

in the name of god

**HOPE AND DESPAIR
IN THE SELECTED NOVELS OF PAUL AUSTER**

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To
Almighty Allah

Contents

Acknowledgement	9
CHAPTER ONE: THE CONTOURS OF ABSURDIST FICTION IN AMERICAN LITERATURE(1987- TO THE PRESENT).....	11
Introduction	11
Absurdist Fiction	18
Common Elements in Absurdist Fiction	23
Absurdist Fiction in Postmodern American Literature from	25
1980s to the Present.....	25
Optimism.....	31
Postmodernism	34
Postmodern Despair	42
Paul Auster: Life and Works.....	45
Plan of the Study	55
Methodology	59
Primary Sources	60
Conclusion.....	61
WORKS CITED.....	63
CHAPTER TWO : REVIEW OF LITERATURE WORKS CITED	71
CHAPTER THREE : A SENSE OF PLACE IN PAUL AUSTER’S THE NEW YORK TRILOGY (1987), IN THE COUNTRY OF LAST THINGS (1987) AND THE MUSIC OF CHANCE (1990)	91
Introduction	91
Sense of Place in Postmodern World.....	93
The New York Trilogy.....	108
City of Glass.....	109
Ghosts.....	118
The Locked Room.....	126
In The Country of Last Things.....	135
The Music of Chance	145
Conclusion.....	151
WORKS CITED	154
CHAPTER FOUR : EXISTENTIAL ANGST IN PAUL AUSTER’S LEVIATHAN (1992), THE BOOK OF ILLUSIONS (2002) AND ORACLE NIGHT (2003)	161
Introduction	161
Existentialism.....	164

Kierkegaard’s View of Existence.....	169
Friedrich William Nietzsche’s View of Existence.....	173
Martin Heidegger’s View of Existence.....	177
Jean Paul Sartre’s view of Existence	181
Albert Camus’s View of Existence	185
Postmodernism and Existential Angst	189
Paul Auster’s View of Existence.....	196
Leviathan.....	203
The Book of Illusions.....	210
Oracle Night	219
Conclusion.....	227

WORKS CITED231

CHAPTER FIVE : CULTURAL STUDY OF PAUL AUSTER’S THE BROOKLYN FOLLIES (2005), MAN IN THE DARK (2008) AND SUNSET PARK (2010).....239

Introduction	239
Culture.....	240
Definition and Meaning of the Term Culture	241
Culture and Literature	243
Cultural Studies	244
Cultural Studies and Humanities.....	249
Theoretical Base of the Study	250
Marxism and Culture.....	251
Frankfurt School.....	253
Culture Industry.....	255
Birmingham Center for Contemporary Cultural Studies	256
Richard Hoggart.....	259
Raymond Williams.....	260
E. P. Thompson	261
Stuart Hall	263
Other Cultural Theorists.....	266
Michel Foucault.....	266
Edward Said	270
Homi K. Bhabha.....	275
Stephen Greenblatt	280
Popular Culture	285
Film	286

Music	286
Television	287
Globalization	288
The Brooklyn Follies.....	295
Multiculturalism.....	301
Man in the Dark.....	311
Sunset Park.....	325
Conclusion.....	336
WORKS CITED	341
CHAPTER SIX : CONCLUSION	353
BIBLIOGRAPHY	375

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Robab Adamzadeh

CHAPTER ONE

THE CONTOURS OF ABSURDIST FICTION IN AMERICAN LITERATURE (1987- TO THE PRESENT)

Introduction

The title of this book, “Hope and Despair in the Selected Novels of Paul Auster” puts strong emphasis on three terms that are of immense significance. These key terms are:

- a. Hope
- b. Postmodernism
- c. Despair

The aim and the scope of the present study is determined and delimited by two areas:

