

**SEARCHING THE SELF: AN ODYSSEY OF EXISTENCE IN PAUL
AUSTER'S THE *BOOK OF ILLUSIONS***

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Abstract

Man has always tried to put himself in a sphere where he can fully comprehend himself and the world. There has always been a conflict in his mind to realize his position and identity in the world among the others. An insistence on subjectivity remains there through which man's exploration of his self can be achieved. But in today's commercialised world, this exploration has become a tiresome and stern objective to achieve. There is no meaning in the world, and in this vast nothingness is man, trying to give a purpose and meaning to the reality around him, trying to interpret symbols and events as part of some larger whole, as pieces of a puzzle that is too big for him to fully comprehend. Paul Auster through his characters also depicts this inherent and self-deprecating nothingness. Auster's fiction is set in a postmodern world where identity has already been lost but in spite of this the characters are relentlessly involved in reinventing their lost identities as they are conscious of their existential self. This paper will focus on the ways through which Auster's characters in *The Book of Illusions* try to find their lost self while living in fragmentary and chaotic world.

Keywords: Self, Existentialism, Absurdity, Identity, Struggle, Internal Conflict

The Book of Illusions depicts conflicts, dilemmas, tensions and the absurdity of life in a postmodern American world. The novel very clearly presents the identity crisis of the characters and their struggle to reframe their lost identities. Here is a complex tale of "multiple lives, deaths and resurrections"; the question of individual existence- the basis of existential thought- forms the central concern of the book. As Madeleine Sorapure puts it:

...in Auster's work, the question of identity is repeatedly the site of a profound struggle for characters whose postmodern sense of themselves and of their place in the world shifts, multiplies, disintegrates, and must be reconstituted, if only provisionally... Indeed, many of his characters experience a trauma or rupture that causes them to break down

completely... They strip away all that is familiar to them, all that had previously sustained them, pursuing a self sacrifice that leads (or fails to lead) to redemption – or at least to an ability to return to the world. (20)

David Zimmer, the narrator of the novel, writes a book about a silent movie star, Hector Mann after the death of his family in a plane crash. The tragic death of his wife and children pushes him in oblivion from where he finds it impossible to return. He finds a nothingness and meaninglessness in his life and a gradual deterioration of self. He spends long and tiresome hours of his solitude in despair and ultimately faces the existential question of identity, anguish, alienation, angst and absurdity. This state of estrangement and loneliness impels him to embark on a journey of self exploration. As Auster in one of his interviews with Sinda Gregory says, “Our sense of self is formed by a pulse of consciousness within us – the endless monologue, the life long conversation we have with ourselves. And this takes place in absolute solitude.” Jean Paul Sartre in *The Transcendence of the Ego* states that “there is something that provokes anguish for each of us thus grasping, as it occurs, this tireless creation of existence of which we are not the creators” (46).

Zimmer feels no enthusiasm for the living and breaks social ties to gut out the days in the darkness. He first discovers Hector Mann, the silent movie star, when one day he sees a clipping of Hector’s movie on television. That scene makes him laugh after breaking a prolonged catatonic state of emotional stoicism and he realizes that there is still some piece of him that wants to live. The glimpse of Hector’s movie gives him a temporary relief from his miserable and absurd life. The time spent by him in void of nothingness propels him to write a book. To be more precise, he chooses to write a book about Hector’s movies. Existentialists believe that there is no pre-established goal in the life of a man and in the face of this meaninglessness, he must create meaningful life by making active choices. Choice forms a very important facet of existential thinking and the chosen thing always has value. Sartre, in his essay “Existentialism Is A Humanism” says, “To choose between this or that is at the same time to affirm the value of that which is chosen; for we are unable ever to choose the worse. What we choose is always the better; and nothing can be better for us unless it is better for all” (6).

Along with choice, freedom also is an important existential parameter. Zimmer is free to choose and his choice of writing the book brings the existence of Hector to the light of outside world. For him, Hector deserves the chance to be discovered. Not only Hector, Zimmer’s self also feels a sort of revival. Concentrating on the details of movies, the story, the technicalities and observing Hector as a comedian gives him a means to know his individuality. In searching his self, Zimmer is actually looking for a way out of confusion and darkness, and says that “my outward purpose was to study and master the films of Hector Mann, but the truth was that I was teaching myself how to concentrate... It was the life of a monomaniac, but it was the only way I could live now without crumbling to pieces” (27).

