



The Art of Narrating: Analyzing the Narrative of Illness in Jodi Picoult's Novel My Sister's Keeper.

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ABSTRACT

Narrating a story in an effective way is always been a challenge. In case of narrating 'illness' it cannot be trouble-free. Various human conditions provide various meanings of illness. Illness offers ample number of perceptions and connotations. Arthur Kleinman, a prominent American Psychiatrist, in his theoretical work, The Illness Narratives, views illness in a wider perspective. He states, "by invoking the term illness, I mean to conjure up the innate human experience of symptoms and sufferings. Illness refers to how the sick person and the members of the family or wider social network perceive, live with, and respond to symptoms and disability." Thus illness becomes part and parcel of human life and suffering. It moulds the thoughts of the society; manipulates and gears human life, invades people's thoughts and inhabits their memories. It occurs often in conversations of the sick and in the people surrounded them. A person's health and mental conditions change according to the despotism of illness and mould lives, thoughts and creative processes. In a nutshell illness more often mirror the society. Illness in its wider sense represents suffering, misery, pain, death, the question of existence and so on. On the other hand it also lays a hand on inter/intra personal human relationships, empathy, ethics and care. When illness holds its influence on human life, unsurprisingly it reflects in literature, which in turn reflects human embeddedness with illness. A patient is not only an object of medical query, but also a "narrator of suffering". Some narrators can effectively represent the sufferings of the ill, but it is not effortless. This paper tries to understand how illness is represented in Jodi Picoult's novel My Sister's Keeper. It is also intended to go deep into the techniques used to narrate illness.

Keywords: *Illness, illness narratives, cancer, metaphors*

Jodi Picoult has constructed her novel *My Sister's Keeper*, by placing illness as the focal point. Her novel depicts the sore voyage of a family after a member of the family is diagnosed with cancer. The narrative is inspired by Picoult's personal experience with sickness, which she acknowledges in the very beginning of the novel. Her child had undergone ten surgeries within a short time span of three years and as a mother witnessed her child being ill for a long time. This experience of witnessing the suffering of a sick child might have influenced her in the narration of her novel. The novel is a culmination of research and real life experiences of the author as well as of other experts and patients. An elegant novel gains its greatness from its subject matter and efficacy of narration; not from the amount of information it produced. This paper is analysing how far the author is successful in narrativising illness in the novel.

Apart from all other characters, cancer plays a major role in the development of the novel, *My Sister's Keeper*. Before figuring out the fact that Kate had promyelocytic leukemia (a form of blood cancer) the Fitzgerald family was running smooth and happy as any other family could be. Brian Fitzgerald and Sara Fitzgerald had a comfortable married life and were satisfied with their small family and their children; Jesse and Kate. After the inversion of cancer into their life everything started to change. By means of vitro fertilization they brought into the world a genitival match for Kate, and they named her Anna.

The way people perceive or react to illness differs from one individual to another. Their understanding and responses on illness will be purely subjective. It produces multiple meanings and interpretations in the mental realm of the society. "Illness has meaning...in several distinctive senses. Each type of meaning is worth examining....illness is polysemic and multivocal; illness experiences and events usually radiate (or conceal) more than one meaning." (Kleinman 8). Picoult's novel is giving this multi-vocalised reading of illness. The novel skilfully demonstrates the subjectivity of the people by introducing multiple narrators. The novel is narrated throughout by different characters in the novel such as Anna, Sara, Brian, Kate, Jesse, Campbell and Julia. All the main characters in the novel are subjectively reflected through the pages. The novel reflects the natural reaction of human beings when they were put into a circumference of pain and suffering; also reveals their moral, practical and emotional responses to pain. Storytelling is an integral component of the novel. The novel exists in storytelling; stories with unique flavours and ingredients. The subjective storytelling technique enables the reader to understand the multiple perspectives of the characters towards both sickness and to the sick.

Metaphors are the integral part of every narration. It provides the reader with a better understanding and suits the narrator to transform his thoughts effectively. Susan Sontag's critical work *Illness as Metaphor* discusses on different kinds of metaphors used to narrate illness. Her work mainly deals with the popular use of illness as a figure or metaphor. Oxford Advanced Learners dictionary defines metaphors as "a word or phrase used to describe somebody/something else, in a way that is different from its normal use, in order to show that the two things have the same qualities and make the description more powerful." Traditionally illness metaphors; especially cancer metaphors were used to indicate social injustice, corruptions and malpractices and it has always been used as metaphors to accuse or blame a society which is idiotic and unjust. Phrases like "eating like cancer" or "political system affected with cancer" or "social carcinogen" are among most commonly used terminologies to express viciousness in a social or in a political system. Cancer is considered as ill-omened, monstrous or repugnant to the senses. Metaphors of "degeneration" and "invasion" are also used frequently as the part of daily vocabulary. Cancer cells degenerate the natural cells and destroys its normalities. Inversion metaphors are used in cancer narrations because the patient is invaded by foreign cells, which proliferate, adapt and make changes in the original tissues and ends in

