

**BRAIDED REALITIES BLEND WITH FICTION IN PAUL AUSTER'S
*TRAVELS IN THE SCRIPTORIUM***

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Abstract

Postmodern Literature abstains from complete meaning and instead stress on metafiction, intertextuality and fragmentation. Postmodern writers reject entire meanings in their works rather they emphasize and celebrate the multiple meaning or totally lack of meaning in the literary work. There are many famous postmodern writers one among them is Paul Auster. Auster works are also known for an amalgam of innovative narrative techniques and succinct words. Metafiction plays a significant role in Auster's fiction. As Patricia Waugh describes Metafiction as "a term given to fictional writing which self- consciously and systematically draws attention to its status as an artefact in order to pose questions about the relationship between fiction and reality" (2). The real and fictional world of the characters mingles. Similarly the novel *Travels in the Scriptorium* blur between the boundary of reality and fiction.

My paper explores Auster's use of Metafiction which is one of the common features in postmodern literature. Metafiction revolves in the novel *Travels in the Scriptorium*. It is a story about an old man named Mr. Blank confined into a room and does not remember how he had arrived and imprisoned in a room. As days passes by different characters come to meet him. Few characters start to rebuke for the crimes he had committed. Mr. Blank is not able to recognize even one character and crimes he had committed in his life. Each of these characters brings his past identity. As the novel progresses we get to know that Mr. Blank acts as a puppeteer in Auster's manipulation. Mr. Blank becomes the subject as well as object of Auster's narration.

Keywords: Postmodern Literature, Metafiction, Reality and Fiction.

Postmodern Literature expresses a various range of conceptual communication and involving grand narratives into unjudgeable language games. Postmodern literature rejects many of the tenants of modernism. Postmodernist celebrates fragmentation while modernists lament. Contradictory feature of modernism and postmodernism towards art and literature is the modernist over elaborate the art forms which is reflected in modern architecture like designs, adopted structures and carvings. In the case of literature, the writers shrink poems to narrow

columns of two words lines carrying precise feelings and observations. Postmodernists try to free from all the restrictions of intellectualism in its literature. Postmodern literature is associated with irony, scepticism and philosophical critiques of the concept of objective reality and universal truth.

In Postmodern literature most of the writers employ metafiction and pastiche for irony. Black humour and playfulness are also used as one of the characteristic features in postmodern literature. Postmodernist treat serious subjects in a humorous manner. Another characteristic feature in postmodern literature is Intertextuality and Fabulation. Fabulation means rejection of realism which holds the concept that literature is a created work. Magic realism, paranoia, maximalism and minimalism are also used by postmodernist in their literary work.

According to postmodern writers they see universe as absurd. The writers believe that there is no point in producing fiction that gives an illusion of life when life seems so delusive. This led to the creation of non fiction novels. Some of the well known postmodern writers are Vladimir Nabokov the Russian novelist, Jorge Luis Borges is an Argentinean writer, Alain Robbe- Grillet the French writer, Doris Lessing, John Fowles, Iris Murdoch and B.S.Johnson are British writers and few remarkable American postmodern writers are Kurt Vonnegut Jr., Ken Kesey, Thomas Pynchon, Norman Mailer and Paul Auster.

Paul Auster is an American poet, novelist, dramatist, essayist, screenwriter, translator, memoirist and film maker. He was born on 3rd February, 1947 in Newark, New Jersey, America. He started to write prose and poems when he was pursuing his college. He had translated few works and also worked on many film projects. He had won many awards. His works are also known for an amalgam of innovative narrative techniques and succinct words. Brendan Martin words, “Paul Auster hailed as the latest in a series of American author who could be labelled postmodernist” (1).

The fictional world of Paul Auster is unembellished composed of complex motifs and refigured intrigues drawn from his past life and from the history of American literature. Auster employs the most characteristic images in order to exemplify the process of literary creation. Metafiction plays a significant role in Auster’s fiction. Most of the works of Auster deals directly with the relation between the writer and character. The imaginative and real worlds commingle and characters go beyond the range of their own space. The world created by the writers in the narration world run side by side to our readings. Patricia Waugh comments this concept as such:

The author attempts desperately to hang on his or her ‘real’ identity as creator of the text we are reading. What happens, however, when he or she enters it is that his or her own reality is also called into question. The ‘author’ discovers that the language of the text- The reader is made aware that, paradoxically, the ‘author’ is situated *in* the text at the very point where ‘he’ asserts ‘his’ identity outside it. (133)

Auster’s famous novel *Travels in the Scriptorium* (2006) intricate with metafiction characteristics. As Metafiction plays a significant role in Auster’s fiction, David Lodge says, “Metafiction is fiction about: novels and stories that call attention to their fictional status and their own compositional procedures” (206). Auster’s works blur between the boundary of reality and fictitious.

The protagonist of the novel is an old man named Mr. Blank whose identity is hidden for both the character as well as for the readers. The protagonist undergoes a conflict in his identity and questions himself like who he is, how he came to the room? why he is being confined in a room?. He searches continuously for his identity and a surveillance camera is fixed in the ceiling

directly above him which continuously takes pictures of him. The plot of the narrative takes place in the third person narration by placing Mr. Blank under the critical observation.

