

THE ORGIASTIC POSTMODERN LIVING: JERZY KOSINSKI'S PINBALL

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Abstract

The postmodern American life and fiction go hand in hand with each other and stark comparisons and similarities are candidly visible. The decentering and fluidity that the ethos of postmodern mass society represents have become the hallmarks of the creative matrix of the novelistic art that the contemporary fiction writers practice. The much acclaimed novelist of the second half of 20th century America Jerzy Kosinski, in his novels, especially Pinball employs the postmodern creative therapy to lay bare not only the indulgences into sex and music but also depicts the internal dynamics of mind and psyche that unravels the intricacies of postmodern mind vis-a-vis the lives that is lived. This paper reads the novel Pinball from the prism of postmodern creative principles in order to analyse and interrelatedness between the art and dynamics of contemporary life.

Keywords: creative, decentering, mass society, music, postmodern

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Jerzy Kosinski lived and died the life of a typical postmodernist hero as his fictional protagonists do. Being traumatized as a young Jewish boy by Hitler's persecution of the Jews and having traveled across the war-ravaged Europe during World War II, he came to imbibe the postmodernist essence of a detotalised self, incognito with an anonymous identity. From his very first novel *The Painted Bird* (1965) to one of the latest ones *Pinball* (1982), Kosinski's fictional protagonists seem to embody and practise their creator's "Art of the Self", a self which becomes a multidimensional prismatic entity and hence difficult to negotiate and cope with. The postmodernist existential therapy of decentering, of constant change and unpredictability of problematisation and atomization, forms the narrative and thematic crux in *Pinball*.

The novel centers on the enigmatic fusion of sex, violence, and disguise, heightening the debasing ethos of a mass society. *Pinball*, with its symbolic and problematic title, involves the world of music, sex and disguise on an axis of creation and recreation, innovation and renovation, revolving around the world of Synthesizers and music maestros. The novel's narrative gives the first shock of postmodernist therapy by introducing the reader to Patrick Domostroy, a musician, whose professional fortune dwindled, thereby forcing him to adopt a low profile. He develops intimacy with a tantalizing and voluptuous female, a veritable enchantress, Andrea Gwynplaine. Domostroy and Andrea are bound together in a common interest: to unravel the mystery of Goddard, a legendry musician whose identity nobody knows and whom nobody has ever seen. Goddard, in the first half of novel, symbolizes the practice of disguise in tune with postmodernist trait of dedoxification. Goddard assumes a big celebrity status as Michael Jackson once possessed. All the same. Goddard, whose real name is James Osten, operates from a secret hideout in a ranch in the New Atlantis "mountains from where he goes on recording his songs and musical compositions, marketing them through a New York-based music company, Nokturn Records. Events happen at a fast pace and Domostroy and Andrea are joined by Osten himself and an ambitious black beauty named Donna Downes with a lot of musical talent.

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These two men and two women, Domostroy and Osten, together with Andrea and Donna, form the postmodernist heady-mix of man woman demonic-erotic interplay.

Patrick Domostroy, as an astute strategist and schemer designs a conspiracy in tandem with Andrea to trap Goddard by forging letters replete with musical expertise and dispatching these letters along with nude and erotic photographs of Andrea. The letters and the photographs arouse Goddard's curiosity to such an extent that he is unable to resist the lure of female photographic nudity and thereby forfeits his anonymity by having his identity revealed. Towards the climactic portions of the narrative, Pinball assumes the typical postmodernist combination of disguise and violence, music and orgiastic sex. Consequently, the novel ends with a mini mayhem in which Andrea, her diabolic associate, Mercurio, and two hired hoodlums lose their lives. Thus, Kosinski designs the narrative of Pinball according to the postmodernist chessboard of antitotalising-totalisation.

