



READING FIVE FEATURES OF LITERARY POSTMODERNISM IN  
MARK Z.DANIELEWSKI'S *THE FIFTY YEAR SWORD*

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ABSTRACT

Mark Z. Danielewski's is a highly experimental novelist who subverts the established notions (the philosophical ideas and the conventional principles of fiction writing) by resorting to the various strategies or techniques dominant in postmodern literature. The prime aim of this research article is to understand Danielewski's use of postmodern strategies or elements and the significance of their use. For this purpose I have chosen his tiny novel *The Fifty Year Sword* (2012). Like postmodernism, the term postmodern literature is also a broad concept or literary movement that cannot confine to five or ten or fifteen features only. However, reading *The Fifty Year Sword* in association with the five features of literary postmodernism could be encouraging, fruitful, and methodical. The features that have been taken for analyzing the select novels are antiemetic or unnatural narrative, the features of multimodality, genre blends, and metafictional elements, and magical realism. Some clarifications need to be made here: a) The features of literary postmodernism include a wide variety of literary devices or techniques, including fragmentation, temporal distortion, parody, pastiche, playfulness, irony, hyperreality, vicious circle, looseness of association, generic hybridization, intertextuality, an assemblage of media, metafiction devices, and so on. However, considering the scope of the present study and the chosen novel, it is restricted only to the five features mentioned above only. b) The sequence of these five features is an arbitrary one. Using these techniques or features, Danielewski effectively offers the story of three people: Chintana, Belinda Kite, and the mysterious story-teller.

**Key Words:** Unnatural narrative, multi-modality, genre blend, metafiction, etc.

Introduction

Mark Z. Danielewski is an American novelist who is famously known for his experimental choices regarding the form of writing. He was born on 5<sup>th</sup> March 1966 in New York and had his schooling from Yale University and University of California. Danielewski is also the forerunner of experimental novels of the twenty-first century who has employed multi-layered narratives, typographical variations and the techniques of visual writing throughout his works. Till the date, he has written five novels including *House of Leaves* (2000), *The Whalestoe Letters* (2000), *The Fifty Year Sword* (2005), *Only Revolution* (2006) and *The Familiar* (2015). The last

novel in this list is actually Danielewski's big project and he has divided this work in twenty seven volumes and out of which he has written and published four volumes. All of his novels attract the seasonal readers as well as academic readers as they are quite experimental and challenging in nature, but I will focus on only one novel *The Fifty Year Sword* here. The novel is nothing but heartbroken story of Chintana- a Thai Seamstress who is a divorced woman, the epic journey and black intention of the story teller, and the tragedy of Belinda Kite. Though, the story is of mature people, it is recited before the orphans- five little kids. This small hint makes us to think that this novel is overloaded with the features of literary postmodernism which will be analyzed in the following sections one by one.

### Methodology

Since this is a theoretical study, it adopts descriptive and interpretative methods of research. The analysis of the select is purely based on the features of literary postmodernism. Some of the ideas or principles have been taken into consideration while developing the present research. These are: Aristotle's idea of *muthos* (as postmodern literature deviates from traditional notion of plot), unnatural narrative (as postmodern literature do not follow the mimetic tradition of depicting the real world and projects the impossible world), assemblage of multiple media for describing the events (as postmodern literature doesn't adhere to one media of transmission), metafiction (as postmodern literary works are dominantly self-reflexive) and the idea of double-coding (as postmodern literary works combine high and low culture).

Bearing these above points in mind, Mark Z. Danielewski's novel *The Fifty Year Sword* (2005) is analyzed in the following section. This analysis highlights how the tiny story in the novel is weighty with the features of postmodernism. For better understanding of the analysis, the novel *The Fifty Year* is briefly summarized here.

