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THE QUEST FOR LIFE: A CRITICAL STUDY OF PAUL AUSTER'S *IN THE COUNTRY OF LAST THINGS AND MOON PALACE*

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Abstract: The contemporary American novelist, Paul Auster's works engage critics for their philosophical and existential concerns. His characters constantly search for their identities, meanings in life, and a place in this spatial reality. Sometimes, they miserably fail in their endeavours and plunge into despair so much so that they reach the point of extinction; however, they never lose the urge for survival. What I have sought to focus in this paper is that Auster depicts through his characters a quest for life. I have taken two of his early novels to present this issue. Both the novels evince that the protagonists enable themselves to survive in this harsh universe by the means of story-telling, self-realization, and true companionship.

Keywords: Survival, Story-telling, Self-realization, Quest for life.

Paul Auster is one of the champions of postmodern literature. Regarding his novels, critics stem forth utterly contradictory remarks. On the one hand, critics like Dennis Barone have compared him with Nathaniel Hawthorne. Dennis Barone comments:

> In short time since the publication of the Trilogy (1985-1986) he has become one of America's most praised contemporary novelists. He has frequently been compared to authors ranging from Nathaniel Hawthorne to Alain Robbe-Grillet. (1)

On the other hand, Auster has been condemned merely as a third grade practitioner of fiction writing. Eric Wirth severely criticises Auster's mode of presentation. According to Wirth, Auster is a writer who "admits clichéd formulas of melodrama" (*Beyond the Red Notebook,* 176) and his "predilection for artless language reaches to hackneyed figures of speech" (*Beyond the Red Notebook,* 176). Nevertheless, Paul Auster is a deft novelist whose primary concern lies in explicating human identity and existential crisis. Critics have discerned elements of detective novel and of the picaresque in his oeuvre. Joan Dupre has pointed out the constant search for a father figure in Auster's novels. In this paper, I seek to focus on the theme of survival in Paul Auster's early novels, namely, *In the Country of Last Things* and *Moon Palace*, an aspect usually overlooked by Auster scholars.

These two novels are apparently very different. While *In the Country of Last Things* "is a nightmarish tale of complete breakdown set in an apocalyptic and

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anonymous metropolis" (Lerate, 122), the main concern of *Moon Palace* is identity (Iverson, 125). However, one thematic approach of Auster binds them invariably. The protagonists of these novels struggle to exist in this hostile world. This struggle has been depicted through two types of quest. These two quests are: the quest for a self and the quest for a true companion. These two quests persistently encourage the characters to go ahead in life. They can accept the physical world and the pains associated with it by seeking refuge in a new self and bonding with a true companion. My approach to this quest for self is two-dimensional. First, the characters take up new selves; and secondly, they try to reach the bottom of their selves to understand themselves. By a contact with their own selves, they secure an understanding of others and the universe. The protagonists undergo multiple trials in order to ultimately discover their selves. Again, his lonely individuals ceaselessly seek for companions. They survive through their benevolences. An avid reader of Auster can easily discern one very general feature in his protagonists—a confessional tone. They are always pregnant with certain experiences which they desire to share with their chosen companions. Storytelling becomes a means of survival for them. The alienated individuals re-live the past experiences and prepare themselves for future confrontations by unburdening themselves.

In *In the Country of Last Things*, the protagonist Anna Blume is out to search her journalist brother. She undergoes an extremely strenuous and painful journey. She confronts innumerable hazards throughout her journey. Yet, she is determined to go on. She does not want to shun her search:

> But finally, I cannot let myself go. I will not allow it. I am going to hold on for as long as I can, even if it kills me. (*Country,* 11)

This determination slackens a little bit when Anna comes face to face with death and scarcity of food, shelter, and security in the nameless country of last things. She writes in a letter to her friend:

> That is the dilemma. On the one hand, you want to survive, to adapt, to make the best of things as they are. But, on the other hand, to accomplish this seems to entail killing off all those things that once made you think of yourself as human. Do you see what I am trying to say? In order to live, you must make yourself die. That is why so many people have given up. For no matter how hard they struggle, they know they are bound to lose. And at this point it is surely a pointless thing to struggle at all. (*Country,* 20)

Anna was perambulating the city without having friends. She persistently felt the necessity of a companion. For her survival, she needed the help of some outsider. She had in her coat a photograph of her brother's friend who was totally unknown to her. Yet, that photograph consoled her in her distress. She confessed:

> I had no friends, no one to talk to, no one to share a meal with. If not for the picture of Sam, I don't think I would have made it. (*Country,* 44)

