

## INVESTIGATING MODERNISTIC ELEMENTS IN NOCTURNAL ORCHESTRA OF WOODS

**Elham khayef**

PhD candidate in ELT,  
Department of English, Islamic Azad University  
Sarab, Iran

**Ramtin Nickfam**

M.A in English Literature,  
Payame Noor University. Tehran, Iran.

**Bahram Behin**

Assistant Professor,  
Department of English–Azarbaijan Shahid Madani University  
Tabriz–Iran

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**ABSTRACT:** *Present study investigates modernistic elements in Reza Ghasemi's masterpiece 'Nocturnal Orchestra of Woods'. This specific book has caught so much attention in Iran, and deserves a chance to be known worldwide. The overall organization of present study is, first to provide a short description of various types of elements in a narrative and second, to explain modernism in fictional literature and its most important elements using scientifically authorized sources in literary criticism. Structural analysis of the novel in terms of most important elements is provided briefly, and signs of modernistic features such as: theme, character, story, plot, structure etc. are discussed. Moreover, most prominent elements of the novel is provided holistically. The results prove that modernistic elements in the novel are clear and copious enough to consider and classify the novel as an example of Modernistic novel.*

**KEYWORDS:** Nocturnal Orchestra of Woods, fictional literature, story elements, Modernistic elements.

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### INTRODUCTION

Folktales have been the oldest form of fiction in Persian literature. Story in its simplest definition is “a simple narrative style without plan and its reliance mainly is on events and descriptions.”(Yunesi, 10: 2005) Fictional literature especially, short stories and novels had taken into serious consideration and had replaced poetry after the Constitutional Revolution in Iran, and in compliance with the West; the authors have expressed their own thoughts and feelings through short stories and novels, and novels have been considered more than ever in comparison with short stories, because of broadness and variety of its subject.

Since literature in general, and fictional literature in specific; have been influenced by the social and cultural situations in their community or even by other communities; consequently, after getting familiar with the West, first Iranian writers turned to realist style in their stories following footsteps of West very cautiously, and the peak of this style in Iran was during 1970s. But at the same time, another tendency has been settling in Iranian fiction along with realism which is well-known as modernism. Since the early 1980s, Modernism turned into dominant

story writing attitude in Iranian fictional literature. Fictional works of plan position were the most important and fundamental raised issues for people in modern times.

Modernism components have also had growth parallel to literature of migration in Iran. *Migration Literature*, which has emerged in its contemporary form, is very important branch of Persian Literature after the *Islamic Revolution* of 1978 in Iran and has grown and flourished alongside with the domestic literature widely. Components and characteristics of this branch of literature have specific definitions that must be recognized in any literary works in order to list it as an example of migration literature. The novel of “Nocturnal Orchestra of Woods” is one of the successful practices of migration literature in the category of fictional literature which has been ever published in Iran. The novel has been written by Iranian dramatist, novelist and musician Reza Ghasemi who is residing in Paris. His work was considered by many critics and readers as his masterpiece and has become one of the most studied and controversial works of contemporary Iranian fiction. Though the novel has a small volume, it is indeed a complicated work and is included various subjects and concepts that has placed it in the framework of the novels of *Ideas and Opinions* (categorization, specific for Persian literature which challenges ideologies and prevailed ideas of the societies).

The novel has an everyday style of writing and is totally distanced from poetic styles, common to literature of exile. It speaks about emotional sufferings and the erosion of contemporary Iranian in exile. Ghasemi’s compacted novel is an interesting and mind-provocative book and its indescribable magnetism is in such an artistic manner that in spite of all suspensions and ambiguities, it takes the readers hypnotized and mesmerized to follow the speaker of the narrative to the end with curiosity. It is for fact that not everybody has the ability to understand the values of its structure and contents without difficulty, and according to the scholars, critics and readers, discovering author’s ability and observing the beauty of his words depends on reading it over and over again. Ghasemi also has applied some components of modernism in his novel, which has provoked the complexity of the novel. Consequently, present study aims to highlight those modernist components of the novel; and starting with analyzing some story elements as well as modernism elements of the novel, it is determine to seek the answer to this very question: *Whether Nocturnal Orchestra of Woods can be classified as a novel of modernism or not?* The research method is in the form of library and content analysis.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Although several studies so far has been written on the critical analysis of this novel, the examination of modernism components of the novel still remains untouched and pristine. Hereunder is the most important studies in correlation with the present article which has used the related methodology and approach.

