



## Fractured Realities: Unveiling Postmodern Dimensions in Guillaume Musso's French Thriller *Central Park* (2014)

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Abstract	Article info
<p><i>Postmodern literature had emerged as a response to its previous waves of philosophical thought, aiming to bring new and unorthodox perspectives to the literary sphere. In this light, it refuted the preconceived and conventional techniques of storytelling and dismantled traditional hierarchies. Postmodern tenets have found fertile ground in the thriller novel as a way to plant the seeds of fragmented, nonlinear, and unreliable narrative mechanisms in a literary genre fueled with themes of uncertainty and pandemonium. Central Park (2014), written by Guillaume Musso, is a contemporary French thriller novel disguised in a postmodernist cloak, tapping into postmodernist tendencies through its intricate narrative structure and exploration of memory.</i></p>	<p>Received 10 March 2024 Accepted 12 March 2024</p> <p><b>Keyword:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>✓ Postmodernism;</li><li>✓ Thriller Novel;</li><li>✓ Fragmentation;</li><li>✓ Nonlinearity;</li><li>✓ Unreliable Narration ;</li></ul>

### 1. Introduction

In the mid-twentieth century, a cultural and intellectual upheaval known as postmodernism emerged like wildfire, unfurling a wave of thought that challenged the established norms and structures of the preceding modernist era. This multifaceted movement, draped in the cloak of skepticism towards grand narratives and a denial of absolute truths, left an indelible mark on a myriad of disciplines, with literature standing as a salient arena of its expression.

Literature, in particular, emerged as an effective venue for the expression of postmodernist ideals, and it is within this realm that this academic endeavor is cast as it delves into an exploration of

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## *Fractured Realities: Unveiling Postmodern Dimensions in Guillaume Musso's French Thriller Central Park (2014)*

the complex interactions between postmodernism and literature, with a particular focus on its profound impact upon the thriller novel genre.

Within the labyrinth of postmodern literature, there is a clear departure from the linear narratives and cohesive structures that characterized the modernist era. Instead, it embraces a fragmented and kaleidoscopic narrative, an artistry that mirrors the intricacies and uncertainties of contemporary existence. This departure unfolds through distinctive features such as self reflexivity, fragmentation, unreliability and nonlinearity.

The amalgamation of postmodernism and the thriller novel genre, with its intrinsic tension, suspense, and penchant for plot twists, becomes a verdant ground for the cultivation of postmodern literary techniques. This union allows authors to subvert traditional expectations, heightening suspense through the orchestration of narrative ambiguity. Readers are challenged to navigate the intertwined web of fragmented storytelling, elevating the literary experience to an art form.

On the other hand, authors and notably Guillaume Musso deftly deploy Alzheimer's as a narrative device to embody postmodernist techniques in literature. This is particularly true in *Central Park* (2014) as through fragmented memories, unreliable perspectives, and nonlinear temporal shifts, he mirrors the disorienting effects of the condition. This thematic exploration not only challenges traditional storytelling norms but also invites readers into a poignant, immersive experience that echoes the broader postmodern ethos.

### **2. Postmodern Literature**

Postmodernism is a school of thinking in western philosophy that originated towards the close of the twentieth century. It revolted against all of the accepted and modern structures for evaluating and analyzing social concepts. Postmodernism, in a literal sense, denotes a period subsequent to the era of modernism in the realm of cultural and artistic discourse therefore it is inevitable to pinpoint Postmodernism without mentioning modernism as literature is the reaction or response to modern literature.

Postmodernism is at core a philosophical movement that essentially adopts a cynicism way of all of these literary authorities. It eventually subverts from other philosophical doctrines that assert an alleged supreme truth. According to Kuznar Postmodernists connect this relativism and skepticism about truth back to Sigmund Freud, Max Weber, and Nietzsche, and then to Jacques Derrida, Michel Foucault, and other current postmodernists (2008, p. 78).

John Barth, the American novelist refers to postmodern literature in his seminal essay and postmodern manifesto as 'the literature of exhaustion' in a sense that conventional forms of narratives and storytelling have been exploited to their limits; writers have exhausted the traditional narrative techniques leaving little room for originality. Barth believed that in the face of this exhaustion, literature sought to find new ways to engage reads and break free from previously established

boundaries. In this light, this led to postmodernism, a literary movement that championed experimentation and the exploration of new modes of expression (Barth, 1967).

