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THE NOMADIC LIFE IN *SUNSET PARK* BY PAUL AUSTER

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Abstract

Being widespread among the literary works of the recent period, postmodernism has become the most frequently mentioned movement in the literature. Considered as one of the most important representatives of postmodernism in contemporary American Literature, Paul Auster deals with the postmodern people and sheds light on their inner journeys with such themes as coincidence, paternity, identity problem, and nomadism and successfully deals with the psychic world of the dynamic postmodern individual. Within this context, Paul Auster's latest novel *Sunset Park* can be regarded as a typical example of postmodern literature. The novel includes some characteristics of nomadism, which is associated with Paul Auster's own life whose parents are of Polish descent. In the novel, the author explores both the mental and physical activity of modern American society in terms of nomadism. Our claim is that the theme of nomadism at *Sunset Park* is not only about migrating from one place to another, but it is also an inner journey of ordinary characters. The novel depicts characters that in different ways and on varying levels struggle to find meaning in what they do, and who are forced to explore their identities during their quests. Therefore this study aims to discuss *Sunset Park* in the light of nomadism and is to focus on how the concept of nomadism is reflected in postmodern life from the point of view of an American-born writer Paul Auster.

Keywords: Contemporary American Literature, Postmodernism, Nomadism, Paul Auster, *Sunset Park*.

Introduction

The discourse of postmodernism has begun to become more and more widespread among the literary works of the recent period, and even today it has become the most frequently mentioned movement. Many of the writings are now representative of the postmodern movement. However, the definition of the term and how the term should be evaluated are among the most debated questions of the twenty-first century. Authors and philosophers prefer to define the term according to themselves as a requirement of postmodernism.

Postmodernism is used to highlight a new era after the modernist period. The prefix "Post" means "after" in Latin and indicates that a new process has begun. There are various ideas as to when the term was first used, but many philosophers and writers agree that after World War II, fundamental differences and developments were experienced in the world. The aim of modernism in the twentieth century was to present all kinds of technological and scientific progress to the service of mankind and thus to establish a world order in which everyone could live in prosperity and happiness. However, while all these dreams were

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being put forward, the fact that human being is a psychological, social and emotional being was left behind. Surprised by the scientific developments, the individuals could not go beyond the manpower needed to maintain these developments (Martin, 2008, 6). As a result of this disregard and being pushed to the background, all the balances of the individuals were turned upside down and dissociation and problems emerged in the psychological world of the individuals. While none of the dreams that modernism speaks of came true, individuals found themselves in the midst of a major social collapse. From this point of view Paul Auster works can be regarded in terms of Postmodernism.

One of the most important representatives of contemporary American literature, Paul Auster, in his novels, handles the postmodern people in the best way and sheds light on his inner journeys. Auster, who successfully blends fiction and reality, employs characters who are constantly on the move and in a quest (Atwood, 2003, 67). Auster deals with scattered families in all his novels. In fact, the disintegration of the family is a fact emerging with modernism. Families divided due to the expanding industry with modernism, especially men leaving their families behind and coming to big cities to work in factories. Although some of them migrated to big cities with their wife and children in order to protect their families, they had to break with each other in time. In this way, it can be said that the family institution succumbed to capitalism. In postmodernism, which emerged as a criticism against modernism, the concepts of society and family were examined in depth (Martin, 2008, 71).

Loneliness, paternity, chance and coincidence, the quest for identity are among the themes that Auster mainly deals with in his novels (Atwood, 2003, 59). As in the *Sunset Park*, a novel that combines love, pain, anger and many other human emotions, Auster's characters pursue great obsessions. In the hope that they can get something, they find themselves on a path where they completely ignore everything after a while. Then they think that the solution is not in them but in the mind of the other person and at this point they enter a new maze.

General Characteristics of Postmodernism

The views of some authors and philosophers on postmodernism are as follows:

According to Kumar it is not reasonable to perceive postmodernism as a self-emergent, independent, all-in-one concept. The roots of postmodernism go back to modernism. As Kumar emphasized, regardless of the meaning imposed on the term postmodernism, it has to refer to a certain idea of modernity. To understand and question the postmodern, he states that the meaning of modernism should be understood first (Kumar, 2005, 88).

