



'Self' as the Book written by the 'Other': Constructing the Postmodern Identity of the Writer in Paul Auster's *Oracle Night*

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KEYWORDS	

Paul Auster is a contemporary American writer, who is not half as popular as writers like Kurt Vonnegut, Don DeLillo, Cormac McCarthy or Thomas Pynchon. He writes in a language that is exceedingly Postmodern to discuss topics which are also extremely Postmodern. Paul Auster is one of the greatest exponents of metafictional writing, a writing that deliberately indulges in the meticulous explanation of how writing is done.

Paul Auster is an obsessive and compulsive writer who writes not just for livelihood but for life itself. He himself has confessed in many of his interviews that writing to him was as important as breathing. Being a writer of autobiographies, it is almost shocking to find out that his life has served as a material for nearly half a dozen of memoirs written at different stages of life, discussing his experiences down the ages with utmost devotion.

The quest of the self, a fixation with Auster, is a theme that has been appearing and reappearing in the literatures across ages and nations. The hero who sets out on the quest has either material or spiritual benefits as his reward at the end of his successful journey. As a romantic realist, Paul Auster is more concerned with the spiritual quest, although not in the usual religious sense of the word; but in a more broadminded, all-inclusive perspective, with a view to enlighten his own self and his readers, not by offering solutions but by posing questions. His 'self' is then the hero on the quest, which sets out on a journey to unravel the mysteries of its identity.

Frye, while speaking of the role played by the hero, asserts that fictions may not be classified morally, but by the hero's power of action, which may be greater than men, less, or roughly the same. He goes on to classify the hero as an individual who is either superior to men in 'kind', or as one who is superior to other men in 'degree', or as one who is superior to men but not to his natural environment, or as one who is neither superior nor inferior, or as one who is inferior to other men in intelligence. An Auster hero falls under the second category as a romantic, "whose actions are marvellous but who is himself identified as a human being." His romantic hero "moves in a world in which the ordinary laws of nature are slightly suspended: prodigies of courage and endurance, unnatural to us, are natural to him" (Frye 33). Of course, there are no weapons, witches or ogres in the postmodern world inhabited by him. However, his actions and intentions are no less than any of the heroes of those legendary folktales and their derivatives stated by Frye, as his world is filled with invincible phantoms of the past and imminent fears of the future and he is on an unwavering mission to fight them, be it successfully or otherwise.

When one considers the gallery of Paul Auster's heroes, it becomes almost impossible not to compare their feature to Paul

Auster's own. In fact, it is obvious that all of them have been created in his own image and it is he who finds it difficult to refrain himself from creating characters who are nothing but his look-alikes. They indulge in the routine activities that Paul Auster himself would indulge in. They go the places where Auster himself would like to go.

In *The Red Notebook*, Auster also makes a clean breast of the fact that as a writer of novels, he feels morally obligated to incorporate events from his own life into his books, to write about the world as he experiences it. He does not deny that his books are full of references to his own life (120). He goes one step further and argues that there is nothing unusual about writers' referring to their personal lives in their works: "All writers draw on their own lives to write their books; to a greater or lesser degree, every novel is autobiographical." (122)

Thus, allegorically speaking, a Paul Auster novel is nothing more than a fictional extension of Paul Auster's all-time obsession with his own self as a writer. It serves as a chronicle of the writer's attempt to divulge the problems of a writer at work, who creates a fictional world for his work, inhabits it and gets lost in it in the bargain. Living in the city of sky-scrapers has only added to his despair and loneliness. The frustrated individual has become a reluctant part of the system but still cannot get out of it. It is like a vicious circle where he is supposed to act in a certain way in order to achieve a certain objective, predestined for him by his milieu. He writes not about disturbed people but about his own disturbed self, a self that finds itself trapped by circumstances, nevertheless that is ready to go with the flow, no matter wherever it takes it. With a really deep feeling to resolve the mystery of life, the self takes on this eventful journey unmindful of the instability and moral bankruptcy that it is struggling with.

Consequently, even before starting to write fiction, he begins to construct an individual myth with his 'self' as the hero on a quest to understand itself from a newer angle, from a different perspective. In a way, the tangible writer who is physically present in the novels of Paul Auster is a symbolic representation, a concrete manifestation of his much complex, impalpable, abstract 'self'. The 'self' of the postmodern writer is embodied in the protagonist of the novels, and his corporeal journey in the physical world emblemizes the spiritual journey of the 'self' in the convoluted labyrinths of his psyche.

Linda Hutcheon, in *Narcissistic Narrative: The Metafictional Paradox* (1980) argues that most discussions of postmodernism are concerned primarily with the psychological, philosophical, ideological or social causes of the flourishing self-consciousness of its culture. (3) She enumerates the attributes of the self-conscious postmodern literature as being

"narcissistic", "introverted", "introspective", "self-reflective", "self-informing", "self-reflexive", "auto-referential", "auto-representational" (1-2) Though each of these terms do not render the same meaning, it is obvious that they are all directed towards only one center- that is the 'self'.

