile in her life. She articulates: "I wanted to feel successful again, and talented. I wanted to do something that would give me a sense of control" (241). It is her mind which gives her direction to erase the wrongs and to have a control over her life. She gets a clarion call to change her life for the better. In the end, Ariel starts doing constructive works, like she joins a school as a spiritual mentor to bring her life back on track. She herself confesses: "I was making up for the shame I'd brought upon my family by doing something positive for my community" (248). It is clear that she is a focalizer who lays bare her mind and the readers get to know her and her relations with others from her perspective.

The plot gets intertwined with the columns written by the protagonist in a weekly as the columns too use the first-person narrative technique. The readers start liking the columns because of the style of narration which makes the column lifelike. One of the readers' comments: "I think its greatest strength is its first-person component, the columns, the fact that you can tune in to different lives each week" (76). They stay tuned to the write-ups and eagerly wait for the next issue. The sexual adventures of the columnist fascinate the readers to the extent that another reader comments: "I await your column each week like a junkie awaits his fix, like a dog awaits his walk, like a baby awaits his mother's treat" (102). It becomes a routine affair for the readers to read the columns and they make it a part of their everyday life. Not only this, some of the readers find their life dull and boring if they miss out a single column. Once Ariel gets a response from one of her ardent readers: "Reading your column is the highlight of my week" (149). Ariel too brings spicy and interesting episodes in her sex columns

so that the readers stay hooked to them. The internal focalization used by the chick lit writers also has limitations. It is only through Ariel that the readers get to know about the feedback of the readers of her columns.

The novel can also be explored via the paradigm of memory, which Amy Sohn employs to understand the mind of her protagonist. By referring to what Freud and Breuer said about the discovery of hysteria, Linda R. Anderson suggests that the preoccupation with memory that characterized the female condition of hysteria could be a form of nostalgic longing, not just for a past but for an imagined future as well. She further writes that “*memory could also provide a space in which the subject can create herself, or that it contains a future we have yet to gain access to, could also change the knowledge we already have*” (“*Feminist Autobiography: The Personal and the Political*”). Amy Sohn, through her revolutionary narrative style, unleashes how her protagonist goes forth in time by making use of memory as a tool to explore her individuality and selfhood.

Ariel Steiner indulges herself in fanaticizing about her future and it can also be viewed as her introspections. She wants to taste success and imagines herself accomplishing her goals. She imagines that one day she will “write a book called *Leaving Nick* and everyone would buy it” (57). Not only this, she longs for a better life ahead with all the laurels to her credit. She expresses: “When I turned seventy-five, I would receive a Lifetime Achievement Award at the Oscars” (58). The desire to be a successful writer is deep in her mind. She plans to “publish a book a year” (69). She imagines herself bestowed with the highest honours as a writer: “I’d collect a Pulitzer, Nobel and MacArthur along the way” (70). She voices her revolutionary ideas in her nostalgic longings for the life to come. She says that one day she will be the owner of her own company and will “produce chick-friendly scripts with completely one dimensional roles for men” (14). It shows that she wants to rule the world and has great zeal to reverse gender roles by selecting chick lit as her preferred genre of writing which is written for women and by women. *The writer’s incorporation of day dreaming and fantasy in the style of narration can be viewed as a radical mode of articulating female sensibility.*

Amy Sohn has also used the flashback technique in her novel. Describing what flashback is, Maureen Turim writes that it is “a privileged moment in unfolding that juxtaposes different moments of temporal reference. A juncture is wrought between present and past and two concepts are implied in this juncture: memory and history” (1). Ariel reflects upon her past by memorizing how she lost her “virginity to a near stranger, the sex being horrible” in her childhood (79). She even misses her childhood days, which is evident in one of her introspections:

When I was a kid, he was my best friend. Every spring weekend we would ride our bikes across the Brooklyn Bridge to the Lower East Side and run errands for my mom. We’d buy pistachios and clothes and fish, and then we would stop at the Chinatown branch of the New York Public Library and he would check out mystery books for himself and Judy Blume books for me. (148)

The longing for the past becomes so intense that Ariel wishes to go back to her childhood days and wants to enjoy the same innocence. It is mainly due to the graveness of adulthood and her expectations from her own self that remind her how good her life was when she was a kid. She feels bad for being a subject of ridicule. She is unhappy with the way her career as a sex columnist has been mocked at by her own relatives. She expresses: “In twenty years my relatives had gone from applauding my naked dance to guffawing at my unconventional career choice. They were mocking the same exhibitionistic spirit they had once adored. I wished I was two again” (136). Her desire to be a two year old girl evidently manifests her longing for the past to become alive again.