Şaylan states that people who thought that they would have a better life together with modernism, confronted with major transformations such as two great world wars, the struggle of independence of the old colonies and the emergence of them as national societies and national states, genocides, nuclear weapons technology and the threat of extinction of human species in the universe for the first time, science and technology, developments in the field of capitalism and the ineffectiveness of capitalism (Şaylan, 1999, 12). The individual, who thought that he/she would experience an economic recovery, found himself in a life order in which the poor became more impoverished and the rich became even richer. People were confronted with the fact that all the labor they spent only benefits the rich. Since the second half of the twentieth century, postmodern discourse has taken its place against modernism, which aimed to bring meaning to life in the light of science, technology and industry.

Stuart Sim shared his views on the use of the term in the preface to the second edition of *The Icon Critical Dictionary of Postmodern Thought*. Sim states that in the 1870s the British painter John Watkins Chapman argued that art, which went beyond impressionism, the revolutionary new art style of the period, could be defined as "postmodern painting" (Sim, 1998, X).

According to Sarup, the term postmodernism emerged between artists and critics in New York in the 1960s, and was developed by European theorists in the 1970s (Sarup, 1993, 186). In his book *Postmodernizmin ABC'si*, Akay states that postmodernism is a movement that Charles Jencks put forward in 1977 as an artistic movement developing through architecture when he explains the time of the emergence of postmodernism (Akay, 2010, 21).

Various authors made their definition of postmodernism. The common consensus that postmodernism advocates agree is that the structure of modernism, which disregards the individual differences that people possess and envisages uniting them under a single pattern or an accepted line, no longer meets the needs of society (Martin 9).

There is no doubt that Jean François Lyotard is one of the most important names when it comes to postmodernism. Lyotard, in his first book, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, which considers



postmodernity as a general change in world conditions, argues that postmodernism does not believe in great narratives (Lyotard, 1984, 12). He shows the progress of science as the reason for not believing. Lyotard's argument briefly is that big narratives are bad, small narratives are good. Lyotard substitutes small/large narrative criteria for true/false distinction. Narratives are bad when they are philosophies of history. Large narratives integrate with a political program or party, while small narratives integrate with local creativity. In other words, while Lyotard introduced the term postmodern to the world, on the other hand, he determined his rules and drew his boundaries.

George Iggers defines the postmodernism from a social point of view. According to him as time passes, people's expectations for life increase and these expectations show differences. He also points out that postmodernism reflects a constantly changing and transforming society and culture, displaced by the old firm assumptions of industrial growth, rising economic expectations and traditional middle-class rules (Iggers, 2005, 14).

Terry Eagleton, in his *The Illusions of Postmodernism*, defines postmodernity as a question of thought that is doubtful of the notions of classical truth, reason, identity, and objectivity, the idea of universal progress or redemption, the individual frameworks, great narratives, or final grounds to which scientific explanation can refer. (Eagleton, 1996, 9).

Postmodernists draw attention to the importance of pluralism both in society and in thought. In other words, what is often referred to by postmodernity, which is very meaningful and controversial, is, above all, the acceptance of the indestructible plurality of the world (Bauman, 1991, 131). Postmodernists have included identity and cultural majority in their pluralistic ideas, and in this sense have also opposed concepts that bring together people, such as the class and nation, peculiar to modernity, which ignores the unique qualities of different social structures (Bauman, 1993, 62).

Postmodernists have opposed the absolute truth that encompasses all individuals, as well as integrative theories aimed at gathering society under the same roof. Another characteristic of postmodernism is that it opposes total narratives and laws, such as Marx's great narrative of liberation, Freud's psychoanalytic therapy, and Darwin's theory of evolution. (Aslan and Yılmaz, 2001, 93). In other words, nothing is central in a postmodern world. (Lucy, 1997, 15). Postmodernism opposes all aspects of the world, including political, social or economic. It rejects all such narratives because it has an answer to all kinds of problems and questions like the main characters of Paul Auster's novel *Sunset Park* opposing the system and order.

