

HOPE IN THE MIDST OF CHAOS PANDEMIC: REFERENCE TO THE SELECTED NOVELS OF PAUL AUSTER.

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Abstract

In the vast context of world literature, diseases and disasters often stand for mental state of characters that have lost their hope for a better future. In his apocalyptic novels, Paul Auster tries to show how humans can create hopeful relationships and have a stress reduction during pandemic. This study aims at conducting cultural analysis of Pula Auster's dystopian novels. The researchers' methodology is going to be descriptive-analytic with its main focus on cultural aspects. This study is important as it helps the readers to shape a suitable lifestyle within the postmodern world. To conclude, Auster implies that those who value their potentialities can be hopemakers for themselves and others even in the midst of pandemic.

Keywords: Hope, Despair, Pandemic, Culture, Society

1.Introduction:

Paul Auster's novels may be interpreted as the critique of social and cultural norms in the contemporary chaotic age. It reveals the shortcomings of technology and insufficiency of human skills as they get related to the basic needs. The selected novels depict the blight of inequality as the main obstacle to reach humanitarian goals. In Auster's literary works of art we are obviously able to understand the feminist themes, especially, by analyzing the characters and their roles in the story. Auster illustrates humans' civilization as the complicated networks developed over centuries while incapable to face disaster strikes. The selected American writer combines myth, history, and fiction. By showing the sudden changes in the setting of his novels, Auster gets his readers familiar with the remote past and revives their memories of the plague-ridden cities they know through myths and legends.

The American prominent novelist utilizes the element of satire to displays a relatively pessimistic view of human nature although there are some points of optimism. In contrast with didactic works, the selected novels pose complicated questions for which there

are no specific answers. These apocalyptic novels narrate the events in the societies struck by filth and disease pandemic. In the next part, we will discuss different aspects of these prominent literary works of art.

2. Discussion:

In Understanding Paul Auster (2016), James Peacock makes the readers aware of the prominent figures and schools of thought that influenced Paul Auster's writing. He demonstrates:

Major influences include Samuel Beckett, Franz Kafka, the Bible, philosophers such as Gottfried Wilhelm von Leibniz, Jewish writers such as Edmond Jabes, and Freudian psychoanalysis. In later works Auster openly references his nineteenth-century American antecedents, particularly Nathaniel Hawthorne, Edgar Allen Poe, and Henry David Thoreau. This combination of European and American influences gives Auster's work its unique flavor, at once inward-looking, speculating on the big mysteries of the personal existence, and expansive, engaging with America's foundational myths.

The Locked Room is the last exciting detective story of The New York Trilogy. In this story the nameless narrator receives notice that his friend, Fanshawe, has been missed. Fanshawe's wife, Sophie, appoints a detective named Quinn to find her husband but in vain. The narrator falls in love with Sophie and adopts her son. He is obsessed with the horrific possibility of Fanshawe being still alive lest he loses his own position.

Paul Auster's The Locked Room represents and symbolizes the urban life in the postmodern world. New York is all-present and never-sleeping place in this story. Auster's 'sense of place' is reinforced with his descriptions of every nook and corner of New York City. It is personified and unrolled before the spectators. The narrator describes:

The streets were gloomy in the piss-gray air, and as I walked to the South End, I saw almost no one: a drunk, a group of teenagers, a telephone man, two or three stray mutts. Columbus Square consisted of ten or twelve houses in a row, fronting on a cobbled island that cut it off from the main thoroughfare. Number nine was the most dilapidated of the lot—four stories like the others, but sagging, with boards propping up the entranceway and the brick facade in need of mending. Still, there was an impressive solidity to it, a nineteenth-century elegance that continued to show through the cracks. I imagined large rooms with high ceilings, comfortable ledges by the bay window, molded ornaments in the plaster.

At the age of twenty-three, Paul Auster moved to France to make his living. Although Auster had been under poverty line in those days, he prefers the natural environment of Paris to the suffocating atmosphere of New York. In The Locked Room, the anonymous narrator reaches to Paris in his process of finding Fanshawe. He describes Paris as follows:

Things felt oddly bigger to me in Paris. The sky was more present than in New York, its whims more fragile. I found myself drawn to it, and for the first day or two I watched it constantly...., The Paris sky has its own laws, and they function independently of the city below. If the buildings appear solid, anchored in the earth, indestructible, the sky is vast and amorphous, subject to constant turmoil. For the first week, I felt as though I had been turned upside-down. This was an old world city, and it had nothing to do with New York— with its slow skies and chaotic streets, its bland clouds and aggressive buildings. I had been displaced, and it made me suddenly unsure of myself. I felt my grip loosening, and at least once an hour I had to remind myself why I was there.