Authors of postmodern literature disregard the "traditional" conventions of the novel by employing a range of stylistically inventive strategies. Through the subversion and fusion of several genres, styles, and structures, postmodern novels defy conventional narrative conventions and create literature that is difficult to easily classify. Postmodern literature frequently employs self-referential and deconstructive techniques, such as metafiction, unreliable narration, and genre merging, to create hyperawareness (Maier, 2020).

Sensu stricto, foundational postmodern principles encompass the dismissal of rigid plot construction, an ironic engagement with reality, the embrace of fragmented discourse, utilization of collage and montage techniques, genre hybridity, the cultivation of paradoxical elements, manipulation of the text, temporal play, and reader engagement. Interwoven within these principles are the use of intertextuality, citation, a diversity of styles, multilayered text organization, a commitment to multiple interpretations, and a reader-centric co-authorship principle. Consequently, adherence to traditional narrative conventions is frequently eschewed (Tatyana Fedosova, 2015, p. 79). The afore-discussed complex postmodern techniques have created a distinct fusion with the thriller novel, a literary genre that has garnered significant popularity in recent years.

### **3. *Thriller Novel***

The thriller within the literary and cinematic realm can be academically defined as a genre that strives to create suspense, exhilaration with intense setting and high level of tension. According to Cyprus (2000), the main requirements for a gripping thriller are a quick pacing, an intriguing storyline, and a tension-building sequence. Similar to the mystery genre, thrillers should constantly leave the reader wondering what will happen next (cited in Azmi, 2014, p. 60). In this light, in thriller genre, the reader is led on from bewilderment to bewilderment, till everything is explained in a lump in the last chapter.

Martin Rubin (1999) in his renowned essay "Thrillers" contemplates on a defining aspect of the thriller genre that it engages in a portrayal of a societal milieu in disarray, gripped by the contemporary chaos, meaningless life and a society lacking moral standards. These narratives are, characterized by a palpable imbalance and ambiguity engenders a profound sense of vulnerability that permeates the experiences of both the characters within the storyline and the audience engaging with the narrative.

This heightened susceptibility to potential threats is further underscored by the depiction of characters who find themselves estranged from their foundational roots, grappling with a pervasive sense of alienation as they endeavor to traverse hazardous circumstances with an inherent lack of familiarity and connection (cited in Maortua & Echart, 2015, p.112). In culmination, the thriller novel's emphasis on this absence of connection and coherence fulfills a specific purpose in bringing forth the embodiment of postmodern literary principles and *Central Park* (2014) is a vivid example of this postmodern manifestation.

#### **4. Central Park Plot Summary**

Central Park (2014) is a French thriller and the twelfth novel penned down by Guillaume Musso. The story hovers around the fearless and respected police officer Alice Schäfer, a thirty-eight woman from Paris who finds herself in New York City. After spending the night partying in Les Champs-Élysées with her friends in an unexpected turn of events she wakes up on a bench in Central Park, handcuffed to a total stranger, a jazz musician named Gabriel Keyne and has no memory of the previous evening as he was playing piano in a bar in Dublin (Ireland) the night before.

Alice, bewildered, disoriented, she discovers that the weapon she is carrying does not belong to her, that a bullet is missing and that her blouse is covered in blood from someone else, tries desperately to recollect the memories and piece the puzzle together. Consequently, they refrain from going to the police due to their suspicious situation. Alice and Gabriel, the two protagonists within the story team up with the help from a French detective Seymour to solve the mystery in a detective adventure where they will be acquainted with each other. Through this journey, Alice has to be confronted with her darkest memories from when she lost her partner and unborn child due to a case she took two years before and when she was investigating a serial killer called Erik Vaughn.

It is by the end of the novel that Alice is taken to a hospital and it is revealed that Gabriel is in fact a doctor specialized in neurology, he orchestrated an elaborate scheme and that the investigation for the case is in fact a plan to make her come to terms with her illness, he tells her that she is diagnosed to suffer from an early form of Alzheimer's, she has been on a sick leave for three months a fact he has been denying all along and that she must accept to be treated.