- a. Cultural Studies
- b. Postmodernism

It proposes to investigate the way through which Paul Auster captures and highlights the American culture and milieu in his novels. A writer with a postmodern inclination, Auster’s worldview is tragically absurd and shows his despair at the futility of contemporary existence. However, for him, fortitude and hope matter even in the worst situations. He urges the readers to embrace life with full confidence and ponder over the numerous possibilities open to them. In an interview with Mark Irwin, Auster states, “I think, my works have come out of a position of personal despair about the world, the isolation of one person from another and yet, at the same time, I have wanted to express the beauty and extraordinary happiness of feeling yourself alive” (Conversation with Paul Auster 46). In accordance with this, in *The Invention of Solitude*, the imaginary character A, contemplates his place in the world and celebrates the core of his existence. The narrator states:

He is flooded with a happiness so intense, a happiness so naturally and harmoniously at one with the world, that he can feel himself alive in the present, a present that surrounds him and permeates him, that breaks through him with the sudden, overwhelming knowledge that he is alive. And the

happiness that he discovers in himself at that moment is extraordinary. And whether or not it is extraordinary, he finds this happiness extraordinary. (Auster 121)

Paul Auster often talks about the struggle for self-reinvention within the contemporary American life to cope with the dilemma of existence. His protagonists are the individuals who try to wrestle with the problematics of existence to establish the credential of existential self in the postmodern society. The minds of individuals are engaged with the questions of 'who I am?', 'Why I am in this world?', 'Where are we going?' and 'What I have to do with my life?' In short, these questions are related to the enigma of human existence.

Since the end of World War II, Nietzsche's announcement of 'death of the God', established the belief that no divine power would bring peace and justice to the absurd world and man has lost the meaning of life. In such lack of meaning, individual feels alienated from society and himself. M. H. Abrams stated, "After 1940s, there was a widespread tendency to view human beings as isolated existences, cast in alien universe that offers no inherent truth, value or meaning to human existence" (Glossary 1). However, Western societies tried to create new values and meanings through advancement of technology and commercialization, which could be replaced by God and his organization. However, they failed because with the death of God and modernization, man lost his religious and cultural roots that led to his alienation against 'The New World'.

As such, the postwar American writers like Kurt Vonnegut, Don DeLillo and Paul Auster address such fictive nature of reality and realize that such progression becomes a weapon of destruction and not an instrument of empowerment to the extent that alienation and dissolution promote within such disturbing circumstances. In *American Literary Criticism Since 1930s*, Leitch declares:

Despite the apparent mobility, comfort, and wealth of American life, many intellectuals saw in contemporary mass society as well as postwar technological science much decadence and danger, much alienation and absurdity, much repression and sickness. Mass man was puny, weak, dependent, repressed, controlled, and absurd. The subduers of man were corporate capitalism, big government, mass advertising, rampant technology, rigid social conventions, coopted science, and total administration- all of which tamed forms of opposition and fostered docile conformity. (129)

Indeed, Western societies' new value becomes an 'aporia', an issue that is getting worse day by day in such a way that they confronted a value crisis and an individual cannot get rid of meaningless and absurd life. However, in the absence of God and death of all absolute values and meanings, the individuals get encountered with numerous possibilities and they should try to create their own values and reconstruct themselves. In this regard, Nietzsche demonstrated, "being a self isn't something you are, it's something you do" (qtd. in Panza and Gale 251). After World War II, a new philosophical school 'Existentialism' developed in European and particularly in continental tradition. Many American writers were influenced by the works of these existentialist writers like Friedrich Nietzsche, Jean Paul Sartre and Albert Camus, the absurdist writer, who refused to be placed in Existential canon

but much of his works addressed the same view and he is categorized as an existentialist. Paul Tillich claimed:

It is common knowledge in this country that existentialism in the Western intellectual world starts with Pascal in the 17th century, has an underground history in the 18th century, a revolutionary history in the 19th century and an astonishing victory in the 20th century. Existentialism has become the style of our period in all realms of life. Even the analytic philosophers pay tribute to it by withdrawing into formal problems and leaving the field of material problems to the existentialists in art and literature. (qtd. in Cogswell 15)