Such images capture the essence of nature and the power of place in Auster's novel. The life flowing in the vessels of Paris is compared with the metropolitan life of New York devoid of tranquility and peace.

In his epistolary and dystopian novel, *In the Country of Last Things* (1987), Paul Auster depicts an unnamed city where humans have no choice except tolerating the uncertainties and disorders. In order to release themselves from the grip of anxiety, they must learn to face the calamities of life. The protagonist, Anna Blume is looking for her brother, William, a journalist. After getting disappointed, Anna starts tackling with the chaotic place into which she has entered. In this novel, Auster prefers the East as the place which has not been collapsed.

When you live in the city, you learn to take nothing for granted. Close your eyes for a moment, turn around to look at something else, and the thing that was before you is suddenly gone. Nothing lasts, you see, not even the thoughts inside you, and you must not waste your time looking for them. Once a thing is gone that is the end of it...., The streets of the city are everywhere, and no two streets are the same. I put one foot in front of the other, and the other foot in front of the first, and then hope.

A great part of this novel is dedicated to Anna Blume. She is the homelessness and penniless in a strange place devoid of hope for returning home. Addressing to one of her friends, Anna Blume describes the horrible condition of the city in a letter. Anna writes:

For those at the bottom, there are the streets and the parks and the old subway stations. The streets are the worst, for there you are exposed to every hazard and inconvenience. The parks are a somewhat more settled affair, without the problem

of traffic and constant passersby, but unless you are one of the fortunate ones to have a tent or a hut, you are never free of the weather. Only in the subway stations can you be sure to escape inclemencies, but there you are also forced to content with a host of other irritations:

the dampness, the crowds and the perpetual noise of people shouting, as though mesmerized by the echoes of their own voices.

In the Country of Last Things (1987), stands as the metaphor for the present world with all its concrete abominations. While the presence of the world's anxieties is unavoidable, it is left to the humans to become its prisoners or not. In Peace of Mind (2012), Hari Dutt Sharma offers his happiness roadmap through fighting the negative emotions. He defines the term in the following way:

Peace of mind does not mean soothing the mind. It also does not mean escape into a dream world. It means more effective participation in a real world. It does not mean innocuous lulling but dynamic stimulation of creative activity. Peace of mind greatly increases our intellectual power. It enables us to think rationally and in a better way. An excited mind can not produce rational concept or orderly thoughts. The mind is efficient only when it is cool and not hot. When our mind is heated, emotions control our judgement which proves costly in the long run. Power of the mind comes from the quietness.

Paul Auster's novel displays human characters who try to take their heavenly soul out of the disheveled world. This journey continues in his latter novel, The Music of Chance.

The Music of Chance:

Paul Auster's The Music of Chance (1990), bestows the readers with provocative insight into Auster's 'sense of place'. This novel is the story of Jim Nashe's relentless drifting across American states and cities such as New York and Pennsylvania. Nashe enjoys traveling as it helps him to keep distance from the agony of his divorce. Rather than being a simple means of transportation, the car is the place of tranquility for him. The narrator observes:

The car became a sanctum of invulnerability, a refuge in which nothing could hurt him anymore. As long as he was driving, he unencumbered by carried even no burdens, the was slightest particle of his former life. That is not to say that memories did not rise up in him, but they no longer seemed to bring any of the old anguish. Perhaps the music had something to do with that..., as if the sounds were somehow emanating from him and

drenching the landscape, turning the visible world
 into a reflection of his own thoughts.

On the way, Nashe picks up Jack Pozzi, who loses everything in a poker game with two lottery winners, Flower and Stone. The winners suggest the losers to erect a stone wall for them as the only way of gaining freedom. While being appointed on this drudgery, the meadow is the place of wonder, beauty for him. The narrator states:

It wasn't a bad life in the meadow.
 It was calm and simple and good for the soul.
 He just needed to share it with someone now. He had been
 alone for too long, and
 he didn't think he could go on by himself anymore. It
 was too much to ask of anyone, he said, and the
 loneliness was beginning
 to drive him crazy.

In the light of the above-cited lines, one realizes Auster's consciousness of humans' need for self-recognition. He explores this theme in his next novel titled as *Timbuktu*.

Timbuktu (1999), is the emotional narration of self-titled dog who is present in the human's world. Mr. Bones is a dog belonging to an ailing vagabond, Willy G. Christmas. This dog understands the language of his owner perfectly. Indeed, *Timbuktu* is a place, a promised land. Mr. Bones reviews all the memories and advices of his owner, Willy. He knows that Willy will go to *Timbuktu* after death. The place is defined as follows:

..., where people went after they died. Once your soul had been
 separated from your body, your body was buried in the ground
 and your soul lit out for the next world. Willy had been harping on
 this subject for the past several weeks, and by
 now there was no doubt in the dog's mind
 that the next world was a real place. It
 was called *Timbuktu*, and from everything Mr.
 Bones could gather, it was located in the middle of a desert
 somewhere, far from New York or
 Baltimore, far from Poland or any other city
 they had visited in the course of their travels.

