

Examining Postmodernism in Günter Grass's *Crabwalk* and Naguib Mahfouz's *Miramar*

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Abstract

This research paper will attempt to examine the most prominent postmodern features in Günter Grass's *Crabwalk* (2002) that are common with the most evident postmodern aspects of Naguib Mahfouz's *Miramar* (1967). These two novels in particular have been chosen for examination due to the fact that both Grass and Mahfouz employ historiography to weave a story about one of the prominent characters in relation to a certain event that actually takes place once upon a time. In *Crabwalk*, Paul tries to comprehend the engulfing circumstances behind the sinking of the German Wilhelm Gustloff in 1936, whereas in *Miramar* Amer tries to learn about the July Revolution of 1952 and its aftermath. But most importantly, these two novels which seem to be very different in nature and time frame are chosen for examination to illustrate how tenacious is the postmodern structure of fragmentation, heteroglossia, anachronism, and the open ending; in an attempt to define what is postmodernism in aesthetic writings after all.

Keywords: Deconstruction; diversity; fragmentation; heteroglossia; multiplicity.

1. Introduction

After emerging in the 1940's, postmodernism has changed the conventions of literary genres with its diverse approaches toward the suggestion of new realities in aesthetic writings. In postmodernism, the readership is encouraged to form its own convictions as no longer grand narratives are dominant. Instead a multiplicity of voices become existent to offer a fragmented vision of the events in stories. Critic Mikhail Bakhtin used the word polyphony to describe the

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voices of characters, who liberated themselves from the domination of an authorial sole voice. In postmodernism several discourses start to surface as new insights. This allows authors to become more experimental and suggestive allowing the readership a much larger margin of not only analysis and critical thinking, but also creative implications. In this regard, authors who are taking literary genres to new realms of creation are paving the way toward a carnival of interpretations based upon the individual interpretations of stories.

This research paper will examine postmodernism in Günter Grass's *Crabwalk* (2002) and Naguib Mahfouz's *Miramar* (1967) as both authors employ historiography, which heavily relies on the accounts of others, to comment on a particular incident that is crucial to the construction of each story. This is done in the same pattern in both stories, as the protagonist tries to collect information from the other characters about this grave matter that is to help him in comprehending the reality which he exists in. Interestingly enough, each of them is encountered with fragmented stories about the same incident based upon the view point of each character.

2. Objective

These novels are deliberately chosen for examination as they seem to be very different in relation to the background of each author as well as the time each was produced. In spite of such superficial deviations, the focus is on how tenacious the postmodern structure is in literary works in relation to fragmentation, heteroglossia, anachronism, and the open ending in each story that belongs to a different time frame and a different culture. This is done in order to highlight the doctrine that for a literary work to be postmodern; it must basically involve these distinctive features.

3. Methodology

Each feature of postmodernism including fragmentation, heteroglossia, anachronism, and the open ending will be discussed one at a time in both novels. This will be observed to secure a smooth transition from one feature to another. It will be adopted to also maintain the focus on the feature itself as it is existent in both stories rather than on the events taking place.

4. Review of Related Literature

There is no precise definition of what postmodernism is as it is still in a state of progress. However, a number of scholars attempted to suggest several explanations based on

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postmodernism's most distinctive features in their view. Postmodernism heavily deals with hybridity, identity, diversity, multiculturalism, race, and ethnicity; which are themes in radical opposition to the sole voice of authority (Thornborrow & Wareing, 1998). Postmodernism indicates richer connections and a coherence of a different degree that would invite more discourse as well as counter proposals (McHale, 1987). Postmodernism in literature refers to the non-realist and non-traditional literature, which highlights certain key modernist characteristics of the post-Second World War period (Miller, 1996). It is to be viewed as a diversity of the representation of reality (Callinicos, 1990). In other terms, postmodernism liberated authors from the confined rules of literary writing without worrying about their creations being labelled as disorderly (Klages, 2003).

The above explanations share a strong relationship with Jacques Derrida's theory of deconstruction as language could be attained at various levels of perception. As deconstruction flourished; fragmentation, which rejects an imposed set of convictions, became popular. Fragmentation leads to the permissibility of various perspectives. Fragmentation, according to Roland Barthes, gives a more comprehensive insight by offering more than one point of view in terms of a certain incident (Webster, 1996). This inevitably leads to a multiplicity of truths. Heteroglossia then highlights the multiplicity of social voices along with the wide variety of their links and interrelationships (Bakhtin, 1981). It is consequently inferred that postmodernism is strongly based on playfulness, incoherence, and suggestiveness.

