



Lacanian Desire& Fantasy & Trauma in Paul Auster's Man in the Dark

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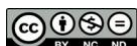
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ABSTRACT

This paper aims to examine Paul Auster's *Man in the Dark* (2008) under the light of Jacques Lacan's theories including "Desire," "Fantasy," "Trauma". In spite of various valuable works that have been done in all different areas, there has not been any attempts to examine the concept of desire, fantasy, and trauma together in one study. Moreover, the researcher attempts to prove that the juxtaposition of desire and fantasy result in trauma on some of the characters. The word, trauma, is concerned with the psychological and individual characteristics. In this sense, the researcher focuses on the psychological reading of trauma to examine how some characters combat with these traumatic experiences. Due to the fact that no traumatized characters can manifest the full image of trauma, the researcher claims that there is no master-signifier. That is to say, this reveals the infeasibility of categorizing the multiple layers of trauma impacts. Furthermore, Lacan asserts that the notion of desire causes the entire propensities in the characters' life. On the other hand, these tendencies lead to frustration as well as depression in some characters. By scrutinizing the main character, August Brill, the researcher aims to elucidate the unfulfillment of his desires which leads him to experience traumatic occasions. In this sense, this research demonstrates the sequence of notions like fantasy as well as the desire by evaluating his life. Although this character battles with own issues to remove his traumatic memories, it becomes apparent that the consequence of traumatization remains inevitable.

Keywords: Desire, Fantasy, Trauma, Master-Signifier, Lacan, Paul Auster

1. Introduction

Paul Auster is a writer in the Post-World War II, subsequently, most of the critics place his writings in the classification of postmodernism. In fact, the presence of fragmentation in the postmodern period appears in his writing. This fragmentation in the postmodern novel is a result of some historical catastrophe. In more detail, the researcher strives to survey *Man in the Dark* one of his challenging books and to explain how these fragmentation and dissociation impact on the lives of his characters. In this sense, Lacanian reading helps to demonstrate the psychological problem of traumatized characters. This paper also approves Lacanian psychoanalysis in the surveying of how war has produced various dimensions of human traumas. Lacan's psychoanalysis is not the same as traditional psychoanalysis which emphasizes the id, ego, superego offered by Sigmund Freud. Lacan, suggests a unique theory that highlights not only the subject encountering violence but the unfeasibility of an incorporated self within the subject. Lacan's psychoanalysis invites the individuals to accentuate psychological impacts on the subject. In fact, the Lacanian view lets the researcher articulate the effects of war in the psychical aspects (Malsen 1-7).

In order to accomplish this aim, three notions are taken into consideration. First, the notion of desire will be discussed in order to elucidate the origin of the characters' pain. Second, the notion of fantasy will be deliberated in order to demonstrate that the victim of unfulfilled desire detaches from the world of reality. Third, the notion of trauma will be considered in order to shed light on the relation between desire and fantasy as well as traumatization on the traumatized person. Furthermore, when the above-mentioned book is read with a broader view, we can realize that writing is a means of survival for Brill in order to forget his current lot. In addition, the researcher is not going to limit his study on just Brill, other characters of the story are taken into consideration as well.

2. Desire, Fantasy, and Trauma

2.1. Desire

The term, Desire, is located in the middle of Lacan psychoanalysis. In fact, Desire is an indefinite concept in the Lacanian theory which does not carry a certain meaning in mind. It is often misconceived in a way that it changes into other desires and Lacan claims that analytical experience reveals that "not to want desire and to desire are the same things" (Azari 9). Furthermore, Desire demonstrates nothing because it is alienated both from need and demand and it is "related to the subject's loss of beings and the Other ex-sistence" (ibid 10). That is to say, although it is alienated, it is perceived as the representative when it is elucidated from an unlimited unconscious eagerness for enjoying the primal object of achievement. In this sense, subject and Other are detached and alienated from each other but the desire of the subject is the desire of the Other. Interestingly, Desire comes from lack. "After you get what you want, you do not want it" (Fink 44). From this sentence, we realize that satisfaction always hides desire. When ones receive whatever they wish for, they do not acknowledge it anymore. Moreover, Lacan claims that the inspection of the dream is the survey of the dreamer, that is, a subject who tells the dream to another. Furthermore, desire needs the support of fantasy, where the fading subject meets the lost object which makes his desire. That is to say, this fading of the subject is what makes desire foggy to the subject himself (Rodriguez 55-8).