#### **5. Postmodern Dimensions in Central Park**

The analysis in the subsequent paper revolves around an exploration of the ever-present postmodern literary techniques including temporal and spatial fragmentation, as well as nonlinearity and unreliability of narration in Guillaume Musso's Central Park with a particular focus on its portrayal of Alzheimer's disease which sheds light on how the postmodern narrative intricacies interact with the portrayal of this condition contributing to a deeper understanding of the novel's thematic complexities.

##### **5.1. Fragmentation**

In a literal fashion, fragmentation refers to the act of fragmenting—fracturing or splitting into pieces. Modern tales are characterized by a clear, linear, and comprehensible storyline. Conversely, postmodern storylines disrupted the conventional order of events in a story. Fragmented narratives cause a story's sequencing to become disorganized, creating a challenge for the reader to make sense of the overall narrative.

Zhuanglin Hu explains that fragmentation is one of the fundamental tenets of postmodern literature along with Deconstructivism, Decentralization and Planarity (2018, p.1). On the light of this

account, Hu further maintains that the concept of fragmentation revolves around a philosophical shift away from unified and structured systems of thought (2018, p.2).

This idea entails that fragmentation encourages the impossibility, needlessness, or undesirable nature of making reference to any one cohesive, coherent, focused field, concept system, or narrative. It is in a broader sense a "liberation of discourse, experience, and self from imposed requirements of the unified centered idea system and culture or "regime of truth"" allowing for a more diverse and decentralized understanding of knowledge and reality (Hu, 2018, p. 2). In literature, this fragmentation may be presented in different forms, for example it can be manifested through jumps in time or temporal distortion, jumps in place, narrator, or characters; any literary mechanism that displays a sense of fracture within the narrative (Ni & Lian, 2012)

Fragmentation is threaded intricately within the novel, as this specific technique weaves its way in the narrative, the most prominent one is temporal distortion displayed through nonlinear narration and the delay and disruption of the narration in critical events; this particular idea will be further discussed within the following title. Nevertheless, Fragmentation is also manifested through the shift in characters perspectives; the story is unwrapped before the audience through multiple perspectives and intersecting lines, unraveling districts versions of events and revealing new pieces of the multi-layered narrative. In this respect fragmentation drowns the story in an ambiance of mystery and suspense that is pertinent to the genre by the same token, it serves to echo the disjointed and chaotic nature of the characters' internal struggles as several signs of her trauma are scattered throughout the novel.

The main female character in the novel is revealed to suffer from Alzheimer's Disease (AD) a form of dementia defined as "the most common cause of a decline in cognitive ability. It is a progressive neurodegenerative disorder that usually affects people ... with the involvement of language, memory, comprehension, attention, judgment and reasoning" (Kumar et al. 2022). This condition leads a person to become disoriented and confused by place and time, this entails a time shift in their memory. The same thing happens for Alice "Every morning when she wakes up, her memory resets. She doesn't know she has Alzheimer's and she thinks that she was partying on the Champs-Élysées just the night before" (Musso, 2021, p. 209).

Fragmentation includes breaking up all forms of a narrative structure and wholeness, this involves settings and place. The story in *Central Park* switches from place to another, one continent to another. In a sense, Musso explores the tapestry of emotion fragmentation in relation to the fragmentation of place; Alice in New York and as opposed to Paris, her home, she experiences a sense of disconnection, loneliness and longing, she feels like a stranger in an unfamiliar place and she is faced with the challenge of adapting to this new environment. Their inspective journey involves many places in New York, from Central Park to Chinatown, Riverside and Little Egypt displaying her attempt to navigate and locate herself within her surroundings.



A conventional postmodern perspective, an individual's identity is shaped by the cultural elements in their environment. A flexible concept that develops via contact with the environment, individual consciousness is a vague, de-centered collection of conscious and unconscious ideas, knowledge, and intuitions about oneself and the universe. In this respect, Fredric Jameson argues that the absence of a cohesive connection to the past or history is the cause of people's fractured identities in postmodern society. Today's postmodern cultures are unable to forge a unified identity since their sense of history has been lost (Cited in Mehrabi & Maleki, 2010, p.102).

This fragmentation of place is weaved with the theme of memory, and therefore identity as Alice's memory deteriorates her sense of self becomes fragmented as well her understanding of who is she and how she fits into the environment becomes a fragmented maze. Fragmentation in the novel is also manifested through the fragmented structure of narration.