Existentialist philosophers' insist on alienation, absurdity of existence, refusal of absolute value, the absence of God, human subjectivity, responsibility and freedom. They believe that, although there is no absolute meaning/value in the world, each individual must try to give meaning to his or her own subjective reality. So, human's life is determined by the choices that they make and the results that follow. Consequently, Existentialism is an optimistic philosophy that "makes an authentically human life possible in a meaningless and absurd world" (Panza and Gale 28), through choice, free will and responsibility. Thus, with the absence of God and absolute values, existentialism provides a path to finding meaning and purpose in life. Postmodernism concentrates on the subjective experience of individuals and calls into question the possibility of any absolute truth, leading to the refusal of 'grand narratives' and acceptance of pluralism instead of absolute one. In his essay, "Postmodernism and Philosophy", Stuart Sim discusses the way postmodern

philosophers encourage diversity and the level of uncertainty. He states, "Anti-foundationalists dispute the validity of the foundations of discourse, asking such questions as 'What guarantees the truth of your foundation (that is, starting point) in its turn?'" (3).

While, modernism celebrates the unity and coherence of life, postmodernism advocates the alienation, fragmentation and absurdity of life. Postmodern and existential thought reveal not only the absurdity and meaninglessness of contemporary life, but also the unpredictable nature of events that shape an individual's life and still emphasize the futility of existence itself.

As the postmodern American writer, Auster amalgams absurdism, existentialism, crime fiction and the search for identity in an absurd world and has received much praise for his varied and innovative narrative techniques to address existential issues. He depicts human being's alienation in an absurd universe devoid of meaning and value. By adhering to rules of existentialists, his characters undertake an odyssey of self-reinvention and try to grapple with the problematics of existence. Bakhtin stressed, "the novel is a flexible genre, a genre with the unique ability to constantly adapt and change" ("Epic and Novel"). The New York Trilogy, which consists of three short novels, namely, *City of Glass*, *Ghosts* and *The Locked Room*, Auster employs the classical detective form to address not only existential problem and identity in question but also creates his own specifically postmodern form in the process. By subverting the pattern of traditional detective story, Auster makes significant contribution to the innovation and renewal of this genre in Anglo-American literature. Auster's *The New York Trilogy* established him as the popular author who could deliver exciting plots with a dash of existentialism and literary theory. The novel explores some important themes of Auster's works like the role of chance and coincidence, the

detective's lonely investigation of the crime, dislocation, search for identity, the inadequacy of language, the loss of cognitive certainty and the absence of final ending. This triad anti-detective novel depicts detectives' solitary and futile attempts to find culprits and to uncover crime mysteries. However, unlike classical detective fictions in which the detective can successfully solve any crime mystery through logic and reason, this anti-detective novel shows the futility of these methods in deciphering mystery where chance and contingency replace them. As a result, one can hardly identify a definite ending and the readers' feelings are left with a vague unease

because while classical detective novel emphasizes on the search for the absolute truth, the anti-detective novel indicates that one can never find it. The more the readers get immersed in the novel, the more complicated the plot appears. Auster points out, "the mechanics of reality are far stranger than we think, because unexpected things are happening all the time and we ought to embrace that and try to understand the world as an unstable, unpredictable place, not instant that it's an exception every time we see it happen. This is how things work"(Auster Interview) In reality, Auster believes that the only certainty of life is chance and the individual must take the opportunity that has been presented as a means of personal salvation. This argument is supported by Marco Stanly Fogg, the protagonist of *Moon Palace*, who shares the opinion that, "our lives are determined by manifold contingencies and every day we struggle against these shocks and accidents in order to keep our balance" (Auster 80). However, some of Auster's characters surrender to a belief that every single event happens for a reason and cannot accept the unexpected and unpredictable nature of the world. Such a view is depicted by Daniel Quinn, the protagonist of *City of Glass*, a writer of detective fiction, an isolated and dislocated person from social society. The narrator describes, "he no longer exists for anyone but himself and no longer has any friends" (Auster 5). This person by chance takes the role of a private detective and immerses himself in the case of Peter Stillman Sr. He believes that by applying the principle of cause and effect evident within classical detective novels, he can unravel the identity of a culprit and discover the truth about his motivation. But he fails and realizes the futility of his work. As the narrator states, "Quinn was nowhere now. He had nothing, he knew nothing, he knew that he knew nothing. Not only had he been sent back to the beginning, he was now before the beginning and so far before the beginning that it was worse than any end he could imagine" (Auster 6).

