



## Study of Postmodern Elements in the Novel *Schlafgänger*

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**ABSTRACT :** In this paper the key elements of post modernism in the novel *Schlafgänger* by Dorothee Elmiger are discussed. To outline the strategies and common postmodern features i.e. fragmentation, intertextuality, Subjectivity, Indeterminacy and Alienation present in the novel the research focuses on the characteristics which are be linked to the novel. In this Paper different narratives of the story that are subjective are analyzed. Indeterminacy is discussed by emphasizing several passages in which open questions prevail. This Paper will focus on Elmiger's strategies and postmodern elements that are used to conceptualize this modern work.

**KEYWORDS:** Fragmentation, Intertextuality, Elmiger, *Schlafgänger*, Alienation, postmodern

Received 26 April 2019; Accepted 06 May, 2019 © the Author(S) 2019.

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### I. INTRODUCTION

*Schlafgänger* is a novel by the swiss author Dorothee Elmiger. The book was published in 2014 and deals with modern day issues of Migration, Refugees, Sleeplessness, Trespassing and Homelessness. The Title “*Schlafgänger*” is a German term, used back in 19th century, to relate to the guest workers that came to Germany during industrialization. These people have to work 20 hours a day and could not even then afford a house for themselves. These people use to rent a bed for couple of hours a day to sleep. But even then, they could not sleep as there were constant question of existence and survival. The existence crisis and constant questing lead to insomnia and restlessness. *Schlafgänger* can be seen as an appropriate title for this novel as the figures are sleepless due to their inability to cope up with the community of people who are insensitive towards the present human problems i.e migration and homelessness. *Schlafgänger* merely translated as sleepwalkers is a novel without a plot. It has figures that are conversing with each other and yet we don't know if they are together or when they speak. It is an experiment with traditional time, place and plot characteristics in a novel. The themes like home, identity, borders, migrants, refugees, trespassing try to sensitize the reader with the modern era problems.

### II. POSTMODERNISM

Postmodernism is a delicate topic in a wide variety of disciplines or areas of study, including art, architecture, music, film, literature, sociology, and technology. The definitions available, some scholars believe that postmodernism refers to a movement, for example, as Sarup<sup>1</sup> understands, it is “a movement in advanced capitalist culture, particularly in the arts”, while some others, like Murfin take it as “certain radically experimental works of literature and art”. Postmodernism is a cultural phenomenon present in areas such as art, literature and so2 on, which is becoming increasingly dominant in contemporary world.

“Postmodern fiction stirs the waters fundamentally in two different ways. It disturbs our conventional expectations in what is told (the story's “substance”) and in how it's told (the telling's form and language)”. Nash suggests “Postmodern writing should be understood as diegetic which means that the counting events are in the world where they get “spoken”). Any narrative takes place in the words of its telling. The story or what can be called history solely originates from speech itself.”<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Sarup, M(1993). An Introductory Guide to Post-Structuralism and Postmodernism. Athens:The University of 1 Georgia Press. P. 131

<sup>2</sup> Murfin, R.&Ray,S.M.(2003).The Bedford Glossary of Critical and Literary Terms. Boston:Bedford/2 St.Martin's. P.397

<sup>3</sup> Nash,C (2001). The unravelling of the postmodern mind. Edinburgh, UK : Edinburgh University Press. P. 15 P.17 P.20

### **III. SCHLAFGÄNGER : A POSTMODERN NOVEL**

Schlafgänger by Dorothee Elmiger can be identified as a work of postmodernism. The novel experiments with the tricode of plot, time and place. There is no concrete story of the novels. It is a work derived from the fragments of various figures and their experiences. It can be said that this novel is a product of emerging globalization. Unlike many novels, this particular novel lacks storyline. The reader can just start up from any page and still the themes remain the same. The themes that play an important role in the novel are home, identity, borders, fall, refugee, life and death. The borders not of countries but the borders between Fiction and reality. The name Schlafgänger is a German term used for the migrant workers that came to Germany in 19th century during industrialization. The working conditions and wage were so poor that these workers have to lend a bed for some hours so that they could sleep. Although in sleep they were restless as they were fighting for their existence. The characters in the novel are described with their professions and they all have one thing in common i.e. they all are sleepless.