Khourvash in an article named “*A Planet out of Its Orbit: Postmodernism in Reza Ghasemi’s ‘The Nocturnal Orchestra of Wood’*” (Summer 2010: 149-167) examines elements of postmodernism including time irregularities, uncertainties and other elements in the novel of Nocturnal Orchestra and has concluded that in spite of having some elements of modernism and realism, the novel should be considered as postmodern.

Afshar also in his article “*Symphony of Wooden Dummies*”, published in *Haft*, a literary journal, has studied the atmosphere of the novels and as a result he concludes that the novel's tone is affected by its characters and is full of horror and illusion.

Koushyar Parsi in his significant article “Critical Review of The Nocturnal Orchestra of Wood”, after delivering a very short and general review, investigates the elements of Migration Literature in details and believes that it is one of the best example of this genre for the few last decades.

Pour Ahmad in an article titled as "The Mirror's Fear of Being Mirror ", published in the literary journal of *Haft*, states that the novel's tone is affected by its characters and is full of horror and illusions. He has analyzed unstable and illusioned character of narrator and believes that the narrator is an innocent and poor person who under certain social conditions, has been suffering from variety of mental illness.

In the article “The Hell, Nocturnal Orchestra... and Blind Owl” by Pour-khoshbakht, a comparative study of some elements and themes in these novels has been conducted and the results indicate that there are significant shared themes such as: narrator's personality type, horror atmosphere and also realistic aspects in these novels.

Sarlaki in her article “The Nocturnal Melody of Shadow Courier” investigates psychological themes in the novel and considers the narrator one with paranoid personality that suspects everything and everyone that has led to uncertainty in the novel.

Shahrokhi in an article entitled “Analysis of The Nocturnal Orchestra of Wood” investigates the story elements in the novel and considers Reza Ghasemi as an author proficient in techniques of fiction.

Sadeghi also in her article “Synchronization of Nocturnal Orchestra with Slaughterhouse No.5 and Blind Owl” published in the Journal of *Kalak* investigates similarities and differences among three novels of ‘The Blind Owl’, ‘Nocturnal Orchestra of Wood’ and ‘slaughter house number 5’ and believes that the most important similarity among these three novels are the unique character of the narrators and their eerie and illusion-stricken atmospheres.

Safarian in an article named “Fear, Envy, Satire” reviews specific and biting satire in the novel and believes it as a result of author's frustration and failure in his social and political life.

Valaei in an article entitled “A Note on The Nocturnal Orchestra of Wood” after a short and general criticism has concluded that based on the capacity of the characters in the novel, the author could have dealt more with the plot and he could have written a more comprehensive and louder novel.

Mohammadi in his article on Ghasemi's novel entitled “Fear of Evil Spirits” surveys the illusion-stricken atmosphere of the novel and considers it a reflection of superstitious beliefs of the author; beliefs which now has also been criticized by the author himself.

Mirzaei in an article “Iranian Modernity and Sickness of Time-Slots” by analyzing Ghasemi's novel claims that events and morale of the characters and atmosphere of the novel reflects the inner conflict of human beings in traditional societies during the transition from tradition to modernity.

Yarmohammadi in his article entitled "For an Instrument Untuned" has concluded that the novel is reflection of the author's failures and disappointments in his motherland. There are still many more criticism on this novel or studies related to it in approach or criticism but the list above is the most critical of them; and the rest such as Haddadian and his article "On Novel and on Nocturnal Orchestra of Wood" sometimes provides only an overall analysis of the content of the novel and result of his research is not strong and detailed and hence less appropriate to mention.

## **METHODOLOGY AND DEFINITION OF RESEARCH CONCEPTS**

For the first part, present study is dealing with most important elements of story and very short definition of these elements and tries to show some of these elements in the story, as an example. For the part following, the most important elements of modernist approach will be provided and the procedure is to find these elements in *Nocturnal Orchestra of Woods*. Obviously, finding these elements in practice will prove that *Nocturnal Orchestra of Woods* must be considered as a novel of modernism; otherwise it should not be analyzed from modernistic criteria.

