

# Paul Auster's *Moon Palace* As A Postmodern Historiographical Meta-Fictional Narrative

R. Annamalai<sup>1</sup>, Dr. A. Selvaraj<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Ph.D. Research Scholar, Department of English, Annamalai University, Tamil Nadu, India

<sup>2</sup>Professor, Department of English, Annamalai University, Tamil Nadu, India

---

## ABSTRACT:

Paul Auster has given a self-reflective and equally historical dimension to his writing through performance of historiographical meta fiction. The term 'postmodern' is used to describe the philosophy, art, literature, music, architecture etc. Historiographical meta-fiction attempts to position within the context of historical debate while retaining its fiction-like autonomy. The postmodern novels simultaneously use, exploits, build, subvert, claim, and reject the conventions of both fiction and historiography. Historiographical meta-fiction's precise and general recollections of the various styles of history writing and their contents help to familiarise the unfamiliar through a very familiar narrative, but its meta-fictional self- reflexivity makes any such familiarisation problematic. The intention of this paper is to analyse Postmodern Historiographical Meta-fictional narrative in Paul Auster's *Moon Palace*.

## Keywords:

Postmodern, Historiography, Meta-fiction, inter-textuality, self- determinism

---

## INTRODUCTION

The term Postmodernism can be reserved for meta-fictional and historical fiction that resonates past texts and contexts. The connection and reciprocal implication in the relationship between fiction and reality in the postmodern era and history is much more complex. Historiographical meta-fiction attempts to position within the context of historical debate while retaining its fiction-like autonomy. The postmodern novels simultaneously use, exploits, build, subvert, claim, and reject the conventions of both fiction and historiography.

The inter-textual parody's double existence as literary and historical one is textually inscribed. This parodic process's doubleness has not been thoroughly explored and that has triggered the recent fervour about the concept of postmodernism. Any native realist idea of representation, as well as any similarly native textualist or formalist claims of the

complete separation of art from the world, present a historiographical meta-fiction problem. The postmodern is art that is consciously self-aware. The postmodern is self-consciously art "within the archive" (92), which are both historical and literary in nature. Historiographical meta-fiction's precise and general recollections of the various styles of history writing and their contents help to familiarise the unfamiliar through a very familiar narrative, but its meta-fictional self- reflexivity makes any such familiarisation problematic.

The explanation for this similarity is that we learn of both actual and imaginary worlds through their descriptions of them, i.e., through their traces, or documents. The difference in ontological status between history and literature is not blurred, but rather illustrated. Historiographical meta-fiction thus represents a challenge to traditional modes of fiction and history by recognising their

inextricable textuality. In many interpretations of Auster's novels, critics put too much focus on his overtly postmodern narrative, which involves metafiction, intertextuality, indeterminacy, and other elements. Paul Auster's fourth novel, *Moon Palace*, published in 1989, focuses the city and the history of the frontier, particularly in light of his previous works. *Moon Palace*, which is replete with allusions to past events in the United States, should be read within a particular historical context. The novel is set over three generations and covers the bulk of the twentieth century. Auster achieves the effect of placing the context in a specific time period in history with significant events in America from the very beginning of the novel the narrator's story, which becomes the story of his time, is intertwined with history.

The story is told from the point of view of the main character, Marco Stanley Fogg, who is relegated consigned to the role of a spectator when his grandfather and then his father narrate him their stories. In this respect, *Moon Palace* is similar to *The Locked Room*, the third chapter of *The New York Trilogy*, which is set in "an intimate, first person narrative that veers off into the third person. There are long passages in that book where Fogg literally disappears" (303). *Moon Palace* includes a variety of self-referential devices in addition to several cross-references to various fictitious works and mentions to historical substantiation, the protagonist's name, Marco Stanley Fogg, is most definitely a reference to a scene in the *City of Glass* where Quinn is reading Marco Polo's Travels. One of the core themes of *Moon Palace* is the quest, and Fogg's name is often related to Marco Polo, a historical figure. When Fogg's blind

grandfather, Effing, demands that he read aloud many travel narratives, the question of their truth value arises.

