

Reconstructing the Self: A Critical Study of Geoff Dyer's *Paris Trance: A Romance*

Chayanika Roy*

Abstract

The complexity and delay associated with an expatriate writer forms the core of the novel *Paris Trance: A Romance*. Through his protagonist, Geoff Dyer represents the difficulty of comprehending oneself without prior baggage of the past. Going by its title, the novel revolves around love, drugs, adventures and travel as agencies to locate the self. Through this paper, an attempt has been made to analyse how the search for originality, in case of the protagonist, ends up in 'duplicity'. This novel is a reflection on the art of writing amidst chaotic search for self in a foreign country. Paris, which was once the hub of inspiration for many writers has ceased in its capacity to fulfill the urge of a twentieth century expatriate writer who is haunted by experiences of past writers. Reflecting on modern day 'ennui' experienced by the protagonist, the novel is a projection of Dyer's own experiences as a writer. For Dyer, "experiences are derivative" and the novel rightly throws light on the haunting effect of the 'lost generation'. The search for self compels the protagonist to create a comfort zone by befriending other such expatriates and creating a self-identity that is otherwise imperceptible. The paper examines how far does this complication moulds and affects the characters within the novel.

Keywords: Derivative experiences, Duplicity, Expatriate, Past, Self.

1.0 Introduction

Dissecting the ideas associated with the difficulty of writing and the danger of repetition, Geoff Dyer's novel *Paris Trance: A Romance* brings to light its metafictional aspect, together with a reflection on certain other post-modern concerns including the idea of the self, haunting past, intertextuality, etc. In the words of Patricia Waugh, metafiction involves both creation and criticism of fiction simultaneously (Waugh, 1984). By his metafictional writing, Geoff Dyer, (1998) consciously questions various ideas like originality, selfhood, home and

* Assistant Professor, Department of English, Krishna Kanta Handiqui State Open University, Guwahati, Assam.

displacement, etc. It must be noted that Geoff Dyer (b. 1958) is one of the contemporary British writers who have four novels and a number of works of non-fiction to his credit. Apart from *Paris Trance* (1998), Dyer's three other novels are *The Colour of Memory* (1989), *The Search* (1993) and *Jeff in Venice*. The most interesting aspect of Dyer's writings is his breaking down of the tight compartments that constitute the various genres. Therefore, several works that he wrote are genre-defying in the sense that they cannot be properly categorised into a particular genre. For instance, *But Beautiful* (1991) is a book on jazz, *Out of Sheer Rage: In the Shadow of D. H. Lawrence* (1997) takes up as its concern the author/novelist D. H. Lawrence, *The Ongoing Memory* is based on the theme of photography, etc. are among such writings of Dyer which do not fall into one single category. In fact, in the interview with Matthew Specktor, Dyer stated that he did not see any difference between fiction and non-fiction apart from the techniques used; to him, genres are restrictive of the broad horizon in which the writer can freely write. Being a metafictional novel, *Paris Trance*- the novel under discussion tends to be self-reflexive and self-conscious. Keeping with Geoff Dyer's attributes as a writer, this paper aims to find out the dilemma associated the search for originality and identity by taking into consideration its metafictional aspect.

2.0 Reading Geoff Dyer's *Paris Trance: A Romance*

With an aim to analyse the search for originality in terms of both writing and identity, we shall throw light on four characters, particularly speaking, two couples in the novel. Borrowing from the title of the novel, the context of the novel is based on the life offered by the city of Paris. Luke Barnes, as the novel portrays is "in exile" and comes to Paris with the hope of penning down a book "based on his experiences of living" outside his own country. The novel revolves around the pressurised "self-consciousness" of the protagonist which turns out to affect ironically his literary output. Although, he tries to accumulate his experiences as an exile for the novel that he was supposed to write, yet he fails to accomplish this task. Akin to his inability to write a novel, he lacks in asserting his identity as well. As "experiences" forms one central factor in the novel, it impacts Luke Barnes as a person as well as a writer.

The novel can be read as the protagonist's search for self; being an expatriate, he strives, quite surprisingly amidst love, drugs, sex, films, etc. to get a settled idea of his otherwise fluctuating identity. Having found no fixed identity to incline upon, his novel never sees its day and dies away in his mind. The uncertainty and vagueness that the protagonist faced is replete in the way this novel is structured. It is devoid of a 'story': "Whatever makes events into a story is entirely missing from what follows" (Dyer, 1998, p. 2). The arrival of Luke Barnes from London to Paris in such a season when the city is most inactive hints at the inadequate experiences that the city has to offer to him.

