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Play of Metafiction: A Postmodernist Reading of Paul Auster's *Man in the Dark*

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Modernism dominated the first half of the twentieth century. This took birth due to the social, religious, political and economic situation after the First World War. Modernist authors felt betrayed by the war, believing the institutions in which they were taught to believe had led the civilized world into conflict. They no longer considered these institutions as reliable means to assess the meaning of life and therefore turned within themselves to discover the answers. By the end of the Second World War, many leading Modernists had passed away. High Modernism came into being, and it was seen as being elitist and so the artists felt the need for a new non-elitist alternative and this thought gave rise to postmodernism.

The Postmodernists broke down the conventional boundaries of discourse between fiction and history, autobiography, the merging of fantasy and reality can also be seen in the works. Postmodernists undermined metanarratives and championed mini narratives. The term mini narratives and metanarratives were used by Jean- Francois Lyotard, in his work, *The Postmodern Condition*, (1984). Postmodernism, Lyotard argues, prefers 'little narrative' those which do not attempt to present an overarching "Truth" but offer a qualified limited truth, one relative to the particular situation" (Nicol 12). Another important Postmodernist theorist and philosopher, Jean Baudrillard, also spoke about how in today's world, the distinction between the real and the unreal world is so blurred, that one is not able to find the distinction between the two.

Paul Auster's themes revolve around characters who suffer at the hands of fate, discover that the events in the past shape their present, and how they accept their identities. This novel *Man in the Dark* (2008), deals with memory, elusive identities, and stories within stories, Dex Westrum says:

This novel... says everything that needs to be said to understand life in our time... Auster points out that all of us, metaphorically cripples in the dark of contemporary life can find the impetus to roll on with the weird world by interpreting our own stories, by assigning symbolic value to the happenings of our lives and by fulfilling the needs of those we love (Westrum 1).

August Brill, a seventy-two years old book critic weaves a story wherein the protagonist of the tale, has the task of murdering the tale's author, who ironically is August Brill himself, and interestingly the protagonist in both the worlds are confused, depressed affected by their realities, but each character start and end their lives by telling stories. Three generations of the narrator's family is encompassed in the story, but each character in the story is united by themes and anxieties of varying kinds.

In the novel one can see how time is disjointed, the world of fiction and dream being blurred and also the play of metafiction. In the world of fiction, the writer creates a world, but in metafiction, a prominent technique and device used by postmodernists, there is a world within the world of fiction which is created by the writer. The most powerful way by which it is achieved is when the writer, suddenly, 'intrudes', into the fictional world, which is also seen in this novel *Man in the Dark*.

The term metafiction was coined and introduced in the critical vocabulary of literary studies by William Howard Gass, an American novelist, essayist and critic in his essay, "Philosophy and the Form of Fiction," which was a part of a collection of essays named *Fiction and the Figures of Life* (1971). The master of literary criticism, Gass drew analogy from mathematics and logic in order to explain the dynamics of metafiction, in the essay, "Philosophy and Form of Fiction", he explains

There are meta theorems in mathematics and logic, ethics has its linguistic oversoul, everywhere lingos to converse about lingos are being contrived, and the case is no different in the novel. I don't mean merely those drearily predictable piece of writers who are writing about what they are writing, but those, like some work of Borges, Barth... in which the forms of fiction serve as the material upon which further forms can be imposed. Indeed, many of the so-called anti novels are really metafiction (Gass 10).

Patricia Waugh gives a clear definition of metafiction she says, "Metafiction is 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" (Waugh 2), whereas Linda Hutcheon suggests that though self-consciousness is an attribute of all fiction, it is the degree of self-consciousness within the (meta) fiction that is different in novels which are metafictional in nature, hence one can say that "the degree to which a metafictional displays its self-consciousness "(Hutcheon 15) would be greater.

Metafiction is a technique of writing. It is a device which is present in many contemporary postmodern novels. Metafiction does not abandon the real world; instead, it helps us understand as to how the reality which we live in day to day is genuinely constructed, and similarly 'written', the writers of metafiction create a fictional world which is culturally relevant and comprehensible to contemporary readers.

