



Paul Auster's *Moon Palace*: An Existential Reconsideration

Amin Khanbazian* (Corresponding Author)

M.A. Student in English Literature, Tabriz University, Tabriz, Iran

E-mail: khanbazian.amin@gmail.com

Hossein Sabouri

Associate Professor of English Literature, Department of English Language and
Literature, Faculty of Persian Literature and
Foreign Languages, Tabriz University, Tabriz, Iran

E-mail: sabouri@tabrizu.ac.ir

Abstract

As one of the outstanding works written in the late twentieth century, Paul Auster's *Moon Palace* is the extension of the prominent discussion existing in his works, which concerns the issue of identity formation and the characters' involvement in the expedition toward self-acknowledgment. Looking through the life of Marco Fogg as the main character of the novel, it has been desired to outline the existential points of view laid in the novel. Unlike the previously conducted studies, this paper is diverting the central focus of its analysis from the psychosocial perspectives introduced by James Marcia to the existential outlook by providing the notions of critical existential philosophers such as Heidegger and Sartre. Accordingly, the famous theory of identity formation that Marcia established has close parallels with the concepts that Heidegger and Sartre have discussed concerning the human beings who are considered beings-in-the-world, or, as it is called, "dasein." Throughout this procedure, the main protagonist's various identity formation phases have been investigated through existential concepts like "thrownness," "nothingness," and "bad faith." And in the end, the outcome of such an analysis is tracking down the latent sides of existential concepts existing in the novel, which have not been the center of focus in previous studies.

Keywords: Dasein, Heidegger, Identity, Nothingness, Paul Auster

ARTICLE INFO

Research Article

Received: Monday, November 16, 2020

Accepted: Monday, April 12, 2021

Published: Saturday, May 15, 2021

Available Online: Monday, April 12, 2021

DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.22049/jalda.2021.27002.1229>

Online ISSN: 2383-2460; Print ISSN: 2383-591x

Introduction

The advent of the postmodern novel in twentieth-century American literature was a prolific district among which many great novelists thrived and bestowed much to the field of literature. Among whom, Paul Auster as the great novelist, translator, poet, and also a director whose primary line of works focuses on the depiction of self and the quest for finding an identity, has a significant place among the contemporary writers. His eminent works such as *The New York Trilogy* (1987), *Moon Palace* (1990), *Leviathan* (1992), and *The Invention of Solitude* (1982) have all earned an excellent reputation among the postmodern works. The American writer, Bruce Bawer (1992), commenting on Auster's writing, lauds the perfection of his language in terms of its form and action by remarking the point that "*Moon Palace* feels more assured than its predecessors and has a satisfying sense of closure that they lack. [...] It is certainly more realistic than *The New York Trilogy*" (p. 69). Considering his writing skills, Auster has a great talent for using metafictional devices devised by his precursors. Yet, when it comes to the range of its usage, he is fully aware of its extension so that the process of reading would not be ceased or interrupted.

Following the line of his thoughts emphasizing the character's identity formation, Auster (1990), in *Moon Palace*, manifests the arduous life journey of Marco Fogg as the protagonist of the novel whose blurred family background and peculiar life condition initiates the trigger for going through various stages and phases of experiencing the bitter taste of his challenging world. The novel starts with giving away the precursory account of the events that happened to Marco in the form of a foreshadowing and then goes on explicating them in the following chapters. Marco's expedition commences with a lonely life where the only companion is his uncle Victor, and losing him is the impulse after which he steps into an array of events where the outcome is finding his new "self." After losing his mother in a car accident and having no idea of who his father was, he is left with his uncle as the only companion of his solitary life. Moving from Chicago to New York to study in college, he spent his first year living in a dorm, but soon he found the communal living as appalling and intolerable. Thus, he decided to separate the path of life that he had from his peers by renting a house by himself and keeping a proper distance from others, although he knew that this way of independent living would cost him a lot. Consequently, he was taken to a more miserable situation in his life when he had to stay in Central Park for some months until his only friend Zimmer and the girl he had only met once came to his rescue. Later, his part-time job as a caretaker of an old man named Thomas Effing was a threshold to many of his enigmatic sides of life.