2.2. Fantasy

Freud uses the concept of fantasy to reveal a scene that is demonstrated to portray the imagination and which creates an unconscious desire. These scenes can be not only conscious but also unconscious. Interestingly, Lacan accepts Freud's idea, he also emphasizes its protective function of it. "Lacan compares the fantasy scene to a frozen image on a cinema screen; just as the film may be stopped at a certain point in order to avoid showing a traumatic scene which follows, so also the fantasy scene is a defense which veils castration" (Evans 60). Moreover, fantasy becomes known as a noticeable concept in Lacan's works. Indeed, the notion has roots not only in Lacan's idea of fantasy but also in his concept of the clinical structure. These two are arranged as a relatively firm way of defending one against castration, a lack in the other. On the other hand, the fantasy empowers the subject to stand up for his desire (ibid 61). It is worth mentioning that unconscious desires are revealed throughout fantasy. There is a fact that fantasy is an imagined perspective in which the subject demonstrates the fulfillment of a desire in a way that is contorted to a higher or minor degree by the defensive system. Furthermore, "Fantasy is not the object of desire, neither is it the desire for specific objects; it is the setting or the *mise-en-scene* of desire" (Homer 87). Apart from that, if we consider metonymy and metaphor in Lacanian concepts we should return to the notion of desire. Due to the fact that desire is articulated in fantasy, it is subject to a metaphorical mapping and losses meaning in the practice. But Lacan reveals human desire to be a force whose motion is restricted around an object that it never wholly fulfill. Therefore, Lacan demonstrates the desire to be essentially metonymical, because there is a perpetual move between contractual objects that none of them can entirely satisfy it (seminar xi 202, 228) "desire is a metonymy" (Ecris 197). Moreover, fantasies are not only imaginary hallucinations but also the mold into critical sensations. Interestingly, fantasies connote that immediate objects are unattainable or they are lost objects.

2.3. Trauma

The concept of trauma refers to not only negative incidents that create distress but also the distress itself. At the extreme, trauma is perceived as an unspeakable incident that leaves the most tremendous sign on both the individuals' psyche and their emotions. Some reviewers claim it is impossible to demonstrate trauma completely. In this manner, they have been blamed for narrowing down the involvement of trauma to some specific crowds. The notion of psychological trauma has been complicated over the years. In fact, psychic trauma is considered as an emotional shock that creates an impact on the mind, mainly subconscious mind in which both emotional and mental disorders happen. Interestingly, individuals' traumas stem from a chain of incidents as well as a set of occasions that are experienced by the individuals in a manner that threaten their physical, social, and spiritual situation (Wechsler 157). It is worth mentioning that trauma is not only a psychological notion, but it is observable in the collective culture of society after experiencing traumatic occasions including terror as well as revolution. In

addition, based on Freud, trauma might be the stem of outside incidents such as family abuses, wars, ethnic conflicts, economic disasters, and other factors which most families from various cultural backgrounds are victim of them in a manner that leads them to melancholic situations. Interestingly enough, Radstone claims that only psychoanalysis focuses on the mediation of trauma by psychical process, and also, Freud reach to the conclusion that trauma is both registered by the unconscious and also mediated by fantasy (Meek 3, 27).