#### **A) Fragmentation in the novel**

During the past century, the common narrative structure of the traditional story changed. We are no longer dealing with only one story. A second story congruent with the actual story has developed. This story has not only a different emphasis but also a different time-span. Time can be expanded in all directions: it moves sideways, backwards or stops. The same applies to space which can be enlarged, reduced, displaced or evacuated.<sup>4</sup>

Fredric Jameson refers the peculiar notion of time to the term “schizophrenia” which is considered as a language disorder. “Schizophrenic experience is an experience of isolated, disconnected material signifiers which fail to link up into a coherent sequence”. One characteristic of schizophrenia is the refusal to engage with the present or to think historically”. This means not only that the schizophrenic has an intense experience of any given present of the world but also that it has no own identity. The schizophrenic has a kind of project which is able to commit oneself to a certain continuity over time. “The schizophrenic experiences a fragmentation of time, a series of perpetual presents”. Pastiche<sup>5</sup>, a technique which points out the unavailability of unique and personal style and the disappearance of the individual, is often used in this regard by post modern authors.

The novel Schlafgänger is built upon fragments. The first fragment starts with a dream of of Übersetzerin. She sees European Alps collapsing thus rendering Europe border less. The second Fragment starts with a monologue of the figure A.I Erika in which she says “she thinks of a place, that can no longer be reached by roads, one can go on foot or on hoarse.”<sup>6</sup> The third Fragments begins with Fortunat, a figure who narrates about knowing the Alps stones on hiking tours and also the Switzerland and cantons. We don’t know when and from where the fragments are placed together and figure are together in a same place at a same time. We have no information about them. We have only fragments which are arranged in ascending order that lead to the Peripety in the story, thus alienating the figures in fictions and readers in reality.

#### **B) Intertextuality in the novel**

The intertext that can be found in the novel Schlafgänger by Dorothee Elmiger due to its persistent reference to other texts. Intertextuality can be seen an important aspect in the post-modern literature. Intertextuality expresses a connection between the texts through various devices and techniques. In her view, “Any text is constructed of a mosaic of quotations; any text is the absorption and transformation of another”. Julia Kristeva<sup>7</sup> derives her theory of intertextuality from Michael Bakhtin’s idea of a “polyphonic novel”, which is open to various voices and interpretations. M. Bhaktin concluded that “Fragments of experiences of the figures lead to a polyphony. Kristeva understands a literary text as part of other literary texts in the history of the literary tradition.

As a consequence, the idea of authorship is reduced and it can be said that the text is not a product of one author, but exists within specific literary and cultural contexts and it is open to various understandings and interpretations. Direct reference, allusion, quotation plagiarism, collage and mosaics are the some of common techniques to create intertextual framework of literary texts.

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<sup>4</sup> Nash ,C (2001). The unravelling of the postmodern mind. Edinburgh, UK : Edinburgh University Press. P.5 P.4 15

<sup>5</sup> Sarup, M(1993). An Introductory Guide to Post-Structuralism and Postmodernism. Athens:The University of 5 Georgia Press. P.132. P.134

<sup>6</sup> Translated to English from german from the novel Schlafgänger

<sup>7</sup> Kristeva, J. (1986) Desire in Language: A Semiotic Approach to Literature and Art. Leon S. Roudiez (ed.), T. 6 Gora et al (trans.). New York: Columbia University Press. P.37

There are many instances of intertextuality in the novel *Schlafgänger*. The first author that is quoted many times is Walt Whitman. „A. L. Erika nachts die langen Gedichte Walt Whitmans vorgetragen, sie habe seine Stimme durch die Wand gehört. Whitmans Sätze enden oft mit Ausrufezeichen,“

A poem from the *Sleepers* of Walt Whitman. “I wander all night in my vision, stepping with light feet, swiftly and noiselessly stepping and stopping, bending with open eyes over the shut eyes of sleepers “.

One can identify the tone of poem sleepers with the insomniac characteristics of the acting figures in the novel. The figures i.e Logistiker wanders all night and is sleepless. One can see that the figure carries also the gestures that make it similar to that of Whitman’s *Sleepers*. Intertextuality, thus, provides reader here an idea of the figure of Logistiker and its destiny which one can relate to at a point where the centrelessness of the figure comes to light.

The little mentioned Victor Considerant also plays an important role in intertextualising the novel.

„Victor Considerant war ein Vertreter der Schule Fouriers, sagte Fortunat, Fourier glaubte daran, dass der Mensch grundsätzlich gut, aber die Gesellschaft schlecht organisiert sei“

„Fortunat: Mit einer Schrift richtete sich Victor Considerant im Jahr 1855 an die amerikanische Bevölkerung, um das Vorhaben der europäischen Kolonisten in Texas zu erklären und vor den Know-Nothings,“<sup>8</sup>

The constant confrontation with the works of Bebi Suso thus provide a framework for the readers that increases the understanding of the fragments. One can see how the figures identifies themselves with the quoted person.