Postmodernism in Literature

It is inevitable that the trend of postmodernism, which finds its place in all spheres of life, strongly influences its effects in the literature. It can be said that the postmodern/poststructuralist understanding of literature is actually the literature that emerged after the Second World War. In a world where the concept of truth is displaced, writers participate in postmodern understanding with their works. No artist can completely isolate himself from the experiences of the society to which he belongs (Lucy, 1997, 29).

Every individual is highly affected, whether he is aware of the troubles, sadness and happy moments experienced by the people around him. It is quite possible to find traces of postmodern discourse in the works that emerged in postmodern time. In terms of content, the concepts of universal reality and universal values put forward by modernism are put aside. After the Second World War, trust in such concepts disappeared. For this reason, postmodern writers put aside the production of works for a better world, searching for the good and the truth and putting them in their works, instead they put their own understanding of reality to their works (Rosenau, 1993, 14).

The author is the one who creates his work because he has something to say to people. In other words, the essence of literary works is subjectivity. There are independent narratives in postmodernist works. Since the existence of a truth that encompasses everyone is no longer accepted, postmodernist writers turned their works into narratives that everyone could make different meanings and truths when they read. Narratives are not finished with a certain end and are left open (Barone, 1995, 76). In postmodern literature, the conclusions drawn by the people who read the same book are different because the work does not take the reader in one direction, leaving the reader in the middle of the narrative and leaving the reader to its own choice (Lucy, 1997, 31-32).

An important representative of postmodernism is Baudrillard, who describes himself as theorist and nihilist at the theoretical level. He indicates that he does not use any method, and states that non-method is a method, and that linguistics is the best method. According to Baudrillard, if modernity codes are the era of production determined by the industrial bourgeoisie, postmodernity is an age of knowledge and indicator



governed by cybernetics. Baudrillard states that there is no boundary between image, simulation and reality in the postmodern world (Baudrillard, 2014, 64).

Baudrillard also states that in the postmodern media the boundaries between information and entertainment, image and politics have disappeared. Baudrillard notes that the masses are silenced by being bored by the constant bombardment of messages. This destroys societies. With the collapse of societies, the differences between classes, ideologies, cultures and reality disappear. According to Baudrillard, the postmodern world lacks meaning (Baudrillard, 15).

For Derrida, however, postmodernism is a rebellion against modernism, which disciplined rather than liberated it. Derrida mainly focused on the relationship between thought and language of postmodern works and has made playful questions about the limits of this relationship in philosophy and literature (Derrida 83). Therefore, Derrida completely ignored metaphysical certainty. According to Derrida, the idea that there is a unity between word and action should be questioned, because reality lies not under the surface of thought, but under it. He stated that there is a connection between thought and language, and that language may be appropriate for reasoning. The term "différance" that he developed is used to describe the way the language works and the movements of deconstruction (Derrida, 1993, 18). Derrida's main theme is to go deep into the events that seem ordinary to us. There is always something hidden behind, as in the *Sunset Park* by Paul Auster. The main character takes photos of home appliances. From this sense, Paul Auster's novels contain many elements of postmodernism. He is also an important figure of Postmodernism.

Evaluating Paul Auster in terms of Postmodernism

According to Tanrıtanır, in postmodernism studies, Paul Auster is a prominent figure in the list of other contemporaries. The evaluation of postmodernism apart from Auster and independent of his works is a situation on which many of today's critics remain. Auster is a striking postmodern writer, with the events he fictionalized, coincidences, the fact that fiction and postmodern techniques are indistinguishable from each other and his characters, even with the name of his characters. Therefore, Auster is one of the pioneers of the postmodern novel. Tanrıtanır also states that Auster has become the most extraordinary name of postmodern works of not only the United States but also of world literature, with the fact that he has stories that start quite normal and are completed with very unusual endings, because he sometimes makes the reader think even for very small details, writing very short sentences and directing them to dozens of books and encyclopedic research. He argues that Auster is one of the most suitable materials for a postmodern analysis with his numerous uses of postmodern techniques specific to its own unusual style, such as fiction, intertextuality, pastiche and more. Auster, who references his own life in his books and shapes all his characters through himself and the names around him, succeeded in combining his real life with fiction with a very thin line (Tanrıtanır, 2019, 39-40).