malfunctioning of the body. Most of the cancer metaphors express the negative side of life. People find difficult to acknowledge the fact of their illness because the society conceives it as ill-omened or as a result of immorality. Cancer as a disease and also as a metaphor received negative colouring because cancer attacks almost every part of the body including some parts like colon, bladder, testicle, breasts and prostate that people feels embarrassing to acknowledge. The stigma associated with the disease especially with cancer also depends on the part of the body that is affected. For instance, a patient of lung cancer will be more acceptable in the society rather than a patient of testicle/urinary cancer. As far as the social norms and belief systems are concerned, the upper parts of the body such as brain, heart and lungs are considered to be more spiritual and as the organs of wisdom and knowledge. In contrast to this, the lower parts of the body are identified as the organs of physical passion which are prone to degradation. The social outlook on cancer is directly reflects in the metaphors they used to comment on the disease. Most of the metaphors related to cancer compromises with the characteristic features of the disease. An example is pointed out by Sontag in her *Illness as Metaphor*, the earlier metaphors of cancer were the metaphors of “idleness” and “sloth” (Sontag 14), the reason behind is that cancer spreads in the body rather slowly but steadily. It eventually makes the patient incapable and gradually leads to casualty. In another sense, in cause of time cancer destroys the physical and mental abilities of the sick by restricting his/her body movements and make them confined to bed. Cancer is much related to time and space “its principal metaphors refers to topography. Cancer ‘spreads’ or ‘proliferate’ or ‘diffused’ tumours are surgically ‘excised’.” (Sontag 14-15). Time and topography are the whole mark of cancer metaphors. These kinds of metaphors are found in abundance in Picoult’s novel, *My Sister’s Keeper*. Anna describes Kate’s Promyelocytic Leukemia as a “bear” hibernating under her skin “until it decided to roar again.”(Picoult 10). The hibernation of the bear shows the characteristics of cancer. Cancer sometimes shows no traces of its existence in a human body but it will come out from its slumber like a ferocious bear with all its rage to destroy. The hibernating image of a bear shows the idleness of the disease and the roaring bear represents the destructive side of the disease.

Picoult has used different varieties of metaphors in the novel. War metaphors, metaphors of stats and heavenly bodies, fire metaphors and animals metaphors. War metaphors gained its prominence especially after the First and Second World War. War images and metaphors were started appearing in literature in abundance. In the novel, Picoult compares chemotherapy treatment with an assassin which kills everything in their path. Chemotherapy medicines cause damage to every tissue; both cancer cells and normal cells. In metaphorical usages chemotherapy is considered as chemical warfare. This character of chemotherapy treatment is skilfully links with the metaphor of an assassin. The metaphor of an assassin to explain the dark side of cancer is not Picoult’s innovation. Assassin metaphor can be seen in works of many of her predecessors. W. H Auden’s well acclaimed poem *Miss Gee* gives a similar metaphor on cancer. He says “it’s (cancer) like some hidden assassin waiting to strike at you” (Auden). Dr.Chance, the Oncologic doctor in the novel *My Sisters Keeper*, uses a different war metaphor when he identifies the transfusion of white blood cells(WBC) as a “relief army” (picoult 168) supporting the front-line army of WBC. Jesse attributes a “Martyr” metaphor for Kate. He considers her as a war victim who struggles to keep her life intact. The metaphor draws cancer as a war field and Kate as a war victim. As the perfect genetic match and as the sole donor for Kate, Anna plays the role of a “peacekeeper”. The words like defence, fight, rescue and all the words which suit war and war field is used throughout the novel. The language of warfare is more appropriate in narrating the attack of cancer cells and the counter attack of treatment. Oncology wards in hospitals will always have an air of anxiety and tension. The doctors and nurses are always in a rush to attend different causalities of the patients. Sara would like to call it as a “battle field” and she entitle doctors as “conquering

heroes”; who always rush into the ward and goes out customarily. War metaphors are greatly influenced the thought processes of the common folk. The use of war metaphors and symbolic usage of war images are recurrent in narratives; especially in illness narratives.

Fire has both symbolic and metaphorical meanings in the novel. Brian is a fire-fighter in the novel; his job is to rescue people from life threatening situations. But he stands helpless when he comes face to face with his daughter’s cancer. His family is burning because of the illness affected. Brian is capable of extinguishing all other fire except the one which is burning inside his family. He is helplessly watching Kate sinking in the pool of suffering. Brian as a closet-astronaut metaphorically describes the death of stars. Just a few lines before this metaphorical account on stars we can see Brian musing over the situation of Kate. He relates the death of the stars with the awaiting death of his daughter.