## **RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

### **Elements of Story**

Narrative (or story) "is any report of connected events, presented in a sequence of written or spoken words and has a narrator (storyteller)" (Akhvat, 1992:8)

Plot "is a mind map or scheme and conspiracy in the story" (Baraheni, without date: 557)

Structure "is the result of necessary connection between the components of a whole artistic work that causes integration of the work" (Mirsadeghi: 185)

Subject "is a concept that the story is written about it" (Mastour, 2000:28)

Theme "is central insight and main idea in every literary work" (Mirsadeghi 2009: 127)

Character (or fictional character) "is a person or persons in a narrative work of arts (such as a novel, play, television series or film)" (Mirsadeghi 2009: 199)

Dialogue "is a conversation between characters or more broadly, freely in mind of single character in a literary work" (Mirsadeghi, 2009: 255)

Point of view "is the writer's perspective through which a story is communicated" (Mastour, 2008:35)

Incident, accident, event "is a unit of story action, conflict or displacement of at least two things or two forces or alliance and changing of two things and two forces with each other" (Mastour, 2008:93)

Tone "is writer's mood of speech." (Mirsadeghi, 2006:521)

Atmosphere in fictional literature “is dominant spirit of story.” (Mastour, 2008:49)

Setting “is the time and place of an event in the story” (Homan: 429)

Message “is the main word of a subject” (Beheshti, 1996:70)

## **Elements of Story in Modern Novels**

### **Narrative**

The novel has several narrative lines. “The reader enters to a maze that it seems impossible to get rid of it” (Khourvash M., 2010:152). According to the narrative level of the novel, as the requirement of modernist novels, the chronological time line is broken, because “The modern narrative ruins the available regular equations in the economy of identity and overturns the descriptive course by linear narratives” (Yazdanjou, 2008:308) As a matter of fact, there is a partition in modernist stories that the beginning and the end of the narrative is obvious and the rest or the body of the narrative is broken into pieces and it is the modern reader that by completing this puzzle, enjoys the extra joy. These group of novels reject the order and coherence of classical stories by fragmenting narratives, an order which classics were the founders and promoters through unities of time, place and later action. On the other hand, modernist stories are always narrated in a layer of ambiguity in order to allow the reader to get numerous interpretations of the story. Therefore, the structure of the narrative in this novel is irregular and it is narrated out of any specific course like narration of modern stories.

### **Plot**

Plot of a novel is as complex as novel structure and the sequence of events, is irregular in terms of the time. It is based on the logical cause and effect relationship. Unlike traditional plots which had specified components, modern plot is irregular and has no specific courses, while having numerous suspensions, struggles, conflicts and crises. Plot in this novel is similar to the modernist novels regarding complexity. The novel plot comprises four lines narrative or episodes which are connected together in a place. Several flashbacks which is a feature in novels of stream-of-consciousness have created successive suspensions and have given a unique charming to the story. Suspension has created a kind of up and downs in the novel; while the reader thinks s/he has got all the answers and there is nothing to worry, another turning point begins and brand-new puzzle emerges. The suspension is increased in each line to the end of the novel also when the novel ends, some events are still continuing in the mind, perhaps trying to reach its end eventually. The plot of the novel corresponds with subject, theme, style and tone and it can be considered as complex plot, because the progression of the events is in the form of non-linear, zigzag and full of sudden up and downs.

### **Structure**

The structure also has no logical regularity in this novel. The structure of the novel like its name is similar to a musical system and a symphony and each part of it gets its definition and discipline in the form of whole. The start, the middle and the end of classical novels have been challenged by the novel and the reader is faced with an irregular structure. The structure of the novel like the structure of modernist stories is clipped pieces of single or multiple events that the reader can tinker them in order by himself or through metaphorical effects at the end.

## Characterization

The characterization in this novel follows the same manner as standard modern style. Since “Modern characters are representation of the internal contradictions as a result of their incompatibility of desires and beliefs, instead of visualizing set of coherent and compatible characteristics in the novels of the nineteenth century” (Lodge; Watt; Dychz, 24: 2007). In this novel, the characters are always involved in choosing between their desires and beliefs and this conflict leads to a kind of internal conflict; its representation is the formation of a religious extremist and fanatical character like Profet or a broad-minded character in matters of religion and beliefs like the narrator.