The choice of writing the book takes him to different places as he has to collect the copies of twelve of his silent movies distributed across the world. Writing becomes a fixation for him, the only thing that makes sense; a quest for subjective truth. He intends to proceed for the odyssey to discern the unexplored facet of his mind and inner self. Finding solace in studying those movies in archives and museums, Zimmer winds up in putting pen to paper on his book, *The Silent World of Hector Mann*. After this venture, he gets an offer of translating Chateaubriand’s *Memoires d’outre-tombe*; Zimmer finds another opportunity to hold his self from falling apart. Here again, he chooses to translate and finds a fascination for this massive chronicle which lends him a sort of escapism. He translates the title in English as *Memoirs of a*

Dead Man. As a consequence of anguish which he has been facing in his life, he writes voraciously because, as Sartre believes, anguish is the very condition of action. In both the works, Zimmer immerses himself in dealing with the dead; Chateaubriand is long dead and Hector is not seen for the last eighty years. The two works haunt him until their completion because Zimmer himself is a living dead – a dead man narrating the story of a dead man. With the death of his family most of him has died along with them. Facing the angst, he realises that “when a man has nothing to look forward to, he might as well be dead” (9). Meanwhile he receives certain letters from Frieda Spelling, claiming to be the wife of Hector Mann, to pay them a visit on their ranch somewhere in New Mexico. She says that Hector has read his book and wants to meet him. Zimmer presumes it to be a prank but soon afterwards a girl named Alma, Hector’s daughter-figure, arrives at his house to take him to New Mexico.

Alma, as it turns out, is Charlie’s daughter who shot all of Hector’s films. She is another character in the novel who is writing Hector’s biography. Here, for Alma as well, to write is to give meaning to her life and the book becomes an instrument in her search for identity. She is an orphan and finds consolation in writing her book. She has distributed some of Hector’s earlier movies to the outside world. As Alma finds Zimmer reluctant to go with her to Hector’s ranch, she threatens to take him by force by pointing a gun at him. Her impulse to threaten him is a consequence of anguish as she has a sense of responsibility to take Zimmer with her as Hector is in extremely poor health and awaiting death. Somehow Zimmer agrees and they set off their journey to the ranch during which both fall in love with each other. As existentialists hold that man is the artefact of his choice, this drives the course of his life. Zimmer’s choice to write book lets him meet Alma and his choice to go with her bestows him another chance to overcome his absurd life. “Alma was giving me the possibility of a second life, that something was still in front of me if I had the courage to walk toward it” (200). On their way to the ranch, Alma narrates the story of Hector’s life from his disappearance to old age. During their visit from Vermont to New Mexico, Zimmer’s feeling of love for Alma retrieves his lost self, although temporarily. He becomes a changed man, ready to start his life all over again.

The play of identities has always been an important trait of Auster’s fiction. As narrated by Alma, Zimmer comes to know about Hector’s chaotic life; he, too, involved in delving into the self. His life, like Zimmer, encompasses displacements at multiple levels engulfed in solitude and eventually losing the sense of self. Sartre in his book, *Being and Nothingness*, argues that “man is the being through which nothingness comes to the world” (24). During his early interviews, Hector is quoted as saying different things about his birth place, the foremost instance of his perplexed life. The catastrophe that marks his disappearance is the gun down of Brigid O’Fallon, his mistress by Dolores Saint John, his would-be wife. His disappearance is symbolic of the erasure of his sense of self. Because of anguish and despair he cannot go away with the guilt of hiding the truth of Brigid’s death and disposing off her body. Thus begins Hector’s odyssey for the exploration of his self. Renouncing his identity of Hector Mann, he changes his appearance and becomes Herman Loesser in search of a different identity. “Hector minus the moustache, and Hector plus the cap. The two operations cancelled him out, and he left the men’s room that morning looking like anyone, like no one...” (144).

The meaninglessness of his life drives him to take various jobs from a fishmonger to his indulgence in pornography. Like Zimmer, Hector also jots down the experiences of his life in a diary which becomes the source of Alma’s book. At one point in the novel Hector propagates the existential paradigm that man is the measure of all things. It evokes Sartre’s notion which he proposes in his essay, “Existentialism Is A Humanism” that “man is nothing else but that what he

makes of himself.” The nullity of life takes him to another errand of visiting Sandusky where he views himself as a “soul in ruins.” He feels as if his existence is dribbling out of him. He sinks in despair and depravity and many times he tries to commit suicide to put an end to his absurd life but he cannot make it.