There were quite a few works in line with the research conducted in this paper that corroborated the overall point of view of the discussion. One of those works is *The Death of the Other: A Levinasian Reading of Paul Auster's Moon Palace* by Kanae Uchiyama (2008), which investigates the novel in terms of Levinas's philosophy with special regard for what he refers to as the passivity of a subject with particular attention to the concept of alterity. Moreover, the

psychosocial aspect of the novel also has been analyzed through the article *In Search of the Relationship between Self and Society: Reading Paul Auster's Moon Palace* written by Li Jinyun and Huang Ruifang (2016) through the means of taking self and society and how their interactions develop the identity of the main characters. Through the analysis carried out in our paper, knowing the fact that psychology is a science arising out of philosophy, it has been attempted to shift the angle of how the identity is formed from an ego-identity formation, which is primarily introduced by the famous psychologists Erikson (1968) and to look from an existential perspective by deploying the notions of Martin Heidegger and Jean-Paul Sartre. In the following, each side of the discussion and their connection to each other is sketched, and their application in Auster's (1990) *Moon Palace* is delineated.

According to Erikson (1968), during one's life, there are eight age-based levels for the development of one's identity, referred to as stages. Unlike his predecessor, Sigmund Freud, who primarily related every aspect of man's behavior to sexuality, Erikson offers a broader view of the subject and emphasizes the life-long process of identity formation. Being considered as the expansion of Erikson's theories, the ideas introduced by James Marcia (1980) are more inclusive, and he, unlike Erikson (1968), does not see the identity resolution and identity crisis as stages and phases every adult may go through, but as two primary aspects that lead to an individual's identity development. Providing a cohesive analysis and explanation of identity formation in adolescence, Marcia (1980) signifies four different identity statuses, "each embodying one particular phase of the identity formation process. Besides, it provides a methodology for empirical investigation: the Identity Status Interview is a measure by which individuals can be classified reliably into one of the four identity statuses" (Bilsker, 1992, p. 177). Both these psychologists have pointed out that there is a proximity between the existential approach and identity. Erikson (1982) believes that "a kind of *existential identity*, then [...] must gradually transcend the psychosocial one. Therefore, adolescence harbours some sensitive if fleeting, sense of existence [...]" (p. 73). Besides, Marcia (1989 as cited in Bilsker, 1992, p. 2) comments on ego-identity, calling it as "a particular kind of existential position".

The other side of this discussion is the philosophical outlook of Existentialism, for which there has been no precise definition, though it is generally known as "an attitude and outlook which emphasizes human existence and the qualities which are distinctive in the individual persons rather than man in abstract or nature and the world in general" (Titus, 1959, p. 290). Two critical thinkers of Existentialism whose ideas are employed and applied in this study are Martin Heidegger (1973) and Jean-Paul Sartre (1992). The former has proposed various thoughts, among which his main work, *Being and Time* (1992), is the analysis of the nature of "being." In his idea, "Instead of an Ego (however 'transcendental'), his subject is *dasein*, man as *being-there (da)*, mind not distinct from its world but *one* with it: being-in-the-world" (Dobrez, 2013, p. 58). The same issue is also discussed by Sartre (1992), giving some ideas about human beings and their natures. Having

relatively similar thoughts with Heidegger, he believes that the reality of human beings is present in this world.

As the primary concepts aspired to coalesce in this study, existentialist ideas of Heidegger (1973) and Sartre (1992) and the psychological views of Marcia (1980) both share a resemblance. The individuality and the process of obtaining self-reliance as the core of Heidegger and Sartre's discussions correlate to the chief purpose of the ego-identity theory that aims to integrate the peculiar and not imposed but controlled identity. In addition, another common ground between these two concepts "is a shared reliance upon concepts of meaning and value as basic explanatory units" (Bilsker, 1992, p. 178). Correspondingly, in his book, *The Existentialist Critique of Freud*, Professor Gerald N. Izenberg (1976) remarks on the existential thinkers, highlighting the focus of those philosophers on the priority of meaning. He takes this in contrast with Freud's notions, who sees instinctual impulses as the essential motivational term. Thus, the ego-identity theory proposed by Erikson (1968) and the following theory related to identity formation "can be placed in the tradition of explanation based upon human intentions and subjective meanings. In this respect, the identity formation model is more compatible with existentialism than with the reductionist approach of Freudian psychoanalysis" (Bilsker, 1992, p. 179).

Identity Formation in *Moon Palace*

Auster's (1990) is the story of Marco Fogg, who is subjected to various events, experiencing different ups and downs in his life. From growing up in a solitary life with almost no one being around except his uncle, up to the point where he runs out of money and ends up living in Central Park, from finding a job as a caretaker and discovering new people in his life until he buries his father after few months of finding him, and then heading toward the end of the continent, they are all surfeit to offer sufficient knowledge concerning the identity formation of Marco. However, the main task to be done here is to employ Marcia's (1980) identity formation theory, which consists of four identity statuses, including Identity Diffusion, Foreclosure, Moratorium, and Identity Achievement, and alter the perspective to the existential outlook by mainly applying the notions of Heidegger (1973) and Sartre (1992).