### *The Fifty Year Sword: A Brief Summary*

*The Fifty Year Sword* (2005) narrates the scared tale which overloaded with violence in the forms of murder and other crime and associated with three central characters. Thus the novel details three stories: Of Chintana's, Belinda's and the Story-teller's one. Chintana, a divorced woman is a weaver by profession and suffers physically as well as mentally a lot. Two causes are there behind her anguish: the first one a divorce from her husband and the second one is her wound- thumb cut. She is invited to attend the birth day celebration on the Halloween night at orphanage by the Mose Dettledown. Because of the physical wound, she becomes very weak so that she could not walk or work properly. Irrespective of her weakness, she accepts the invitation and travels towards the place where the Halloween party is going to happen. This act shows that Chintana is hunted by the revenge motif. The second story is about the mysterious man- the story teller who has been invited by Mose Dettledown to entertain the five orphans on Halloween night. The man tells that he has black and sinful mind and to appease his mind he takes long journey in search of a magical weapon. He travels from village to village, crosses rivers, valleys, forests, mountains and the boundaries of countries and finally reaches the place where he met the man with no arms. He purchases a small sword- a magical sword that has only sword- hilt no blade and carries this by hiding it in the wooden box which has five latches. He opens it, shows the same and says that this would cut the person without showing the cutting mark on the body. The cutting marks will appear when the victim turns into the age of fifty. The third story is about Belinda Kite who is marriage hacker and the cause of Chintana's divorce. She doesn't believe in the tale of the story teller and the magical power of the sword. She comes forward, takes the sword without blade, stabs herself throughout her body and shows nothing happens to her. Unfortunately, she turns into fifty at the stroke of midnight and her body starts to fall down accordingly to the cutting marks. Belinda dies because of her disbelief and bravado. This seemingly simple and tiny story offers a number of features or strategies that are dominant in postmodern literature. The following discussion focuses on the five features of literary postmodernism.

### Textual Analysis (Discussion)

1. Postmodern literature is marked by the features of unnatural or antimimetic narrative techniques. They do not follow the Aristotelian principles of plot- *wholeness*, *magnitude* and certain *unity*. By *wholeness* he means- the beginning-middle-end, *magnitude* means the length (not too lengthy nor too short) and

unity means coherence and logicity. Rejecting this, postmodern literature takes the stance of adopting antimimetic or unnatural narrative that violates all the traditional principles of plot, character and setting, etc. This violation is done through offering multiple plots, implausible and unnatural world in a single text by the postmodernist novelists. When we look at Danielewski's *The Fifty Year Sword* we witness three story lines with five (in fact six) narratorial voices. Again the world we come across in the novel is full with implausible and unnatural materials- firstly Belinda Kite, a marriage hacker destroys a huge number of married lives that seems hardly possible, secondly she dies because of her bravado. The story teller's epic journey, his meeting with the man with no arm and the magic sword do not belong to the natural world. How is it possible of making a sword by a person who has no both hands? And how is it also possible for any sword that has no blade to cut the human body? Danielewski's use of unconventional formatting, language games, inserting images and symbols, etc make the novel as a form of unnatural narrative. In short, Danielewski's use of the multiple storylines, multivocal narration and unnatural world disrupts the smooth flow of the plot.

2. Multi-modality is the trending feature of postmodern literature. Allison Gibbon's remark "--- works exist within postmodernism that are multimodal" (421) highlights this observation. Gibbon enlists several features of multimodal text as varied typography, unusual text layouts and page design, the inclusion of images and playing with size, shape and design, etc (420). When we apply these features, Danielewski's *The Fifty Year Sword* appropriately highlights its multimodality. The novel has unusual size, unusual typography, half of the pages are blank, few pages include a number of images- the image of sword tilt, butterfly, mountain, several cut marks on body, etc.
3. The third feature of literary postmodernism is the hybridization of literary genres. Postmodern literature problematizes the generic convention by mixing different genres in single novel. It also erases the border between high and low culture, different genres and fact and fiction. It appeals to the minds of seasonal as well as academic readers. Danielewski's *The Fifty Year Sword* is described as a ghost story in the readers' note but one cannot find a ghost in the story. It is recited in front of the five orphan kids and thus, it seems children's story but it doesn't follow the tradition of children book as it is overloaded with revenge motif, adultery and violence. In this sense, it is a crime story. Moreover, the epic journey offers picaresque elements. Thus, the author has used genre-blend technique in this novel.
4. Metafiction is a dominant mode of writing in postmodern literature. Metafictional novel addresses the reader, informs them that they are reading artistic construction by offering comments on themselves. *The Fifty Years Sword* exposes in the very beginning that the readers are going to read a ghost story, then there is a direct address to the reader and in the middle of the story one of character expresses her disbelief by saying how can we call it a ghost story. Further, the story-tellers entry and the act of telling a thrilling story show the metafictional quality of the novel.
5. Finally, the man with no arm who prepares magical sword, the sword without blade causing injurious harm i.e. the death of its victim in his or her fiftieth age, the hidden cut-marks and other mysterious elements throughout novel show the features of magical realism

## Conclusion

Mark Z. Danielewski's *The Fifty Year Sword* offers a tiny story of revenge by the deceiver but this small story requires 285 pages for its fulfillment. Authors use of experimentation and innovation at the textual, graphical and compositional levels make this book bulky and postmodern literary artifice. It plays with the form, typography, size, language and even story telling tradition. It also offers a number of examples of irony and the most suitable is the death of the birthday-woman Belinda Kite at the time celebration.

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