The failure to acquire new and unique experience by the protagonist—a thing that would trigger his inertia into creativity is strikingly missing in his life. Geoff Dyer admits the tendency to rely on the past authors, choosing to call the quotations he borrowed from several other writers like Ernest Hemmingway and Albert Camus as "samples". Dyer borrows very insignificant lines from these two writers, for instance: "It was an amazing champagne" (*Ibid.*, p. 123), "It was raining hard outside" (*Ibid.*, p. 177): etc. This is done consciously in order to throw light on how even at trivial moments, repetition occurs in verbal exchanges. The protagonist also has a similar difficulty in gathering originality in terms of experiences. Initially, his obsession with 'cinema' can be seen as a 'solace' to being "acutely conscious of your (his) existence" (*Ibid.*, p. 4) in a lonely city. But it soon ceased to be so as gradually "the idea of the city began to lure him out of the darkness of the cinema" (*Ibid.*, p. 5). For the many complexities that the protagonist faced, reasons were his inactiveness or his effortless gesture towards everything he pursued. Coming to a foreign place, putting none of the effort, Luke Barnes suffered in utter loneliness and desolation. The experiences of 'isolation' on the one hand and 'happiness' on the other, had a mutually 'dependent' relation: "No day was uniformly terrible. Even the worst days had moments of relative happiness." (*Ibid.*, p. 15) Similarly, his experiences at Paris were both good and bad. The train journeys provided him a sort of happiness as it enabled him to "stand at the back and watch the life of the city unfurl like a film." (*Ibid.*, p. 11) However, lonely life, low self esteem, "negative consolation", "sexual recession", etc. impacted the way he constructed his self. Loneliness affected Luke only until he was able to secure a job at the warehouse where he met Alex (also the narrator) with whom he developed a close friendship later in the novel.

Speaking about experiences, Luke's first meeting with Alex was incidentally a repetition of their past encounters/experiences albeit in a different place: "They had known the same people, eaten in the same places, drunk in the same pubs, and now they were drinking in the same bar, in Paris." (*Ibid.*, p. 32) Though Luke came to Paris with the intention of writing, contradictorily, he did not find it necessary to "create anything". As the novel fluctuates between an omniscient narrator at times and Alex at other times, it becomes difficult to rely solely on the narrative point of view because from Alex's standpoint, his likeness (towards Luke) compelled him to paint a biased image of Luke. However, the experiences they shared like a common interest in football and films were to be noted apart from the space/place they shared, that is, Paris. Alex used his idea of Luke to create "an extrapolated mirror for himself." Not very surprisingly, it is Alex who finally writes a book about *Paris Trance*.

Every aspect of Luke's life had a bearing on his impression of himself. The love interest of Luke Barnes- Nicole, hailing from Belgrade was in Paris for her studies. Coincidentally, even before their actual meeting, Luke had seen her picture in the photographer's room which he took on rent. Speaking about the 'ghosting' effect in the novel, Kellman in the article "Ghosting the Lost Generation: Geoff Dyer's Paris Trance" highlights on the "spectral intervals between event and perception" that persist in the novel. Indeed, the charm associated with "coincidence" or "luck" does not get enough scope to be cherished among the couple. An eerie kind of feeling is offered by the revelations of how things have actually happened even before it was conceived. To this may be added the significance of 'photographs' as an agency entrusted with creating the recurrent idea of capturing moments that are already experienced or past.

Luke Barnes who had come to Paris with an ambition was required to acquire a new language that would enable him to create a different identity because "the more languages you speak, the more people you become." (*Ibid.*, p. 50) In fact, the cultural rifts and displacement faced by an expatriate shapes the way he/she conceives himself/herself. As in the case of Luke, the immigration was voluntary, he consciously came to Paris to gain new experiences and find a "different person" in himself. This initiates many questions like: What is that he is looking for in Paris?; Was his aim of writing a novel a strategy to search for an identity, etc. In fact, the expatriate writer faces an identity crisis due to the transformed experiences

of leaving his own country to settle in a new one. Pulverness (2007) pointed out that "when we make a journey into another culture . . . our sense of ourselves is altered". Similarly, in Luke's case, the journey from England to Paris challenged his definite idea about himself. Nicole explains to Luke that to acquire a different identity, he must learn the French language. Learning of language in the novel forms a significant aspect as it "is never simply a matter of acquiring an alternative means of encoding ideas, feelings and experiences. It always implies . . . a way of responding to new experience, which also revives and re-fashions past experience".

