



QUEST FOR IDENTITY AND REALITY IN THE SELECT NOVELS OF PAUL AUSTER

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ABSTRACT: “Knowing yourself is the beginning of all wisdom” (Aristotle). *The Brooklyn Follies* (2005) by Paul Auster depicts the human relationship and irrationalities of the characters. Auster frequently uses Intertextuality and metafictional aspects in this novel. The chief narrator in the novel is Nathan Glass who tells his family incidents and records their follies in his book entitled “*The Book of Human Folly*”. Many past incidents, events are recollected in memory and transmitted in narrative forms like autobiographies, diaries, testimonies, documents etc.

Keywords: human relationship, irrationalities, follies, misfortunes, intertextuality, metafiction

Nathan Glass, the protagonist narrates the sequences from his own life and his family members. Nathan is a fifty-nine-year-old retired insurance salesman who comes back to his native place Brooklyn in order to have a peaceful death. Nathan is spotted with lung cancer. He is recently divorced from his wife Edith and separated father to his daughter Rachel. The concept of divorce is often repeated in Paul Auster’s works. Auster includes the concept of nostalgia in few of his works. Nathan’s life is like Auster’s father where Sam Auster and his mother Queenie got separated which made Auster and his wife Lydia Davis got separated. All these bitter incidents created a great impact on Auster’s life so he uses divorce as a subject in

many of his works. Nathan as divorced, separated father and lung cancer patient surrounded with misfortunes loses his hope in life. He is leading a temporary life because of cruelty of the disease.

Most of the novels of Paul Auster deal with introverted state of his characters. He indirectly narrates his own experience through the narration to his readers. Metafiction plays a most important role in most of Auster's works, *The Brooklyn Follies* is no exception. David Lodge states "Metafiction is fiction about fiction: novels and stories that call attention to their fictional status and their own compositional procedures" (206). Metafiction brings the attention of the readers that they are reading a fictional work of the writer. Nathan's life looks to end but he wants to change his hypnotic life and decides to write a book. In most of Auster's works the narrators are the writers. However, there are few characters like Nathan Glass, the protagonist whose main career is not a writer but he does the act of writing the story in *The Brooklyn Follies*.

The narrator of the novel takes the place of the writer (Auster) and explains the readers that the book, they are reading is written by him. He entitles his book as *The Book of Human Folly* plans to set down in "the simplest, clearest language possible an account of every blunder, every pratfall, every embarrassment, every idiocy, every foible, and every inane act I had committed during my long and checked career as a man" (5). Nathan was not a professional writer like Quinn in *The New York Trilogy* (1987) and the character called Peter Aaron in *Leviathan* (1992). Writing the book becomes interest to Nathan as he says:

"When I couldn't think of stories to tell about myself, I would write down things that had happened to people I knew, and when that source ran dry as well, I would take on historical events, recording the follies of my fellow human beings down through the ages, beginning with the vanished civilizations of the ancient world and pushing on the first months of the twenty-first century." (5- 6)

Moreover, he says that the book may be good for a few incidents like laughs and the tone which would be light and ridiculous. Mostly, Nathan introduces himself in the beginning of the novel in order to make the readers comfortable in understanding who is the hero and how the story line progresses.

Auster plays a metafictional game on the writing process where the writer mentions all the details is a kind of way of preventing critics to criticize his work. This kind of metafictional game displays the writer's ability and knowledge on the literature. Nathan attempts to describe his work *The Book of Human Folly* which has various fragments. The readers can see that the narrator Nathan clearly identifies himself as the author of his work. Usually, Auster's characters are well educated and often make references to many writers,

books, films actors and arts. This can be seen in Nathan Glass and Tom's conversation in the novel. He works in army for two years then due to family responsibilities he dissuades his ambition. In Nathan's life, there is always an urge to escape from reality, he fears for loneliness and searches for a way to escape it. Nathan settles on the Cosmic Diner as his regular spot for lunch. He is served by a waitress named Marina. A strong desire starts to develop in Nathan towards her. He says,

“One of the waitresses was an adorable Puerto Rican girl named Marina, and I rapidly developed a crush on her” (4).

He knows about few restrictions and the modest way of behaviour in the society and enhances his view as,

“She was half my age and already married, which meant that romance was out of the question, but she was so splendid to look at, so gentle in her dealings with me, so ready to laugh at my less than funny jokes, that I literally pined for her on her days off” (4).

Nathan's lost love and happiness of leading a painful life change to a passion which triggers him after seeing this young adorable girl. Nathan's foolishness is seen clearly because as an old man developing a crush which is away from modest behaviour in the society. Nathan thinks that it is not clear to Tom what he had come through in his life,

“Tom knew that he was letting go to hell, another part of him thought that perhaps this job would do him some good, that if he paid attention to what he was doing and why he was doing it” (23 - 24).

