

BEAT THE DRUM AGAIN: REVISITING GRASS' THE TIN DRUM THROUGH A POSTMODERN LENS.

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Abstract

Written during the early sprouting of post-modernism, in the 1950s the novel, *The Tin Drum*-published in 1959, is far beyond conventional. It presents its readers with a collage of parody, satire, brewing ideas about war and its aftermath in Germany. The fundamentals of post-modernism can be located in its innate use of experimental narration, magic realism and historiographic metafiction. The present research shall shed spotlight on elements of post-modernism by revisiting the text with a postmodern lens.

Keywords: German literature, war, history, post-modernism, magic realism.

INTRODUCTION

The Tin Drum, originally *Die Blechtrommelis* a novel written by Gunter Grass and is a part of the *Danzig Trilogy*. The other titles in this includes, *Cat and Mouse* (1961) and *Dog Years* (1963). The entire trilogy is set during the interwar and war time period in the 'Free City of Danzig', which was then a semi-autonomous state, especially after the World War I. Born on 16th October 1927, Gunter Grass was a German literato, a novelist, a poet and playwright, illustrator, graphic artist, sculptor and also the Noble Prize winner in 1991 for his contributions to literature. He belongs to the Kashubian tribe which is the culture closely associated to the Polish culture. The novel, *The Tin Drum* became massively popular and made Gunter Grass an international sensation. The novel is most widely read post-war German novel. The work is extremely rich in terms of its complexity and symbolic value.

The reader begins the novel with a sense of uncertainty and trust issues with the narrator who informs the reader that he is an inmate of a mental hospital. The narrator Oskar is a dwarf; a self-willed one at that, who refuses to grow up, to reject the moral complexities of adult world, by purposely falling off the basement staircase, stunting his growth, so even when his mind grows, his body does not. The title, *The Tin Drum* is an actual tin drum that is given to Oskar by his mother when he turns three. As a child he drums to communicate and does not speak. The title also holds an idiomatic suggestion which means to create disturbance or to draw attention. In this regard, the drumming of Oskar is symbolic of his rejection and protest against the mentality of his family and his surroundings in general.

The narration of the novel oscillates between the first and the third person. Oskar is an actor as well as the narrator of the novel, as such the tense of the novel alternates between the present tense and the past tense. The success of *The Tin Drum* is massive. The book was translated into many languages – more than a dozen. The novel also incorporates autobiographical elements because it journals Grass' own experiences as a child and as a youngster in war-time Germany.

DEFINING POSTMODERNISM

Although many scholars have claimed that postmodernism is a dead theory, and that we now live in the pseudo-modern era, can be relatively true. Nonetheless, the theory of postmodernism is a wide one. It has always rejected a clear-cut definition, and even if it is a thing of the past, it is still difficult and complex to construct a single line definition for the same. Postmodern practice in art, music, dance, architect and literature rejects oppressive structures and embraces plurality, mini-narratives and experimentation. Postmodern theorists deconstructed reason, truth and reality as they believed that these very ideas of truth, reason and reality has enabled the Western civilisation to wrought dominance injustice and oppression. Postmodernism then becomes a potent weapon, a confederation to fight the oppression. Frank Lentricchia explains that Postmodernism,

...seeks not to find the foundation and the conditions of truth but to exercise power for the purpose of social change. The task of postmodern professors is to help students spot, confront and work against the political horrors of one's time. (qtd in Hicks. 13)

These aforementioned 'horrors' are those experienced mainly by the West and that too not equally, where the upper gentry, males, the Whites have exercised dominance over women, racial minorities and the poor. Postmodernism rejects any claim to absoluteness or truth, the critical body of theory in Postmodern criticism states that all literary texts have no true interpretation, the dogmas are deconstructed and there is immense subjectivity. A certain example can be the way the reader can interpret and symbolically attach meaning in the text by bringing his or her own race, sexuality, experience, ethnicity and culture. Stephen Hicks state;

Post-modern literary criticism rejects the notion that literary texts have objective meaning and true interpretations. All such claims to objectivity and truth can be deconstructed. (Hicks, 16)