## Scene

The time of the novel cannot be adjusted with the time in calendar, because the confine of the specified time is not identified for the novel, neither by verb tenses nor by following sequence of events. The time in the hands of the writer is like a toy with which he leaves the reader undecided in the boundaries of its occasional discoveries. The narrator points out the irregularity of the time in the novel repeatedly, passes in search of lost time, expresses his aversion of future anxiety and only “The power of the moment” is his desire. The disease of “Time Interval” of the narrator is another reason for disappointment in search for the confine of the specified time in this novel. In fact, the narrator sometimes refers to the time briefly. For example, in a line at the beginning of the novel he says: “When I say for twelfth time during a year of my residence ...” (Ghasemi: 8) and somewhere else he says, “Here I had such a peace and tranquility in a year that...” (Ghasemi: 9), these sentences show that he had lived on the sixth floor of the building a year before the arrival of Profet, but there isn't any particular calendar date for it. It is not observed any other word of the time from the beginning of the novel anymore and the reader does not know how long it takes since Profet's arrival to the murder of the narrator. The story line related to the trial of the narrator by “Munkar and Nakir (Arabic: منكر و نكير) (English translation: "The Denied and The Denier") in Islamic eschatology, are angels who test the faith of the dead in their graves” passes in an absolute timelessness in accordance with “Next Door Fellow” (the name that the narrator calls one of The Denied and The Denier because of his invisibility), “things like today, yesterday and tomorrow belongs back there. You've just died, that's it!” (Ghasemi: 88). Therefore, the time confusion is the main feature of the time element in this novel. “They say: Eric Francois Schmidt has died right after he had read my book, while I was next to him today. They say Rana has thrown herself under a train, but she had a telephone conversation with me an hour before I get into this mess (Ghasemi: 88).

## Modernism and Characteristics of Modern Novel

Modernism is a movement referring to the art, poetry, literature, architecture, and philosophy of Europe and America in the early 20th-century. Scholars do not agree exactly when Modernism began-mostly refers to late nineteenth century in France. Likewise, some assert Modernism ended with World War II or the bombing of Nagasaki, to be replaced with Postmodernism, or that modernism lasted until the 1960s, when post-structural linguistics dethroned it. The early decades of twentieth centuries became known as the “Golden Age of The Modern Novel”. Others suggest that the division between modernism and postmodernism is false, and that postmodernism is merely the continuing process of Modernism. Under the general umbrella of Modernism, many art movements are founded such as: Symbolism, Vorticism, Expressionism, Futurism, Surrealism, Acmeist poetry, and various French

movements. This term is used for works that on one hand, the great passion of modernistic enthusiasm causes violation of forms and technical aspects of traditional in them and on the other hand, individuality and inner world of human beings are considered more than social aspects. In the field of fiction writing, most novels with violated linear narrative style and chronological description of events, multiple point of views and multi-voiced narrative styles are considered as modernism (Mirsadeghi, 2009: 263-264).

Modernism had profound impacts on the literary and artistic society of Iran, "In addition to providing the most appropriate background for making writers' techniques complicated, it caused considering new issues that they were neglected before, due to the limitations of realism in Iranian fiction. In other words, it made Iranian novelists' circle of interests wider and gave them new possibilities for expression. It also turned the attention of Iranian fiction writers to city and interpersonal relationship issues in the city from village and villagers' deprivation and poverty" (Payandeh, 2010:16).

Therefore the most prominent characteristics of modern novels can be generally summarized as:

1. Attention from the outside world into the dark and ambiguous world of mind.
2. Internal conflict rather than external conflict.
3. Complicating the narrative by applying stream of mind and inner monologue.
4. Refraining from the application of the third-person omniscient narrator or limited omniscient narrator.
5. Protagonist' anti-hero characteristic in the story. (Quoted by tabloid from Payandeh, 2010:22-23).

There are absolutely many more characteristics of modernism in novel that are not listed above, but it is arguable that these are the most frequently referred and most common milestones of modernism. Other characteristics which are going to be introduced in practice after the main elements such as: identity crisis, sense of nihilism and isolation, are all ornamented with reference to the novel, whenever possible.

### **Modernism Components in the Novel**

#### **Attention from the outside world into the dark and ambiguous world of mind:**

Modernist writer as a psychoanalyst considers invisible realities in the unconscious instead of characters' appearance. The narrator expresses his internal affairs with all the specifics along with internal states of other characters in *Nocturnal Orchestra of Woods*. Therefore, it can be even considered as a psychological novel in this respect. For example, the narrator describes the character of Rana in this way "... she has three different characters. The first character was a beautiful woman, intelligent, spirited and sociable... The second character was a cutesy and fractious boy and the third character was quite, weak and fragile girl ..." (Ghasemi: 83)

#### **Internal conflict rather than external conflict.**

The modern novel shows the individual's conflict with oneself in many different ways, and consequently, this novel reveals the internal conflict and struggle of its characters. For example,

the narrator (about his unbalanced character) says: “Which aspect of me was human-like that my friendship should be?” (Ghasemi: 30) Most of the other characters are also suffer from the internal conflict. The variety of aliases that they choose represent their internal conflict and struggle.

### **Complicating the narrative by applying stream of mind and inner monologue.**

Multiple flashbacks of the narrator to the past, complicate the narrative and direct it to non-linearity along with the multiple episodes of the novel.