Stars are fires that burn for thousands of years. Some of them burn slow and long, like red dwarfs. Other-blue-giants-burn their fuel so fast they shine across great distances, and are easy to see. As they start to run out of fuel, they burn Helium, grow even hotter, and explode in a supernova. Supernovas they are brighter than the brightest galaxies. They die, but everyone watches them go. (Picoult 43)

Brian compares Kate with “Supernova”, the brightest star which burns out its fuel very fast. Like people watching the death of a star, he has to watch the death of his beloved daughter. The author has arranged symbols of glow, fire, stars and death sequentially and artistically to confirm with the diminutive nature of life.

The problem of metaphorical thinking on illness is that it is always associates with death. Whenever people think about cancer, a notion of death or fear of death comes out simultaneously. One of the earlier thinkers made a supportive statement which goes with the notion of cancer and the death follows; “what is not fatal is not cancer” (sontag 1). Since the older days, people mused on cancer as a fatal disease. Sontag substantiates this argument by giving a statement from Kafka; he describes his disease as a “germ of death itself” (sontag 1). This kind of metaphorical thinking of cancer transfers from one generation to another like genetic materials. Even in this modern era people consumes cancer as a fatal disease. This conception of cancer as a fatal disease moulds their thought processes and even reflects in their communication with one another. The innocent question raised by the five year old Jesse, in Picoult’s novel, echoes the influence of social perception of cancer as fatal. “Is that where Kate will go?” (Picoult 110) Jesse asks his mother Sara by pointing at huddles of tomb stones while they drove past a cemetery. This query of a five year old is not instinctive; it was permeated in the psychological realm of the child from his surroundings. Even adults are not capable of an escape from these kinds of thinking; the moment Dr. Farquard announced young Kate’s state of illness as blood cancer; Brian raised the question “is she....is she going to die?”(Picoult 33). Even if he asked it in form of a question, he never expects that question to be answered because his consumption of cancer is equivalent to death. The mythologies persist the fatal colouring on cancer; the perceptions and fantasies concocted around cancer transfers from one generation to another. The notion of cancer as a messenger of death is imbibed in the psyche of the society. Picoult artistically draws these strange characteristics of the society.

Though she spoke against the use of metaphorical thinking of illness, Susan Sontag metaphorically observes illness as the “night-side” of life and as an “onerous citizenship” in the kingdom of the sick (Sontag 1). She visualizes two extremely opposite sides of human life- one being healthy and the other being sick. The first side is more comfortable and all human beings are preferred to be in that side; but one day or the other every human being should enter into the sick side of life. The state of being ill gives a new identity for the sick. The moment a person realizes the existence of illness inside, he/she enters into new realm of identity. Even in natural conversations of the sick this identity reflects. In the novel Sara narrates an incident where Kate meets a young man, who is also a victim of cancer, Taylor Ambrose. In the very beginning of their interaction their new identity (identity of illness) exposes itself out.

“I’m Taylor” he holds out his hand. “AML”

“Kate. APL.”

He whistles, and raises his brows. “Ooh,” he says. “A rarity”

Kate tosses her cropped hair. “Aren’t we all?” (Picoult 308)

The identity shift happens not only to the sufferer but also to the persons in relationship with the ill. Kate’s illness changed the identity of her family. When cancer unexpectedly knocks the door of a family, it totally alters rhythm of the harmonious life. Kate thinks over this unexpected visit of grief to her family. She considers grief as a band-aid which cleaves the naturalness of family life. “Grief is a curious thing, when it happens unexpectedly. It is a Band-Aid being ripped away, taking the top layer of a family” (Picoult 422). Cancer brought change in the lives of everyone in Fitzgerald family. Brian and Sara’s marriage life suffers as a result; to an extent they began to feel total strangers to each other. The sexual life they had enjoyed before ends up in dissatisfaction. Because their centre of attention has been deeply rooted in Kate and in her disease, the other two children, Jesse and Anna, suffered their childhood and adolescence. The new ‘citizenship’ or the identity shift happens to the people, who are in relationship with the ill as well. Sara talks on her new membership in the kingdom of the sick. She asserts “There is an unexpected comfort to being at the oncology wing of the hospital, a sense that I am a member of the club” (Picoult 59). All the members of a good family are like a single organism, members of the family are inseparable parts of this organism. Family is the perfect blend of distant individual; where whatever happens to one individual have an effect on the other members of the family. The physical illness Kate has having, in the novel, leads to a traumatic experience for the family as a whole. Sara makes this point clear to Kate by giving a statement “if you got the buries outside, we got it inside” (Picoult 296). This statement reflects the mental grief and agony, through which a family is going because of an affected illness.