Considering Paul Auster as an envoi of postmodern American writing, the idea of suspension of an absolute identity is an ongoing obsession with him. The boundaries of identity have faded away from the psychological picture of the postmodern man. The 'self' is lost in its own place as it does not know for certain what it actually is. This phenomenon is best explained in terms of anonymity, ambiguity, decentralization and similar concepts.

Lechte shows how Levinas speaks of the importance of the 'Other' in the formation of the 'Self'. Levinas calls it an astonishment of the 'Other' speaking in him, as the 'Other' speaking in him which enables him to become a self in language; in other words, through language, the 'Other' enables him to have an identity. (134)

This is what Auster tries to demonstrate in his novel *Oracle Night* in the most unprecedented, postmodern way possible. Here, he attempts to reveal the nature of the self to itself through the feeling of the self from the point of view of the other. It is not the story of just one 'other' character. Sidney Orr, Sylvia Maxwell, Trause and to an extent Nick Bowen (an editor) in *Oracle Night*, probe deeply into the problems of knowing one's identity.

Oracle Night is one of the most complex works of Auster as he layers so many stories one after the other- to begin with, the story of Sidney Orr, a writer who struggles to get back to writing fiction after his slow recovery from his near-fatal illness. He is from Brooklyn and things begin to take disastrous turns in his writing career and his personal life the moment he sets his eyes on a blue notebook. He speaks of his wife, Grace and his mentor, John Trause (a senior writer who has unconditional love towards the couple). Later, he writes about Nick, Flagg, Eva, Jacob, Edward and such other characters who inhabit the fictional world he creates.

Without writing, without being able to wander, Orr is traumatized to the extent that he believes that he has become someone else- when he feels his 'self' has become the 'other'. Even though he had lived in New York all his life, he is not able to understand the streets and crowds anymore and he "felt like a man who had lost his way in a foreign city". (2)

Walking the streets of New York is another preoccupation with Auster heroes. Orr records his first walking experience after spending many days in bed:

I was able to extend my walks into some of the more far-flung crevices of the neighborhood. Ten minutes became twenty minutes; an hour became two hours; two hours became three. Lungs gasping for air, my skin perpetually awash in sweat, I drifted along like a spectator in someone else's dream, watching the world as it chugged through its paces and marveling at how I had once been like the people around me: always rushing, always on the way from here to there, always late, always scrambling to pack in nine more things before the sun went down. (2)

Thus, Auster heroes right away establish themselves as travelers who are always on the go. Moving is a part of their routine and without walking their day is not normal. For them, walking is a sign of a healthy life, a symptom of their symbolic progress as writers. Besides, they are not writers by choice. They are obsessive compulsive writers who are born to write and the urge to write is innate in them. That's why, Orr feels almost guilty when he has not been able to write for a long time: "It must have been because I secretly wanted to start working again - without knowing it, without being aware of the urge that had been gathering inside me. I hadn't written

anything since coming home from the hospital in May - not a sentence, not a word." (2) The stationery involved in writing- the pens, pencils, notebooks, ink cartridges, erasers, pads and folders- are all so alluring to their eyes, and the writers look at them just like how a mythical hero would look at his new weapon.

In reality, Brooklyn is said to be a writer's hub and that is the reason why the sleazy Chinese man, M.R. Chang says that he has opened his 'Paper Palace' there, that is to say, to cater to the needs of the writers in the neighbourhood and make a good business out of it. To this, Orr quickly retorts as the unofficial spokesperson of the majority of the writers and tells: "The problem with writers is that most of them don't have much money to spend." (6)

The perennial concerns of a postmodern writer like the deliberations on naming the characters, sketching their personae, creating details, choosing the point of view for narration, alternate realities, multiplicity of meanings, blending fact with fiction, distractions and blocks, financial trepidations, are all discussed in detail, as the writer, more often than not, seems to be obsessed with the issues of authorship. For instance, when the stationery man introduces himself as M.R. Chang, Orr deludes himself into thinking all possible expansions like Mental Resources, Multiple Readings, Mysterious Revelations. This, however, is a habitual routine for the deconstructive mind of the postmodern writer.

Orr's friend, John Trause is also like an advisor figure to him. Being a senior and a more popular writer, Trause is always there to help, support and guide Orr through his journey as a writer. He gives him ideas and feeds him with all the information possible to see him prosper as a writer. It is not without reason that Auster has given the name 'Trause' to this imposing character as it is an anagram of his name.

Trause has a soft corner for Sidney Orr primarily because he has known and loved Orr's wife, Grace right from her childhood, being her father's very close friend. Grace is one charismatic lady with a rock solid personality and an inspiration to Orr's writing. Auster sees himself in both Orr and Trause only that he shuffles their identities whenever possible. Orr is the faithful and devoted husband of Grace who is obviously modelled upon his own wife Siri, who is a tall, attractive woman with enchanting eyes.

