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Crafted Identities: A Psychoanalytical Reading of Paul Auster's *City of Glass*

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ABSTRACT

We currently live in a postmodern society in which the ever-challenging problem of self-cohesive identity, individuality, diversity, scepticism and innovation is on the rise. On an average, society is becoming more and more tolerant of new ideas and ways of thinking as opposed to remaining committed to supposedly objective truths established by previous generations. Paul Auster's *City of Glass* deals with many transactions of the concept of identity in postmodern society. It proclaims a set of wondrous mazes of identity, peopled with mysterious observers, authorial surrogates, mirrors facing mirrors and persons missing in one degree or another. Identity, gender and mythology are essential components of the fabric of human society as we know it. Our society is made up of stories and narratives, those that are told to us and those that we craft for ourselves. In this study, the objective is to study how society addresses them and how we investigate those narratives, often leading us to greater insights into our individual and collective psyches, bringing us closer to answers regarding the essential nature of mankind and our mythology. This is the method of this paper. The process by which we determine and craft our importance to the community at large will be investigated.

Keywords: Paul Auster, *City of Glass*, identity, psychoanalysis, post-modernism, gender studies

Introduction

Through globalisation, individuals become interconnected with one another leading to the exchange of culture and ideas, which in turn results in everyone growing in their perspectives and knowledge of the world around them. Identity, in its base form, is linked with existential anxiety in individuals. Identity, gender and socialisation are essential components of the fabric of human society as we know it.

The sense of self and its identity, followed by multiple choices and crises of uncertainty, has been the central notion in the course of the twentieth century and has become the principal site of human thought. This is true not just for the Western world but increasingly for the entire globe. The self provides a link between

the experience of socialisation and the evolution of individual personality through the course of life. It is a well-established fact that while modernism, as one of the greatest schools of thought, has portrayed the subjective consciousness as unstable, disorderly, and irregular, postmodernism prefers to focus on revealing that fictionality, which is the condition of being fictional, constructed, narrated and mediated (one that produces a great scope and sense of distrust, scepticism and alienation in individual consciousness) resulting in a profound perplexity in the community of human subjects and their enigmatic space of identity.

Apart from this, however, identity is deeply connected with subjectivity. Subjectivity is a condition of being a subject, i.e., the quality of possessing perspectives, experiences, feelings, beliefs, desires and/or power.

Subjectivity is an inherently social mode that appears through innumerable reasons within society. This implies that the individual is not isolated in a self-contained environment, but is endlessly engaged in an interaction with the surrounding world.

The concept of a self-cohesive subject, which has been one of the prominent topics of debate throughout the history of civilisation, could be extrapolated in a postmodern manner, which saw a great awareness of the personal biases, frameworks and lenses that colour an individual's view of the world. Jean-François Lyotard states that it is impossible to pass judgement on the validity of a certain individual's framework of understanding, rather "all we can do is gaze in wonderment at the diversity of discursive species just as we do at the diversity of plant or animal species" (*The Postmodernist Condition*, 2000, p.26).

The contemporary era is considered a period of social, political, economic and moral transition from modernism to postmodernism, which brings into notice the overall claim that modernism cultivated as doctrines, the individual genius in alienation from society, the autonomy of the subject and the instability of human language. Even to examine the complexity of the human situation and the intrusion of chaos in human lives, the crisis of the language that arises in modernism can be thought of as one example of the impossibility of a mutually acceptable meaning for true communication. The ideological frames within which identities are formed, occupy a position within society that facilitate a way for postmodernism to adopt a "model of rapture" (Hutcheon, 2003, p. 27) that is predicated on the irremediable breach in the social construction, signifying the instability of all spaces of the subject's identity. It is evident that in this activity, the postmodern writer has been especially willing to embrace what Lyotard considers the new subject of postmodern science, the search for instabilities.

Although the concept of identity has a long tradition in Western culture, the idea of an identity that can be constructed by every person is a rather new one, that is to say about 200 years old. It is closely linked to the beginning of the so-called modernity. This is what Douglas Kellner (2003)—among many others—proposes. In modernity, identity is slowly becoming subject to change and innovation. Mobility, multiplicity and self-reflexiveness are characteristics of modern identities. Yet the forms of identity in modernity remain for a long time relatively substantial and fixed, depending on a circumscribed set of roles and norms. Change is one feature of modern identities, the other-relatedness

another, for as the number of possible identities increases, one must gain recognition to assume a stable, recognised identity. In modernity, identity, therefore, becomes 'both a personal and a theoretical problem. Certain tensions appear within and between theories of identity, as well as within the modern individual' (Kellner, 2003, p. 142).