## **5.2. Non-Linearity**

At its core, a narrative is a linear, structured and cohesive development of ideas that unfold in a sequential and orderly framework to convey meaning. In other words, a narrative is a "chain of events in cause-effect relationship occurring in time and space" (Bordwell & Thompson, 2004, p.69). Perry argues that The arrangement of a set of textual elements is rationalized by considering the text as conforming to an order known to the reader—an external order that the text either "obeys" or "imitates" (Perry, 1979).

However, in postmodern and contemporary fiction, there appears to be a deliberate departure from conventional linearity in narrative construction. The unfolding of events showcases an inclination towards innovation, wherein the chronological sequence does not adhere strictly to the order of their occurrence (Isaac 2005).

In this light, nonlinearity can be demonstrated in a work of fiction through Analepsis, or also known as a flashback, a technique that interrupts the chronological flow of a literary piece in order to depict events from an earlier time. This term is used to describe any fictional scene inserted to showcase events that took place in the past at a specific moment (Ameur-Said & Mouro, 2021, p. 746). In a certain respect, the past and present of the characters within the novel are juxtaposed (Paul & Alan, 2022).

On the basis of the aforementioned strands of thoughts, it can be affirmed that Guillaume Musso unfolds the story of *Central Park* (2014) in a non-linear structure, as the novel deviates from the straightforward conventional chronological timeline. Instead, two distinctive intertwining storylines intersect, each transpiring in different settings with the initial one commencing in the present day, accentuating the central narrative that hovers around the criminal investigation in which Alice and Gabriel work to unravel the mystery of their whereabouts and actions the day before in New York. However, this seamless progression is abruptly and intermittently disrupted by poignant flashbacks, adding depth and complexity to the unlayering tale. In these flashbacks the narratee is taken aback

with Alice's tragic past to her previous case that took place in Paris "Suddenly, the flood of memories sweeps her further back in time, like a river rushing to its source in the heart of pain " ( Musso, 2021, p. 107)

This overuse of flashbacks and the patent nonlinearity utilized in the novel mimics Alice's psychological condition as it had been firmly established her disease is characterized by a progressive cognitive decline and memory impairment. In this sense, she experiences disjointed memories and struggles with temporal orientation, as a result her consciousness ceaselessly jumps back and forth within time. In some instance she travels back to her past and in others she find herself in the present "she felt like that other Alice, the one who fell down the rabbit hole into a land where nothing made sense " (Musso, 2021, p. 93)

As her Cognitive deterioration increase, the story becomes increasingly disjointed, mysterious, and peculiar—making it harder for the reader to decipher. In this sense, Musso's narrative technique encourages a parallel experience of the character. As both the reader and the first-person narrator feel disoriented—the reader in trying to understand the narrator's perspective, and the narrator-character in relation to his (fictional) reality.

### **5.3. Unreliable Narration**

The concept of unreliable narration has been an inevitable topic of discussion in textual criticism and narratology after it was first coined by Wayne C Booth in his book *Rhetoric of Fiction*. Booth has called a narrator "*reliable* when he speaks for or acts in accordance with the norms of the work (which is to say the implied author's norms), *unreliable* when he does not" (1961, p. 158-59). On a further note Gerald Prince provides a more detailed definition in his work *Dictionary of Narratology*, where he values the unreliability of the narrator according to the author intentions; for him an unreliable narrator is:

a narrator whose norms and behavior are not in accordance with the implied author's norms; a narrator whose values (tastes, judgments, moral sense) diverge from those of the implied author's; a narrator the reliability of whose account is undermined by various features of that account (Prince, 1987, 101).

Various categories of unreliable narrators can be delineated based on the dichotomy between those who possess awareness regarding their deceptive narrative and those who lack such awareness: such as the liar to the naïve and ignorant but also the impaired one, or in a pejorative phrasing the madman, a narrator whose credibility is called into question due to the possibility that they suffer from a trauma experiencing a mental defense mechanism or psychological condition like schizophrenia or paranoia, which allow them to recount events based on their emotions (Raj, 2015, p.289).The use of impaired narrator highlights the constraints of human perception and cognitive abilities. This prompts readers to scrutinize the dependability and understanding of the narrative by considering the narrator's impaired condition (Phelan, 2007, p. 281).

