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**SIMPLE STORY, COMPLICATED PLOT: A POSTMODERNIST READING OF
MARK Z. DANIELEWSKI'S *ONLY REVOLUTIONS***

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Abstract

Mark Z. Danielewski's *Only Revolutions* (2006) is highly experimental novel as it uses the unconventional formatting, unusual size, other physical materiality, language games, such and other postmodern narrative techniques. The novel contains a very simple story of two young couple- Sam and Hailey- who are traveling through different modes across the United States covering the time span of two hundred years. Thus, the novel has a simple story but the author has presented it in a complicated way by using various narrative techniques that are dominant in postmodern literature. The techniques of unconventional (unruly) narrative, metafictional writing, genre-bending techniques, multimodal presentations, reader participation, etc have been profoundly used by Mark Z.Danielewski. The unconventional narrative techniques are anti-mimetic or unnatural narrative techniques that go away from the traditional norms or established principles of novel writing. It violates the traditional notions of plot, character, setting, and temporality by employing various devices. The metafictional writing is a self reflexive approach that attracts the readers' mind towards the fact that the text is the product of creative mind. It is nothing but artistic construction. Genre-bending techniques owes to intertextuality, pastiche and other devices that erase the boundaries between different genres. Mark Z Danielewski has used these techniques profoundly to present the love story of young couple as well as the world (particularly American) history in the novel *Only Revolutions* (2006) and the excessive use of these techniques make the simple love story of two lovers complicated. This research article is an honest attempt of understanding in what sense; the novel is revolutionary and complicated one.

Keywords: Postmodern narrative, anti-mimetic narrative, multi-modality, metafiction, genre-bending techniques, etc.

Introduction

Chronologically, *Only Revolution* (2006) is the fourth novel of Mark Z. Danielewski. The novel

details the love story of two young couple-Sam and Hailey as a main narrative and records some historically significant events and happenings that begin from 1863 to 2063 across the world in the

margins of every page. These historical details are not comprehensive and chronological series though it appears to be. These details are only random selections of various events from the readers of Danielewski's earlier novel *House of Leaves* (2000) and they have little relevance to the main narrative i.e. the love story of Sam and Hailey. The love story of the couple has also two perspectives. Sam starts to narrate the story from one side of the book and continues it until the page number of 360. However, his story occupies the half page space horizontally right from beginning to the end. The remaining half page space is given to the story narrated by the second character Hailey and it is presented upside down that also goes upto 360 pages. Thus, the materiality or the physical organization of the matter in a varied book form shows Danielewski's experimentation with the form and content. Moreover, it is noticed that the historical gutter standing at the margins has no relevance with Sam and Hailey's story and most of the readers are willing to neglect historical notes while reading the novel. Danielewski, in his one of the interviews states it is the readers' choice to give weightage or not to the historical details. How to read this novel is a challenge and one can get some hints or clues from the novel itself. However, the paratextual materials of the book provide a hint for reading the novel but this one seems an inadequate as it doesn't expose from which side the reader should read first. The novel includes three major narratives- Sam's story, Hailey's story and the historical narrative. The two protagonists narrate the same story in their own versions with different perspectives, the historical details doesn't show any logic of their inclusion the book and more over, the historical information is presented in segments by using typical phrases, small segments and quotation or sometimes incomplete quotations. The content of history gutter includes vast information from the wide verities of the field such as war, politics, sports, natural calamities, disasters, diseases, inventions, and so many other things. Because of the combination of multiple narratives and contradictory things a novel becomes a complete mess for average readers.

Objectives and Methodology

This research intends to understand the concept of literary postmodernism, unconventional plot patterns and techniques with reference to Danielewski's *Only Revolutions*. Since this is a theoretical study, it follows descriptive, interpretative and analytical methods of research. As the prime aim of this research is to understand and identify various postmodern elements reflected in the *Only Revolutions*, the feature of postmodern literature and various narrative models constitute the theoretical basis upon which the interpretation and analysis of Danielewski's novel *Only Revolutions* is based. Aristotle's principles of plot, Jencks' model of double coding, the concept of subversion, deconstruction, the author is dead, writerly text etc have been taken into consideration while developing the base of this research. Like postmodernism, the term "Postmodern Literature" is nebulous and slippery one as it suffers from chronological uncertainty and unstable meaning. Though it is widely accepted that the postmodern literature appears during the second half of the twentieth century (just after World War II), many critics and scholars have traced the elements of literary postmodernism particularly postmodern narrative techniques long way back in the 18th century literary creations. Some of the dominant postmodern narrative techniques such as fragmentation, blank spaces, temporal distortions, etc have been traced in *Tristram Shandy* (1757-65) by Lawrence Sterne and though many have claimed the end postmodernism in the last decade of twentieth century, still many are willing to trace out the significant postmodern narrative techniques or tendencies in the writings of contemporary novelists. Postmodern literature covers wide varieties of thematic concerns and narrative techniques and hence, it is hardly possible to touch upon all the aspects of postmodern literature in this research article. So the present study proceeds with the following features of postmodern literature.

- Postmodern literature is marked with the use of unconventional (unruly) narrative techniques. It is in fact, anti-mimetic or unnatural narrative as it violates the traditional notion of plot, character,

setting and other aspects of narrative. It does not follow the Aristotelian Model of Plot or Bharata's idea of plot progression. Postmodern literature, particularly postmodern fiction rejects the earlier model of *Beginning-Middle-End* or the model of unified and complete plot. Instead presenting a single story, it presents multiple stories by juxtaposing parallel narratives with multiple narrators. Many postmodern novelists employ unusual formats and strange layout to make their literary productions something different.