Post-modernism has always been considered a great equaliser. Because of its paradoxical and interrogative nature, objectivity and truth has no fixed meaning. Therefore, there is no 'right' or 'correct' way to read a text, for example. All interpretations are therefore equally valid. When applied to a larger social construct, there are then, no groups that are socially and culturally special or powerful than the others. All cultures are equal, all ethnicities are legitimate. Stephen Hicks affirms,

Modern debates were over truth and reality, reason and experience, liberty and equality, justice and peace, beauty and progress. In the postmodern framework, those concepts always appear in quotation marks. Our most strident voices tell us that "Truth" is myth. "Reason" is a White male Eurocentric construct. "Equality" is a mask for oppressions. "Peace" and "Progress" are met with cynical and weary reminders of power-or explicit *ad hominem* attacks. (Hicks, 20)

Some prominent names that form the postmodern army includes, Michel Foucault, Jacques Derrida, Jean François Lyotard, Frederick Nietzsche, Alan Munslow, Judith Butler and Linda Hutcheon to name a few. The present research shall study the aspects of postmodern elements like historiographic metafiction, magic realism and fragmentation in relation to the novel, *The Tin Drum*.

SHORT SYNOPSIS: *THE TIN DRUM*

The form of the novel, *The Tin Drum* by Gunter Grass is a story within a story framework. When the novel opens, the main protagonist of the story Oskar Matzerath is writing a memoir from an asylum for the insane. We learn about his family history and how his family grew and he was born. At age 3, his mother gifted him a tin drum. Oskar observes the hypocrisy and corruption around him and decides he doesn't wish to grow up. This leads him to purposely plana fall from the staircase in his basement, that stunts his physical growth, literally. Therefore, he has a stunted body of a dwarf. He also discovers that his voice is shrill enough to break and shatter glass which uses for his aide many times during the narrative. He also discovers that he has this innate passion to beat his drum and he uses the same to communicate or protest against the shortcomings he observes around him.

Oskar is completely detached from his society, he is involved in a sexual play with a girl name Maria. He also works with the circus troupes and survives bizarre deaths of his two fathers and his mother. His mother Agnes is married to Alfred Matzerath but has an amorous affair with her cousin Jan Bronski, who is presuming Oskar's actual father. Agnes dies in the novel after eating filthy fish, that doesn't suit her, Jan Bronski is killed in an attack at the Polish post-office where he works, Alfred Matzerath is shot by the invading troops, when he gets a seizure as he swallows the Party pin of the Nazi, that Oskar hands him. Oskar believes that Maria- his so-called babysitter, who is now a mother to a boy named Kurt is actually Oskar's son, and not Alfred's who married Maria after assuming that he impregnated her. We see that nothing is conventional in his life.

During the war, Oskar performance with the troupe led by a clown midget called Bebra. What is the uses his voice to break class and entertain the German soldiers, the ones fighting on the front line during the Second World War. We are introduced to a character, a midget called Roswitha who is an Italian somnambulist. Oskar falls in love with her and they sleep together. Later the same day, she is killed in an artillery fire, during the Allied invasion of Normandy. Oskar's life is filled with bizarre episodes: he becomes a leader of anti-establishment called *The Dusters*, who are involved in smuggling and stealing, he later becomes a naked model for an art Academy, becomes a tombstone engraver, makes a jazz band called *The Onion Cellar* with his friend Klepp in Dusseldorf.

Oskar makes a fortune, when he takes his drum for shows on road and eventually gets a recording deal. This recording label turns out to be Bebra's who become close to Oskar but dies shortly. Oskar stops drumming and one day while he is out walking in the field outside Dusseldorf, he finds that his neighbour, a nurse name Dorothea, whom he had once tried to seduce is murdered by another rival nurse. He finds a severed finger and asks Vittlar, another man whom he befriends, to turn Oskar to police for murdering Dorothea. In strange play of events Oskar is put on trial and wrongfully convicted and therefore forced to live in mental institution where he writes his memoir. We feel that he is likely to be released and you observe that Oskar is plagued and agonised by his memories. He is not sure what he will do, once he is released. The novel is a contemplation of German psyche and its effects on art. Oskar's character assimilates Grass' vision and view of all the Germans, for allowing Holocaust to happen, lacking morality and not owning up to its crimes.