3. Desire, Fantasy, Trauma in *Man in the Dark*

The above-mentioned book of Paul Auster, *Man in the Dark*, portrays an old man, Brill, who due to insomnia, attempts to make up a story in his mind in order to escape the occasion of the disaster that has happened to him so far. On the other hand, in order to forget those traumatic events, he strives to indulge himself in fantasy to push away the profound pain and certain desires of his own life. Indeed, it is impossible because at the same time he remembers past traumatic experiences of his own life.

I am alone in the dark, turning the world around in my head as I struggle through another bout of insomnia, another white night in the great American wilderness. Upstairs, my daughter and granddaughter are asleep in their bedrooms, each one alone as well, the forty-seven-year-old Miriam, my only child, who has slept alone for the past five years, and the twenty-three-year-old Katya, Miriam's only child, who used to sleep with a young man named Titus Small, but Titus is dead now, and Katya sleeps alone with her broken heart (Auster 1).

As the above passage demonstrates, at the beginning of the book, Brill attempts to describe his gloomy situation surrounded him in order to attract the attention of the reader. It seems that besides his negative personal experiences, he carries the pain of his family as well. In fact, he aims to introduce his traumatic occasion and makes a connection between them. Other members of his family namely his daughter and his granddaughter are particularly at risk of suffering from serious psychological problems. Filled with concern, anxiety, depression, failure, and frustration, both of them are craving to come back to those good days. Based on Lacan, the individuals experience a lack within themselves and seek a desire to fulfill it. For him, all desires are established by underlying following to recombine with our lost desire. As Lacan asserts "man's desire is the desire of the Other" (seminar xi 235). Considering the following passage, a sense of despair and helplessness is more tangible in his words.

I lost her, and then I cracked up that rented car, destroying my leg, nearly killing myself in the process, maybe that added to it as well: the indifference, the feeling that after seventy-two years on this earth, who gives a damn if I write about myself or not? it was never anything that interested me, not even when I was young, and I certainly never had any ambition to write a book (Auster 13).

It becomes more obvious that he suffers the loss of his wife, the lost desire. In this sense, one of his distresses might also stand for his lack of his wife. Increasingly, Brill's suffering empowers us to understand the cause of his transformation to fantasy as well as his isolation that appears as a result of being a victim of permanent traumatization by unfulfilled desires. On the other hand, due to the fertility of disaster, he strives to fantasize and dissociate himself from the real world in order to fight with his emptiness. Meanwhile, as Evans asserts, "Although the truth about desire is present to some degree in all speech, speech can never articulate the *whole* truth about desire; whenever speech attempts to articulate desire, there is always a leftover, a surplus, which exceeds speech" (36). To explain more, Brill's writing is ultimately failing to fulfill his desire, no matter what the horizon of his fantasy is. Moreover, Lacan also claims that the certain desire is unachievable in a way that its objects stays so obscure within the domain of unrecognized Other, that the individuals do not know what they desire for or how to attain it. But all of our desires cannot be fulfilled even when we achieve all of our wantings. In fact, all of our desires demonstrate themselves through the activity of desiring (Gardiner 6). In the following passage, as Brill explains, it seems that Katya strives to forget her previous desire and wish to substitute it with another one.

I need a few moments to reflect on Katya and the films, since I still can't decide if this is a good thing or bad thing. When she started ordering the DVDs through the internet, I took it as a sign of progress, a small step in the right direction. If nothing else, it showed me that she was willing to let herself be distracted, to think about something other than her dead Titus (Auster 14).

Interestingly enough, there is another example that can prove the fact that Katya even wants to forget his previous desire, his boyfriend. When Brill attempts to talk with her, she interrupts him with this sentence, "stop it, Grandpa. I do not want to talk about him. Some other time, maybe, but not now. Okay" (ibid 18)? Furthermore, the researcher wishes to offer another example and follow the evolution of Katya's desire from object to object. Interestingly, watching a movie is ultimately not an escape from the past, but a means by which to enable her to enjoy. Having a bitter dissatisfaction of the past, she can never overcome the present situation with which she is engaged. As Brill narrates, "I don't mean to suggest that Katya has turned herself into a stone. She smiles and sometimes even emits a small laugh during the funny scenes in comedies, and her tear ducts have frequently been active during the touching scenes in dramas" (ibid 14).