Mr. Bones gets acquainted with a Chinese boy named Henry Chow. After a while, the boy's father, Mr. Chow who is the owner of a restaurant in Baltimore. He gets aware of his son's relationship with the dog and beats him. Witnessing the beating scene, Mr. Bones runs away. The narrator states:

All bad things lived in this city. It was a place of death and despair, of dog-haters and Chinese restaurants, and it was only by the skin of his teeth that he hadn't wound up as a bogus appetizer in a little white takeout box..., what good was a home if you didn't feel safe in it, if you were treated as an outcast in the very spot that was supposed to be your refuge?..., To be alive meant to breathe; to breathe meant the open air; and the open air meant any place that was not Baltimore, Maryland.

The dynamic of rebirth is evident in Paul Auster's Oracle Night in which the main character, Sidney Orr, tries to come back to his life and begin writing again.

Oracle Night:

Paul Auster's Oracle Night (2003), is the story of Sidney Orr who starts writing a novel based on John Trause's suggestion after discharging from hospital. In this novel, Sidney Orr refers to the protagonist of Dashiell Hammett's The Maltese Falcon, Sam Spade, who tells Brigid O'Shaughnessy about a man named Flitcraft. While the latter had been going for lunch a beam falls on him but he remained unhurt by sheer chance. Paul Auster opines that world is a living place running more by chance and coincidence than anything else. Flitcraft realizes:

The world isn't the sane and orderly place he thought it was, that he's had it all wrong from the beginning and never understood the first thing about it. The world is governed by chance. Randomness talks us every day of our lives, and those lives any moment— can be taken from us at for no reason at all. By the time Flitcraft finishes his lunch, he concludes that he has no choice but to submit to this destructive

power, to smash his life through some meaningless, wholly arbitrary act of self-negation.

Nick Bowen, the main character of Sidney Orr's novel, leaves New York for Kansas City and stays in Hyatt Regency hotel. Both Nick and hotel have in common their own memories of sad events happened for them in the past. Nick Bowen is interested in Rosa Leightman, the granddaughter of Sylvia Maxwell, the writer of Oracle Night. In a message which Nick leaves for Rosa, he illustrates the impacts of hotel's surrounding areas on his mind in the following way:

It's beautiful out here, by the way. All strange

and

out flat.

at I'm

the city. standing at the window, looking

Hundreds of buildings, hundreds of roads,

but everything is silent. The glass blocks out the

sound. Life

window, but is

in on the other side

here of the

everything looks dead, unreal.

Nick Bowen steps out of hotel and goes for shopping while he comes to know that his debit card has been blocked. Nick does not know anybody in Kansas. But he remembers Ed Victory who had given him his card when he was transporting Nick from the airport. The narrator gives the readers a clear picture of racial segregation in the United States by describing the living place of Ed Victory in the following words:

He has found Ed Victory, who lives in a

tiny room on the top floor of a

boardinghouse in one of the worst parts of town, a fringe

neighborhood of

crumbling, abandoned warehouses and burned-out

buildings. The few people wandering the streets

are black, but this is a zone of horror and

devastation, and it bears little resemblance to

the enclaves of black poverty that Nick has seen

in other American cities. He has not entered an

urban ghetto so much as a sliver of hell,

a no-man's- land strewn with empty wine bottles, spent needles, and the hulks of stripped down, rusted cars.

Mr.Chang is a Chinese man residing in America. His father had been a math teacher in Beijing number eleven middle school. During the outburst of the cultural revolution in China launched by Mao Zedong, then chairman of the communist party, he was accused of being the member of Black Gang. Chang's father was persecuted by the Red Guard and suffered hard labor after being deployed to the countryside as a farmer. Chang believes that no place is an ideal one for living including America. He demonstrates:

It is a hot day in August, terrible sun. My father has blisters on his face and arms, cuts, and bruises all over his back. At home, my mother cries when she sees him. My father cries. We all cry, Mr. Sidney. The next week, my father is arrested, and we are all sent to the countryside to work as farmers. That is when I learn to hate my country, my China. From that day, I begin to dream of America. I get my big American dream in China, but there is no dream in America. This country is bad too. Everywhere the same. All people bad and rotten. All countries bad and rotten.'