### **Refraining from the application of the third-person omniscient narrator or limited omniscient narrator.**

The viewpoint of the novel is first person. The changing of the angle of view is modernistic components of the novel which is obvious in this novel. For example, the narrative at the beginning of chapter five exactly looks like the omniscient point of view. “Sheriff’s words made Eric Francois Schmidt toss and turn in her bed all night...” (Ghasemi: 177)

### **Protagonist’s anti-hero characteristic in the story.**

The narrator who is the main character of the novel has quite anti-hero characteristic, unlike the characters of traditional novels. He uses every opportunity to destroy himself and his self-destructive disease is sufficient for considering his anti-hero in himself. Far from any self-censorship and absolutism, he expresses every single thing that crosses his mind. Ghasemi challenges absolutism method of the classic novel’s hero by bringing such a self-destructive narrator.

### **Other minor elements of modernism that are evidently used in this novel as an instance include:**

#### **Immigration and Exile (Subject Matter)**

The issue of immigration in the modern era is the main subject matter of the novel. The residents of the building’s sixth floor are mostly Iranians who live in exile and deal with the related issues. Every day, characters of the novel choose a new name in order to get rid of their wistful sweet memories in homeland country but they are unable to make it. As Jung puts them “Forgotten memories never disappear... and after years of oblivion, they can often appear completely at any time” (Jung, 1999:40). It can be representative of identity crisis too.

#### **Identity Crisis**

As mentioned earlier, the number of characters with mental illnesses are evident throughout the novel. In this novel also each of the characters are involved in psychological disturbances and have psychological concerns in a way, and the multiplicity of the aliases of Iranian characters of the novel attest it clearly. They have gone away from the original self and have become stranger to it. They have destroyed their true essence and nature in order to create a false, fake self. A person who is his own narrator, with reference to the past and by creating mental uncertainty in audience, starts the beginning of his narrative by building their own identity. “Who knows? There are many bondmaids, as there is many pumpkins...” (Ghasemi: 7) and this uncertainty that reveals its own birth as illegitimate, is the beginning of its lack of identity by the narrator.

### **Feeling pessimism toward life (Nihilism)**

The sense of pessimism toward life (Nihilism), is a general subject in modernist novels. The novel of "Nocturnal Orchestra of Woods" like other modernist novels has turned to a kind of absurdity. Absurdity pictures human an isolated and distressed creature who bears burden of nightmarish life in a strange and meaningless world (Lodge; Watt; Dychz, 176: 2007). The narrator has a meaningless and boring life. He has no plans for the future and does all his efforts in order to forget the past and future and lives merely in the present.

### **Loneliness and Isolation**

Loneliness and isolation are the main components the modern novel and they are considered as one of the most significant and tangible concepts in this novel. The novel's narrator is the most obvious example of loneliness. He loves to sit alone in the room from morning until night and painting, provided that no one doesn't meddle in his affairs. Other characters of the novel are also being stiff and unsociable. Profet is constantly in his room and only comes out to relieve his bowels. Benedict cries out of loneliness to not feel alone. Ali turns to mysticism in order to tolerate loneliness and achieve relaxation after love break down. Therefore, the picture of a man that is presented in the novel is the picture of depressed, alone and pretty unsocial person who can't get rid of his own inner inconsistencies.

### **Religious fundamentalism**

Critical point of view toward religious fundamentalism is one of the components of modernism as well. Ghasemi discussed the other components and concepts of the novel by creating a character called Profet and also giving the role of fundamentalist person and a religious fanatic to this character. The entry of Profet into the building is equal to the loss of inhabitants' peace in the building. It can be concluded that Ghasemi considers the fundamentalism and religious fanaticism as a disruptive factor in the communities and the cause of many massacres throughout the history. For this very reason, he has brought this subject up as one of the main subjects of his novel in the name, behavior, speech and thoughts of someone called Profet.

### **Reincarnation**

Reincarnation has always been considered by fiction writers in modern times. The novel begins with Metamorphosis: "I was like a horse who had already felt the disaster... There are many bondmaids and pumpkins... Maybe one day a mother of my mothers..." (Ghasemi: 7) and it ends with Metamorphosis: "I'll back and will lay between the legs of the chair..." (Ghasemi: 207) It seems that Kafka's "Metamorphosis" and Hedayat's "Blind Owl" have affected Ghasemi in this regard.

## **CONCLUSION**

Ghasemi has used modernistic techniques in such a masterful way that they have taken place in the novel well and have not been imposed on it. Generally, it can be said that Ghasemi has localized the components of modernistic novels.

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