The novel, *My Sister’s Keeper* portrays a set of lost youth as an aftermath of illness. Three youngsters in the novel; Kate, Anna and Jesse goes through crucial circumstances because of the affected cancer in their family. Kate spends the major chunk of her life as an introvert enclosed in four walls of her house. Anna as the sole donor for her sister was compelled to confine her dreams. Jesse acts as a pyromaniac in the novel. He sets fire to old buildings and derives a sadistic comfort by doing so. In many respects he becomes a polar opposite to his father Brian. Brian, being a fire fighter, always tries to preserve everything from the destructive nature of fire; Jesse uses the same nature of fire to destroy everything. The destructive attitude of Jesse has come to him by witnessing his sister’s

state of illness for a long time. Jesse wanted to help Kate to escape her cancer in whatever way possible. But he finds himself helpless because he is not a genetic match for Kate. It is because he cannot rescue his sister he starts destroying everything. Jesse cannot control the cancer affected to Kate, it is uncontrollable and he cannot provide a cure. Hence his conflicted psyche has chosen an uncontrollable medium; fire to his command. Picoult portrays Jesse as an indirect victim of cancer, his pyromania emerges as a result of troubled psyche which was again resulted from illness.

Picoult's novel not only reflects the nervousness and anxieties of a family life, but also reveals the real nature of meaningful family ties. The novel discusses on the impact of 'care' in the lives of the ill. Picoult uses two plots to reveal the importance of care in her novel. In the main plot she narrates the story of Kate and her cancer, were as in the sub-plot she simultaneously narrates the story of Cambell Alexander, the lawyer represents Anna in court. Throughout the novel Cambell gives sarcastic remarks, whenever a person asks him about the service dog he keeps always with him. Only towards the end of the novel he reveals the secret behind the keeping of a service dog. He has been having epileptic seizure ever since a car accident in high school and the dog 'Judge' could sense and foretell the approaching seizure before it yanks him down. In Cambell's case the dog Judge acts as the only caretaker for him and he is having no other meaningful relationship with any other people. Cambell veils his disease in fear of isolation and marginalization. He even hides this fact from his beloved Julia and as a result their relationship drops to an abrupt ending. Because of the deficiency of meaningful relationships and lack of care Cambell's life suffers isolation and soreness. His psychological suffering goes beyond the physical suffering caused by the seizure. But in case of Kate, care plays a major role in fighting her illness. She was diagnosed with cancer in the age of two, since that point of time her family is in a joint venture to support Kate to fight her disease. In the beginning of the novel Anna refers to the image of a 'bridge'. The bridge symbolically represents the invisible bond inside the family. Anna describes the bridge as bridge of 'togetherness' and 'care' (Picoult 11). We could find deliberate sacrifices for the wellbeing of the ill in the novel. Sara quits her promising job as an attorney, for the wellbeing of Kate. Anna also rejects the invitation to the national hockey team, because her sister Kate needs her as donor for frequent blood withdrawals and for bone marrow aspirations and she is the only genetic match for her sister. Anna's remark shows the depth of family ties. She remarks "in house we all wear mask, so that Kate doesn't have to". The members of the family are ready to sacrifice their individual interests to safeguard their family intact.

Care is symbolically represented in the novel using an image of a goldfish out of water. The image appropriately represents Kate and her illness and also shows the amount of pain her family takes to keep her in high spirits. Ezra Pound defines image as "that which present an intellectual and emotional complex in an instant of time". Picoult here symbolically portrays the complex state of Kate's illness and the amount of care given by her family using a single image. Sara, while cleaning Kate's bedroom, finds Hercules, Kate's pet goldfish floating upward to the surface as if it is very much ill. She immediately shifts it into fresh water and she calls the marine research centre to find ways to bring back the fish to normality. Sara at this point acts like an outrageous woman. Her mannerism and behaviour gets shifted as if she lost her daughter. Kate considers the fish Hercules as her own reflection; if the fish die it will affect her hope of recovery from cancer. Sara, being aware of her daughter's mental state, doesn't want to bring down the

optimism and hope in Kate. So she tries hard to keep the fish alive. Picoult artistically accommodates all these concepts of illness and care in a single imagery of a fish out of water. The narrative techniques Symbolism and Imagism has immense role in narrativising illness.

As we analyse the novel as an illness narrative, we can be sure of that the novelist is keen on identifying all the necessary elements in her narration. The novel is said in multiple voices and this multiple voices provide the reader with different reading on illness. Moreover these scattered narrators help the reader to understand the whole social perception of illness. The artistic use of metaphors, symbols and images provides the reader with a better understanding of illness. She has also incorporated both the dark and bright side of illness. She discusses the breach of family ties and meaningful family relationships simultaneously in the novel. Care also plays a great role in the novel; she illustrates how care could weaken the authority of illness and how it provides an inclination to live. Picoult mainly answers two questions in her novel. How it is likely to have illness? And how it can be narrativised in fiction? The analysis proves that Picoult was succeeded in answering these questions.

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