



# Incredulity of Grand-Narratives: Dystopic, Alternative, and Suppressed Narratives in Paul Auster's *Man in the Dark*

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**Abstract**— Paul Auster habitually uses multiple narrative structures in his novels and situates the reader in a mesh of narratives in which neither a real narrator is discerned nor the protagonist's identity is distinguishable. In *Man in the Dark*, Auster uses two dystopic narrative lines in the novel with undistinguished characters' identity to question the credulity of grand-narrative. In Lyotard's theory of postmodernism, credulity of grand narratives is questioned since it disregards different voices in the novels. Brill and Brick are one character but with two functions in the novel. Brill tells a story consciously and tries to recreate a self-made story about Brick who is a semi-fabricated story of Brill who tries to deconstruct alternative America, though political decisions were different. The idea of dystopia, identity confusion, and temporal and spatial confusion in the novel reveals the possibility of a narration in one way or the other. Temporally, the past and present are connected through reinterpretations and imaginations which disproves the credulity of narratives in the present novel. Auster constructs and deconstructs identities and narratives in American setting and implies that most of the unspoken and suppressed aspects of narratives reduce the credulity of grand-narratives.

**Keywords**— alternative, dystopia, suppressed, grand-narrative, incredulity, identity, narrative

## I. INTRODUCTION

Paul Auster (1947-) is an American writer and director who incorporates the elements of detective fiction in a matrix of shattered narratives. His notable detective fiction *The New York Trilogy* (1987) introduced him as a postmodern novelist and reached prominence in *The Music of Chance* (1990) and *Man in the Dark* (2008). "American postmodern critics quickly adopted Auster's as manifestations of one form or another of postmodern and poststructuralist theories (Dimovitz 613). Auster concerns dilemma of his time and the fragmented soul of human being amid the catastrophes shaping his/her identity and self. In his metafictional story in story of *Man in the Dark*, Auster places a fabricated story of a man called Owen Brick who is caught in a hole and forced to assassinate a man who created the war civil war they engaged, but the man who is believed to be the cause

of this fighting is August Brill the old man shattered and lame by a car accident who is living in a dark room. The parallel narratives in the novel are divided into the two stories: Brill's story and Brick's story. Brick has forgotten his identity in the story of Brill and strives to discover it and the meaning of events around him. According to Jahshan "Auster, as writer, haunts a text where reader and critic alike hopelessly strive to catch an equally elusive meaning" (389).

Auster's enigma of the main narrative and the periphery narrative as well as identity confusion in *Man in the Dark* by recreating another parallel America, another possibility, questions the main narrative and identity formations because of political orientations and actions. Besides he suffocates a grand narrative in his story who tries to suppress in his unconscious mind, but the memories and

his conscience overwhelmed that narrative enough to replace superficial narrative of his life and an alternative one. In the micro level, Auster's demand possibilities and chance of alternative conditions can be discussed in terms of Lyotard's postmodern theoretical ideas for deconstructing another grand-narrative. In the macro level, a political dystopia has been depicted that in each alternative version is the reflection of individual's political acts and contribution that revealed as a weapon against one's own existence. However, in light of Lyotard's disavowing the grand-narratives this study reflects upon Auster's preoccupation with the man's involvement in destruction of his own self as the source of the entire worldly dilemma. In Benziman's terms Auster deals with "construction/deconstruction of the self through writing" (462).

Jean-Francois Lyotard (1924-1998), is a French theorist whose contribution on postmodern philosophy introduced him as pioneer who challenged credulity of grand-narratives. In *The Postmodern Condition* (1979), Lyotard's postmodern debate is "incredulity toward metanarratives" and believes that "our incredulity is now such that we no longer expect salvation to rise from these inconsistencies" (xxv). Lyotard's theoretical understanding of the postmodern condition emphasizes on the condition of knowledge and paradigm shift in knowledge especially among sociologists and critics, which brought forth "transformations in the context of the crisis of narratives" (Lyotard xxiii). The discourse of the science and its appeal to the truth as a legitimate narrative in science raises the question that the "scientific knowledge does not represent the totality of knowledge; it has always existed in addition to, and in competition and conflict with, another kind of knowledge, which I will call narrative in the interests of simplicity" (7).

Significantly, in subjective fields of the study, the grand-narratives are illegitimate more than science narratives, since metrics of the social narratives are immeasurable. Hi[story] for instance, in postmodern narrative is interpreted as the product of the mind of narrators or ideological institutes that influenced the production of the text. When Lyotard refers to "postmodern as incredulity toward metanarratives" (xxiv), he explicitly indicates that established narratives are not legitimate necessarily, because "there is nothing to prove that if a statement describing a real situation is true, it follows that a prescriptive statement based upon it will be just" (Lyotard 40).