Approached from another perspective, we can say that there are different pieces of evidence that demonstrate both Brill and Katya feel guilty about the death of Titus. The researcher aims to bring two examples in

order to prove her claim. As Brill explains, "Did he die because he fell in love with our granddaughter? Follow that thought through to end, and you could just as easily blame his parents. If David and Liz hadn't met, Titus never would have been born" (ibid 169). In another example, we can touch the gloomy words that Katya asserts. It seems that her world is doomed to crash under the pressure of society, injustice, as well as wickedness. Also, her occasion and her external obstacles cause her to feel guilty in a manner that demonstrate an unusual reaction towards hardships.

I tried to love Titus, but I couldn't. He loved me, but I couldn't love him back. Why do you think he joined that stupid company and went away? [...] he left because of me. Don't you understand that? I told him I didn't want to see him anymore, and so he went off and got himself killed. Did he die because of me (ibid 163)?

For Lacan, fantasy holds a base association of our everyday lives. Indeed, the individuals create fantasies in an attempt to replace for the loss they encounter through their approval of symbolic connection. In fact, fantasy is a way of announcing a desire (Kenneth 80). As Lacan affirms, "[desire] is satisfied essentially by hallucination"; "Phantasy is the support of desire" (Seminar XI 154, 185). Based on the text, making up a story bring Brill into sharper relief of his real life that it is a way of struggling with his own real. In fact, it is a kind of practicing how to cope with failure and estrangement, how to survive affliction and loss, and how to communicate with his internal world. Indeed, in the world of fantasy, he suffers less from lack of desire and his fantasy allows him to experience a state of freedom. But in his story, one of his characters Brick, that actually portrays he himself, never likes to stay in the unknown world. Indeed, this demonstrates a conflict between the self and the Other. As Lacan claims, "man's desire is a desire for Other". In fact, the aim of one's desire is to come back to an elementary composing between self and Other. In this sense, the individuals seek a substitutions for their lost Other but they can please their ceaseless state of desire through the extension of fantasy.

Once again, Brick puts his head in his hands and begins to moan. it's all too much for him, and after struggling to hold his ground against Frisk's demented assertions, he can feel his mind dissolving, whirling madly through a universe of disconnected thoughts and amorphous dreads. Only one thing is clear to him: he wants to go back. He wants to be with Flora again and return to his old life (Auster 71).

It is crucial to mention that, as time passes, the traces of mental illness appear in survivors of violence like war. "During World War, individuals often experienced symptoms of re-experiencing, hyper vigilance, and intrusive thoughts related to combat events" (Reuther 439). Increasingly, it is impossible for Brill to tolerate all these grieves therefore he attempts to take revenge. It is obvious that in the real world, he cannot destroy the one who caused the war. Therefore, through fantasizing and creating a character in his story he strives to destroy the one who has caused the war. In other words, in the real world, he cannot reach his desires, in fact, he wants to reach them through creating an imaginary character, Brick.

Brick is so confounded by Tobak's statements, he doesn't know what to say. It's like this, the sergeant rattles on. You're the chump they've picked for the big job. Don't ask me why, but the general staff thinks you're the best man for the assignment. Maybe because no one knows you, or maybe because you have this [...] this what? [...] this bland look about you, and no one would suspect you're an assassin. (Auster 8)?