The novel *Run Catch Kiss* bristles with the use of erotic language. Deborah Cameron and Don Kulick in their book *Language and Sexuality* (2003) write that the use of erotic words in contemporary era by the postmodern novelists has become a common affair. They write, “We are apt to congratulate ourselves on our openness of sex-talk, contrasting our modern, enlightened attitudes favourably with the prudishness of previous eras when such talk was taboo-censored in public discourse, and repressed even in private” (18).

The above excerpt shows that the use of erotic words has become commonly acceptable in the postmodern fiction, which was not so prevalent in earlier times. Amy Sohn has used a number of erotic metaphoric expressions which enrich the text. However, the use of such bold language invites criticism as well. The protagonist of the novel in her sexual encounters uses such expressions. She expresses: "The railings on the terraces look like prison bars, the concrete is gray-brown and ribbed like a condom, and the entire phallic palace is the biggest eyesore" (13). She compares the material of the building with a 'condom' and calls the palace 'phallic' which indicates that the chick lit heroines have achieved equality with men since it is no longer the prerogative of men to use such words to seduce women. While watching a fight on television, she compares sex with boxing. She says, "... and I realise boxing is a much better metaphor for sex than baseball" (94).

Ariel uses bold language to seduce the readers of her columns and to get fame. She expresses how she feels about her new partner in sex: "I believed him because I wanted to fuck him..." (105). The text also grapples with informal expressions and slangs. Ariel calls herself a "cool and outrageous sexpot" (143). The word 'sexpot' is used for the woman who is crazy about sex. Ariel tries to peep into her own self by asking who she really is. She uses this word for herself after receiving the feedback of the readers who express their desire to sleep with her due to her overly sexual appeal. On one occasion, she uses the word "muff muncher" for a man she gets involved with. It is a vulgar as well as an offensive expression which has many negative connotations. It is used to demean the reputation of a person and for targeting his or her sexuality. Ariel attacks the sexuality of the man by addressing him as 'muff muncher'.

The above analysis makes clear that the chick lit writers keep on experimenting with new styles of fiction writing. They bring before their readers the psyche of their characters by presenting their thoughts in a lucid manner. The first-person mode of narration and the use of informal style of writing further bring the readers closer to the texts. The novels incorporate numerous colloquial expressions that point towards the change that has taken place due to technological advancements and the expansion of means of communication. Nowadays, the young generation is habitual of using informal expressions in everyday conversation. With the emergence of mobile phones and increasing use of social networking, new terms are coined and gradually, they become acceptable. The writers prefer to write in the language that they feel their readers can easily connect to. Moreover, the use of bold words and slang expressions can be seen as a matter of choice for women.

Thus, the chick lit writers seem to have worked on the line of Sara Mills who has voiced for the linguistic rights of women in her book *Gender and Politeness* (2003) in which she writes: "Stereotypes of gender, developed in the interaction between the individual and the society as a whole, and within specific communities of practice, inform individual choice of linguistic style, strategy, and content, either in terms of reaffirming or challenging those stereotypes..." (190). It indicates that nobody should be given the right to decide our linguistic choices. It should be left to the person using it, whether male or female, to chart his/her own linguistic utterances. Mills has advocated the idea that the linguistic liberty gives women power over men and helps them rise above the victim stage. However, use of sexist words invite criticism as is evident in *Run Catch Kiss*. The protagonist receives critical comments on her columns for using bold words. This shows that linguistic empowerment too comes at the cost of being the subject of criticism.

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