In postmodern narratives, "the narrative function is losing its functors, its great hero, its great dangers, its great voyages, its great goal" (Lyotard xxiv). It implies that in

postmodern narratives the writer decenters hero and legitimized values in grand narratives. It "refines our sensitivity to differences and reinforces our ability to tolerate the incommensurable" (Lyotard xxv). Accordingly, in postmodern narratives we experience legitimization of personal or individual narratives that are off-centered and no single narrative is worthwhile, unless it constitute one narrative in a mesh of many other narratives. This is in Lyotard's terms "dissolution of the social bond and the disintegration of social aggregates into a mass of individual atoms[...] each exist in a fabric of relations that is now more complex and mobile than ever before" (15).

Lyotard's approach of postmodernism can properly explain the Auster's preoccupation with narrative and identity confusion since in Auster's *Man in the Dark*, individuals either try to discover their identity or to escape of it. Some identities are suppressed and some are constructed and deconstructed to question the instability of grand-narratives as those of mental constructed narratives. In the following discussion the ideas of identity and narrative confusion, political dystopia, alternative America, temporal and spatial confusion are discussed and substantiated.

## II. DISCUSSION

In *Man in the Dark*, Auster intentionally exhibits a collage plot of two main stories. The first is told by August Brill about himself and his family. All live quietly with pain haunted by the past. The second story appears through a kind of twisted storytelling that goes hand-in-hand with the first one. This is an abnormal, intense dream of Owen Brick when lost in the world of the Second Civil War of the United States. In fact, the second story is a fake story; it is told by the narrator on his sleepless nights. Auster proceeds the two narrative lines in a parallel and interrupted way: events that occur in New York are the first narrative of the protagonist which are perceived as the real narrative of the story; the second narrative refers to some realistic events such as the Iraq War and 11 September issues without revealing the setting of events.

The most serious challenge in the novel is to discover the profound understanding of narratives and meaning of the text. For the way to build two storylines in parallel, mainstreaming other stories into the main story through collage, quotations, dialogue makes the plot no longer monolithic, no longer moving according to traditional organizational principles, but becoming chaotic and loose. It is one of the persuasive pathways for the existence of randomness in the real world and the human mind.

The confrontation of reality and utopia is depicted in the novel to imply that none of them exists and the novel's

theme is dystopia. The spatial reality of Brill's current position is his room at New York at the home of her daughter, his novel of a parallel America is in fact a fabricated story, the possibility in which a different present exists if political election was different. However, the story of Brill is revealed a narrative in the main story of Brill in which Titus is killed in Iraq and twin towers are destroyed.

The novel opens with seemingly the real story of the narrator; an old man released from hospital whose daughter and granddaughter have died lately, the man who suffers insomnia and hallucination. The man cannot concentrate and cannot collect his stories logically. He says, "I lie in bed and tell myself stories. They might not add up to much, but as long as I'm inside them, they prevent me from thinking about the things I would prefer to forget" (16). The narrator claims that the story he is fabricating is his own story and had roles in the stories that prevent him from going in a wrong way. He indicates that "concentration can be a problem, however, and more often than not my mind eventually drifts away from the story I am trying to tell to the things I don't want to think about" (Auster 16). He tries to convince the reader that he is narrating a story he suppressed and did not like to think about. Accordingly, he tries to remind cognitively and consciously the events that most of them are unconscious and tries to bring them into existence consciously. Here three stories are imagined: the entire story as a whole; the story of the protagonist; and the story that the man is narrating. Accordingly, the three stories belong to the author, narrator, and protagonist (first person story) can be discerned.

The story revealed to be the story of a man caught in a hole with army clothes, but he cannot remember serving any army. He remembers someone with the rank of corporal in the army whose name is Owen Brick, but it is interesting that his own name is Owen Brick. It suggests that though the protagonist claims to be a reliable narrator, he is unreliable, because he is daydreaming and has no concentration due to insomnia. The narrators, however, changes the voice in the story to "he" and narrates the story of a man with double personality. He reminds that the "he" in the novel is himself as a narrator of the second story. Accordingly, the narrator is the protagonist of his own story.

Later he confesses, "The possibility that he is asleep in his bed at home, trapped inside some supernaturally lucid dream, a dream so lifelike and intense that the boundary between dreaming and consciousness has all but melted away" which reveals that he is the same character in the hole since he looks at the identity cards and finds that he is "Owen brick born June, 1977 [...] he is married to a woman named Flora [...] worked as a professional magician (Auster 17). In addition to narratives

that are in flux, identity of the protagonist in fluid and changing in-between the person he has been, the person he is, and the person he is creating.