- Postmodernism as well as postmodern literature tends to erase the boundaries between, fact and fiction, good and bad, high and low, etc. This tendency is reflected in literature through the genre-bending or hybridization of genres. It incorporates with canonical as well as popular materials, high culture and low culture. Jencks while developing his model of double coding remarkably says that postmodern art should cater and soothe the emotions of academic as well as mass users or audiences. Similarly, postmodern literature also appeals to the minds of academic as well as average readers.
- Postmodernism is very much interested in deconstruction, reader response theories. Accordingly, it proposes multiple interpretations from readers. Such literature intends to make their readers as active agents not passive adopters.

Considering the above points, Mark Z. Danielewski's novel *Only Revolution* (2006) is analyzed in the following section. This analysis highlights how the simple story of Sam and Hailey is made complicated one by the author using different strategies. For better understanding of the analysis, the summary of the novel is briefly provided here.

Only Revolution: A Brief Summary.

The novel details the circular road trip of Sam and Hailey who are allways sixteen years old. They meet each other on a mountain top and fall in love with each other. Then, they start their journey

throughout the United States together. They stop at the number of places and meet different types of people. Each time they have to face some problems. Overcoming all these problems they reach their final stop and at this juncture one of them dies (in Sam's story Hailey dies and in Hailey's story Sam dies). During their journey, they encounter with a number of characters including Creep, doctor, officers, businessmen and some rogue people. Throughout their narratives, the readers can read about their love, sex, their adventurous journey, their attempt of getting jobs, registering their marriage, care for each other during hospitalization. Thematically speaking, their running from one place to another indicates the theme of freedom, their descriptions of disasters, forest cutting, descriptions of cars and other inventions, their going away from their own flora and fauna i.e. the world of plants and animals, etc symbolically highlight the theme of environmental degradation, industrialization and urbanization. The historical side bar on each page is overcrowded with information regarding socio- political movements, bills, amendments and acts, riots, earthquakes, tsunamis, rebellions, massacre, assassinations, battles and wars, sport games, strikes, etc show the theme of political efforts of establishing equality, improvising the life status, workers' welfare, environmental degradation, crime and urbanization in the USA, etc.

Textual Analysis (Discussion)

Only Revolutions (2006) follows the unconventional narrative strategies as it adopts unusual compositional, graphical and textual patterns. At compositional level, one can see the book has two cover pages with same symbols or images. The difference occurs only in the use of color. The one cover page has a symbol of circle in green color making similarity with Sam's eyes, and the other cover page has a symbol of a circle in golden color making similarity with Hailey's eyes. Then it has title pages, a dedication page and the page no. 1 with the same text materials and images. Having no the front page or cover page and the blurb in the traditional sense, the book confuses the readers- how to read this novel and

where to start as it presents a unidirectional narrative.

At graphical level, the novel creates some sort of confusion among the readers. The stories of the two narrators are presented by using textual as well as graphical devices. The novel is overloaded with graphical images and symbols. The cover pages include the circles resembling to the eyes of two characters, the page no. 01 includes big capital initial letters from the names of two characters show which one of them is narrating. These entities show that the story is completely about love, sex, work and overall the life of two narrators. But, beneath this there lies another story- the story of ecological destruction due the human involvement in industrialization, war-fare, and so other progressive ideas. Thus, the apparently seeming love story highlights the message of ecological degradation. At textual level, the novel includes different font type and font size text, synchronization of font, unusual spellings or neologism (for example-Allways, allone, etc.), short sentences and incomplete quotations, etc.

The novel offers multiple reading protocols. The dust-jacket provides hint to the readers that read the eight pages of one narrator and turn and spin the book upside down and start to read from front to back or back to front. However, there is no hint whose story we should start to read first. Again there is an arrangement capital letters in the beginning of each eight pages that forms the parts – SAM AND HAILEY and HAILEY AND SAM in both narratives that divides the novel into sections. One can read according to these sections.

Other techniques such as metafiction (addressing the reader- *You were there*, instruction for readers, etc), genre bending techniques (prose in poetic language, part love story, part historical narrative, part narrative poem, pornographic details, etc), multimodality (digitality, internet database structure, image showing CD cassette, etc) show highly experimental quality of the novel.

Conclusion

To sum up it can be noted that Danielewski's use of formal innovation- the four quadrants page

structure, multiple narratives and database narrative, font synchronization, spelling neologism, referential ambiguity, media assemblage techniques, the complicated and contradictory temporalities, metatextual, metafictional techniques, unconventional formatting and generic hybridization and other postmodern narrative strategies in the *Only Revolution* converts simple story into complicated plot. One or two ways can be adopted to avoid this complexity; firstly read only the main narrative start to end and then, turn towards the side bar containing the historical events and happenings across the world without trying to establish their correlations with the main narrative. Secondly, summarize the main narrative and also the historical details with assistance internet, select some events randomly and establish their correlations with the events that take place in the story of Sam and Hailey. Otherwise, reading from first line to last one (both in main narrative and historical narrative) and projecting ambitiously to establish connections between all these events wholly bewilders the reader and offers bizarre experience.

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