To begin with Foreclosure, this term "refers to the individual who has undergone no, or very little, exploration and remains firmly committed to childhood-based values" (Honest & Yardley, 2003, p. 88). In this light, Heidegger (1973) posits the idea of "thrownness" by pointing out that "Man is rather 'thrown' from Being itself into the truth of Being, so that ek-sisting in his fashion he might guard the truth of Being" (Heidegger & Krell, 1993, p.234). By this, he refers to the state of freedom and how human beings are thrown into this world without having any control over the various facts they are supposed to live by in their life. No one can choose whether to be a man or a woman, tall or short, African or Asian, or any other attribute given by birth. However, their attempt in this world is to alter this passivity

by gaining their subjectivity over matters. Thus, the general condition in which Marco lives is not much different from the thrownness of Heidegger, taking into consideration the fact that his solemn world is not based on his own decisions and choices but on the aspects of the life that he did not have any liberty to choose. Not having any choice about his living place or his family, he finds himself with no genuine existence, considering the fact that even his name had been adapted under the influence of the various communities. It is the same challenge for Mr. Effing and Mr. Barber, whose names have been changed in the pivotal events that had occurred in their lives.

Marco comes a long way from a discontent situation where his subjectivity was invaded by others. It was not until his first year of college that he realizes how his life would be comforting, just in the case that he was away from the people around him. Musing on the events that had happened to him until that time, he came to a realization with himself that “what a curious figure I must have cut: gaunt, disheveled, intense, a young man clearly out of step with the rest of the world. But the fact was that I had no desire to fit in” (Auster, 1990, p. 15). On the other side, his descending to the pitiful life he creates for himself in the park is a comforting condition since he is away from the hustle of life in the city and sheltered in nature as the source of tranquility and solace. Comparing the city’s commotion and park, he reveals that,

It became a sanctuary for me, a refuge of inwardness against the grinding demands of the streets. There were eight hundred and forty acres to roam in, and unlike the massive grid work of buildings and towers that loomed outside the perimeter, the park offered me the possibility of solitude, of separating myself from the rest of the world. (p. 56)

By these instances, he illustrates that he is not the one who can easily blend with society and shows it many times by rejecting different people in his life.

On the other hand, in his *Being and Nothingness*, Sartre (1992) puts forward the idea of “bad faith,” claiming that human being is always struggling between the facticity and transcendence trying to keep the balance between these two sides; however, the failure in doing so drags him to inauthenticity. Facticity, though it does not illustrate someone’s “being,” is referred to the individual features of a person, roles that each person has in society, and the conditions of his past and present status. Conversely, transcendence moves on from the past or the determined conditions, indicating the freedom of human beings and the choices he makes subjectively for his future. The state of foreclosure is a playground for the oscillation between these two sides, pushing *dasein* toward a condition in which he attempts to circumvent the burden of responsibility and free himself from making any decision.

Such a struggle between these two sides is also perceptible in Marco’s life, where his given life does not interest him anymore, and he diverts his path to an unknown territory. His quandary of whether to stick to his past and stay in his comfort area or think of the future and his responsibilities is noticeable in his final

days of living in his apartment in New York before being evicted. He remarks on his paralysis by saying,

But that was precisely what gave me the most trouble, the thing I could no longer do. I had lost the ability to think ahead, and no matter how hard I tried to imagine the future, I could not see it, I could not see anything at all. The only future that had ever belonged to me was the present I was living in now, and the struggle to remain in that present had gradually overwhelmed the rest. (Auster, 1990, p. 41)

With this statement, he confesses his passivity by refusing to take action for such an essential matter by adhering to his facticity and refusing to transcend.

For this journey of finding himself, he is supposed to get rid of all the unnecessary things that might hamper his way to self-awareness. What he later decides to do by letting go of his every attachment is the suggestion his uncle gave him before beginning his own journey. They both share some similar actions in terms of the journeys they commence. In his last years, before embarking on the journey to find himself, his uncle told Marco that “I must travel light. Objects will have to be discarded, given away, thrown into the dust” (Auster, 1990, p. 13), which is showing how his task would be easy if he detached himself from his material and emotional belongings. The same process is also happening gradually for Marco when he leaves behind his attachments, including everything that belonged to his uncle, and denoted his past life. The next and more important is how he moves on from a caring and deep relationship with Kitty, with whom he had a profound bonding. It is after giving up these sides of his life that he is light enough to get to know his “self.”