As a Postmodernist novel, Pinball (1982) embodies the "typology of culture and imagination" (Hassan 1985:11). This typology can also be termed as a reflecting mirror in which the reader can witness the spectacle of a culture which is totally anarchic, decreative and disruptionist with a fracturing impact on the human identity and the human psyche. Domostroy, as one of the chief personages in the fictional society of Pinball, defines this society as 'a freewheeling media-crazy society" (1982:177). The living place of Domostroy where he spends his days at the ebb of his professional career, becomes synonymous with his own self, especially, the analogy between the dead battery that he is carrying in the beginning of the narrative and his own state of mind and affairs. The ballroom of the Old Glory is as empty and desolate as Domostroy's own life. The description of this ballroom makes interesting reading: "a huge starship that was grounded on a temporary landing pad" (7). Discontinuity. Disjunction and a paradoxical touch make Patrick Domostroy, a former music celebrity, experience a new sense of personal freedom. Domostroy, in keeping with the postmodernist architecture of the self. rehes upon sex and music as an instance of "autotelic self-reflection in contemporary metafiction"™ 4 (Hutcheon 1992:40).

Though the heroes in Pinball. Domostroy and Goddard alias James Osten become the denizens of a demonic human world in which personal gratification and the practice of perverted erotica constitute the sonum-bonum of one's existence. In other words. the society which Kosinski creates in Pinball is not only sick, perverted and self-centric but also descnbes "instruments of torture and monuments of folly", besides untoldiys a world of "the nightmare and the scape-goat"(Frye 1973).The two men and the two women, Domositroy and Osten, Andrea and Donna are distorted figures in a dystopia in which is

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created a pleasure world of sexual and bisexual hardware, a state of organized anarchy in which carnal enjoyment becomes life's only business.

Domostroy is conscious of the fact that he is living in a society which is deprived of natural and human elements, and a society in which "Bigness has always eaten up greatness" (PB 34). It is a society that rejected Domostroy's music based on classical and traditional essence. and rejoiced in Goddard's rock music which is nothing but a chaotic cacophony. Both Domostroy and James Osten use music to disguise their identity. It doesn't expose the composer and hence the camouflage of postmodernist 'Self continues. In fact, Goddard is Domostroy's antithesis and alter ego. The two rival composers-one publicly known and failed the other hidden and successful-stand in dynamic relationship with each other. For Kosinski, they are the two sides of the same concept: the composer-protagonist bedeviled by the simultaneous need for privacy and public exposure, secrecy and publicity, independence and public support. Such antithetical existential configuration is absolutely in tune with the postmodernist essence of contradiction, disorder, paradox and irony, Both Domostroy and Goddard combine between them what can be termed as "Dispersal that needs centering in order to be dispersal yearning for transcendence" (Hutcheon 49).

Throughout the sex disguise and sex become the archetypal bonding entities in the drama of hide and seek. For all the main personages sex becomes the practical manifestation of disguise and Patrick Domostroy, Andrea Gwynplaine, Jimmy Osten and Donna Downes, enact "their individual and collective roles in a type of sexual utopia in which everyone has the right to everyone else, where human beings reduced to their sexual organs become absolutely anonymous and interchangeable" (Lasch 69). Recollecting her sexual experiences with Marcello at Dead Heat, Donna said, "she could feel the presence of a crowd behind them, somber whispering bulks, a moving forest of silent male and female trunks ..." (214). She felt: There was something sad in all those men and women cruising alone, back and forth through Dead Heat, in all those couples who held hands but couldn't really touch each other, . . . sometimes I wanted to laugh at them, such pathetic creeps, I thought, such spiritual nobodies, such sexual frauds. But when I looked at them again, I felt I could cry for everyone of them so lonely, so desperate, condemned to watch love they themselves could not or were afraid to touch (215).

The excessive indulgence in sex as a game, which is played faultlessly and enjoyed meticulously is postmodernist absolutism 'a demonic "monarchy" of the eccentric self ~

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which Kosinski himself believed in and practised. Towards the end of the novel, Donna Downes and Andrea virtually exchange ar places visé-vis Domostroy and Osten. Donna Downes joins Domostroy in order to seek Domostr6y's help in preparing herself for Chopin's competition in Warsaw and Andrea and Osten come together tn a kind of an ironic witches' Sabbath. Before Osten could confirm his doubt of Andrea being the faceless nude, Andrea identified him as Goddard and along with her gangster friend Mercurio demands a large sum of money from Osten as a price for the retention of his anonymous identity as Goddard. In the final shootout Andrea and Mercurio get killed. Thus, violence comes as the nemesis for the hubris of music and disguise practised by the central protagonists in Pingalt