Hector’s meeting with Frieda Spelling spots another significant episode in the pursuit of his self. He saves her life in a bank robbery while himself getting injured. He gets shot by a robber and his convalescing in the hospital signifies a rebirth because it is only in life that rebirth can be encountered. Frieda recognises his real identity and both of them fall in love with each other. Once again Hector renounces his identity of Herman Loesser because this name represents everything that has gone wrong with his life. He becomes Hector again, not Hector Mann but Hector Spelling. This identity-switch gives him a chance to rediscover himself. Moving to the ranch with Frieda after their marriage, Frieda insists him to make films again because she knows that that is “the one thing in the world that makes sense to him” (207).

Freedom, according to Existentialists, rests on the individual’s own decision as to how he will be engaged with the world. Hector knows how he has to deal; he decides to make movies never to be shown to audiences. He feels unconstrained by outer world and directs his wife to burn the movies within twenty four hours of his death. This nihilistic desire of making movies for “pure pleasure” presents him with a vehicle to discover his lost self. By turning his ranch into a movie studio, Hector makes fourteen movies with Frieda flouting all the rules of a movie by exploring things that other filmmakers are not allowed to touch. Like Zimmer, he also loses his child and once again gets engrossed in looking at his fragmentary self. He invites Alma to write his biography which is another illustration of pursuit of self discovery. To achieve this, Hector provides Alma his diary which becomes a scope of her own pursuit of self. Alma starts her journey of self reframing thus coming into contact of Zimmer who further catalyses her quest. Zimmer’s book creates ripples in the mind of Hector and eventually wants to meet him. He is supposed to be a ‘witness of witness’- an eyewitness of Hector’s existence and Alma’s book. After they reach New Mexico, Zimmer gets very less time with Hector and he dies soon. And then Frieda starts the project of destroying Hector’s movies. However Zimmer manages to see one of the movies, *The Inner Life of Martin Frost* in which Martin rescues Claire, the heroine by burning the pages of his story. Zimmer identifies a symbolic connotation in that movie. It is a kind of bringing Brigid back to life by Hector by burning his films. For Hector it is a kind of reparation for his indulgence in the sin of Brigid’s murder.

With Zimmer’s departure to Vermont, troubles start to mount up. Frieda burns every trace of Hector’s existence, burning even Alma’s biography of Hector in her absence. Frieda’s exploit to burn those belongings is accounted for her anguish, feeling her direct responsibility towards Hector. That results in accidental killing of Frieda by Alma and then her committing suicide after faxing a long letter to Zimmer as she cannot withstand the guilt of Frieda’s death. “Alma was in a state of anguish that night, trembling in a delirium of terror and apocalyptic self-judgements...” (321). Rest of the novel consists of Zimmer’s anticipation of finding Hector’s lost movies that, he thinks, Alma might have distributed to the outside world.

Paul Auster’s *The Book of Illusions* is, thus, an anthology of existential queries where issues like identity struggle, nothingness, choice, freedom, anguish are taken into consideration. Here, characters are involved in relentless struggle for search of their self. Harold Bloom in the book, *Paul Auster* declares, “It is an eternal quest, without guaranteed results, which can never achieve a closure. A detective of the self, Paul Auster applies an uncompromising narrative skill to a metaphysical quest...” (48). Writing is an act of insight for Zimmer and he tries to make

sense of life by writing a book on Hector Mann that symbolises a rebirth for both Hector and Zimmer. In resurrecting Hector, he tries to resurrect his own self. The search for identity is portrayed as perpetual and unfinished. Self becomes central for them which they try to explore because the projection of the self has no precursor.

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The Book of Illusions is a novel by American writer Paul Auster, published in 2002. It was nominated for the International Dublin Literary Award in 2004. Set in the late 1980s, the story is written from the perspective of David Zimmer, a university professor who, after losing his wife and children in a plane crash, falls into a routine of depression and isolation. After seeing one of the silent comedies of Hector Mann, an actor missing since the 1920s, he decides to occupy himself by watching all of Paul Auster's creative practice involves a tendency to transcend the boundaries between different mediums, as exemplified by his cinematographic fiction. Although relevant research has started to gain traction in recent years, there are still few in-depth analyses of the medium of film, its implication in the verbal medium, and its connection with the themes explored in an individual novel of Auster's. Drawing on Stanley Cavell's film philosophy, the present essay attempts to explicate the meaning and function of writing cinema in The Book of Illusions.