Another phase presented through the novel is the state of identity Diffusion that “is comprised of persons who, whether they have explored alternatives or not, are uncommitted to any definite directions in their lives” (Honest & Yardley, 2003, p. 88). In the course of this status, the individual faces numerous choices giving him the authority to leave the state of passivity and facticity by entering the ground of freedom. However, this transcendence being a terrifying district to pass intimidates the individual with the burden of responsibility, and Marco cannot “tolerate a narrowing of [his] infinite possibilities. There is a denial of responsibility for choices” (Bilsker, 1992, p. 184) His descending to that poor situation and living in central park was sprung up from the same source of the issue where he was stuck in a predicament to choose among plenty of options that he had. Discovering himself in impecuniosity, he sat inertly waiting to be evicted while he knew that,

All kinds of options were available to people in my situation—scholarships, loans, work-study programs—but once I began to think about them, I found myself stricken with disgust. It was a sudden, involuntary response, a jolting attack of nausea. I wanted no part of those things, I realized, and therefore I rejected them all—stubbornly, contemptuously, knowing full

well that I had just sabotaged my only hope of surviving the crisis. (Auster, 1990, p. 20)

The main challenge for Marco is to avoid limiting his choices by picking one among the many, or as has been called by Sartre (1992), a desire for “this perpetual rebirth, this constant escape in order to live” (p. 108).

The outcome of such a perspective for Marco is to seclude himself in an impoverished life where his food is the leftovers of visiting people, and his sleeping place is in the bushes. One highlighted point in this seclusion is the contrast of nature against society and how Marco is escaping from people around him by taking refuge in nature, which he finds as a place to focus on the inner side of his life. He describes his status by commenting on this situation as follows:

It gave me a threshold, a boundary, a way to distinguish between the inside and the outside. 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. (Auster, 1990, p. 58)

The next to be scrutinized here in this analysis is the phase of Moratorium known as the period when “the person is *in* the exploration period with commitments only vaguely formed” (Honest & Yardley, 2003, p. 88). As already indicated, Foreclosure was referred to as a state of denying any form of responsibility and being engulfed in the ease of blending with society and group identity. However, the moment an individual abandons this comfort zone to gain his own subjectivity and freedom of choice is the entrance to the phase of Moratorium. For Heidegger (1973), this condition of *dasein* immersed in his everyday life and living among “they” is called inauthenticity, which is primarily known as the state of tranquility and passiveness.

Marco’s life holds instances of having a tied-up connection to people around him, most important of whom were his uncle Victor and then Kitty as his girlfriend with whom he built up a memorable time, and called her presence in his life as “an earthquake in the heart of my solitude” (Auster, 1990, p. 94). Nevertheless, the dependency of Marco on the people around him, which indicates the inauthenticity of his life, does not last long. As stated earlier, Marco is on the transition from fallenness to the state of authenticity, and through this process, he encounters the state of nothingness, which comes from facing the idea of death around him. Yet, existential death is not only in the biological form, but possible to be considered as losing “significant others, the ending of caring relationships, the surrender of belief in a protective deity: each of these are forms of death” (Bilsker, 1992, p. 186).

There are some vital existential deaths in Marco’s way, marked as the significant issues of his life, which paved the way for reaching existential

authenticity. One of the critical points in this process is the moment he loses his uncle, after which his initial understanding of nothingness is formed, and later, he goes on doubting the other attachments of his life. This sense of loss and nothingness continues as Marco gives away his uncle's belongings like his books and suit. Those were the representations of his fallenness or the sense of attachment to his Foreclosure, and by giving them away, he is getting prepared for his transcendence. His decision to give away the only belongings that were indolent of his past is a courageous choice signifying that he is trying to move on. He describes the situation of losing the pieces of his past as becoming disintegrated and states that the room he was living in "was a machine that measured my condition: how much of me remained, how much of me was no longer there.[...]I could follow the progress of my own dismemberment. Piece by piece, I could watch myself disappear." (Auster, 1990, p. 24)

Not only does the novel narrate the life of Marco Fogg, but it also gives us some images of other minor characters and their quite similar journeys. For instance, Mr. Effing, who is later known as Marco's grandfather, faces this nothingness meeting Tesla when he was seventeen. He then describes this meeting as the turning point of his life and the first time he got to know the meaning of death and mortality. Later, he describes this encountering as follows:

For the first time in my life, I realized that I was nothing, absolutely nothing.[...] I felt the taste of mortality in my mouth, and at that moment I understood that I was not going to live forever.[...] It takes a long time to learn that, but when you finally do, everything changes inside you, you can never be the same again. (Auster, 1990, p. 146)

Mr. Effing's decision to become a painter is right after this meeting, but that is not the only change in his life. Later, he is taken toward a solitary life in a desert leading him to an alteration in his identity.

