



## NARRATIVE TECHNIQUES IN ELLEN HOPKINS'S NOVEL SMOKE

Dr. S.J.Kala\*  
Mrs. R. Narmatha\*\*

### ABSTRACT

*This paper aims at providing an outline of the theory of Narratology with reference to Ellen Hopkins's novel **Smoke**. The paper also forges into Gerard Genette's classifications of Narratology and unfolds the narrative techniques used in the novel. It explores Narratology as a theory that focusses on the ways of Narrative, its types, functions and the three main approaches to study it.*

**Keywords:** Narratology – narration - voice – mood – frequency – duration – order – focalization.

Storytelling dates back to the oral tradition of literature. The oral tradition of storytelling in a way narrates the happenings of the society and shares some moral values to the younger generations. Story telling represents a sequence of ideas that organise in a form of structure and develop into a complete story.

The term Narratology was coined in the year 1969 by Tzvetan Todorov. Narratology as a theory has its roots in the western theories of structuralism focusing on the grammar and linguistics.

Narratology is also known as 'science of Narrative' and is further defined as: "the ensemble of theories of narratives, narrative texts, images, spectacles, events; cultural artifacts that 'tell a story'" (Bal 3). Narratology deals with narration of the story and its functions beyond the story sequence.

As Narratives and Narratology are always interlinked, they cannot be studied in isolation. Zeno, the pre-Aristotelian is considered as the first postmodern Narratologist. Zeno affirms that the level of reading of the text always undermines the object of attention.

Earlier, Narratology was used as a most appreciable literary device. Later, it became dominant in aspects like structuralism and historical perception. In the mid 1980s, Narratology was untraceable till it came into limelight in the 20<sup>th</sup> century with transitions. In the contemporary scenario, Narratology has a wider scope and is one of the everyday scenes which can be witnessed in myths, paintings, and stories. Narratives are just impersonation of either the individual's identity or group's voice: "Narratives is as inescapable as language in general, or as a cause and effects, as a mode of thinking and beings" (Currie 2).

Narratology underwent transition in three aspects: namely from discovery to invention, from logic to obscurity and finally from poetics to politics. The shifts of transitions led to the deconstruction of Narratology and resulted in the diversification of Narratology.

The elements that constitute the analysis of narratives include narration (Voice), focalization (mood) and narrative situation. The first component includes homodiegetic and heterodiegetic. The second component

\*Associate Professor, Research Guide and Supervisor, The Research Centre of English, Fatima College, Madurai.

\*\*Research Scholar, Fatima College, Madurai.

comprises of action, story analysis, tellability and the third category combines tense, time and Narrative modes.

Narrative is an approach that constitutes character, setting, time, plot, problem and solutions. The person who narrates the story is said to be the narrator and the narrative is considered omnipresent. The idea of narrative is clearly described by Roland Barthes:

There are countless forms of narrative in the world... Each of which branches out into a variety of media, as if all substance could be relied upon to accommodate man's stories... Narrative is pleasant in myth, legend, fables, takes, short stories, epics, history, tragedy, drama (Suspense Drama), comedy, pantries, paintings... stained allay windows, movies, local news, conversation (Barthes 237)

Tzvetan Todorov defines the term Narratology as "the structural analysis of any given narrative into its constituent parts to determine their functions and relationships" (Todorov 58). It is evident that what is narrated is 'the Story' and the story is mainly arranged in some chronological order with certain themes, motives and plot lines. The plot portrays the sequence of the story and it also explains the events. Such stories are narrated by the narrator in a narrative mode.

Genette categorises the Narrative Discourse Theory into three main branches as tense, mood and voice. Genette also argues in his *Narrative Discourse: An Essay in Method* that Point of View is the combination of mood and voice. Mood states the means of narration takes and voice indicates who the narrator is. Mood is further differentiated as internal and external based on how the narrative is focussed. Genette also emphasises on iterative which means how the plots are interconnected. Iterative is analysed with reference to order, duration and frequency.

After the World War II, the narrative theory was divided into three stands; first stand focussed on the narrative which is the sequence of events. The first stand was followed by theorists like Vladimir Propp, a formalist and

the structuralists Claude Levi-Strawss, Tzvelan Todorov and Roland Barthes. The second stand was initiated by Genard Genetle, Mick Bal and Seymour Chatman who developed the idea that Narrative is a discourse. The final stand explains narrative as a complicated component which can derive its meaning only through the understanding of the receiver. It was pioneered by the Post Structuralists Roland Barthes, Umberto Eco and Jean Francois Lyotard.

Narratology can be understood in the simplified form with the techniques of narratives. Narratives in the novels can be of any form, namely the combination of events and the discourse. The novels can be mainly analysed through the Narrative discourse in order to study the techniques of narratives perceived in the novels. Genette's Narrative discourse paves way for the readers to interpret the novels based on the mood and voice. Most of the writers incorporate all these Narrative techniques in their novels in order to enrich the outlook of their novels.

Ellen Hopkins is one such prominent contemporary novelist whose novels are abundant in narrative techniques. Hopkins's novels are mainly free-verse novels. Instead of using elongated paragraphs, Hopkins uses verses as her narrative tool. Ellen Hopkins, a modern American novelist, was born in California, United States. She has to her credit several New York Times bestselling novels. Her first series of books are about her life and her daughter's life.

*Smoke* is a free verse novel, about two young girls trying to lead their life after the tragic death of their father. Pattyn and Jackie are the two sisters and the novel is narrated by the two in alternative voices. Pattyn is out of her home and she moves in disguise as an immigrant worker to California, whereas Jackie stays with her mother and siblings, Jackie strives to look for a path out of the darkness and struggles hard to voice out her feelings.