Life seems to be long battle for Tom but he does not moan nor did he feel sorry for himself. He finds a method to apologize his stupidity. Finally he finds a job in Brightman's Attic Library. Tom is a pleasant guy but his isolation wounds him badly. He forgets important occasions in his life. Nathan says:

“Another year went by, and so thorough was Tom's birthday alone. The truth was that he had forgotten all about it, and because no one called to congratulate him or wish him well, it wasn't until two o'clock the next morning that he finally remembered.” (26)

Life forces Tom to a sad corner. He leads a tough life and struggles hard for his survival. Nathan and Tom lead a lonely life. Nathan's life is so strong, though he faces sufferings in life but he has determined mind.

Paul Auster has a great admiration for Nathaniel Hawthorne an important American writer. Auster has mentioned Hawthorne in some of his works and this novel highlights about Nathaniel Hawthorne in a different way. Fascination towards Hawthorne provokes Auster to give a title “Hawthorn Street or Hawthorne Street” (239) in one of the chapters in *The Brooklyn Follies*. He adopts Intertextuality to express his idea in this novel as well as in the work *The Book of Illusions* (2002) where the character named Hector Mann wishes to burn all his films after his death and Auster’s other work *Oracle Night* (2003) where the character named Sidney Orr destroys his work blue notebook. Likewise, Tom burns all his collected materials. Collecting materials for thesis is not an easy job. He has worked hard to collect the materials and without thinking he destroys all the materials. He burns his dream along with the materials.

Nathan has to come out from his married life whereas Tom is leading a sacrificed life. Both leave their happiness for the sake of family. Their present situations are almost equal. Nathan says to Tom,

“We both lived alone, neither one of us was involved with a woman, and neither one of us had many friends. What better way to break the monotony of solitude than to chow down with your confrère, your semblable, your long lost Tomassino” (80).

Nathan suffers in old age whereas Tom suffers at very young age. Both are caught in the clutches of solitude. Auster has the same experience in his life in which he confesses in his work *Conversations with Paul Auster* (2013). The natural life of Nathan reflects the reality of life. Auster’s father Sam Auster’s death highly influenced him. After the death of his father, he starts to dedicate his time in writing and produced many notable works. His father has left an irreplaceable trace to him. Auster visits his father’s house after his death and he finds few things which are used by his father. He could not forget his father’s death. As a remembrance of his father, he wrote the autobiography “*The Invention of Solitude*” (1982). He says,

“There is nothing more terrible, I learned, than having to face the objects of a dead man . . . What is one to think, for example, of a closetful of clothes waiting silently to be worn again by a man who will not be coming back to open the door? . . . Or an electric razor sitting in bathroom, still clogged with the whisker dust of the last shave?” (10)

Besides, the death of a close relation creates the biggest scar in one’s lives. Finally, Nathan Glass’s family gets united and he recovers from his health. However, unexpected disaster occurs not only to Nathan’s family but to the whole American nation. The incident took on September 2001. It was a massive terrorist

attack on the World Trade Centre. Auster frequently uses this incident in his works. The narrator of the novel expresses:

“It was eight o’clock when I stepped out onto the street, eight o’clock on the morning of September 11, 2001 – just forty-six minutes before the first plane crashed into the North Tower of the World Trade Centre. Just two hours after that, the smoke of three thousand incinerated bodies would drifts over toward Brooklyn and come pouring down on us in a white cloud of ashes and death.” (304)

Nathan, who accepts life after cancer, ends abruptly in the morning because of terrorist attacks. It remains as a dreadful incident. Many dead bodies are found and clouds are covered with ashes. It is unimaginable scene. Auster brings the incident in his final pages of the novel. Throughout the novel he portrays the family relationship and follies of people but towards the end he encloses a twist. He does this to show the foolish action done by the terrorist group to innocent lives. There are two types of follies in *The Brooklyn Follies*. Auster portrays personal and private follies which are related to family and individuals’ life. The second one is political and social life of the people.

Auster beautifully depicts the human relationships but these relationships get broken because of their actions. Some people’s life gets traumatized because of their foolish acts. Silly actions lead to a disaster in happy relationships. Many do not have the heart to pardon mistakes. For example, Auster’s character Aurora leads a debased life but the family forgives her action. She is the main reason for Tom’s suffering who has to give up his dreams but he doesn’t think about her foolish acts instead he is afraid of how she would live her life. Auster’s narration within narration in *The Brooklyn Follies* adds a great effect. The narration tells the tale of another person’s life incident, whether it is the story of Harry’s secret past or Aurora’s degraded life which shows Auster’s literary talent. Auster beautifully depicts the relationships which provide a thought-provoking message to his readers. Auster connects the fact and the fiction in the novel.

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