The war and the puzzle that Brick is caught in is nothing more than a fabricated story. When Sarge Serge finds him in the hole and lifts him up it is indicated "you are saying it's a story, that a man is writing a story and we are all part of it" (21). It seems that Brick is both a fictional character and a participant of the real war that happened. Therefore, we have two stories in the novel: one is the story of Brill and the other is the story of Brick. Ugo Panzani indicates that "the reader meets the first 'man in the dark', the narrator August Brill, an aged literary critic who, following a car accident, secluded himself in the dark of his bedroom" (79). But, Brick's story is implied to be a mysterious and fabricated one, while the writer tries to convince that the story of Brill is a real one; however, the inclusion of one story in another, and the narrative structure of the novel indicates that no unique grand narrative can be reliable.

Since the novel represents the war on terror dilemma and reflects upon political affairs of post 11/9, he incorporates the subjects of narratives and identity to the same extent. In the country on war, citizens are living for moment and the next moment they are at war; therefore, they are rightful to forget their identity after a sudden struck. When Brick finds himself in military uniforms, he is unaware of his identity and condition he lives and asks Sargent Serge about it. He replies, "that's the way it is. One minute you're living your life, and the next minute you are in the war" (20).

The concepts of sleep, insomnia and nightmare along with the two narrative lines of the story intermingles the reality with fantasy, but fantasies are subverted. In the narrative of Brick, the America is a fictional America with an alternative condition. It indicates how America was if AlGore was president? It talks about possibilities and imaginations as if it is a sleep or nightmare. According to Panzani "Brill operates a specular operation, recovering the nightmare of the American Civil War (1861-1865) from the past" (79) that is a war in America against America. The parallel condition is Brick against Brill, creator of his fictional character. It represents the idea of suicide and self-destruction. Does Auster believe that American war policy is a self-destruction? How it is represented in the novel? and to what extent identity confusion of the characters represents the war policy a self-destructive plan? In Rogobete's view "in 2000 when the presidential elections turned into a national scandal when the Supreme Court decided that George W. bush and not Al Gore was the real winner of the elections...huge disappointment inspired the

creation of an alternative history, another present moment placed in parallel universe" (281). Finally, in a response to the question why Auster interested in creating an alternative American Gonzalez indicates, "we can find common themes and structure as well as a similar protagonist: an old man creating imaginary worlds to try to find a cure for his physical and psychological decline" (30).

There are some sub-narratives in the novel left uncompleted, especially when Brik and Katya are watching DVD films, narrate the story, and analyze them. The sporadic selection of movies in the story are sub-narratives half-narrated. When he narrates *The Bicycle Thief*, he tells the story shortly and then goes on to another movie called *The World of Apu* that is the life of an Indian person engaged in unexpected marriage and consequent dilemmas. In fact, the incomplete narratives are told to soothe the pain and unspoken memories that Brik is not interested to reveal.

In effect, there is a narrative in the novel that is untold and it is the concern of the study. In the beginning Brick says "I begin to remember the story I started last night. That's what I do when sleep refuses to come. I lie in bed and tell myself stories. They might not add up to much, but as long as I'm inside them, they prevent me from thinking about a thing I would prefer to forget" (Auster 16). Brick intends to suppress one important narrative of his life in which he prefers to forget about it. Concluding with the unspoken side of the narrative in the novel, González believes that "we learn the truth about August's relationship with his recently deceased wife Sonia. He had cheated on her and then abandoned Sonia for a younger woman and, although they got back together after nine years, he hasn't forgiven himself for that betrayal (30). And again Brik is suffering from the memories of Titus and depicts it as "the disaster I've been struggling to avoid all night (Auster 168). Titus gives immature reasons not to go to Iraq war and Brick thinks he was responsible for his fate. Accordingly, the alternative American and the real aspects of Brik's life are the surface structure of narrative flouting above his real narrative that he suppresses to hid in unconscious mind.

The idea of temporal and space confusion dominates the story. When Brick finds himself on the unknown road and no one pays any attention to him, the conversation with the old woman assures him that for others it is not important where he is, but he tries to know and discover. In addition, when he wants to reside in Wellington, he does not know how much he is going to settle there. "I don't know. Maybe a night, maybe a week, maybe forever" (Auster 34) and in response he is replied by Molly in the restaurant "you are pretty vague about it" (Auster 34) and even he does not know the time of the year. The idea of time in the novel reveals that temporal and place

position is not a significant subject. The war in which Brick has caught is parallel with the US war in Iraq in reality, while in the Story of Brick, Molly reveals that New York claimed independence and started war against other states. The story of Brick, however, represents the war among US states and the way people of color or parties are at war, while in the real world the war of nationalities is ongoing between American and Iraqi people. Accordingly, the idea of war matters, not its place and time, because when there is war, people are against each other, and even themselves. In Lyotard's terms one "aspect of narrative knowledge meriting careful examination is its effect on time" (21). In addition to time confusion of the Brick in the novel, Auster manipulates the time sequence of the novel in a non-linear process by shifting from one story to another.