The theme of inter-textuality is a central characteristic of postmodern art and literature, perhaps because it is so closely connected to history. Any source text, by definition, contains an aspect of the past, as it must have been written before the text to which it relates. It could be argued that postmodernism is typically preoccupied with history and openly shows its emphasis on conventional forms. These types, which Barthes refers to as the "doxa," are moulded and challenged at the same time, and satire is often used to challenge encounter or subvert them.

Franz Kafka's immense impact on Paul Auster's works is shown when the main character Fogg refuses to work and, as a result, nearly dies of malnutrition which explores the theme of Kafka's short story "Hunger Artist." However, the first section of the essay is about Knut Hamsun's novel *Hunger*, which is described as "a work devoid of plot, action, and character" (10). From the very beginning it is made clear that the hero need not starve" (11) and it appears to be true for Fogg as well. There is also a mention of a semblance with Raskolnikov the protagonist of the Russian novel, *Crime and Punishment*. Auster reports in his essay that the major difference between Hamsun's hero and the protagonist of Franz Kafka's story *A Hunger Artist* is that the latter is a woman, "an artist whose art consists in fasting" (19). In *Hunger*, however, the quick serves no aesthetic reason. In this regard, it's difficult to see any comparisons between him and Fogg, who has little artistic aspirations at this point in the book. This illustrates that while Auster may use character traits from diverse paragons, his

figures are never precise duplications of the original.

The second example from *Moon Palace* is also a reference to a European author: “Then I began to describe Cyrano’s voyage to the moon, and someone interrupted me. Cyrano de Bergerac wasn’t real, the person said, he was a character in a play, a make-believe man. I couldn’t let this error go uncorrected, and so I made a short digression to tell them the story of Cyrano’s life.” (37)

This allusion is important in two ways: To begin with, it tackles one of the novel’s main themes: the “moon voyage.” Second, the fictional character Cyrano de Bergerac is often used interchangeably with a ghost-writer since he decides to create love-poems using a pseudonym. As a consequence, Fogg, who later writes memoirs in his grandfather’s name, may bear some resemblance to Rostand’s tragic hero. An allusion to a piece of music is the third example of inter-textual reference listed here. As a commentary on an argument with his father about their personal tastes preferences in every area of life we could think of Fogg says: “he found Couperin dull, whereas I could never get enough of Les Barricades Mysterieuses.” (282)

This allusion is appropriate because *Moon Palace*’s basic structure closely resembles that of a fantasy. Essentially, the novel discusses about a youth who must demonstrate his bravery and complete a series of tasks before being rewarded with his fortune, which in this case is self-recognition rather than wealth. He has acquired knowledge of his origins and of himself by the end of the book. As a result, the whole plot seems to be harmonious and cohesive at the end as all the loose ends have been wrapped up. This is comparable

to the fairy tale universe which is “a controlled world [...] where we had always sensed disorder, suddenly we see there can be order” (57). The focus on imagination and fantasy is demonstrated by the next sample: on the ride home, Effing and Fogg come across a man holding an open umbrella with the fabric removed. Furthermore, it is not raining. The boy introduces himself as Orlando and invites them to “join him under the umbrella.” Fogg makes the following observation: “he was a gifted comedian, tiptoeing nimbly around imaginary puddles, warding off raindrops by tilting the umbrella at different angles, and chattering on the whole way in a rapid-fire monologue of ridiculous associations and puns. This was imagination in its purest form: the act of bringing non-existent things to life, of persuading others to accept a world that was not really there.” (204)

The narrative technique of embedding one story within another is not a postmodernism innovation. However, such a structure brings to the fore what is known as the “ontological dominant” (10). It’s a theme of postmodernist fiction, and it’s used in a lot of it. The belief that there are an unlimited number of diverse domains is central to this ontological model. One of the most critical inquiries is what occurs when these worlds overlap and connect “what is the mode of existence of a text, and what is the mode of existence of the world” (10).

*Moon Palace* is organized into three interconnected stories. The first embedded story begins when Fogg sees, by chance, Effing, his grandfather, who desires him to pen his obituary, which he will discover at the end of the book. Finally, he says, he wants to tell the story this way “real story”

(126). He is convinced that he will die too. He has never done so before and loves inventing an alternate history by dreaming up multiple stories. This damages his reputation, and Fogg believes that his grandfather's story has taken on a life of its own. Nevertheless, he admits that "the very outrageousness of the story was probably its most convincing element" (178). The second embedded story is the story of Salomon Barber's youth and his love with Fogg's mother Emily. Barber is also the writer of academic history books and a novel called "Kepler's Blood." It is focused on his father's unexplained disappearance. Since this tale is often retold, it is a story within a story within a story. However, the variations between the different stages are readily discernible, so there seems to be no misunderstanding. However, one can easily distinguish between the respective levels, so that there appears to be no "ontological discontinuity" (113).