In the works of metafiction, we see a self-conscious narrator. A few characteristics of metafictional elements include, the narrator taking breaks to comment on the story. The story would have another piece of fiction within it and the narrator would at times tell as to what the readers are going to witness next; a story would be written by a character within the story. A metafictional work is also characterized by intrusions by the narrator, for it is a work which is innovative in nature as the events which are real and unreal are combined beautifully and the demand on the readers of a metafictional work is that they are expected to 'suspend their willing suspension of disbelief' while reading a metafictional work.

Intrusions by the narrator is a prominent happening in a work of metafiction, it is important to remember that intrusions are used not to discredit the story, but, it is used to bring forth significance in the story, and intrusions force the readers to bring to attention the significance of the matter which the narrator is trying to put forth, for instance, August Brill in the story says," I recap the bottle, return it to its proper place on the floor... What now? To turn off the light or not to turn off

the light? I want to go back to my story and discover what happens to Owen Brick...” (Auster, 44). In this context, intrusion is best seen in the words, “What now?” it seems to appear to the readers that the narrator is trying to seek permission from the readers if he should, turn on the light, or turn it off, following which he suddenly remembers that the story about Owen Brick is incomplete.

The entire novel is a combination of real and unreal events, the events imagined by the author is burdened with tragic cruelties and horrors of the modern world, yet the lines between the unreal and the real world is blurred. In the novel chosen for study Brick’s name echoes, with Brill’s, Virginia Blake, the woman whom Brick had a liking for in his school days, shares the name with, Brill’s first love, who was also named Virginia Blake, Brick’s wife, Flora shares a foreign birth with Brill’s wife Sonia. The events in August Brill’s life and Owen Brick’s life are so similar that, the distinction between the real and the unreal gets blurred.

Even while reading *Man in the Dark* the readers are expected to ‘suspend their willing suspension of disbelief’, as the passage reads “there are many realities. There is no single world. There are many worlds, and they run parallel to one another, worlds, and anti-worlds, worlds and shadow-worlds, and each world is dreamed or imagined or written by someone in another world. Each world is a creation of the mind” (Auster, 69). So, when the readers read a metafictional work, they should be willing to ‘suspend their suspension of disbelief’ only then they would be able to truly enjoy the work.

Though metafiction it is considered to be a form of experimental writing, it is often defined as, narcissist, introspective, introverted and self-referential. The principal aim of metafiction is to articulate the unconscious. Metafiction is a branch which has fascinated many writers, and this has nourished the writings of several writers across the globe, hence it becomes crucial to analyze the term textuality, which is a structuralist concept, but is related to metafiction as a postmodern phenomenon.

Textuality was a critical element in structuralism. It was a concept that came about in mid-twentieth century. Though there were various theorists like Jacques Derrida, Roman Jakobson and others who championed structuralism, it was Roland Barthes who focused about what makes a text. For Barthes, a work was a finished, closed subject, whereas Barthes considered a ‘text’ to be a process by which the reader creates a meaning. For example, a copy of the novel, *Man in the Dark* can be called as a work, but when one analyses the underlying themes, structures and messages which lies hidden in the book, the work, *Man in the Dark*, becomes a text.

The Latin word for text is *textus*, which means, ‘to weave’ and this is the fundamental quality of textuality. It was believed that, just like how tapestry must be done to keep its end from becoming worn at the end, a literary text must conform to some structure in order to be cohesive and coherent, but when one analyzes textuality, one understands that it is not necessary that, the scenes, the chapters, and the episodes in the novel should be coherent in nature, whereas, any work from which the readers can derive some meaning, that work would become a text, this phenomenon is seen in *Man in the Dark*, the novel is just one hundred and eighty pages long, with no chapters, or no markers to distinguish one line of thought from another, yet the novel has a tale woven within it, and the readers try to make meaning out of the text when they read the text.