In the story of Brick the idea of time represents another America that is different from its current one in real world. Brick asks Molly,

if I said the words *September eleventh* to you, would they have any special meaning?

Not particularly.

And *the World Trade Center*?

The twin towers? Those tall buildings in New York?

Exactly.

What about them?

They're still standing?

Of course they are. What's wrong with you? (Auster 35)

The idea of another America is, however, a country with different dilemma, while the real world story or narrative of the world that brick knows is war against Iraq, but in the story that Brick is its protagonist the war between different states implies the idea of dystopia and the world with other unfair possibilities.

Brick asks Molly about the Iraq war,

Lifting his head and looking Molly straight in the eyes, Brick asks her a final question:

And there is no war in Iraq, is there?

If you already know the answer, why ask you?

I just had to be sure. Forgive me. (Auster 35)

It reveals that Brick is conscious of the grand-narrative of the world, if not, his questions were irrelevant. The parallel fiction of the war among American states is another alternative or possibility for the fate of the US, even if, American was governed by another president; therefore, the novel indicates that no utopian world can be imagined and grand-narratives of the world were shaped differently if



there was another America based on alternative possibilities. Accordingly Auster's dealing with time and place in the novel implies challenging "rational modes of knowledge because they confuse the spatial (inner/outer) and temporal (past/present) dimensions of reality" (Eckhard 10).

In general, what the main concern of the novel is when there are grand-narratives of the world such as war and catastrophic issues the alternatives are also imaginable which implies deconstructing the idea of dominant grand-narratives by possible narratives of the world. It is believed that the "idea of Infinite God, almighty possessor of infinite powers able to generate an infinite number of worlds, Auster accordingly multiplies any possible level of his fiction, by even doubling his metafictional discourse with a meta-cinematographic one, by constantly enriching a major narrative line within other stories-within stories" (Rogobete 280). However, several small narratives in the novel are left open and the main narrator switches from one story to the other, meantime he did not lose his own narrative the is reflection of event occurred to himself.

### III. CONCLUSION

Auster's *Man in the Dark*, is a narrative of two intermingled stories and one unspoken and suffocated grand-narrative of the main narrator's life. The novel depicted the life of August Brill in New York and his challenge with insomnia so that to relief from overwhelming memories tells another story whose protagonist is Brick, a young man who does not remember his own identity less through his documents. The study concerned the subjects of narrative and identity confusion as well as dystopia, temporal and spatial confusion meshed in the two narratives that are proceeding in a parallel narrative and life ahead of America.

The political dystopia that Auster fictionalized in the novel signifies preoccupation with wholesome dissatisfaction with political trends and the potentiality of raising dilemma in any condition. The claim that Auster's personal life and dissatisfaction with the real world and the alternative is reemphasized in Rogobete indicating that "this narrative already existed in Auster's mind, some of them triggered by personal incidents, the only problem consisting in finding the proper device to connect intimate situations and memories with war and politics" (281). Accordingly, through different narratives of America, Auster implies he is disappointed with the proclaims of policy makers whose utopian decisions always leads to dystopia.

Identity confusion and the idea of several uncomplete narratives, reveals Auster's main character, Brill's tiresome with imagination and concentration and the

shattered 'self' of the protagonist through the life and experience. Identity of Brick, the constructed personality and his uncomplete story indicates that Auster denies the "conventional expectations of fiction- linear movement, realistic representation, and closure-Auster's novels also deconstruct logocentrism" (Russell 71). The identity of Auster's characters and their attribution to real life emphasizes human consciousness of events and attempts to suppress them to unconscious.

The temporal and spatial confusion in the novel, especially in case of Brick and Brill's life, are used as possible or alternative narratives that could happen and Auster implies that what would occur if the events happened in one or another way. Accordingly, situating characters in different stories is the product of the mind of the writers in either way. Therefore, no utopian world can be depicted out of the participants that construct the world and no unique narrative or grand-narrative can be honored. Since the narrative suppressed by Brill is revealed as the third narrative leading the story to contest the other narratives as grand-narrative, implying that the entire narratives are sub-narratives.

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