The haunting effect pervades the novel and the play of reflection of past and present time is well portrayed through the "spooky" mirror from Belgrade which delays, sometimes, to show the reflection on it:

Nicole took Luke's hands and they moved in front of the mirror which, for a second, showed only the bed. Then their reflections moved inside the frame and looked back at them. They stepped aside but, for a few moments, the mirror continued to hold their images. (Dyer, 1998, p. 76)

The mirror symbolically represents Luke's past, which he thoroughly wants to leave, but which always come in between the creation of his new identity. His past, hence, lurks in the background in the process of formation of his new self that seems impossible to be affected by its own past. Everything he does ultimately turns out to be a futile attempt to search and experience originality. "They had both seen before" (*Ibid.*, p. 78) even the thriller at Nicole's place. Repetition of events limits the desired experiences sought for by the protagonist. The occurrence of events "twice" nullifies the perceptions: "Suddenly it seemed that this was not only The Day I Got Up Twice, this was The Day Everything Happened Twice." (*Ibid.*, p. 85) The time that Luke wishes to cherish is not the moment in which he was happy; rather it is the experience that happiness brought to him- the memory of that past experience.

Dyer not only represents the condition of an expatriate writer, he also brings in the idea of home and displacement. Talking about her different experiences in different countries, Alex's love interest Sahra asserts that even though she had spent three years in Paris, a strong urge persists in her to return to her 'roots'. However, Luke wants "to be at home in yourself." (*Ibid.*, p. 97) To him, it is the self that is of prime importance when dealing with the concept of

'home'. This is very clearly laid down in the following lines uttered by Luke in the novel: "When I came here', he said 'I felt I was inhabiting the fringes of my life because for me the centre had always been England. Now I can feel myself, almost physically, moving towards another centre." (*Ibid.*, p. 98) Centre, to him, was where his self was, be it in England or Paris-it did not much matter.

Paradoxically, Luke's coming to Paris can be seen as an escape because "without that there'd be nothing to do" and escaping is "an existential need." (*Ibid.*, p. 111) Does not this convey an idea of the protagonist as someone who is engulfed in existential crisis? For him, physical displacement cannot shift his sense of belongingness to his past culture, but as evident in the novel his longing for England is pervaded throughout the novel. One such instance is his desire to return to England. The tension of asserting his self brews mostly out of having an urge to create someone else in him in which "returning" to England "was a tormenting possibility, simultaneously to be resisted and to draw strength from" to "begin a new life." (*Ibid.*, p. 11) Luke wanted to "keep on living" (*Ibid.*, p. 117) his life by working only "part-time" and "like to retire." (*Ibid.*, p. 118)

As existential crisis crops up from nothingness, there has been much emphasis on idleness in the novel. This is indicative of 'ennui' reflected in the French poet, Charles Baudelaire. Gomes (2013) points out how Baudelaire through his poems reflect on nothingness as a condition in which human beings are born with and analyses the various complexities underlying human nature. In the novel also, the protagonist both metaphorically and consciously depicts boredom or inactivity or in other case effortless attitude towards his life. In fact, he is eager to "open a museum of boredom . . . displaying the full range of boredom, all the culturally and historically specific variants." (Dyer, 1998, p. 72-73) The effort that he would make was not more than just "watching" and doing nothing. The emphasis on "watching" has been focused many a times with respect to Luke while "watching the bones in her jaw move as she chewed" (*Ibid.*, p. 73) or his travelling experiences by the 29 bus which enabled him to "watch the life of the city unfurl like a film" (*Ibid.*, p. 11) or the time when he "watched the ricochets and darts of rain" (*Ibid.*, p. 118); in most cases, therefore, he was interested to do things which "didn't require any effort." (*Ibid.*, p. 33) Our understanding of Luke as an individual, therefore, is closely related to his effortless attitude and at the same time, his thoughtful attitude towards life. The urge to do 'nothing' can

be seen from another perspective, dealing with existential crisis in modern men which in Luke's case has curtailed his creativity resulting in his inability to write the book he aimed for: "All that I had to do was concentrate. But of course I didn't bother". (*Ibid.*, pp. 114-115)