Auster maintains his creativity in such a way that readers are not shown the imaginative world created by him. From the beginning of the novel the old man is confined to a room. The room appears like a prison to him. The windows are never opened and he does not guess what is happening outside the world. The narrator states:

. . . Mr. Blank's disappointment when he peers through the window and sees that the shutters have been close, blocking any possibility of looking out to discover where he is Once Mr. Blank rebounds from his shock, he understands that the situation is not dire as he supposed. (35)

As the novel progresses Mr. Blank gazes at thirty six photographs in order to find some meaning in them. After a while he looks at a photograph of a young woman, with some effort to recognize the name of the young woman. To his astonishment when he turns around after gazing at those photographs he sees the same woman in the photograph standing beside him with her hands poised gently on his right shoulder. She has come to nurse him. She is very kind to the old Mr. Blank. She is really a kind of relief to Mr. Blank who is undergoing a lot of mental conflict. Slowly Mr. Blank tries to regain his memory and asked her:

I've done something terrible to you. I don't know what it is, but something terrible . . . unspeakable . . . beyond forgiveness. And here you are, taking care of me like a saint.

It wasn't your fault. You fault. You did what you had to do, and I don't hold it against you.

But you suffered. I made you suffer, didn't I?

Yes, very badly. I almost didn't make it.

What did I do?

You sent me off to a dangerous place, a desperate place, a place of destruction and death.

What was it? Some kind of mission?

I guess you could call it that.

. . .

How long were you in that place? He asks.

A few years. Much longer than I was expecting to be.

But you managed to get out?

Eventually, yes.

I feel so ashamed.

You mustn't. The fact is, Mr. Blank, without you I wouldn't be anyone.

Still . . .

No *still*. You're not like other men. You have sacrificed your life to something bigger than yourself, and whatever you've done or haven't done, it's never been for selfish reasons. (21 - 22)

The above passage gives a picture of Auster's *In the Country of Last Things*. Mr. Blank is Auster himself and he regrets for sending the character Anna to a devastated city.

Mr. Blank is the man who is in charge of sending people for a mission. He is also a reason for sending few characters as his operatives and they just followed his instruction. He acts like a puppeteer in the hands of Auster who intercedes and manipulates other people's lives. Mr. Blank's operatives are Auster's fictitious characters and can be understood that missions are

Auster's novels. Moreover, the identity of Mr. Blank starts to unveil vaguely to the readers. It is Auster himself residing in Mr. Blank's characters.

Anna's tale does not come to an end. Mr. Blank is not able to understand why she does not look young like in the photograph and questions Anna, she replies, "Time, Mr. Blank . . . You understand the meaning of time, don't you? This is me thirty- five years ago" (13). Anna tells that she is married to David Zimmer, the character that appears in Auster's *The Book of Illusions* (2002) and Zimmer is now dead. Thus the boundaries between fictional and real indicate that these fictive characters do not live real life however have life spans similar to human life span. This is clearly stated by Samuel Farr to Mr. Blank, "Do I look dead, Mr. Blank . . . We all go through our rough moments, of course, but I'm just as alive as you are, believe me" (78). These the characters exist in most of the Auster's novels.

Like other characters Mr. Blank also goes beyond from reality to transitional space. The room in which Mr. Blank resides is actually the world of Auster's. The character named Daniel Quinn in the later part of the novel says that "You picked the spot yourself. In spite of everything that's been going on here, you've gathered us all in a beautiful place. I'm thankful to you for that" (123). Mr. Blank can leave only when he lets his past to go away from his grasp on reality and when he accepts that fictional characters exist within the reality as he finds in himself. One of the important features in metafiction is when fictive characters become conscious that they are fictional. Patricia Waugh points out that:

Fictional characters have no identity *outside* the script, and do not ultimately have identity *within* the script. One common metafictional strategy is the present characters who are aware of this condition, and who thus implicitly draw attention to the fictional creation/ description paradox. (120)

Fiction is not real, but the way authors fabricate the narration the reader travels to an imaginary world. According to Schmid, "Fictional texts are, as a rule, not fictive, but real . . . Fiction should rather be understood as the representation of a distinct, autonomous, inner- literary reality" (21 - 22). In Auster's case of writing process, his characters' exist beyond the pages of his novels which is evident in *Travels in the Scriptorium*. The story does not come to an end at the climax of the novels rather they are carried on in another novel. As the novel progresses, few more characters march to Mr. Blank's room one by one. At one side Mr. Blank is totally blank and the other side news is revealed through these characters when they come to confront him. All these information gives the readers to over look on the first reading of the novel. Another truth is disclosed about Mr. Blank when Daniel Quinn the lawyer to Mr. Blank and also the protagonist of *City of Glass* comes to have conversation with Mr. Blank. Conversation runs as such:

I'm Quinn, Mr. Blank . . . your first operative.