According to anthropological folklore, in traditional societies, one's identity was fixed, solid and stable. Identity was a function of predefined social roles and a traditional system of myths that provided orientation and religious sanction to one's place in the world, while rigorously circumscribing the realm of thought and behaviour. One was born and died a member of one's clan, a member of a fixed kinship system and a member of one's tribe or group with one's life trajectory fixed in advance. In pre-modern societies, identity was unproblematic and not subject to reflection or discussion. 'Individuals did not undergo identity crises, or radically modify their identity. One was a hunter and a member of the tribe and that was that' (Kellner, 2003, p. 141).

City of Glass may be one of the main reasons why Paul Auster is considered one of the most influential writers of Postmodernism. The fact that the story has been the subject of many discussions and debates shows that postmodern detective fiction still fascinates both academics and 'ordinary' readers that's why the paper aims to show how the protagonists of *City of Glass* are more than confused characters in a detective story that does not seem to make sense; each one of them has a fragmented identity, even though the levels of fragmentation may vary; the level of fragmentation changes during the course of the story, and that the city interacts with them depending on how fragmented their identity is.

The main focus of this analysis is on the main characters in the story. It can be shown that the city changes its ways of interacting with Quinn as the story progresses. It is to be noted that there is hardly any interaction between Stillman Junior and the city, so he cannot be analysed with regard to the city.

The novel contains a jumble of identities; in fact, the identities are more numerous than the characters. In other words, characters, with the protagonist Daniel Quinn in the lead, have more than one identity. It can be suggested, most clearly in Daniel Quinn's case, that newer identities to a significant level replace his previous identity. With the help of poststructuralist theory, one can argue that the novel supports the view that all

identities are constructed by outer factors. The case of Peter Stillman Jr. is also interesting in this respect, since his identity, the one he lives with as a grown man, has been given to (imposed on) him by outer sources. He had an identity that was reconstructed to fit into the society he has to live in. But is that identity more of a construction than his first? The question is: is there a hierarchical structure among identities, or are all identities equally original, or rather equally constructed?

Brian McHale (1992) claims that 'all our cognitive operations, including (or especially) perception itself, are theory-dependent,' and subsequently that 'data do not exist independently of a theory that constitutes them as data' (92). In other words, as poststructuralist theory would conclude, reality is constructed by those who interpret reality, and the same is accordingly true for the concept of identity. In the case of *City of Glass*, that would mean that all of Daniel Quinn's created identities are constructions, as well as the Quinn identity, the seemingly original identity of the character. Consequently, the same is true for Peter Stillman Jr. and his old and new identities. This essay thus argues, by applying poststructuralist theory and mainly focusing on the cases of Daniel Quinn and Peter Stillman Jr., that the identities of the characters in *City of Glass* are constructed by various outer factors, factors such as language, cultural codes and chance. These three factors were selected because of their significance in the novel on the one hand and poststructuralist theory on the other hand. The essay analyzes how the three outer factors mentioned influence the shaping of the character's identities.

It is extremely important to point out that Stillman Junior does not consider himself 'real' but merely a 'puppet boy'. He wants to become real and, just like the other characters in the story, to find meaning in whatever is happening. Of course, it is rather difficult for paranoid subjects to find satisfying answers to their questions for meaning.

Detached from any sense of what is real, true, or factual, these characters search for any sense of correlation between events. In Paul Auster's novel, *City of Glass*, the plot is initially driven by a deeply disturbed Peter Stillman Jr. who believes that his father, Stillman Sr. is coming to kill him. This paranoia drives Peter Jr. to hire a detective, Quinn, to protect him. Peter Jr.'s paranoia ends up being paralleled in Quinn's eventual fall into psychotic despair, a not-so-subtle hint that searching for an end meaning or Truth is ultimately a mortal quest. (*W. Lisa 2006: 23*)

Peter Stillman's paranoia does not only influence his own life but Quinn's as well. Peter simply connected

the dots he could find and made up his own story—it could be called *his reading* of a text full of fragments. His desperate search for meaning, which turns out to be futile in the end, leaves Quinn with unanswered questions about everything, and Quinn leaves the reader with unanswered questions about his whereabouts. It seems there are simply no answers. The search for meaning is not successful, not even for the reader; there is simply no real, absolute meaning behind the story.

Review of Literature

The practice of psychoanalysis was developed and popularised by Sigmund Freud (1919), in which one's dreams, personalities and desires were analysed in order to best determine the unconscious wants of the mind. Central concepts related to Freud's (1923) approach to psychoanalysis involve the id, ego, and superego—a tripartite structure of the human psyche that serves different purposes. The id is in charge of our sexual and aggressive drives, as well as our primitive instincts; the superego acts as the moral conscience for an individual; and the ego mediates between these two opposites to create a nuanced, realistic personality.