"Kepler's Blood" illustrates how each *Moon Palace* sub-narrative represents the novel as a whole. Fogg observes that, "everything in Barber's book happens by chance" (255). Ironically, this is a nod to his own report. Furthermore, he characterises his father's job as "a complex dance of guilt and desire. Desire turns into guilt, and then, because this guilt is intolerable, it becomes a desire to expiate itself, to submit to a cruel and inexorable form of justice" (256). As a consequence, its theme represents not only Barber's involvements, but also Fogg's quest for his father, and, at the most fundamental level, Auster's actual life. Barber's nationally acclaimed scholarly works have confirmed that all of these concerns were discussed in Barber's nationally acclaimed scholarly works,

suggesting that there was "always a personal motive behind" (256) them. This may indicate that historical depiction, fantasy, and fact would all be set on the same risky state.

In a dialogue of the intricate association between fictitious and non-fictitious realms, the way historical details are portrayed is clearly significant. This relation is highlighted in *Moon Palace*, where the narrator Fogg stresses the importance of viewing his personal tale in its historical context. He makes the following remarks about incidents such as the Black Panther trial, the second moon landing, and the Mets' improbable winning streak: "Causality was no longer the hidden demiurge that ruled the universe: down was up, the last was the beginning. Heraclitus had been resurrected from his dung heap, and what he had to show us was the simplest of truths: reality was a yo-yo, change was the only constant" (61).

Fogg's issues tend to be a microcosm of the drastic shifts that spread through (American) culture at the moment. The selection of books that his uncle Victor gives to Fogg adds to this impression, as the number of volumes is already considerable. Victor explains: "When I counted them this afternoon, there were one thousand four hundred and ninety-two volumes. A propitious number, I think, since it evokes the memory of Columbus's discovery of America, and the college you're going to was named after Columbus. Some of these books are big, some are small, some are fat, some are thin – but all of them contain words." (12)

These books may be about Victor's family past as well as American history. As a consequence, this passage stresses the relation between Fogg's life story, the

“reality of the past [and] its (only) textualized accessibility to us today” (64). This is a characteristic element of postmodern historical meta-fiction.

In general, the two contrasting concepts of chance and destiny predominate in Paul Auster’s novels. This has long been a subject of criticism, with some accusing Auster of using coincidence chance as a plot device. In addition to these assertions, he states that “the introduction of chance elements in fiction probably creates as many problems as it solves. [...] In the strictest sense of the word, I consider myself a realist.” He actually understands contingency possibility as a part of reality realism as “we are continually shaped by the forces of coincidence, the unexpected occurs with almost numbing regularity in all our lives” (269). As a consequence, it’s not a medium for sharing stories. “Smooth things over” (270), as Larry McCaffery puts locates it, but an inherent integral theme leitmotif of his novels.

*Moon Palace* is no exception exemption to this concept, since the story is highly dependent on chance encounters, which are a typical characteristic in literary postmodernism in general. The book, on the other hand, seems to be dominated conquered by the idea of destiny. These two concepts tend to interact interrelate rather than oppose one another. One example instance is Fogg’s ascension to the status of “live-in companion” for the “[e]lderly gentleman” (94).

Effing is Fogg’s own grandfather. He comes across the ads on a bulletin board at the student job office by accident. The fact that Fogg’s, his father’s, and his grandfather’s life stories are so close in many ways adds to the feeling of predetermination. However, it has been argued that, “chance and coincidence

name the counterforce working against inheritance and genealogy in Auster’s novels” (130). The book’s structure is affected by this sense of mystery and destiny. Fogg, for example, assumes that his “life was under the protection of benevolent spirits” (52). The whole narrative seems to have been decided from the outset. To begin with, Fogg’s name is synonymous with the novel’s main themes, including travel, literature, and the topic of origin. Apart from that, the bulk of the story’s basic elements - with the exception of Fogg and Effing’s family partnership - are outlined in the book’s first paragraph. Aside from the forces of chance and destiny, there is a third dimension to consider: self-determinism. These three concepts seem to communicate in such a way that the characters, especially Fogg, get them mixed up. Fogg is forced to abandon his apartment to remain in Central Park as a result of his refusal to work.