While Luke was keen to search for a new identity at Paris, he was enamoured by the intensifying effect of drugs. His desire to exist and not exist at the same time is what renders complexity to the idea of self. "No distance or direction" (*Ibid.*, p. 164) is a recurring topic related to Luke as the "trance deepened" (*Ibid.*, p. 163) with the intake of drugs. Reflecting on Luke's fascination of experiencing and dwelling in the past, it has been pointed out by the narrator that "Nothing in the past has any value. You cannot store up happiness. The past is useless. You can dwell on it but not in it". (*Ibid.*, p. 177)

Alex is fond of Luke and not only idolises him but also "project his own desires on to him." In the end, it was Alex who shows a sense of direction and ends up writing not a story as such because he "rearrange, alter, change; to make things end differently." (*Ibid.*, p. 196) As the novel progresses, the complexity increases; Luke changed from being a charismatic person to a "hardened" one, who began to be despised. The saddest part was Luke's realisation "that, far from being an intimation of the future, such a moment, a moment that had lasted for more than a year, was actually a part of his past, was already a memory." (*Ibid.*, p. 198) Paris could not provide him a lasting identity. All that he hankered after in Paris was formed of his 'past' experiences; newness of experiences was a distant dream. The narrator was taken aback when he met Luke in London eight years later to find him a failure and leading a monotonous life. Very poignantly, Luke describes that he does "nothing" but "wait" endlessly "for it all to come round again." He left Nicole and Paris "abandoning everything, even himself." Luke watching Nicole "walk away" for the last time was kind of rehearsed for he had done it "so often that it required no effort, no will." (*Ibid.*, p. 203) Alex's meeting with Luke was indicative of the fondness that he continued to have even after their ways parted; it is more so prominent on giving his two year old son the name of Luke. As it turned out, Luke had aborted the idea of writing the book as "an adolescent idea" and hence there was no point in writing "something if you can live it?" (*Ibid.*, p. 223) Luke considers that "we all were and would become: a mass of dry, spongy material, nine tenths of which seemed dedicated to waste

disposal" (*Ibid.*, p. 235) after death. The narrator observes that even though Luke achieves nothing specific in life yet "his falling short was a kind of triumph" (*Ibid.*, p. 246).

3.0 Conclusion

Through this paper, an attempt has been made to observe and analyse the various implications brought about by cultural shift, duplication or lack of originality and significantly 'der-iv-ative' experiences to the idea of self. Intertextuality contributes to this effect by showing how echoes of the past authors and their writings pervades the text as when he quotes Ernest Hemmingway in the novel. Dyer deconstructs the idea of writing by being self-conscious himself as a writer and giving voice to his characters. It is interesting to note how the novelist portrays the reconstruction of self through various media including the strong influence of one's past and touches upon certain significant concepts like the idea of home. In case of the novel, aimlessness and effortlessness serves as the two pillars on which Luke's destiny was carved. He was meant to do nothing after all and live only in the past since "all of the things he associated with happiness came to be lodged absolutely in his past." (*Ibid.*, p. 246) As evident, Luke ultimately can be said to have found happiness in himself. It is this uncertainty that Luke finally settles down with and finds solace in. "If only we could see without being - then we could be what we see" (*Ibid.*, p. 270) - applies very well to Luke. Even though he tries to reconstruct his identity amidst other expatriates, it is in himself that he finds his 'home'.

Interestingly, Geoff Dyer succeeds to some extent in pointing out the crisis of originality in the twentieth century fiction writing as like Luke's, all the experiences are derivative. Hint may be, as Kellman (2006) notes that "the effect is to make a mockery of literary debt" and "how very difficult it is for an expat writer at the end of the twentieth century to avoid the spirits of the Lost Generation¹.

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Notes

¹Lost Generation refers to the generation of writers during the World War I. The term was coined by Gertrude Stein. However, Ernest Hemmingway in his novel *The Sun Also Rises* used the term to refer to an embodiment of the expatriate writers of post war years. Dyer quotes many "samples" from Hemmingway which are very insignificant lines but serves to show his point that it is impossible to be original even while expressing insignificant or trivial experiences of life.