This paper aims to study the sequence of ideas in the novel that highlight the characters through the form of narration which the writer

she chisels them out through her mood of narratives in the novel. It analyses the narrative tools of Genette used in the novel *Smoke*.

Ellen Hopkins in the novel *Smoke* uses many verse forms as narrative forms with differing writing style in each of her verse. In *Smoke*, Narratology is obvious through her writing techniques which are stated as,

Hopkins manipulates the poetry format, Keeping things interesting with dynamic spacing and indentation as well as poem for two voices. She formats the text of one poem into long, spaghetti-like stands. (Fresher 37)

The novel is narrated from the first person point of view by two sisters. Pattyn narrates her story from California and Jackie narrates from her own home.

Order, the essential component of narratives in the novels deals with the time of the narrative denoting both the time of the signified and the signifier. According to Genette, they relate the time of the story and the time of the narration, and he states three important determinations in his book *Narrative Discourse: An Essay in Method*:

...Connections between the temporal order of succession of the events in the story and the pseudo-temporal order of their arrangement in the narrative,... Connections between the variable duration of these events or story selections and the pseudo, duration (infact, length of text) of their telling in the narrative – connections, connections of frequency, that is relations between the repetitive capacities of the story and those of the narrative... (Genette 35)

The narratives of both the narrators in *Smoke* are placed in successive orders forming a chronological sequence of events and thus blend well into one single narrative.

*Smoke* starts with the narration of Pattyn moving somewhere away from her home lacking a clear sense of her destination. However, as she moves along she befriends Adriana and settles down at California. This is manifested Pattyn's narration as,

Pattyn Scarlet von Stratton

Some things

You can't take back, no

...

Hard you pray to

Some

All powerful misacle maker,

Some supposed god of here. (Smoke 1)

These lines, clearly project Pattyn's conflict with past events and the readers learn about Pattyn's impulsive decision to escape from the web of miseries at home:

Dear, sweet God

Forgive me. I don't know what to do.

Where to go. How to feel. I'm perched

on the precipice, waiting for the Clift

to Crumble. No way to change what

happened. What's done is done and I ...

(Smoke 2)

From the words of Pattyn, it is clear that she firmly believes that past cannot be undone. The narration also paves way for the readers to perceive something between the past event and the future event that has taken place in the story which forms the basis of the narrative.

Later, Jackie April Von Stratton starts narrating her story. Jackie talks about 'the death' and she declares that her dad is dead. This incident converges with Pattyn's narration. This narration relates how the death of their father is interconnected with Pattyn's reaction demonstrated in her narration. Jackie narrates,

Whatever made Dad "Dad" is gone.

I don't think he had a soul.

...

Pattyn saved my life. (Smoke 17)

The order of the events is linked, and the time and events are made into logically coherent order. The chronology of the plots is termed as order in narrative.

The narrative is more meaningful when the order is followed. Following the order, the discourse has frequency as one of the narrative techniques. Genette uses the term Focalization for the 'focus of narration'. Gerald Prince the sociologist in *Dictionary of Narratology* defines focalization as "the perspective in terms of which the narrated situations and events are presented" (31). Based on the relation between focalized object and the position of the focalizer, the focalization is divided into three types, as Zero focalization, External focalization and Internal focalization. In Zero focalization or Nonfocalization the readers understand the nature of the characters from the way the characters behave. "External focalization that represents a measure of character awareness but from outside the character"; and "internal focalization" that "is more fully private and subjective than external focalization" (Thon 58).

External focalization and internal focalization are terminated through the experience of the characters in the text. The readers tend to have the understanding of the characters through the words of the other characters. External focalization is semi-subjective and helps in the conception of the characters externally.

Most of the characters of Ellen Hopkins are portrayed through external focalization. Her short poems with different structures, narrated by the characters expose the nature of other characters in the novel. In the novel *Smoke* though there are two prominent characters narrating the story, there are few other minor characters who contribute to the narration. The attributes of the remaining characters are brought to readers through Pattyn and Jackie.

Jackie narrates her story related to her mother, sibling, and her male friends Gavin and Caleb. Jackie tells about each character through her narration that is through external focalization. Jackie says,

Her Eyes Are Vacant

No understanding. No concern.  
No affection.

She doesn't even bother to respond. (Smoke 293)

Jackie's statement about her mother helps the readers to have a perception of their mother's character. Internal focalization is more of subjective. Internal focalization varies in different ways:

... (the representation of) simple perception (e.g., point of view shot), to impressions (e.g., the out of -focus point - of -view shot depicting a character who is drunk, dizzy, or drugged), to 'deeper thoughts' (e.g., dreams, hallucinations, and memories. (Thon 62)

The narrator talks only what the character knows. In Internal Focalization, the events are presided over by the point of view of the characters who is a focalizer in the text. In this internal focalization, two types of narration take place. First, the author uses a focalizer or narrator to tell the story. In the second type the author uses multiple narrators to narrate the story and this type is evident in Hopkins's novels.

Another aspect of Narratology is duration. The duration of the story line is measured in pages whereas the narration of story time is measured in years and days. The narration of a character's entire life can be narrated in a few pages on the other hand the narration of a character's single day can be narrated in a whole text. The novel *Smoke* constitutes the order of events from the month of October to June.

Ellen Hopkins's novel *Smoke* covers the duration of nearly eight months of story line. The narration of the story line can take months but the duration of story time can be narrated quickly. The novel *Smoke* runs up to 542 pages written in verse style. The readers can finish reading the text in a few hours. The duration of story in the novel is determined through the Journal entry that is written by Pattyn. Each journal entry is dated and it shows duration of the storyline.