At this critical juncture Anna finds Isabel, a veteran woman, as her companion. Chance brings them close to each other. Anna saves Isabel from an accident. Metaphorically Isabel, too, saves Anna's life. Anna's life takes a new turn with the arrival of Isabel. She says:

> That was how I met Isabel. For better or worse, my true life in the city began at that moment. (*Country,* 45)

Isabel, too, was in search of a child whom she could adore. In her solitary life Anna comes as a blessing from god. Isabel draws succour from Anna:

> . . . it wasn't an accident. I have prayed to God for so long now that he finally sent someone to rescue me. (*Country,* 49)

Survival is easy for both of them. What is more important, they depend on each other. Without Anna, Isabel and her husband are helpless. This dependence on her is something which sustains Anna. That is why Anna confidently remarks:

> But the fact was that Isabel had saved my life just as surely I had hers, and it never occurred to me not to do what I could. From being a little waif they dragged in off the street, I became the exact measure that stood between them and total ruin. Without me, they would not have lasted ten days. I don't mean to boast about what I did, but for the first time in my life there were people who depended on me, and I did not let them down. (*Country,* 58)

As it happens with other protagonists of Auster, Anna too loses the company of Isabel and forfeits her secured home. After Isabel's death, she is brought back to her previous condition: "After all the ups and downs, I was right back where I had started" (*Country,* 85). Gradually, Anna is drowned in her dark life again. She re-initiates her search for her brother in that God-forsaken country. Fortunately, she meets Sam one day. This company of Sam enables Anna to dream again. She gets rejuvenated. Her life revolves around a new axis. She pleasantly confesses:

> Those were the best days for me. Not just here, you understand, but anywhere --the best days of my life. It's odd that I could have been so happy during that awful time, but living with Sam made all the difference. Outwardly, things didn't change much. The same struggles still existed, the same problems still had to be confronted every day, but now I had been given the possibility of hope, and I began to believe that sooner or later our troubles were going to end. (*Country,* 107)

After the chance meeting with Sam, Anna enjoys a euphoric life. But Anna had to lose this pleasant home life due to a conspiracy of Dujardin. Anna gets severely injured and learns her husband to be dead. Hence, she again becomes a lonely woman with no other person or companion to rely. She is taken to Woburn House and there she leads a lesbian affair with the owner of the House, Victoria. Victoria, too, "was hungry for someone to talk to..." (*Country,* 134)This relationship with Victoria sustains Anna. Anna realizes the importance of this intimacy with Victoria in her life. She confesses: "Because of this bond, I was able to reconcile myself to the work, and that in turn had a calming effect on my spirits" (*Country,* 158-159).

After a thorough reading of this novel, we discern that Anna, Isabel, Victoria and Sam are all lonely individuals who are always in search of true companions. They all are on the verge of death or psychological extinction. But their chance finding of companions enables them to survive and derive immense joy from life.

The very opening of *Moon Palace* brings forth the vital role a true companion plays in the life of Marco:

> I wanted to live dangerously, to push myself as far as I could go, and then see what happened to me when I got there. As it turned out, I nearly did not make it. Little by little, I saw my money dwindle to zero; I lost my apartment; I wound up living in the streets. If not for a girl named Kitty Wu, I probably would have starved to death. (*Palace,* 5)

Marco, the protagonist, was brought up by his uncle Victor. After the death of Victor, Marco sold all the books he inherited from his uncle to meet the basic necessities of life. When all his money had been spent, he started to live in a park like an animal. He succeeds to come out of that infernal life with the help of his beloved Kitty Wu and his friend Zimmer. Rightly does Anniken Telnes Iverson comment:

> He was physically rescued from dying of pneumonia in the rain and cold but mentally and emotionally it was the love of Kitty and Zimmer that changed his outlook on life and himself. (132)

Auster's presentation of human relationship, as a panacea for modern capitalistic society is quite engaging in this novel. When Uncle Victor leaves for his final tour, he urges Marco vehemently to stretch forth his hand:

> Come, give me your hand. Yes, that's right, a good firm grip. Like so. And now shake. That's right, a shake of farewell. A shake to last us to the end of time. (*Palace,* 25)

Hence, a human touch will work as a magic potion for their survival. It is the warmth of human relationship which sustains us.