As for reading and understanding Auster works, Tanrıtanır discusses that it requires a great effort, because he uses the phenomenon of uncertainty as a postmodern technique, and he finishes his books with open-ended ends. He puts one of the characters of his unfinished book back on stage in another story of another book, but he keeps the uncertainty to the end. With a postmodern technique called a mirror in a mirror, he writes games, makes films and tells stories in books. But ultimately, the uncertainty left in the minds occurs both with plot, with reality and fiction, and with characters (Tanrıtanır, 2019, 43).

Paul Auster stepped into the world of literature with the famous *New York Trilogy* and contributed to his success with every new book he wrote. Auster has always been the center of attention for readers and academic circles around the world. Many books, articles and dissertations have been written about him. His latest novel, *Sunset Park*, was published in 2011 and has received much acclaim all over the world. However, the fact that there are not enough academic studies on the book because of its being a new work shows the importance of this study.

All the characters in the novel are the ones who are subjected to a coup and try to hold onto life with a wounded soul and past. The main character of the novel is a young man named Miles. A good student in childhood, a talented athlete, smart, sane and apparently a happy child, Miles has set his mind on being a Hollywood star. His actor and actress parents divorced when he was younger; Miles grows up with her stepmother and her son. His stepmother is a teacher at the university and his father owns a famous publishing house. They live in a wealthy neighborhood in New York, children are studying in good schools and literature is spoken at dinner. The only problem is that the two step-brothers, who are only a few years apart, fight. But this intellectual family suffers a great tragedy. Miles' stepbrother dies in an accident. All the balances in the house change with this accident. Miles blames himself for the accident, therefore hangs out with the wrong friends, and then starts drinking. At the end, he leaves the house. This abandonment became



a voluntary migration that lasted seven years. Miles has been doing odd jobs for years away from home. Meanwhile, while reading a book called *The Great Gatsby* in the park, he meets a girl who reads the same book and falls in love with each other. This young man, who had no ambition about his future, had a privileged old life and left the university, now considered it his duty to be ambitious for her future. Brought together by Miles Heller, it is a work that explores the hopes and fears of unforgettable characters. A mysterious young man works as a garbage worker in southern Florida and obsessively photographs thousands of abandoned belongings left by evacuated families.

Nomadism in Paul Auster Work "Sunset Park"

In examining Auster's novel, *Sunset Park*, we aimed to emphasize the theme of nomadism instead of the coincidence or identity themes that underlie his previous works, because it can be said that nomadism is a common feature in the lives of Paul Auster's dynamic characters. The nomadic characters travel from place to place in a continuous movement without having a home to return to. However, these trips are not limited to physical activity; the characters in the novel also embark on a journey into their inner world. After this journey, postmodern individuals discover new features and situations in their inner world.

The concept of migration has now become a part of the life of the postmodern individual. In the most general sense, migration can be defined as moving of individuals or communities from one country to another, from one settlement to another for economic, social and political reasons. Migration can be understood as a transfer from one place to another, from one social or political unit to another. When people migrate, they change their places and make them their own places (Faist, 2000, 189).

The reasons that nomadism finds a place in the postmodern way of thinking are that postmodernism gives wide freedoms to the individual, accepts it as it is and does not aim to put the individual into certain patterns. In the modern conception of the state, the idea that everything should be in order is dominant, because it is easier to direct the fixed individuals to any thought and to keep them under pressure. Therefore nomadism is opposed to the formation of modern state. It is the spread that emerges with nomadism that disrupts, interrogates and evaluates the surrounding themes of modernity, namely nation and literature, language and sense of identity, centralized understanding, psychic and cultural homogeneous texture. In other words, our perspective towards the center and being has changed. Postmodern nomadism emerges from this changing perspective (Flusser, 2003, 42).

When evaluating *Sunset Park* novel in terms of the theme nomadism, it is worthwhile to mention about Deleuze and Guattari's points on migration. Deleuze and Guattari treats the phenomenon of migration from a philosophical point of view, and argue that a new form of postmodern existence can exist, in which individuals overwhelm repressive forms of modern identity and congestion to become desirable nomads as a result of continuous formation and transformation. Living somewhere else, with the idea of starting a new life there, one always finds himself in a world where different identities are replaced and confused, but not destroyed. Being a foreigner in a foreign place, in a country, getting lost among other foreigners and becoming a homeless person is now a common situation specific to contemporary life. This situation sometimes involves the challenges (Deleuze and Guattari, 2003, 14). As in the *Sunset Park*, Miles, the main character in the novel, who blames himself for his brother's death and leaves the house and migrates to another city to begin to a new life by escaping from his real reality.