In the essay, “From Work to Text,” Barthes provides a poststructuralist perspective, he notes that in recent years, interdisciplinarity has been the norm; a work is not a ‘work’ but a text, because literature and language has been influenced by developments in linguistics, anthropology, Marxism and psychoanalysis. A text is now, fluid in nature, it is not encompassed within one discipline. In the essay he neatly distinguishes the differences between a work and a text.

When Barthes says that it is the readers who construct the text or produce the text, Jacques Derrida’s view on textuality was different. He said that ‘that there is nothing outside the text’ which

means that 'there is nothing outside the text,' this means that there is nothing outside language. Hence, history itself is a linguistic and textual construct.

On first reading textuality could mean, the quality of coherence or connectivity that is present in a text, but as we see in *Man in the Dark*, it is a novel without chapters and flows from one thought to another, and the readers follow August Brill through the course of that one night, but textuality does not mean that a text should be coherent in nature. Hence, it is important to understand that in literary theory, text is not only a book. It is an unpredictable, unstable site where a number of operations take place and the readers engage with the author's words in the text. The play of differences in the language is seen. This marks the arbitrary condition of language, the quality of playfulness and instability in the text and the readers understand the social and cultural institutions and traditions which have been put forth by the writers in the text.

A text is referred to as a sociocultural product, because in some way or the other it reflects the society in which it is shaped. Paul Auster believes that the words in a text gives meaning to our everyday existence, the text, also involves the narrative and Auster believes that the narratives has had a vast transformation in the past few years, there has been a radical breakage from the past, because today's narratives are completely different from how it used to be then. It is interesting to note as to how textuality and the worlds in the novel are brought together by the narrative structure.

In the novel, *Man in the Dark*, the linearity of time is questioned and time is not directed towards any goal. The duration in which the novel unravels disrupts the chronology of the past, present and the future and everything is fused into one event, that becomes the permanent present so the readers are allowed to be a part of the narrator's past and the present in the story, August Brill, the seventy- two years book critic is the narrator, who is lying in bed and is unable to sleep, and he thinks of strange stories to push away the bad memories about life and at the same time he remembers things about his life, this shows the quality of the narration, the narration reveals as to how the past, the present, and the future is fused into one single event.

Textual reality also includes the time factor in the novel, in a postmodern novel we see as to how linearity of time is amputated and the sequential time, with it's before, during and after is eradicated. The past, present and the future become a permanent reality as present in the novel though time is fragmented and dispersed. Time is also divided and multiplied and there is a significant loss of linear time and cyclic time, in a postmodern novel.

In a postmodern text, there would be a postmodern city and in *Man in the Dark*, the postmodern city is New York, but there is also a space which is created by the narrator, and the two spaces are incompatible. In order to comprehend both the spaces the readers must forsake one space to get involved in another space. Space is defined by the human activities that construct the place, but in a postmodern narrative, the physical space and the subjective space could be relational and a postmodern narrative explores to study the relationship between them. In the unreal world Owen Brick is very lonely and the creator of Owen Brick is in a similar plight.

The term historiographic metafiction was coined by Linda Hutcheon, a specialist in postmodern culture and critical theory. In the first chapter, "Theorizing the Postmodern: Towards a Poetics," of her seminal work, *A poetics of Postmodern: History and Fiction* (1988) she claimed historiographic metafiction are works which are self-reflexive in nature and paradoxically lay claims to historical events and personages" (Hutcheon 5). By this Hutcheon means to say that historiographic metafiction are works which are aware of the fact that part of history which is used in their novel are skewed, and "they are consciously aware of element of historiographic metafiction when they read the book" (Hartwell 2).

The realm of historiographic metafiction technique that blurs distinctions between imagination and historical fact; in these novels we see a historical discourse without surrendering its autonomy

as fiction, it uses and abuses the conventions of history and fiction, but also beautifies a work by the addition of fantasy.

Despite a significant amount of research which has already been done in the novel, the novel holds great scope for further research, as the novel can be seen and analyzed from various other perspectives as well. *Man in the Dark* is a contemporary novel, so the element of dystopia which is present in the novel can be analyzed in great detail, or the narrative structure of the novel could be focused on, and narrative structure could be analyzed from a Poststructuralist perspective too.

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