This shows the processes that migrants go through to build lives in their new place. While they try to adjust themselves, the procedure of social, psychological, and cultural adaptation is hampered. In *Multiculturalism in the United States* (2005), George Anthony Peffer has scrutinized how American culture affects immigrants and is affected by them. He observes: Among Chinese Americans, the issue of assimilation has followed a somewhat irregular path, both as a social reality and as a subject of scholarly research. The earliest Chinese immigrants to the United States demonstrated no desire at all to become permanent residents or build stable communities. Also from the beginning, European Americans appear to have decided that newcomers from China represented an undesirable element that the country would be better off without.

The point of interest, here, lies in Paul Auster's examination of violence and its effects on Chinese society and future policy. It depicts his negative outlook on immigration to America as the false dreamland for the asylum seekers. In *The Cultural Revolution: A*

People's History (2016), Frank Dikötter sheds on China's most troubled era a new light. He writes:

It looked like a people's revolution. Just as Mao had incited students to rebel against their teachers months earlier, he now unleashed ordinary people against their party leaders. In doing so he tapped into a deep pool of resentment. There seemed to be no end to the number of people who harbored grievances against party officials. Across the country the population was organized into self-contained work units under the thumb of local cadres, and in every unit there were those who became rebels from farmers, workers, teachers, and shop assistance to government clerks. The country was a giant pressure cooker.

In postmodern America, Chinese identity crisis originates in rapid urbanization and the globalizing burst of progress. In his essay titled, 'Imagined Nostalgia', (2000), Dai Jinhua argues:

The wave of nostalgia brings new representations of history, making history the "presence in absentia" that emits a ray of hope on the Chinese people's confused and frenzied reality. A kind of familiar yet strange representation of history, a long repressed memory emerging from the horizon of history, through the repressed identification of contemporary Chinese history, allows people to receive consolation and gain a holistic, imagined picture of modernized China...the mesmerizing allure of this picture is that it rebuilds a kind of imagined link between the individual and society, between history and the present reality, in order to provide a rationale for our contemporary struggle and to impart to us some sense of comfort and stability.

In his book, The European Dream (2013), Jeremy Rifkin observes:

The American Dream, once so coveted, has increasingly become an object of derision. Our way of life no longer inspires, but, rather, is looked on as outmoded and, worse yet, as something to fear, or abhor. Even most Americans, if we took the time to really think about it, would have to say that we have somehow gotten off track, ... to some extent, it is the American Dream itself that has led us to our present sense of malaise. Its central tenets are less applicable in a globally connected world, ... just as important is the fact that American Dream has been truncated.

Rifkin differentiates between American Dream and European Dream. Although the former is declining the latter is appealing universally. In the introductory notes of James Truslow Adams's *The Epic of America* (2017), Howard Schneiderman writes:

The American dream is so widely used that It has become a powerful metaphor of core American values. While economic success is first among these values, others, as Adams knew, are almost equally important. Among these values is "being able to

grow to fullest development as men and women unhampered by the barriers which had slowly been erected in older civilizations, unrepressed by social orders which had been erected for the benefit of classes rather than for the simple human being of any and every class”.

The common idea between both of these dreams is freedom and security. Americans hail the idea of independence which is attainable through material prosperity. However, the negative implication of this idea is that autonomy makes one self-centered which is not acceptable in the present world. The European Dream interprets freedom as having free access and relationship with the rest of the world. Normally, success seekers get attracted to European Dream as it guarantees security, material attainment and interrelationship.

Conclusion:

It is the creative function of literature and the important part of identity. ‘Place attachment’, ‘Place identity’ and ‘Sense of Place’ are the main concepts in environmental psychology. Although they are used interchangeably, ‘Sense of Place’ is more personal, emotional and impassioned. Paul Auster shows the particular impact of ‘place’ on the characters’ identities. In turn, ‘places’ are affected by characters too. Characters identify themselves in larger and smaller scales. While the former includes country, state, and city the latter covers neighborhood, room, school and workplace.

Paul Auster’s ‘sense of place’ makes him give reference to several western and eastern countries of the world. He elaborates on the postmodernist concept of urban nothingness which is present throughout all the novels analyzed in this essay including The New York Trilogy, The Music of Chance and Oracle Night. Auster resents the shallow and superficial culture of America and slams the idea of ‘American Dream’. ‘Places’ are not only flourished on the ground but also in the characters’ minds and their inward imaginations. Whether the running theme is identity in City of Glass, Ghosts and The Locked Room, or chance and coincidence in The Music of Chance, or predictability and possibility in Oracle Night, or quest for self in The country of Last things, or passion for salvation in Timbuktu, the monster of urbanization is the common pattern that underlies all these novels.

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