The last status known as *Identity Achievement* is the condition in which "The individual has gone through a period of exploration of alternatives and has made well-defined commitments" (Honest & Yardley, 2003, p. 88). The final chapter of the novel is the place where Marco has come to the point of conclusion with himself, knowing that with the death of his father and losing his beloved girlfriend, his metaphorical journey of finding his true self is an obligation that must be done by only and only himself. His expected failure in finding the cave, along with his car being stolen, is the last piece of this puzzle to push him to wander for months until he gets to the end of the continent. Coming to peace with himself, he starts to believe that all he had is gone, and a fresh start is needed. The final scene of the novel is the moment he comes to this point, "This is where I start, I said to myself, this is where my life begins" (Auster, 1990, p. 306).

Although what is presented in the last chapter is not the end of Marco's identity formation journey, the final episode contains a sense of Heideggerian angst known as the state in which "Everyday familiarity collapses. Dasein has been

individualized, but individualized *as* Being-in-the-world. Being-in enters into the existential mode of the ‘*not-at-home*’ (Heidegger, 1973, p. 233). In other words, it means that *dasein*, setting himself apart from others, builds up a new identity for himself, rising above “they.” After his futile trip to find the cave, Marco goes on roaming for a while, trying to find an answer for all his questions, and sensing a kind of change in himself, he ponders that,

I felt that some important question would be resolved for me. I had no idea what that question was, but the answer had already been formed in my steps, and 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. (Auster, 1990, p. 306)

These questions are the same angst or worries that a *dasein* gets, having lost his purpose of life amid the sense of everydayness.

Conclusion

Through the analysis of Paul Auster’s (1990) *Moon Palace*, a novel outlook is provided by employing the existential perspectives of Martin Heidegger and Jean-Paul Sartre, whose contributions to this field are substantial. Auster’s works are well-known with characters in search of their identity, and, in this light, the psychosocial point of view introduced by Marcia (1980) is playing a critical and influential role in discussing and analyzing them. However, in this paper, and by looking from an existential view, a fresh approach is presented to the readers using the four-stage division of Marcia’s identity formation theory.

The novel is the narration of Marco Fogg as the main character who goes through various vicissitudes losing all he has in his life and living a wretched life. What is grasped in this research is that in existentialism, the *dasein* that Heidegger (1973) introduces is the same as Marco, who is initially struggling with his “thrownness.” In other words, he does not have any control over the already made decisions and the events that occurred in his life until he steps up and takes control gaining his own subjectivity. Additionally, Sartre’s (1992) notion of “bad faith” is yet another existential concept also applied to Marco’s identity formation. Sartre (1992) believes in the challenge between the man who is surrounded by his facticity and the one who is trying to transcend those restraints and gain his own freedom. Marco’s situation is also quite similar to these philosophical notions, where his first reaction to his choices is being inert and staying in his comfort zone by denying any responsibility. As the story goes on, he tries to maintain the balance between the two and, in the end, comes to peace with himself, making himself prepared to start his journey.

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Author's Biography

Amin Khanbazian was born in Tabriz, Iran, in 1996. He received his B.A. degree in English Language and Literature from Tabriz University in 2018. He is an M.A. student at Tabriz University in Iran studying English Literature, and his field of interest is Focusing on Literary and Film Criticism, Psychosocial Studies, and Comparative Literature. He can be reached at khanbazian.amin@gmail.com



Hossein Sabouri was born in Tabriz. He got his B.A. from university of Tabriz and following a successful MA degree in English Literature from Tehran Azad University, he received his Ph.D. in English Literature and Language from Punjab University in India. His interest areas mainly lean towards Dramatic Arts, Literary Criticism, Poetry, Translation and Teaching. He has been teaching in Tabriz State University as a faculty member and Associate Professor for over ten years. He has been the Head of English Department in the same university for four years during which he gave rise to various educational developments in the mentioned department. Administratively, he has been the Director of the International Affairs of the university for the last two years. Dr. Hossein Sabouri has managed to publish numerous papers in his professional areas not to mention five volumes of books he has successfully published within the same line of knowledge. He has been prolific in translation and poetry studies as well whose books have already been published as well.