Mr. Blank groans. He is mortified with shame, embarrassed to such a point that a part of him, the innermost part of him, wants to crawl into hole and die. Please forgive me, he says. My dear Quinn – my brother, my comrade, my loyal friend. It's these rotten pills I've been swallowing. They've screwed up my head, and I can't tell if I'm coming or going anymore.

You sent me on more missions than anyone else, Quinn says. Do you remember the Stillman case?

A little, Mr. Blank replies. Peter Stillman. Junior and Senior, if I'm not mistaken. One of them wore white clothes. I forget which now, but I think it was the son.

Exactly right. The son. And then there was that strange business with Fanshawe.

Sophie's first husband. The madman who disappeared.

Right again. But we mustn't forget the passport either. A small point, I suppose, but it was tough work just the same.

What passport?

My passport. The one Anna Blume found when you sent her on her mission.

...

And then, last but not least, there was my aunt, Molly Fitzsimmons, the woman who married Walt Rawley. I helped him write his memoirs. (120)

Another character named Walt Rawley the protagonist in Auster's *Mr. Vertigo* (1994) appears here. Auster's characters keep appearing in one or the other novels and they also bring interest to the readers to reread his works.

The events, characters, photographs make Mr. Blank to think his criminality but these incidents and things are presented literarily. This notion is evident in Blanchot's another concept about the infinite sort of the work and its radical unfinished state. These characters have no end they continue and confirm this statement following Blanchot. The work does end but it maintains itself as persistent. When Mr. Blank encounters these characters he is pushed to a state of trauma. His relationship with those characters in his past years stands as an emblem of pensive state. Though the ontology gets disconnect but one cannot be separated from one's own work. This contradiction perfectly describes Mr. Blank's radical torment. The work is confidential to him as its writer. The work is unknown and yet it returns persistently to hold him for its fabrication. Mr. Blank is tormented by the boundless work. This logical concept is related with Blanchot's concept and the reader gets an idea that the protagonist is plagued by the boundless work, due to his past criminality these characters are impending towards him. It is obvious that it can be related to Auster who in an obsessive manner comes back to the characters and themes likewise Blanchot's describes perfectly about the writer in his work. The following lines are as follows:

The writer's solitude, that condition which is the risk he runs, seems to come from his belongings, in the work, to what always precedes the work. Through him, the work comes into being; it constitutes the resolute solidity of a beginning. But he himself belongs to a time ruled by the indecisiveness inherent in beginning over again. The obsession which ties him to a privileged theme, which obliges him to say over again what he has already said – sometimes with the strength of an enriched talent, but sometimes with the prolixity of an extraordinarily impoverishing repetitiveness, with ever less force, more monotony – illustrates the necessity, which apparently determines his efforts, that he always come back to same point, pass again over the same paths, persevere in starting over what for him never starts, and that he belong to the shadow of events, not their reality, to the image, not the object, to what allows words themselves to become images, appearances – not signs, values, the power of truth. (24)

The above passage adduces the proper writers. Blanchot is expressing not the circumstance of Mr. Blank alone as the writer of previous texts but also Auster himself. In the actual sense it is the writer Auster who is the real writer of the previous novels and not Mr. Blank. He did not send these characters to various places and assign work rather the novelist. It is Auster who had sent all his characters into different directions and assigned works. As Blanchot's concept, it is

Auster who comes back to the same fact and it is he who passes over the same paths. It is Auster who comes back from the very beginning and prevents his work as a writer in *Travels in the Scriptorium* as a result becomes as an archive a kind of revenant. The novel merges the past and present. The crime done in past is regretted and feels guilty for committing bad deed in the present moment.

Mr. Blank acts as a puppeteer in Auster's manipulation. Mr. Blank becomes the subject as well as object of the narration. He as a writer regrets for his mistakes wrong doing through his narrative in front of the jury members who are actually his fictitious characters. Auster skilfully plays where he does not allow himself to be figured very distinctly as being in the text. Auster neatly covers the conclusion. He manipulates his novel somewhat like Moebius strip. Mr. Blank is left all alone in the room and he decides:

. . . to go on with his reading. Directly below Trause's story about Sigmund Graf and the Confederation there is a longer manuscript of some one hundred and forty pages, which, unlike the previous work, comes with a cover page that announces the title of the piece and the author's name:

Travels in the Scriptorium

by

N. R. Fanshawe (126)

N. R. Fanshawe is a character appeared in Auster's *The Looked Room*. Fanshawe resembles the character Hector Mann who appears in Auster's *The Book of Illusions*. Hector Mann writes novels and then he denies that he had no connection or responsibility for them. Likewise, *Travels in the Scriptorium* was Fanshawe's way towards a kind of penance for forsaking his fiction. Fanshawe's turn does not end completely, the novel which he writes is obviously similar to Mr. Blank who reads the first paragraph of Fanshawe's fiction which is like the first paragraph of original work of Auster's *Travels in the Scriptorium*. Thus, Mr. Blank is completely encrypted within a fabrication and realizes that he is to be created a fictional version in everlasting.

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