It is also worth paying attention to Brick's journey, from real world, that obliges him to accept in-betweenness. Brick has a resemblance with the concept of the in-between in which this concept of in-betweenness shares a similarity with the Lacanian view of Antigone's position of being 'entre-deux-morts'. Lacan's studying of Antigone offers this form as that of being between two deaths that were in the form of exile and being buried alive. Similarly, Brick is exiled from his real-world and is doomed to do an unwanted job that results in a state of freedom. In addition, in the story Brill seeks freedom from his real position indirectly in which he attempts to make up a story that he is replaced by Brick. The position of in-betweenness is not only like a living death but also like a position of freedom in a manner that the individuals can realize that the essence of life is accidental and is tied with a chance. In this way, the individuals have such an opportunity to explore their own selves. On the other hand, Brill, indirectly through approval of death in life, and through the perception of life as an accident explores the power of his own self. "In order to do that, he must accept a command to murder someone he has never met, a total stranger. He will have to accept, but once he gets to the other side, what is to prevent him from refusing to carry out the job" (ibid 71)?

Interestingly, Lacan introduces four different kinds of discourses that one of which is master discourse. Master discourse is the primary discourse from which the other three are extracted. He presents each discourse by an algorithm and any algorithm consists of different algebraic symbols that one of which is named master signifier (Evans 45). Apart from that, Individual trauma is not referred to a particular moment in the past. In fact, there is an unlimited chain of signifiers that are not possible to be mastered. Based on Lacan's opinion trauma does not have any master-signifier in order to be presented in its whole image (Seminar XVII 16). Trauma impacts an individual's life both in various moments and ways. In this sense, the master-signifier for Lacan is untenable (ibid 34). Based on

the text, although, Brill's trauma has no master signifier to connect all of the numerous layers of his traumatic mind, some of them overlap one another.

I promised to write for Miriam after I retired three years ago, the story of my life, the family history, a chronicle of a vanished world, but the truth is I'd rather be on the sofa with Katya, holding her hand [...] For over a year I went at it every day, building up a hefty pile of pages, about half the story I'd guess, perhaps a little more, but now I seem to have lost the stomach for it. Maybe it started when Sonia died, I don't know, the end of married life, the loneliness of it all (Auster 13).

It is important to note that there is a similarity between Brill and his granddaughter. It means, both have experienced the loss of their own beloved, but in different ways, which causes them to experience collective trauma. According to a sociologist, Jeffrey Alexander, Collective trauma happens when a crowd of people suffers an event that has negative side effects on their lives (Alexander 3). Brill and his granddaughter's narration let us attain a sense of collective trauma. This passage has revealed lots of clues that will provide similarity between traumatic occasions of Brill and his granddaughter. "His wife died last year. The daughter's husband left her five years ago. The granddaughter's boyfriend was killed. It is a house of grieving, wounded souls, and every night Brill lies awake in the dark, trying not to think about his past, making up stories about other world" (Auster 71). It is plausible to some extent to mention that both of them share a common pain and depression. When Brill encounters with his granddaughter's trauma, his empathic resonance invites him to share deeply in her suffering. As he carries the pain that is on waylaid of his granddaughter, he feels overwhelmed by the difficult challenge.

If I had to choose, I would say it was Katya. Poor, suffering Katya, as resistant to sleep as her immobilized grandfather. I would love to be able to walk up the stairs, go into her room, and talk to her for a while. Tell some of my bad jokes, maybe, or else just run my hand over her head until her eyes closed and she fell asleep. But I can't climb the stairs in a wheelchair, can I (Ibid 12)?

I wish to offer a different interpretation, in fact, the traumatic occasion is noticeable in the body of Brill in a manner that this wound tells a story of his trauma. The evidence demonstrates that trauma is placed between both his body and his mind. Although with fanaticizing he attempts to conceal the memory of trauma, the traumatized body highlights his mental trauma. "A car accident. His left leg was shattered. They nearly had to amputate" (ibid 71).

It becomes more obvious that Brill inevitably experiences double trauma in his own life. In this sense, he experiences his first trauma in the society due to the war then by losing his wife besides other issues of his family. Clearly enough, destruction of the system of society produces issue in individuals. Due to this fact, by fantasizing about a story, Brill strives to hide his trauma and fight with his real-life that is already considered as a war. Evidently, he fights a war within a war. In fact, he produces war in order to find a sense of peace and solution for it.