In the absence of meaningful connection with physical and social world, Quinn loses touch with reality and does not believe the arbitrariness and the meaninglessness of the case that is shaped by the logic of the forces of contingency. Hence, he searches for possibility of a profound meaning hidden within the case. Auster's novel remains open-ended without any definite closure and it becomes clear that his detectives "do not discover very much, except how little they know about themselves" (Auster 176). However, Auster maintains that although the connection within an inexplicable world remains impossible, it is through self-awareness and

acceptance of contingency that the individual can find a sense of selfhood and his place in the world. In *The Locked Room*, the protagonist of the novel reflects Auster's belief that contingent events are constant dominance in human existence; and they can determine an individual's subsequent life choices. He explains that, "In the end, each life is

no more than the sum of contingent facts, a chronicle of chance intersections, of flukes, of random events that divulge nothing but their own lack of purpose” (Auster 213). Through a renewed level of self-discovery, the protagonist regains his own identity and understands the mystery relates to the case of an individual who intentionally disappears and breaks all emotional attachments.

In fact, Paul Auster uses the novel form as the vehicle for not only individual expression on life, existence and survival, but also to consider his state of being in the universe. In fact, he uses this genre as the medium for explaining his own existence in the world and his characters become extensions of his own consciousness. Auster states, “If all these books were put together in one volume, they would form the book of my life so far, a multi-faceted picture of who I am” (Collected Prose 296). As a result, many of Auster’s autobiographical elements resound through his fiction and his characters share the experiences and cause blurring elements of fact and fiction within his narratives. The result is to bring into question the concept of conventional truth, which reinforces ambiguity and ontological skepticism.

Auster was influenced by existentialist writers as well as European modernist ones such as Samuel Beckett, Franz Kafka and American romantic writers the prominent figures of which are Nathaniel Hawthorn, Melville, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry David Thoreau and Allen Poe for whom the realization of self was the crux of thought. By referencing to these romantic writers, Auster reflects this concern and emphasizes on reframing the existential self within contemporary society. In *The World That Is the Book*, Aliko Varvogli states that, “Paul Auster’s fictions as well as their recurring themes are influenced by the ‘literary fathers’” (52). For instance, in Auster’s *Leviathan*, Sachs, the protagonist, takes his inspiration from Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau who express their concern about abuses of institutional power. They believe that American government has suppressed individuality and instead emphasizes values related with materialism and commercialism. However, they emphasize that individuals must encounter this negative and flawed system, which leads into social reform.

Sachs supports Emerson and Thoreau’s concerns regarding the need for activity, as he believes that institutional power has become the oppressive force. Sachs tries to instigate change as his friend describes:

Thoreau was his model, and without the example of *Civil Disobedience*, I doubt that Sachs would have turned out as he did. Once, when *Walden* came up in conversation, Sachs confessed to me that he wore a beard because Henry David had worn one which gave me a sudden insight into how deep his admiration was (Auster 26).

Actually, as a postmodern writer, Auster believes that a single and knowable reality is not available and the best method is to construct reality collectively through storytelling. So, by referencing to these literary antecedents, Auster builds communal truths that are based on our experiences as social being. In *True Tales of American Life*, he expresses, “people would be exploring their own lives and experiences, but at the same time they would be part of a collective effort, something bigger than just themselves. With their help, I was hoping