The *Sunset Park* tells the story of a young man fleeing his own past and even his future. Miles leaves his family, his school and his home to escape his remorse, to punish himself and to ease his pain. This migration is both an escape from his reality and an identity search for Miles. In this process, Miles struggled to exist by struggling with many difficulties.

Nomadic life is an experience of creativity and being and has a character against tradition. The postmodern nomad attempts to liberate himself from all roots, borders and identities, and thus resists the state and all other institutions. In the novel Auster describes Bing Nathan who has also a nomadic life like Miller, as the fighter of anger, the champion of discontent, a militant shedding the dirty laundry of the modern world. He is the one who dreams of building a new reality from the ruins of the defeated world. Unlike most opponents of the established order like him, he does not believe in political action, he is not a member of any movement or party, he has never spoken in front of the community and has no desire to rage the angry masses on the streets to demolish buildings and to overthrow the power. His is a completely personal positioning and is confident that others can follow and imitate himself if he can continue his life according to his own principles. (Auster, 2011, 71). From these statements, it can be argued that Bing is a nomad and rejects great narratives while remaining true to the spirit of postmodernism. Introduced as an opponent of the established order, Bing, together with Miles, is the greatest representative of nomadic



identities in the novel. While underlining that subjects are not happy in the world we live in, after all this pessimistic picture, the idea of nomadism is presented as a salvation and a chance to establish a small world in which man thinks he can be happy. Moreover, after mentioning nomadic thought, it is pointed out that the two concepts are in conflict with each other by mentioning power. Bing's resistance to his traditional anti-nomadic attitude, which closes, restrains, and tries to keep it under control with his non-violent stance and outlook on life, is presented as the point that distinguishes him from other nomads, including violence. Bing sees America as a collapsing country that no longer works. At the heart of Bing's life lies the desire to fight the insisted order (Auster, 2011, 120).

On the first page of *Sunset Park*, when Miles, the protagonist, describes his work, he describes the people who left their homes and their belongings behind. The reason these people migrate from their homes is mainly due to their debts to banks. The lucky ones can settle in smaller and worse than the homes they abandoned, while others are left homeless on the streets. As stated in the book each house is the story of a burnout, bankruptcy and failure to fulfill its commitment to payment, borrowing and loss of mortgage. (Auster, 2011, 11). Miles' job is to clean these empty houses and prepare them for their new owners.

Miles is the first person to talk about the migration spirit of *Sunset Park*. Every migration has an abandonment and people left behind. As a matter of fact, there is sadness for both sides. While people leave different places and emigrate to a new region, even though this region is a new place for them, it is actually a place that many people have left beforehand. As Deleuze points out, the places where nomads are located are places that oppose the law and the city, such as the back of a country, the slope of a mountain, or an unspecified open space around a city (Deleuze and Guattari, 2003, 81). *Sunset Park* is also described as a place that is far from the city, abandoned and uncommon. In the novel Miles describes his views on *Sunset park* as a non-living place, a sad void from poverty and immigration; This is a small world where there are no banks, no bookstores, and a public library that has become almost useless with check-exchange offices, a small world outside the world where most of the time doesn't even need to look watches. (Auster, 2011, 123).

Miles' other colleagues claim ownership of the remaining belongings, even though they do not have rights, but Miles takes pictures of them. He believes that he is doing his last duty to the goods left behind. As stated in the novel his friends make fun of his obsession with taking photographs (Auster, 2011, 13). Miles is different from his co-workers in many senses and has a personality that cares about jobs that his friends find unnecessary, such as taking photos. Despite the mere materialistic world views of his co-workers, Miles embraces spiritual works that seem empty and meaningless in his life.