Though he acknowledges that he was drawn to the assertion because of its “incomprehensibility,” the assertion highlights the dynamic relationship between self-determination, opportunity, and destiny. Effing’s prediction of his own death is another striking example. The old man expects his death date two months in advance. In terms of narrative strategy, this prediction can be interpreted as an added aspect of suspense, reinforcing the novel’s enigmatic tone. As a consequence, the omen motif, whether positive or evil, continues to act as a plot instrument.

Fogg finds the same expression in a copy of Tesla’s autobiography more than a hundred pages later. Tesla was a major figure in his grandfather’s life. He states as a result that, “[t]he synchronicity of these events seemed fraught with significance,



but it was difficult for me to grasp precisely how [...] It was a node of impenetrability, and it seemed that nothing but some crackpot solution could account for it: strange conspiracies of matter, precognitive signs, premonitions, a view of the world similar to Charlie Bacon's" (227).

Modernist and postmodernist novels both have open endings, as opposed to the conventional Victorian closed closing. It often results in labyrinthine systems that lack a focal point and, most critically, no discernible endpoint. It seems that the narrative itself is more important than the result of the story: "actually the way is the end. [...] Plot is practically deprived of beginning and end, or at least of the end; it is the middle that counts" (309). This has an effect on the reader's sense of anticipation, which is typically created by introducing a crisis that the reader wants to be resolved at the end. The classic instance is investigative literature, in which the aim is to solve the mystery. "Mystery novels still give answers; my writing is about posing questions," (295) says Auster, who has been stated to as a writer of detective stories since the release of *The New York Trilogy*. Indeed, he sees the fairy tale's open-ended nature as a defining characteristic. The anti-closure can be interpreted as an instrument to stimulate the reader's creativity, analogous to the minimalist narrative form of the genre. This work is a significant emblem in the narrative since it tends to incorporate key themes from the book. Fogg, on the other hand, is initially surprised when he first sees it.

As a result, Blakelock's 'Moonlight' can be perceived as a gateway to Effing's true self. Furthermore, it seems to reflect both Effing's past and American history. After

more than an hour of gazing at the painting, Fogg realises that this may have been the explanation for taking him to the museum in the first place. Blakelock's painting portrays a beautiful campfire scene with an Indian tepee in the foreground and the moon in the background. The fact that the sky is lit in a green hue and that the Indians are clad in green clothes strikes Fogg appear to be at peace with them.

As a consequence, this piece of art may reflect Effing's lost innocence, as he feels guilty for the death of his young comrade during their joint desert trip. Another explanation may be that he was compelled to kill the outlaws who had threatened him. Moonlight, on the other hand, may be a reflection of America's sin against the Indians. Furthermore, the artist Blakelock has been forgotten in the annals of history, making him yet another historical figure on the fringe of civilization. In this way, he may also be identified as Effing's alter ego, highlighting the painting's central role.

Paul Auster's texts have been debated and viewed from a range of viewpoints in recent years, highlighting a variety of various facets. What seems to be settled upon is that Auster often uses literary postmodernism elements in his works. As a result, he acquired a reputation as a postmodern poet. However, such an attribution may be controversial since the word "postmodernism" is potentially vague. Drawing a difference between what is known as modernism and its counterpart postmodernism is perhaps the most difficult task. It has been shown that the former is mainly concerned with so-called "epistemological" concerns, i.e., questions of science, while the latter is more concerned with issues of being or

“ontological” matters. This trend tends to express itself in a multitude of forms, culminating in a series of generic characteristics in postmodern literature. These texts, it may be argued, are marked by intertextual references and critical self-reflection, which is why they are often referred to as meta-fiction.