HISTORIOGRAPHIC METAFICTION IN *THE TIN DRUM*

The term historiographic metafiction was first coined by the postmodern critic Linda Hutcheon, who used it to describe the retelling of history in literature. It is therefore a new critical innovation that aids the creative spectrum in retelling history. She defines it as,

The term post-modernism, when used in fiction, should, by analogy, best be reserved to describe fiction that is at once metafictional and historical in its echoes of the texts and contexts of the past. In order to distinguish this paradoxical beast from traditional historical fiction, I would like to label it 'historiographic metafiction'. (Hutcheon, 03)

Keeping the paradigm of history and metafiction, the present novel in discussion reflects the tenets of postmodernism through historiographic metafiction. The novel is set in Germany and Oskar's personal history is filled with the episodes of the World War II. The novel shows how Germans were easily gullible and how the Nazi were able to infiltrate their society and gain power, enough to make German citizens commit crimes against their fellow Poles and Jewish friends. Through many acts of bully and lack of empathy the Germans were lauded to be torturous towards the vulnerable. This is shown in Oskar's 'Brick Soup' drinking episode which has gross elements including the human fluids in it. It shows that how the German population, who all supported Nazism, turned a complete blind eye towards the mass killing of millions of Poles and Jews in their frenzy of purifying the Aryan race.

Gunter Grass' own experience as being the part of 'Schutzstaffel' the SS, which was Hitler's paramilitary organisation, makes the novel a self-reflective one. Oskar's indirect hand in the deaths of his alleged fathers shows the behaviour rampant during the Nazi era. Oskar stands and witnesses when Markus's store window is broken and smashed by the Nazis and how he is killed, Oskar's reaction to this is that he grabs the tin drums from the shop and runs away. Similarly, he points towards Jan Bronski who is then shot dead and he hands and open Nazi party pin to Alfred Matzerath on which he chokes and is shot dead in the frenzy, by the Russian troops. Oskar's stunted abnormal growth after he tosses his drum to Matzerath's grave is symbolic of guilt-ridden Germans living in the post-war era.

Throughout the novel, Grass presents us with fragmented memories from the war era and the post-war guilt. The novel is grounded in reality of Germany during the Nazi era and how the society became cold and unempathetic. Without a doubt, there is a blurring between fiction and history as the novel is grounded in historical reality. The novel is at once, thought-provoking, filled with guilt, a critic of Germans themselves and their inability to resist fascism. It shows how the youth was supportive of Hitler, without thinking about the outcome of their participation. In allegorical fashion, *The Tin Drum* blames its own people for not owning things up to themselves, Grass blames himself as well for keeping silent and a moral failing.

To sum up the discussion of historiographic metafiction, Stuart Sim describes Linda Hutcheon's idea as,

What marks out historiographic metafiction for Hutcheon, is the presence of parody, irony, self-reflexivity, and paradoxically enough for a genre that is deliberately concerned to blur the line between fiction and history, 'a sense of historical grounding – even if it takes the form of historical consciousness mixed with the ironic sense of critical distance' (Hutcheon 1988a:201). Those are characteristics to be found in works like Gabriel Garcia Marquez's *One Hundred Years of Solitude* or Gunter Grass' *The Tin Drum*. (Sim, 139-140)

MAGIC REALISM IN *THE TIN DRUM*

The term 'magical realism' was introduced as a genre by German art critic named Franz Roh in 1925. The idea was to not ground art in structures of realism alone. Although coined in 1925, the concept came into practice in the 1940s with the Latin American and Caribbean writings. A dash of magic in everyday life, without generating

any extraordinary reaction or disbelief is a technique employed by the writers to create an alternative reality or even question the reality. Gabriel Garcia Marquez's work can be classified as seasoned works in this genre. The elements essential to magic realism are, realistic setting, something which the audience is familiar with, there everyday world, the magical elements interwoven into this everyday life, no logical justification or information is provided about these magical abnormalities which are treated as normal occurrences in plot structure and the work often offers critique to something.

Magic realism is one of the key elements of postmodern literature. The novel in this framework tends to present fantastical, surreal and bizarre events in realistic tone. Elements which can be traced in many ways in the present novel *The Tin Drum*. The novel is set in the pre-and post-war life in Poland and Germany. The plot and setting brims with authentic details and facts about the place during the World War II. Among this true, authentic and realistic portrayal of episodes, the character of Oskar defies complete logic in many ways.