I think about Titus's death often, the horrifying story of that death, the images of that death, the pulverizing consequences of that death on my grieving granddaughter, but I don't want to go there now, I have to push it as far away from me as possible. The night is still young, and as I lie here in bed looking up into the darkness, a darkness so black that the ceiling is invisible, I begin to remember the story I started last night (Ibid 2).

There is a fact that experiencing trauma produces a fear that destroys individual identity. Indeed experiencing trauma produces a dissociation in personality for the victim. As mentioned before, the Portrayal of the trauma and the constitution of the isolated identity for Brill has built blocks of trauma on his mind.

Conclusion

In more detail, this essay demonstrates complementary operations of fantasy, desire and their relations to the trauma. To elaborate more, according to Lacan's point of view the individuals' behavior stems from their unconscious in a manner that one can tell how, when and where his unconscious has been formed. In fact, Lacan seeks the roots of one's behavior and the way they have been shaped. Crucially, based on the Lacanian view, there is no way to explain the subject without encountering lack. This confrontation for Brill was too profound that he could not manage to come out through his creative story and his life became increasingly meaningless and empty for him. Although his creativity had helped him survive transiently, he pulled himself toward fantasy. In his case whose wife is absent but her void is filled by fantasy, and despite the gap, he is visibly attached to an unreal world. In fact, he juxtaposes his real life and his story in a way that these complexities make a challenge for the reader to differentiate between what is real and what is fantasy. This issue, lack of desire, is also congruent with his granddaughter, Katya. In fact, the austerity of her suffering is too fathomless that it pulled her relentlessly and virulently toward passivity. Although, she sought a state of replacement for her desire in order to escape from her situation, her attachment to the pain remains inevitable. It is worth mentioning that the individuals who are so traumatized and lost in the moments of their trauma, they are not able to do much and in some way live through their past differently. For Katya who has relatively lost her way, the issues become multi-layered, in a way that it can be difficult to her to differentiate between right and wrong. In this sense, trauma makes it difficult for her to use her

own internal signals in a manner to be able to find relief her own distress. On the other hand, her trauma does not let her recognize her own feelings, so she inevitably accepts whatever is offered to her, including an unreasonable one. Approached from another view, the researcher says that the interference of desire and trauma make it difficult for both Brill and Katya to be able to overcome their issues.

Furthermore, there is a fact that living in a society where war happens causes a permanent state of despair as well as agitation. Typically, War also has a major effect on the whole dimension of motiveless and bitterness that overshadow the story in a manner that its power is most deeply felt than the peace. The centrality of the notion of war makes the idea of conflict. It profoundly shapes the new characters who penetrate in their traumatic situation. It is hard enough to imagine the individuals who are suffering from the trauma of war. In addition, the deaths of the family leave deep pain in those who remain. In fact, they have been the direct witnesses and victims of war. Sharply evident, Brick is a case which in many ways, may seem to reveal several affinities with Brill who get involved in an unwanted and unfair struggle between a wartime reality that is as opposed to his peaceful position. For a variety of reasons the character of Brick, in fact, reminds us of Brill's character because not only exactly as him he is fighting a war within the war in the minor story but also fight with the occasion looming over him.

Moreover, based on Lacan, the child in the immature condition demonstrates his desires as well as fantasies. Since the child come into the symbolic order, such basic mode is not only objected but also castrated by others, and the child turns into an alienated being to his own self. This Lacanian narrative is considerable to Brill. Since society considers itself a moral nation, the individuals express themselves through desire and fantasy in a primal form that is similar to a child in the immature state.

All in all, the concept of trauma makes a significant ambiguity because, under this term, a series of diverse realities are hidden. These realities comprise more details which seek to highlight the particularities of each of the truths that involve the trauma. Fabulously enough, sometimes the traumatic event appears suddenly, and the result is exceptionally severe that leaves the individuals bewildered in a way that they cannot find an adequate answer among their capacities.

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