„Ich, sagte Fortunat, lag in der vergangenen Nacht selbst lange wach und las in Bebi Susos Roman, auf vielen Seiten beschreibt sie die Fahrt auf einem Schiff zwischen zwei Kontinenten,“

„Über ihre Reise, sagte Fortunat, schrieb Bebi Suso des Weiteren, Zitat: Unsere Reise führte uns zu jener Zeit durch zahlreiche Landschaften,“<sup>9</sup>

This reference creates an effect of escaping from the home to another continent. The escape is dangerous but worth the risk. The reader can feel how Bebi Suso and figures correlate the concept of fleeing with oneself and with refugees.

### **C) Subjective Elements in the novel**

Subjectivity or subjective perspective is something that is established on one’s own reflection, perspectives, thoughts, and feelings. It has nothing to do with right or wrong, other than the person’s beliefs of what is right and wrong. In the same way, subjective writings or perspectives are based on the writer’s own perception and experiences. It is not based on facts that others observe or things others perceive but, on the writer’s, personal point of view. Although one can identify the subjectivity of the novel with ultrasubjectivity, this paper identifies the novel with the classical subjectivity in the novel.

Subjectivity or Subjective perspective allows the readers to get an insight into the mind of a writer through interpretations and analysis of the characters and their thoughts. Subjective point of view creates tension and provides a greater freedom to readers to understand actions of individual characters. Through the subjective approach we can understand that every person sees a thing from different perspective. Elements of subjectivity can be traced in the novel from the very beginning. We can go inside the mind of the figure and observe their perception of a place, that they hold on to.

„Der Ort, an den ich denke, sagte A. L. Erika, ist ein Haus in Kalifornien, auf dessen Dach sitzt der Künstler Ader, dann fällt er, langsam, und verschwindet im Gebüsch.“

„Der Ort, an den ich denke, sagte Fortunat, ist ein Schiff, es fährt von Venedig nach Patras“....

„Der Ort, an den ich denke, sagte Fortunat, ist ein Fluss in Portugal,“

„Der Ort, an den ich denke, ist ein Wald, sagte Vater Boll.“<sup>10</sup>

The figure of Logistiker is sleepless and has no clue why he is sleepless. We are narrated with his experiences, his falling from the roof top, his observations of the other people and conversation with his friends.

„Nach Tagen ohne Schlaf verließ ich dann das Haus, ich trat auf die Straße, das helle Licht schoss mir gewaltig in die Augen, und als ich zurückblickte, sah ich eine Person in meiner Wohnung am Fenster stehen,“<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> *Schlafgänger* Elmiger, Dorothee. eBook 2014 © 2014 DuMont Buchverlag, Köln. ISBN eBook: 7 978-3-8321-8778-1

<sup>9</sup> *Schlafgänger* Elmiger, Dorothee. eBook 2014 © 2014 DuMont Buchverlag, Köln. ISBN eBook: 7 978-3-8321-8778-1

<sup>10</sup> *Schlafgänger* Elmiger, Dorothee. eBook 2014 © 2014 DuMont Buchverlag, Köln. ISBN eBook: 7 978-3-8321-8778-1

<sup>11</sup> *Schlafgänger* Elmiger, Dorothee. eBook 2014 © 2014 DuMont Buchverlag, Köln. ISBN eBook: 10 978-3-8321-8778-1

#### **D) Indeterminacy in the novel**

Postmodern fiction cannot be easily restricted to a definite definition; however, most postmodern works share some common features, such as plurality, centerlessness and experiment with language. These features usually contribute to the principal character of indeterminacy.

In literature, indeterminacy is sometimes mixed with the idea of ambiguity, as the two are very similar. However, as opposed to ambiguity, indeterminacy is "applied by its practitioners not only to literature but also to the interpretation of texts".<sup>12</sup>

The existence of indeterminacy does not necessarily mean that decisions about meaning cannot be made at all. The meaning of indeterminacy is often related with deconstruction, the post-structuralist theory propounded by Jacques Derrida, and is best described as "a philosophically sceptical approach to the possibility of coherent meaning in language".<sup>13</sup>

Dorothee Elmiger abandoned themes in this literary creation, because there is no meaning, center, or essence in postmodern works. Everything in *Schlafgänger* is on the same level so that no theme or subheading or even a topic is needed, and writers' attention is paid to the randomness, extemporisation and collage during the creative process of this production. The novel is produced in such a way that It's merely a sequence of dialogues and monologues.

Indeterminacy in the Plot *Schlafgänger* is structured with an open plot and the skill of juxtaposing multi-closures. At the beginning, we are in media res directly into the story with the dream of Übersetzerin and then monologues of other characters. As there is no proof of exact time when or place where the dialogues take place the proportions of time and space are thoroughly shattered. The dialogues between the figures include multiple themes revolving around the present-day issues like Refugees, border crossing, Home, Identity, Places, Sleep.