The first component of magic realism lies in the fact that Oskar, being a child, is still able to see things in an adult way, his understanding is far more grown and complex for his age. He even understands the sexual spree his mother Agnes indulges in and how much Oskar is observing the same. Oskar's autonomous decision do not grow up after he is three years old and his success in achieving the same, when he purposely falls from the staircase, lacks complete logic but this disbelief is a suspended by the leaders. Similarly, his decision to grow up in the end also defies logic.

The most striking projection of magical realism can be seen in Oskar's ability to break glass with his shrill high-pitched voice. While many people claim to do so in real world, carving delicately on to glass; the scene which occurs when Oskar and Rosewitha spend time alone in the room, Oskar carves heart shape on to glass, completely flouts logic. Oskar's act of drumming is also an element of magic realism. He communicates his protests through his tin drum. He also discovers, later in the novel that performing on his tin drum can make him a decent living. The drum somehow tends to evoke intense memories among the audience, leading to catharsis of all pent-up emotions. The drum is also effective in creating a ruckus during the party parade of the Nazi. Dr Anuradha Bhattacharya states,

On the surface the story has no clear magical attributes and everything is conveyed in a real setting, but Oskar's character breaks the rules of our real world. The author gives precise details of the real world such as the date of birth of the protagonist. Oskar narrates his own story, strangely remembering every minute detail of his birth even detailing things that happened to his mother before his birth as if from first-hand knowledge. (Bhattacharya *The Character of Oskar in The Tin Drum*)

As presented in the above section, one can see how the novel, *The Tin Drum* can be classified into the genre of magic realism, as it presents the scenarios that defy logic, while not inciting any special reaction towards it, placed in a historical reality of Poland and Germany during the World War II both pre-and post.

FRAGMENTATED NARRATION AND NARRATOR IN *THE TIN DRUM*

The Tin Drum begins with Oskar's narration, he is the first-person narrator, but often he switches to third person narration himself. It is speculated of how many things Oskar remembers about his past and his own birth. The novel lacks a linear narration and often skips multiple years. Oskar's claims tend to portray how he had full control of his life from the very first day and understood everything around him. The reader is initially sceptical and therefore careful to believe in him. There are shifts from this first-person narration to third when Oskar narrates things like *Oskar's blue eyes* (Grass, 37). He can be considered as the most unreliable narrator as a reader at times feels that he is delusional because he mentioned in the opening page how he's an inmate of an asylum and how his first version of the story isn't the complete one. Moreover, the sentence structures do not necessarily aid the reading process. In many scenarios the structure of the sentences run so long that it makes the reader lost and paranoid. Oskar's constant oscillation between the past present and the future add to the challenging stance of postmodern style narration.

Grass also deploys the use of metonymy to reveal Oskar is unique way of thinking. His tendency to think about a certain character is not direct- he refers to the four skirts, for example, when he talks about his grandmother. As the novel playfully incorporates parody, dark humour and grotesque imagery there is a strong sustenance of local dialect and action. These elements are prominent features of postmodernism.

CONCLUSION

The novel does not end on a positive or hopeful note. Uncertainty about Oskar's released from the hospital looms over the readers in the end. The novel is filled with symbolism and Oskar's character can get as complex

as possible. As mentioned, the research clearly depicts that the novel, *The Tin Drum* contains various postmodern elements like historiographic metafiction, magic realism, fragmentation and parody which are skilfully applied by the author. The novel is a beast, it is a satirical commentary in the post-war era of Germany, a reflection that the German government with the collaboration of massive population committed atrocities that still haunt the society and portrays the worst of mankind. The novels grotesque imagery and filth clearly resemble this. Gunter Grass becomes a postmodern author when he proclaims that his works have no abstraction or meaning. The work is although specific to the German population, like any literary work transcends the language and cultural barriers to become universal. The novel has many shades, the end of its literary output has not yet been exhausted. *The Tin Drum* is one of those rare pieces of literature that needs to be mined time and again to unearth the complex layers of themes and deeper questions of humanity. It is undoubtedly, one iconic work ever written.

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