Miles knows he won't be in Florida for long. He is a person who is constantly in motion and can be described as improper homeless. He has lived in different states since leaving his home. Acting on his desires, Miles only waits for the time when his desire will tell him to go. Miles describes this feature in the book as follows: He knows that he will not stay in Florida any longer, that he will soon want to go elsewhere; but he is content with living today without looking forward until that desire forces him to act. Finally his desire force him to migrate to New York city (Auster, 2011, 14).

Another character living in the house is Alice Bergstrom. Alice is a Ph.D. student and, at the invitation of Bing's friend Ellen, agreed to live at *Sunset Park* because of her economic difficulties. As stated in the novel she is desperate, unhappy and thought that she has no other choice (Auster, 2011, 86). Alice is a character who makes the best observations at home, analyzes her roommates, but often prefers to be silent. Alice, who takes a neutral stance against everyone, is only willing to finish her PhD. Alice also has problems with her boyfriend, Jake, and feels that she is increasingly moving away from him. He cannot rely on Jake's mocking criticism of a school where the children of working class immigrant families are the majority, because she thinks that children are struggling with both immigration and the difficulties of studying. While Jake's view shows a general attitude towards immigrant children who are not valued and despised in society, Alice, who has stepped into nomadic life, now supports these children because she feels that she is one of them.

Conclusion

As can be seen that there are different ideas about the emergence of postmodernism, but today especially the post-World War period is often referred to as the postmodernist period and the works created are accepted as the product of postmodernist literature. Postmodernism is now a trend that has permeated every aspect of life, from economy to art, from knowledge to politics. The point of view, which sees the individual as only a part of society, has changed; instead, the concepts of subjectivity and pluralism, which are characteristic of postmodernism, have taken their place in life by giving it the value and importance it deserves.



Our study aimed to show how nomadism, one of an important theme in Paul Auster's *Sunset Park* is reflected in the novel. It is always difficult to analyze postmodern narratives, because such writings are not narratives created by strict adherence to strict rules, but rather in the spirit of postmodernism the author often dealt with abstract subjects in his own style. For this reason, it is natural to encounter these difficulties sometimes when studying *Sunset Park* by Paul Auster.

In almost all of Auster's novels, the lives of the characters are filled with successive migration. Characters adopt a lifestyle that begins to move dynamically and then migrates from one place to another. The nomadic movement is the most radical decision taken by the characters in their lives, because migration shapes the rest of their lives. Miles migrates to New York with Bing's invitation. Miles confessed to himself why he had to flee when he sometimes questioned why he went on this migration. Even though temporarily, *Sunset Park* is an escape place for him and a place to continue his freedom. Therefore, the theme of nomadism at *Sunset Park* is not only about migrating from one place to another, but also an inner journey. In Paul Auster's works there are characters who go on a journey and experience the effect of this in depth in their lives. In *Sunset Park*, the main characters Miles and Bing, Alice, Ellen are the characters that Gilles Deleuze describes as schizophrenic. What Gilles Deleuze wants to express with schizophrenic identities, as it comes to mind first, is not people with a psycho-problem problem. On the contrary, the term schizophrenia is used to refer to identities created by social conditions, authority, and even capitalism, which correspond to the world system that involves the individual in the hunter.

The characters in *Sunset Park* are also in the nomadic movement mentioned above. They are the people who pursue their desires and strive to continue their lives in this way. Although their expectations from life, education levels and professions are different from each other, these characters met on the common ground of nomadism. Moving into the abandoned house in *Sunset Park* has become a physical indicator of their opposition to the state apparatus, their nomadic movements, their schizophrenic identities and their rhizome. Miles is a man who travels from one state to another in the United States, making every effort to fulfill his desires. Bing is the most opposed to the state in the novel. He avoids the purchase of state-of-the-art products and by repairing defective devices he shows resistance against capitalism. Also, the idea of moving home first comes from Bing. When it comes to the court's decision to leave the house, this implies the war machine created by the nomadic movement against the state apparatus. When these and similar examples are brought together, it can be said that the nomads in the house first moved to the house as a passive demonstration of resistance against authority, but as time went on, this situation reached to physical intervention. Therefore, how nomads are present in today's society and what kind of struggles they engage in are illustrated in Paul Auster's *Sunset Park* quite successfully.

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