#### **E) Alienation in the novel**

Alienation as explained by Britannica Encyclopaedia in context of social sciences is the state of feeling estranged or separated from one's milieu, work or its products, or self. The idea of alienation remains an undecided concept with elusive connotations despite being so discussed in the modern era. The key features for alienation are powerlessness, estrangement, meaninglessness, despair and pessimism. Cultural and Social estrangement is the sense of being out from established values in society and self-estrangement<sup>14</sup>. Perhaps the most difficult to define and the main theme of alienation remains the ability to understand that in one way or another, the individual is no more himself or out of touch with himself. Similar is the case with the loss of identity. Search for identity and conflicts arising due to this quest, serves as a foundation for alienation. There are some important reasons behind the feelings of estrangement and alienation. It may occur in answer to certain events or situations in society or in one's personal life.

Karl Marx theory of alienation describes the estrangement with his theory of estrangement from the self. In the capitalistic society one can see this in a way like if the worker is deprived of the right to think and right to define his prevailing relationships with others, the worker losses the ability to determine life and destiny.<sup>15</sup>

Some sociologists observe that individuals become alienated when they perceive government, employment, or educational institutions as cold and impersonal, unresponsive to those who need their services. Entire groups may experience alienation.

As far as the novel is concerned it should be mentioned that the figures are alienated from the society, in the sense that only these people are concerned with what is happening around They have empathy with the trespassers. They are the one thinking and associating themselves with the others. Others is the term that is constantly being used to refer the refugees and trespassers. The figures thus while thinking and concerning with the conditions of other alienate themselves from the society in which they are living. The society is deprived of there ability to think as they have radio and government officials that set the rules. The government has nothing to with the humanistic values of the trespassers. For them are trespassers illegal and not welcomed in the country. The trespassers are sleepless and so is this group of people who however belong to elite class as they cross countries but are sleepless because they don't know what is to be done and how the people opinions can be change around them. There also instances that lead to estrangement. For example: „ das Windrad hatte sich

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<sup>12</sup> Encyclopaedia Britannica 2011, "Indeterminacy" <https://www.britannica.com/art/indeterminacy> p.1

<sup>13</sup> Chris Baldick, "Indeterminacy" from the Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms, Oxford (2009)ISBN 0-19-920827-112

<sup>14</sup> Encyclopaedia Britannica "Alienation-society" <https://www.britannica.com/topic/alienation-society> p.

<sup>15</sup> [https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/Marx%27s\\_theory\\_of\\_alienation](https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/Marx%27s_theory_of_alienation)14

beruhigt, in der Luft flog der Kauz, ich näherte mich dem First und blickte auf die Straße, dort sah ich eine Person in Richtung Grenze gehen, und es schien mir für einen Augenblick, als sähe ich mich selbst im Schlaf, als stünde der eine Logistiker schlafend auf dem Dach oder als ginge der andere schlafwandelnd über die Grenze, aber ich schlief nicht, nein, war wach, und ich war, wie gesagt, in guter Gesellschaft.”<sup>16</sup>

At the end the Logistiker comments the wind wheel had calmed. An eagle flew in the air. I came closer the edge and saw the street. I saw a person going towards the border and it appeared me so, as if I am seeing myself in sleep as a Logistiker standing asleep on the roof or as the other sleepwalking towards the border but I don't sleep. No, was awake, and I was, as said, in a good company. The way he speeds at the end and the last word of the paragraph depicts the feeling of estrangement.

#### **IV. CONCLUSION**

The paper has shown that *Schlafgänger* has been written in a style that complies with many postmodern conventions and includes postmodern Elements such as Fragmentation, Intertextuality, Subjectivity, Indeterminacy, Alienation. Probably the most noticeable ones are the use of fragments that lead to alienation of figures as well as of readers. Judging from all that has been said above, it can be claimed that *Schlafgänger* is built on post modern traits, which it takes pleasure in debunking here and there. No savvy reader would be able to ignore the intrusive narrator, or how intertextuality subvert the postmodern traits present in the novel. Linda Hutcheon has explained that postmodernism “uses” and “abuses” at the same time, subverts and enhances the previous tradition<sup>17</sup>. Under the light of this postulation *Schlafgänger* can be understood as a fine example of post modernism.

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Sahib Kapoor" Study of Postmodern Elements in the Novel Schlafgänger" Quest Journals Journal of Research in Humanities and Social Science , vol. 07, no. 4, 2019, pp. 01-05

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<sup>16</sup> Schlafgänger Elmiger, Dorothee. eBook 2014 © 2014 DuMont Buchverlag, Köln. ISBN eBook: 15 978-3-8321-8778-1

<sup>17</sup> Quoted in Linda Hutcheon. *A Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction*. London: Routledge, 1988, 16 p.168.