Just as how Auster has modelled the character of Grace on Siri, the reader understands that Sidney Orr gives the attributes of his own wife Grace to Rosa Leightman, a character he creates for his novel *Oracle Night*: "I decided to give Grace's body to Rosa Leightman - even down to her smallest, most idiosyncratic features, including the childhood scar on her kneecap, her slightly crooked left incisor, and the beauty mark on the right side of her jaw." (14) On the other hand, Nick Bowen, the protagonist of the novel that he is presently working on, does not share Orr's characteristic features, he declares, as he wants to make him the quintessential 'other' that has only contrasting attributes: "As for Bowen, however, I expressly made him someone I was not, an inversion of myself. I am tall, and so I made him short. I have reddish hair, and so I gave him dark brown hair. I wear size eleven shoes, and so I put him in size eight and a half." (15)

It is not a mere coincidence because Orr is self-conscious of what he writes. As he explains the craft of story-telling, it is only Auster that the reader sees. Sidney's novel faithfully reflects the happenings in the life of Auster in reality. When Sidney Orr is torn between writing his fictional book and facing his reality, the reader is actually introduced to the problems of a writer- especially those of Paul Auster. His fictional creations Bowen and Eva share a relationship that evades understanding and is as complicated as that which is shared by Sidney and his wife, Grace. This in turn makes the reader aware of the idea hinted by Auster, the writer, who has a personal life.

As a fact, a well-read resourceful reader sees the connection straightaway and the complex task of story-telling becomes an endless play of words, where any number interpretations is possible and nothing can be definitely named as the *only* correct reading. This idea is extrapolated when Orr and Trause discuss writers, touching everyone from Faulkner and Fitzgerald to Dostoevsky and Flaubert. Trause makes a small digression citing an anecdote from Dashiell Hammett's books.

He summons up the Flitcraft episode in the Seventh Chapter of *The Maltese Falcon*. Flitcraft is also another postmodern individual just like Auster himself as "he felt like somebody had taken the lid off life and let him look at the works. For him, "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 stalks us every day of our lives, and those lives can be taken from us at any moment – for no reason at all." (11-12)

In a deciding moment, Orr writes the following lines that witnesses the amalgamation of metafiction and intertextuality:

I saw my Flitcraft as a man named Nick Bowen. He's in his mid-thirties, works as an editor at a large New York publishing house, and is married to a woman named Eva. Following the example of Hammett's prototype, he is necessarily good at his job, admired by his colleagues, financially secure, happy in his marriage, and so on. Or so it would appear to a casual observer, but as my version of the story begins, trouble has been stirring in Bowen for some time. (12)

Writing a new story is often treated as the beginning of an adventure: "To the degree that the story I am about to tell makes any sense, I believe this was where it began – in the space of those few seconds, when the sound of that pencil was the only sound left in the world (4)", exaggerates Orr as he begins to write a novel after a short gap.

Sidney Orr is not a mirror image of Trause or Nick Bowen. In fact, Bowen's features are created in such a way so to be contrasting with those of Orr. Orr also has nothing much in common with Trause, except for the fact that they both are writers. Their affection for Grace also can be considered as a play with the mirror as perceptions change when approached from the opposite directions. The book that Orr writes vaguely resembles a Paul Auster book, just like its distorted yet faithful image.

The mirror motif is used to the fullest to make the text itself as a mirror that not only filters reality but also alters it. Sylvia Maxwell's *Oracle Night* dictates the meaning for Orr's *Oracle Night*. And Orr's work modifies Auster's. Just as Orr progresses with his book, he notices that he evolves his thinking accordingly. It is, however, not a conscious act. It happens as naturally as a reflection undergoes a corresponding change when the subject modifies its posture. Only that in *Oracle Night*, it happens the other way round. It is the reflection that dictates the modification of the subject.

To a postmodern writer, his notebook is his mind. He exposes all his thoughts, ideas, beliefs, conventions, and even his innermost secrets in it. As he opens his notebook, he exposes his mind to the reader. The notebook, then, becomes an outward manifestation of all the darkest crannies of his otherwise locked-up mind. As he permits the reader into his book, he actually allows him to rummage across his psyche. He makes himself susceptible as he provides access to the 'other' to pass through his 'self'. Symbolically, the notebook is the bridge that connects the 'self' of the reader and the 'self' of the writer.

Hence, a Paul Auster hero worships his notebook just like Auster himself does. He treats it as a living organism, as if the inanimate object possesses a life of its own. For that reason, the following lines about Sidney Orr seem entirely reasonable:

"When he came to the blue notebook, however, he paused for a moment, held it up in the air, and ran his fingertips lightly over the cover. It was a gesture of appreciation, almost a caress." (5)

The notebook effectively performs the function of the mirror as it allows the 'self' to see its image in the 'other'. In a way, the notebook is also the 'other' that has a life of its own. In either case, whatever is written in the notebook has a direct connection with the evolving of the 'self'. Just as the characters of the novel who inhabit the notebook of the writer serve as the 'other' for him; they, along with the 'self' of the writer who belong to the novel in the hands of the reader, become the 'other' for him. The reader's 'self' is shaped by the writer's 'self', which is, but the inevitable 'other'. Thus, *Oracle Night* serves as a great example to prove that the 'self' is always like a book in progress, constantly changing as dictated by the writer, the 'other'.

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