5. Discussion

Grass's *Crabwalk* is a story that revolves around the protagonist, Paul, who wants to record the event of the sinking of the German *Wilhelm Gustloff* in 1936 from various sources. Even though his mother reiterates that he was born on board the ship and on the day it sunk, Paul is found to be reluctantly engaged in this affair of documenting the event. Nonetheless, his mother does not cease any effort or opportunity to stress the fact that this incident is the deadliest maritime disaster of all times and that it will be soon forgotten if it is not recorded. Paul finds himself dragged in this task without a sufficient source of information to rely on except for the offered glimpses and tips that he is to sort out from here and there.

In this sense, experience in postmodernism cannot be conveyed except through the narrative, which is subjective. A good example is Paul's constant reliance throughout the story on the www.blutzeuge.de website, which basically consists of chatrooms where anything is displayed. The reference here to the internet is a good metaphor of postmodernism due to the fact that it offers diverse voices and perspectives and that all of them are regarded at the same level of credibility.

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This is a major feature in postmodernism as it does not offer a unified and homogeneous account and that is how antithetical readings of the same literary text may emerge. So for Paul, this website as a source of information is as good as the account of any eyewitness:

For my work I need to be able to snare information wherever it may be wandering around the world. I got pretty good at using the computer. Soon terms like browser and hyperlink were no longer Chinese to me. With a click of the mouse I could haul in stuff that I might use or might end up throwing in the trash. Soon out of idleness or inclination, I began flitting from chat room to chat room, also responded to the most idiotic spam, checked out a couple of porno sites and after some aimless suffering finally landed on sites where old unregenerates but also freshly minted neo-Nazis were venting their venom on hate pages. And suddenly – entering the name of a ship as a keyword – I clicked my way to the right address: www.blutzeuge.de (3).

Paul relies on what he is told by his mother, other witnesses, and the above mentioned website. The ability to produce such constructed dialogue supports a view of their proficiency (LaScotte, D. & Tarone, E., 2019). Therefore, the Jews' version happens to be exhausted, the mother's version seems to be boring, and Konny's version is obviously primitive. Characters differ in fluency of expression based on their discourse style and social stance. But it seems here that Grass is actually encouraging the readership to construct its own version of the same story as he is attempting to give the silenced, the forgotten, and the repressed a voice. This is a postmodern feature as the underprivileged are finally heard:

Never, he said, should his generation have kept silent about such misery, merely because its own sense of guilt was so overwhelming, merely because for years the need to accept responsibility and show remorse took precedence, with the result that they abandoned the topic to the right wing. This failure, he says was staggering... (103).

Paul appears to be a postmodern character himself as he has several dichotomies and, therefore, seems to be always in a state of "in betweenness". To explain, he is not a typical character by any measure. At the time that his birth should have been a celebration, it turned out to mark a national catastrophe. He was there on board the ship when he was born, but naturally he does not recall or even relate to that incident had it not been due to his mother's constant urging. He has a forename and a surname as anyone else; but as his father is unknown it may be suggestive that he is a nonentity. Furthermore, he seems not to share very good relations with those whom he should have been the closest to as his mother, his wife, and his son as he acknowledges the fact that they view him as a failure. Nonetheless, Paul seems to be detached as he does not really care and that nothing genuinely catches his attention. This combination of discrepancies makes him such a postmodern character.

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Likewise, in Mahfouz's *Miramar*, Amer is another pattern of a postmodern character. He happens to be in his eighties, yet he is young at heart. He belongs to an upper social and educational class, but he befriends others who are much lesser than him as Zohra. He appears to be mentally distant, but he always proves that he is very much present in the story of *Miramar*. The story itself is about the July Revolution of 1952 that took place in Egypt along with its aftermath. None of the characters' narratives correlates with any other. In fact, each of the diverse characters narrates his own account of the same events offering a different and new perspective.

Each character narrates a fragment of reality through his consciousness by employing his personal point of view to narrate what he sees, hears, and believes in. This is done in accordance with the social background, education, political references, national aspirations, as well the personal ambitions of each character. Moreover, other characters use the second point of view to directly address the readership revealing their stream of consciousness and their internal monologues. This diversity of narratives offers a fragmentation rather than a complete and unified perspective of the events in the story.