Furthermore, compared to the conventional model of sequential narrative, the principles of fact and understanding are disputed. As a result, many postmodern stories have a circular and open-ended form as well as a spontaneous, planning. Another distinctive aspect is the usage and reinterpretation of different genres, which mainly act as a paradigm that is both formed and overthrown. As previously illustrated, Paul Auster’s art displays a variety of these postmodernist traits. The reality that his perhaps best-known books, the three segments of *The New York Trilogy*, are explicitly representations of postmodernist literature seems to be acknowledged as fact by now. In the case of his later novels, however, this cannot be said with such certainty. With the aid of the representative novel *Moon Palace*, it has been shown that while Auster does use intrinsically postmodernist methods in most of his books, he is still highly inspired by the literary modernist tradition. This seems to be true of the organization and style of his tales, since they contain many of the above stylistic devices, including self-references, inter-textual allusions, open ends, and elements of numerous genres.

The picaresque and imaginary story, the Bildungsroman, and the fairy tale seem to be Auster’s preferred paragons in the case of the discussed novel. Aside from that, many of his texts are in the shape of so-

called Chinese-boxes, in which a frame narrative integrates a variety of embedded sub-narratives. This unusual structure has been called a ‘plot within a story,’ and it is one of Auster’s most distinctive features. It has also been shown in this sense that history plays an important role in the *Moon Palace*, where it is often portrayed as a set. Furthermore, since these competing concepts are widely identified with Paul Auster’s novels, the essential position of chance and destiny has been highlighted, even in terms of narrative structure. Another recurrent motif in his works is the slow decay of a person, which can also be viewed as a metaphor for the collapse of human civilization.

The ‘zero’ sequence is a repeating pattern that can be classified as such. Aside from these structural elements, the depiction of familiar motifs may be categorised as postmodern. Nonetheless, these details reinforce the theory that Auster’s script is inspired by both modernist and postmodernist literature. What can be said with confidence is that the writer often stresses the enigmatic existence of the universe. This hypothesis can be reinforced by examples such as an abrupt tradition and money in general, several symbols, and the role of art and literature. Similarly, his distinctive approach to representing time and space in his novels reveals his close connections to the postmodern tradition. Auster’s type of characterisation is the third point to remember in this debate. He specifically uses a variety of repetitive forms, analogous to some themes and motifs.

Three main aspects have been identified as the protagonist’s position, the ex-centric old man, and the dynamic relationship between fathers and sons. Auster highlights the contradiction of these

protagonists once again, stressing his 'postmodernity.' In comparison to the protagonist, whose exploration for uniqueness and the true self is open to the reader, much of Auster's eccentric old men are depicted from an outsider's viewpoint. Their identity cannot be determined when they tend to switch between multiple personalities, or to wear two masks. As a result of these investigations, it's conceivable that *Moon Palace* exemplifies the postmodern tradition's impact on Paul Auster's fiction. It has been noted that there is a major contrast between *The New York Trilogy*'s decidedly postmodernist and poststructuralist style and his later published works. Auster tends to prefer a more conventional style in these works, suggesting that he mainly incorporates aspects of postmodernist and modernist literature.

### Works Cited

Auster, Pual. *Moon Palace*. London: Faber & Faber, 1989.

— — —. *The Art of Hunger – Essays, Prefaces, Interviews*. Los Angeles: Sun & Moon Press, 1992.

Allen, Graham. *Intertextuality. The new critical idiom*. London: Routledge, 2000.

Henry, David. *Basic Elements of Narrative*. West Essex: Wiley – Blackwell, 2009.

Hoffmann, Gerhard. *From Modernism to Postmodernism: Concepts and Strategies of Postmodern American Fiction*. Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2005.

Hutcheon, Linda. "Histographic Metafiction: Parody and the Intertextuality of History." *Intertextuality and Contemporary American Fiction*. Ed. O'Donnell, P. and Robert Con Davis.

Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1989.

Hutcheon, Linda. Ed. Marjoreperloff. *Postmodern Genres*. Oklahoma: UP of Oklahoma, 1989.

McHale, Brian. *Postmodernist Fiction*. London: Routledge, 1987.

Rabkin, Eric S. *The Fantastic in Literature*. New Jersey: Princeton UP, 1976.

Wesinburger, Steven. "Inside *Moon Palace*." Ed. Dennis Barone. *Beyond the Red Notebook – Essays on Paul Auster*. Philadelphia: Pennsylvania UP, 1995.