Freud also discusses the idea of the Uncanny, or that which is real yet feels distinctly unreal. Freud referred to the uncanny as 'das unheimlich,' categorising it as uncomfortable and unfamiliar, yet completely concealed from our knowledge (punter, 2007, p. 137). In fiction, the uncanny is typically utilised to depict something that is decidedly out of its environment. With this concept of the Uncanny, as well as the *id*, *ego* and *superego*, a Freudian psychoanalysis can be applied to fictional works by evaluating these aspects in the characters created by the author.

In addition to the Freudian perspective, Jacques Lacan (2007) posited a theory of the human psyche that framed itself within a spectrum between need, demand and desire. Lacan posits that human beings demand things of others, based on their needs and desires, and this is what drives our attitudes and behaviours, however conscious or subconscious. According to Lacan, we are mostly driven by our desire to be recognised by an 'Other,' and/or to desire what the Other also desires or lacks (Lacan, 2007). Desire is what drives our need to be recognised and validated by others: 'Desire is neither the appetite for satisfaction nor the demand for love, but the difference that results from the subtraction of the first from the second, the very phenomenon of their splitting (Spaltung)' (Lacan 2007, p. 690–692). In essence, desire

happens when demands exceed our needs; we may meet our needs in some way, but what we demand beyond that becomes our desire.

Furthermore, another approach focuses on texts that use more than one language in more complex, enriching, general and interactive ways (Zucca, 2022, p.7). It aims at viewing texts that move beyond bounded communities, as prescribed by monolingual ideals and standards, towards theorising language boundaries as fluid, dynamic, hybrid and mobile.

In the context of self and its positive role, Kirpal Singh (2022) believes that the absence of POSITIVITY can be highly debilitating. Thus, we yearn for the positive in our leaders. It cannot be denied that when and where positivity exists and works as the *operatus mundi* plentiful gains are expected as well as frequently obtained. The challenge here is how to properly ascertain and use positivity.

Research Methods

For this paper, I have conducted a close textual analysis of the *The New York Trilogy – City of Glass*. The primary focus of this analysis was to perform close readings of the characters of this work, examining the ways in which their behaviour, motivations and the way Auster created them to fit within the framework of Lacanian and Freudian psychoanalysis (the *id*, *ego*, *superego*; Lacanian notions of desire). Elements of poststructuralism and postmodernism were also used to investigate how these characters were utilised to facilitate Auster's commentary upon genre and narrative fiction itself.

Discussion

In trying to sort this issue out, one must, first of all, be aware of the fact that since *City of Glass* is a novel, all identities of the characters are constructed by the author. This is an important point. However, novels can be read as displaying real-life issues, as stated in Alford: “[w]hile they are obvious fictions, narrators’ and characters’ claims can be understood as arguments about the ‘real’ world, the world of lived experience” (1987, p. 65). That is one side of the argument which gives relevance to this analysis. On the other hand, the poststructuralist view is that all identities are constructs, fictional or non-fictional. Kristeva used the term “*sujet-en- procès*,” translated into “subject-in-process” and “subject-on-trial” (Becker-Leckrone, 2005, p. 165). In other words,

even the identities of non-fictional people are shaped and reshaped throughout our lives. This will be dealt with further later in this section, but first, however, arguments against a hierarchical structure among identities of the novel's characters will be presented. Daniel Quinn has numerous identities, identities which he, at times, changes as though they were his clothes. There is Daniel Quinn, William Wilson, Max Work, Paul Auster, and even, in encounters with Peter Stillman Sr., Henry Dark and Peter Stillman Jr. As stated earlier, Quinn's Daniel Quinn identity is a painful one to live with. That is not the only reason his other identities are constructed. Sometimes the Daniel Quinn identity is just not suitable for the tasks that he sets out on. Quinn is not a private detective, but Paul Auster is, and with that one can conclude that if nothing else, the Quinn identity is certainly not “better” than his other identities. In fact, one can argue that his many identities complement each other and create a wholeness of the character. Peter Stillman Jr. has fewer identities than Quinn, but still he has two, however, not simultaneously. His first identity has been reconstructed to become another, but nothing suggests one's superiority.

City of Glass, in classic Auster style, follows a detective novelist named Quinn, who is mistaken for a real detective (ironically named Paul Auster) and sent on a mission following a strange phone call. The most prominent female figure in the novel is, intriguingly enough, missing from the novel's narrative: Quinn's wife, who (along with his son) died under mysterious circumstances before the events of the novel (Auster, 1986, p. 17). Quinn, as befits the prototypical detective novel protagonist, carries that pain with him throughout the book, using his wife's memory as yet another symbol of his grief and the emptiness of his life: ‘He had nothing, he knew nothing, he knew that he knew nothing’ (Auster, 1986, p. 159). From a Lacanian perspective, Quinn carries the desire for a normal, everyday life that comes with having a wife and child; his wife's absence in that respect is what drives his desires.