In other terms, each of the characters in *Miramar* uses his own account of truth. For instance, the fight that takes place between Hosni and Sarhan over Zohra is narrated four different times in four different ways by Amer Wagdi, Hosni Allam, Mansour Bahy, and Sarhan himself. Heteroglossia is being employed here since the diversely oriented characters reveal their true intentions through the dialogic form. The diverse narratives in this regard definitely enrich and develop the overall events in the story by offering more information about the narrators' intentions. Hosny says:

I go back to the pension in a deplorable condition, deeply disappointed. Zohra is just leaving the bathroom in her shift. I block her way with open arms. "Go away," she says firmly. I beckon her to my room. "Leave me alone!" She threatens me. Excited with drink and desire, I throw myself at her. She fights me off, beating my chest with her fists so fiercely that I'm enraged and go berserk. I start hitting her savagely, determined to shove her or drag her into my room. Then I feel a hand on my shoulder and hear Sarhan. He is breathing hard. "Hosny, have you gone mad?" I push him away firmly, but his grip on my shoulder tightens. "Go into the bathroom," he says, "and stick a finger down your throat. You'll feel better if you get it out of your system." I turn on him suddenly and hit him in the face. He reels, then hits back in a rage. Then Madame comes in, pulling on her dressing gown (78-79).

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Here is the account of the same incident depicted by Sarhan:

What's that? Thunder? An earthquake? Or a demonstration? Has anything fallen in my room? I put my head out from under the bedclothes. It was pitchy dark; and I was myself. Yes, this is my bed, and this is my room at the Pension Miramar. But what's that? God, it's Zohra! She's calling for help! I ran out and saw her by the night-light struggling desperately with Hosny Allam. I guessed the reason for the scene at once and tried to save her without too much scandal and without spoiling my relationship with Hosny. I laid my hand gently on his arm. "Hosny". But he didn't hear me. I caught him by the shoulder and said aloud, "Hosny, are you out of your mind?" He shrugged me off violently, but I clutched him by both shoulders and said firmly, "Go into the bathroom and stick your finger down your throat." He turned on me and hit me on the forehead. Angry now, I hit him back and we didn't stop until Madame came out (162).

It is apparent that each character views what happened from a different angle of the spectrum; even though they were both engaged in the same event at the same time and place. This shows that there is no innocent narrative as each has his own intention behind his "truth". Barthes states that the author of a literary work is no longer the voice of authority or the one in control. He, therefore, announces "the death of the author" and "birth of the reader" since various interpretations of the same situation could be derived (Waugh, 1992). Consequently, the readership is at liberty to construct another account of truth based on the narratives of Hosny and Sarhan combined together. Other similar accounts are also given by other characters in the story as Mariana, Tolba, Zohra, and Mohmoud.

Through their narrations, it is evident that the characters in the two stories shift backward and forward in time as both Crabwalk and Miramar depend on historiography to weave their stories. The departure from the chronological sequence of time or anachronism is another distinctive postmodern feature as stories cannot be traced with an orderly time sequence. To illustrate, at the beginning of Crabwalk, Paul says that he is uncertain how to research information about the sunken ship as he had to "sneak up on time in a crabwalk, seeming to go backward but actually scuttling sideways, and thereby working [his] way forward fairly rapidly" (3). This shift in time and place, happens through the usage of flashbacks, which is also used by most of the characters in Miramar as they recall past events relating to the revolution and its influences of their psyches. For instance, the story opens with the arrival of Amer Wagdi to the Miramar Pension. Upon his arrival, Mariana inquires about his marital status, which triggers in his mind a flashback a relevant incident earlier in his life:

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“Sir, may I ask for your daughter’s hand? ” Silence. Between us stood a cup of coffee, untouched. “I am a journalist. I have a good income. My father was the keeper of the mosque of Sidi Abu al-Abbas al-Morsy.” “He was a pious man, God rest his soul,” he said, taking up his prayer beads. “My son, you were one of us. You studied in al-Azhar once. But don’t let us forget that you were expelled.” That old story, when would they forget it? (10).

The events in both *Crabwalk* and *Miramar* do not really lead to a kind of resolution in any sense as they are left open for the readership to come up with its own closure. For instance, it is stated toward the end in *Crabwalk* that: “It does not end. Never will it end” (234) indicating that every person will have his own account of truth of the same incident as there will always be a multiplicity of meaning. Similarly, *Miramar* does not prepare the readership for a smooth closure after Sarhan’s presumable murder and eventual suicide. Both stories offer an open ending adding yet another prominent postmodernism feature.

6. Conclusion

After careful examination of Gass’s *Crabwalk* and Mahfouz’s *Miramar*, it becomes evident that both literary works are postmodern in nature as they encompass prominent features as fragmentation, heteroglossia, anachronism, and the open ending. Both stories are heavily packed with fragmentation, which suggests a diversity of discourses involving potential shifts of language and time. These stories do not adhere to a chronological time sequence in the narration of events adding yet another distinctive feature of postmodernism till the very end. In conclusion, examining these two seemingly different stories in background, time frame, and culture, it becomes evident that for an aesthetic work to be categorized as postmodern, it has to follow a particular structure that encompasses these distinctive features.

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