*Fractured Realities: Unveiling Postmodern Dimensions in Guillaume Musso's French Thriller Central Park (2014)*

Narration in the novel is predominately diegetic as Alice is the main narrator and her narration transpires within the boundaries of the story's realm though alternating between first and third person perspective. Though, occasionally Musso employs authorial voice that steps outside of Alice's perspective to provide additional commentary and context insinuating the presence of occasional non-diegetic narration. On an additional note, the novel is divided by three parts, each part with different chapters in each part a chapter titled "I remember" dedicated to her past life in which the reader is confronted with Alice's perspective and her recollection of the past; five chapters called 'I remember' which creates a paradoxical effect a sense of irony and poignancy in the narrative and reflect her unawareness of her unreliability.

In a certain respect, Alice's unreliability is both conscious and unconscious; conscious in the sense that in several instances she is willingly deceptive towards the audience. During the investigation, Alice is described as a clever detective, this entails that as a narrator she is selective in what she chooses to share with others among them the audience, she is often found withholding salient information for the sake of her case and embellishing accounts of events in a evident manipulation of truth. She also is very secretive about her previous life. Nevertheless, the great share of her unreliability as a narrator is unconscious as it stems from her psychological condition.

Alice Shaffer suffers from Alzheimer's which leads to distortions and inaccuracies in recollection of events thus this strand of thought paints Alice an unreliable narrator, an impaired unreliable narrator, the things and the events she recollects have no proof of their existence, for example in an instance she experiences a flood of memories:

I remember everything. The name of my grandmother's perfume was Soir de Paris, and it smelled of bergamot and jasmine / Apollo 11 landed on the moon on July 20, 1969 / The name of Tom Sawyer's girlfriend was Becky Thatcher ... The pin code for my debit card is 9728 / The card number is 0573 5233 3754 61 / The security code is 793 / Stanley Kubrick's first film is not Killer's Kiss but Fear and Desire (Musso, 2021, p.200).

In the aforementioned passage of the novel, Alice starts recollecting past events in her life and includes factual truths. With this technique the author confutes the absoluteness of her description as the unreliable narrator. These factual and some historic details increase her credibility in certain respect however it does not guarantee that her entire discourse is reliable or that she can consistently provide an accurate account of events. Since Alzheimer's is characterized by an unpredictable nature of memory loss; she oftentimes is able to recall particular facts but these moments of clarity are fleeting and they are swiftly disrupted by confusion and distorted memories.

## **6. CONCLUSION**

Postmodernism is a literary movement that orbits around the belief that truths are contingent, shaped by diverse contexts and subjectivities, leading to a fragmented and subjective understanding of reality.



This rejection of grand narratives and the acceptance of fragmentation and unreliability are central to postmodern thought, reflecting a departure from the modernist emphasis on unified, coherent structures of knowledge and representation.

The nuanced interplay of fragmented narratives and unreliable perspectives characteristic of postmodernism adds layers of complexity to the thematic exploration in the context of thriller genre. The dynamic fusion of these features not only serves to engage readers on a cognitive level but also facilitates a more profound exploration of the intricacies associated with mysteries and the poignant portrayal of Alzheimer's. This symbiotic relationship between postmodern literary techniques and the thematic elements of thrillers underscores the versatility of such features in enhancing the narrative depth and experiential impact within this genre.

In conclusion, the meticulous examination of postmodern dimensions such as fragmentation, unreliability, and nonlinearity within the narrative architecture of thriller reveals a rich playground where literary innovation converges with profound thematic exploration. The deliberate fracturing of narrative structure, the subtle choreography of unreliable perspectives, and the deft manipulation of temporal sequences collectively re-define the very essence of storytelling, transcending the confines of traditional genres.

Within Guillaume Musso's *Central Park* (2014) These postmodern techniques, have been employed in the context of portrayal of an Alzheimer's patient, it emerge as more than mere stylistic choices as it manifests a powerful metaphor for the fragmented nature of memory and the subjective, elusive quality of personal narratives in the throes of cognitive decline.

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*Fractured Realities: Unveiling Postmodern Dimensions in Guillaume Musso's French Thriller Central Park (2014)*

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