Marco inherited a suit of his uncle. This suit symbolically turned out to be his uncle or a father figure. The suit also became analogous to home and security for Marco. The suit took such dimensions because it was invested with the memory of Uncle Victor. It is not the palpable suit rather the impalpable memory Uncle Victor's company which sustains Marco in his days of pains. Marco says:

> At moments of stress and unhappiness, it was a particular comfort to feel myself swaddled in the warmth of my uncle's clothes, and there were times when I imagined the suit was actually holding me together, that if I didn't wear it my body would fly apart. It functioned as a protective membrane, a second skin that shielded me from the blows of life. (*Palace,* 27)

After Uncle Victor's death, Marco gradually plunged into an abyss of despair. He sought to destroy himself. He lost interest in life, society, and people. He was a lonely sufferer. At that moment he found the loving and caring touch of Kitty and Zimmer. Marco delineates his condition in vivid terms:

> I had jumped off the edge of a cliff, and then, just as I was about to hit bottom, an extraordinary event took place: I learned that there were people who loved me. To be loved like that makes all the difference. It does not lessen the terror of the fall, but it gives a new perspective on what that terror means. I had jumped off the edge, and then, at the very last moment, something reached out and caught me in midair. That something is what I define as love. It is one thing that can stop a man from falling, the one thing powerful enough to negate the laws of gravity. (*Palace,* 78)

It is human company which brings out Marco of his dark and alienated life. He regains his faith in life and is able to discern the joy of life: "I was seized by an uncontrollable sense of happiness and well-being, a newfound love for the world" (*Palace,* 80).

Story-telling, in Paul Auster's novels, becomes a very convenient tool for the protagonists to relieve themselves of their past burden and to cope with the existing problems. To Auster, story-telling takes the means of survival. We find glimpses of this method to be scattered through his early novels. By taking recourse to story-telling, the alienated protagonists seek to build a reconnection with the world at large. Rightly does Mark Brown comment:

> Story-telling in Auster's work functions as a means by which the alienated individual can share with others, and reconnect to the social realm. (4)

In *In the Country of Last things,* Anna Blume perambulates over the non-descript country bringing forth innumerable hazards upon her. But she keeps record of all the events happening around her. She ultimately succeeds to send a letter to her

friend whose identity remains in darkness. This writing of the letter is something that keeps Anna moving forward. It is really interesting to discern that Auster's characters stick to story-telling or writing but they are hardly concerned about responses. They are elated when they get the opportunity to vent out their emotions as well as their experiences. Telling itself is a pleasure and provides moral support. In *In the Country of Last Things,* Anna Blume says:

> I am not sure why I am writing to you now. To be honest, I have barely thought of you since I got here. But suddenly, after all this time, I feel there is something to say, and if I don't quickly write it down, my head will burst. It doesn't matter if you read it. It doesn't even matter if I send it—assuming that could be done. Perhaps it comes down to this. I am writing to you because you know nothing. Because you are far away from me and you know nothing. (*Country,* 3)

The characters of Paul Auster take a plunge into their inner territories through this telling. They also dream of a better life through this story-telling. Auster has coalesced this method with a sublime tragic feeling in *In the Country of Last Things.* The country, where Anna Blume reaches, fails to provide sustenance to its citizens. Hence, the citizens take refuge to story-telling to derive succour from it:

> Often you will overhear a group of people describing a meal in meticulous detail, beginning with the soups and appetizers and slowly working their way to dessert, dwelling on each savor and spice, on all the various aromas and flavours, concentrating now on the method of preparation, now on the effect of food itself, from the first twinge of taste on the tongue to the gradually expanding sense of peace as the food travels down the throat and arrives in the belly. (*Country,* 9)

Auster's *Moon Palace* absolutely depends upon this method of story-telling. Thomas Effing requires Marco as a listener to salve his past crimes. Marco is, time and again, dubious about Effing's story. But in Auster's novels, the telling is important not the authenticity of telling. Effing is desperately in need of a listener. When Marco asks Effing about his selection as a listener, Effing is quite explicit:

> Because I have no choice . . . Like it or not, you're the only listener I have. (*Palace,* 188)

Effing is not bothered about Marco's responses. He needs an urgent confession. Effing's son Solomon Barber also confesses to Marco. He divulges his clandestine affair with a woman named Elizabeth who is, in fact, Marco's mother. After the confession, Solomon feels relieved and less guilty. His conversation with Marco after this confession bears evidence of his happiness:

> "You're the first person I've ever told those stories to," he said. "Thank you for being such a good listener. I feel...how shall I put it...I feel there's a bond between us now."
>
> "It's been a memorable weekend," I said.
>
> "Yes, that it's been. A memorable weekend. A weekend to end all weekends." (*Palace,* 376)