To have a better picture of the postmodern self and identity, we need to look back at the stages that led to the so-called corrosion of identity in line with the industrial revolution. First urbanisation devalued the traditional community where identity was formed. Then the community was supplanted by fluid sets of relationships, and these changes led to a change in the family structure, which caused a gap between our idea of the private world and the public world. These changes in values (secularisation) concerning the self at the workplace were replaced by the value of efficiency and

technique, a workplace that had no respect for the earlier values of self and called for an efficient self to meet its increasing needs. (Derrida, 1997, p. 197) In other words, the traditional values were spared for newly proposed values that were in absolute opposition to the previous ones. This reduced identity (including social, religion, tradition, heritage, etc.) to a private, leisure time activity and promoted the formerly secular activities to take on a new form of identity and caused questions such as: where does the identity originate? Does it originate in our mind and we determine it, or are there other factors at work?

Even though the author is a physical person and the others are fictional, one can argue that the answer is that since they are all constructed anyway, they are all Paul Auster. The same discussion can be held concerning Daniel Quinn's identities: are they all him, or is it the Daniel Quinn identity that is really him, following that the others are made up? From the viewpoint of poststructuralist theory, the Daniel Quinn identity is as much of a construct as any other. The consequence of that would be that there is in fact no hierarchical structure among identities. All of Daniel Quinn's identities are, to an equal extent, his identities. In the same way, all the Paul Auster-labelled identities, including that of the author, are to the same extent Paul Auster, and this is underpinned by the argument that they are all constructs. Paul Auster once said in an interview: 'The world is in my head. My body is in the world,' (Rydin) meaning that his world, or rather his perception of the world, is true only for himself, and thus that it is not the universal 'real world.' (Little & Auster, 1997, p. 59). It is a construction, and consequently, his identity is a construction. It is, as well as the identities of the novel's characters, in his head. (Little & Auster, 1997, p. 59)

Examining the myths and genres of American fiction writing in a postmodernist, poststructuralist way, Auster explores the inherent confusion and lack of purpose postmodernist thought lends its characters and readers. Along with the notion of personal mythology, Americans latch onto universal narratives specific to their culture in order to preserve a sense of normalcy (Walker, 2015, p. 52). Auster's works lean into this sense of unambiguous, causal storytelling, as noted by the protagonist of *The Locked Room*:

To say that so and so was born here and went there, that he did this and did that, that he married this woman and had these children, that he lived, that he died, that he left behind these books or this battle or that bridge—none of that tells us very much. We all want to be told stories, and

we listen to them in the same way we did when we were young. (Auster 1987, p. 242243)

These stories, then, reinforce social values, such as those that dictate gender norms like the typical roles of men and women. In presenting, then upending, these roles and values through the deconstruction of typical narrative structure, Auster challenges existing myths, empowering the readers to see through them to their problematic core.

Conclusion

Despite the unstable state of identity, which gets worse by entering the postmodern era distanced from the traditional stable state, we witness a definition that sets a contradictory mission before humans in terms of identity. Lacan argues that the self, born vulnerable, forms identity through identifying with 'images' on an unending quest for a unified, stable sense of self. It seems that Lacan is dissatisfied with the postmodern state of identity and prescribes a quest for a more unified and stable one, the same as the traditional one, at least in terms of stability.

A brief review of the origins of our identity types reveals a variety of perspectives. For example, Nietzsche argues that the ethical self must be shown, through 'genealogy', to be a historical construction. In other words, identity has no truth and is a product open to reconstruction over time. From a social vantage point, Marx in *Preface and Introduction to a Contribution to The Critique of Political Economy* argues, 'It is not the consciousness of men that determines their being, but on the contrary, it is their social being that determines their consciousness' (1904, p. 122), an outlook echoing Nietzsche's notion, despite the apparent prioritising of social factors rather than historical ones as the formative factors that form and construct our identity. From a psychoanalytic perspective, Freud argues that identity is not stable or rational, but an ever-conflicted tension between id and ego, the conscious and the subconscious mind.

In this respect, a Freudian/Lacanian reading of Auster's works further contributes to the prevailing wisdom of most scholarly literature on Auster—that his works emphasise postmodernist, poststructuralist uncertainty of what actually constitutes the real. In creating deconstructive works that question the norms, values and structures of detective and dystopian fiction, Auster breaks apart the shared American mythology of the nuclear family and community-based social order

to question its value and maintenance without the mitigating force of women. In the absence of women's nurturing practicality and *superego* on the macro level, a male-driven society would be torn apart by its own worst impulses—its *id*.

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