In Auster's protagonists, we discern a drive towards solitary life. This solitude is necessary for them to penetrate the self and to unite with society at large. As Marco, the protagonist of *Moon Palace* confesses to a doctor:

> . . . I thought that by abandoning myself to the chaos of the world, the world might ultimately reveal some secret harmony to me, some form or pattern that would help me to penetrate myself. (*Palace,* 120)

When they come to know themselves, they can understand other people. In this way a bond is established between the inner and the outer. Auster's characters are ceaselessly searching for true companions. When they fail in their search or any separation takes place, they retreat to their inner selves to discover solace and moral support for survival. Both the novels, *In the Country of Last Things* and *Moon Palace*, depict this issue vividly.

Anna Blume's husband Samuel Farr, in *In the Country of Last Things*, endeavours to find his self after his separation with Anna:

> The object of my life was to remove myself from my surroundings, to live in a place where nothing could hurt me anymore. One by one, I tried to abandon my attachments, to let go of all the things I ever cared about. The idea was to achieve indifference, an indifference so powerful and sublime that it would protect me from further assault. (*Country,* 162)

In *Moon Palace* Marco turns into a pauper. After his uncle's death, he is forced to live in Central Park. He leads an absolute solitary life. The proximity with the nature helped him to discover his self. Marco is quite enthusiastic about this life in Central Park:

> If the streets forced me to see myself as others saw me, the park gave me a chance to return to my inner life, to hold on to myself purely in terms of what was happening inside me. It is possible to survive without a roof over your head, I discovered, but you cannot live without establishing an equilibrium between the inner and outer. The park did that for me. (*Palace,* 89)

Without this realization Marco's survival would not have been possible. Like Nashe, the protagonist of Auster's *The Music of Chance*, Marco desperately wants to undone his past errors. This zeal, obviously, works as a driving force in Marco's

survival. Marco was leading life of an animal in Central Park. That same Marco talks of an ideal life:

> More than anything else, I felt a need to purify myself, to repent for all my excesses of self-involvement. From total selfishness, I resolved to achieve a state of total selflessness. . . I wanted to turn myself into a saint, a godless saint who would wander through the world performing good works. No matter how absurd it sounds to me now, I believe that was precisely what I wanted. I was desperate for a certainty, and I was prepared to do anything to find it. (*Palace,* 110-111)

In Thomas Effing's life, too, we discern regeneration. After lots of travelling, Effing begins to stay in a cave in Utah. Initially in that cave he was almost on the verge of madness. Suddenly a self-realization dawns on him in his solitary existence. He decides to lead a disciplined life. After two or three weeks of this new disciplined life, Effing feels the urge to paint again. The creative urge is the denominator of his desire for survival: "...for the next three weeks he felt as though he had been reborn" (*Palace,* 243). This sort of rebirth is associated with the purification of the self which is the consequence of self-realization.

After his separation with Kitty, Marco goes to a trip with Solomon. Accidentally, Solomon dies. Marco again becomes lonely. Yet he does not lose interest in life. When Marco fails to earn a steady companion, he takes a dip into his self and consequently discerns a new spirit of survival:

> In the morning, I understood that chance had taken me in the right direction. Without stopping to think about it, I had been following the road to the west, and now that I was on my way, I suddenly felt calmer, more in control of myself. I would do what Barber and I had set out to do in the first place, I decided, and knowing that I had a purpose, that I was not running away from something so much as going toward it, gave me the courage to admit to myself that I did not in fact want to be dead. (*Palace,* 413)

Marco now understands the importance of survival. Marco is still lonely but not in a miserable condition. He decides to undertake a new journey. This journey would enable him to discover a new self for him: "...I had only to keep walking to know that I had left myself behind, that I was no longer the person I had once been" (*Palace,* 418). Auster has very dexterously employed the concept of walking or journey as a means to search a new self. It is quite interesting and striking that Marco's tone echoes that of his creator. In his autobiographical work, *Winter Journal*, Auster remarked:

> In order to do what you do, you need to walk. (224)

After this analysis, one thing becomes evident that Auster's characters never lose the battle of life. They are winners as they are able to discover a belief in themselves. They fall in dangerous situations, face emotional turmoil, and suffer from pricks of conscience; but they never think of death. They realize, like their creator, that survival itself is a triumph in human life. This very idea of survival runs as an undercurrent throughout *In the Country of Last Things* and *Moon Palace*.

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