Postmodernist deculture and dedoxification bases itself upon the ethos ofp mass society, a 'melting pot' in which James Osten finds himself adrift. As Goddard, Osten loves his anonymity because it guarantees his freedom, and he loves his freedom as it lcts hep be anonymous. Even though his roots were in New York, it is only when he was secluded in the

New Adantis that he was really at home, a disembodied spirit floating in a mysterious continuum, a mystic possessed by melody, as removed from the natural world of music itself. "His own public self was, therefore, the ultimate affirmation of his private self"(140). Osten is a typical postmodernist, characterized by solitariness even while operating as an individual 'in the social text. His brief relationship with Leila Salem, the wife of the Lebanese Ambassador to Mexico, manages to fuse that ideal aspect of his creativity with the physical nature of experience, catalytically evolving a new spurt of creativity. Sex has become the only source of inspiration and experience that Osten and Domostroy use to write more music. Osten writes innovative compositions based on some of the Mexican folk songs that Leila has come to love. In other words, Osten's inspiration is based on the passion of physical experience. The mind, he reflected, was like an ideal musical instrument -invisible. portable, capable of synthesizing all sounds yet powerless i in itself. {t was also flawed because it required its listener, the body. to exercise leverage on physical matter. This prompting. Thus necessary transfer of power from the mind to the body was for him one of the deepest mysteries of life (133). The last sexual-cum-musical encounter of Domostroy and Donna Downes, synchronizes the musical rhythms with the sexual impulse. This orgiastic sexual encounter makes it clear that for Kosinski's protagonist music and sex are at once the cause and the effect, one causing the other and vice i | | Within minutes, her music was as out of breath as she was. The energy seemed to have gone out of her playing; the sound that had been flowing through her from within had lost its buoyancy and seemed

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to come only from the music sheet over the key board, as separate from the pianist as she was from the instrument she played (249).

The affair between Donna and Domostroy does result in a new surge of creativity in Donna Downes and eventually she wins the concert. Donna Downes is the postmodernist 'heteraerae', the epitome of demonic fusion, an apocalyptic marriage of sex and innovative creativity. Her voluptuous presence at the keyboard makes her appear to Domostroy as more than a mere promising student: "As he listened to her, he came to see that the state of his mind and the pattern of his life would be arbitrary from this point on unless he could go on being replenished by her" (220). Here the artist's lover is an incentive to musical creativity, and sexual energy acts as a repository of new and lasting compositions and "At length with one last plunge into her beautiful young body, he finally found, in a realization as swift as sound, the certainty of his own wholeness" (453). Instinct, as simply intelligence, can no longer be trusted as guide to feeling and conduct. Since the precedent of the past is considered an inhibition from which we are struggling to escape, only technique is left, and for Domostroy as well as Jimmy Osten, it is of course in the "area of sexual technique that narcissistic preoccupations have become concentrated" (Aldridge 2). Frequent sexual jamborees along with disguise and violence constitute a symbolic-cum-thematic troika in Pinball. Music and sex become complementary locked in a symbiotic embrace in which all the chief characters in Pinball get washed away with the wave of a deluge. For instance, while playing before Osten, the intensity of Donna's playing aroused her sexual urge. Osten is not prepared to supply such acts of nutrition, when "after practising the piano in front of him, she would suddenly fall on him and attempt to "impale herself" (125). Osten would, perhaps not surprisingly, practically flee from the apartment, but Domostroy is searching for precisely the kind of passion that once delayed Chopin's tuberculosis, allowing him to continue composing masterpieces. Osten recounts Domostroy's ideas on this subject to Andrea: "Genius and chaos can somehow be reconciled only through sex, and that sexual promiscuity, by combating isolation, timidity, and emotional routine can actually engender creativity" (263). Ostensibly, Kosinski repeatedly manifests in Pinball that the chaotic uncertainties of the self are sought to be neutralized and sublimated into something creative and beautiful through the medium of sexual union. A clear cut sexual syndrome, a carnal axis, operates in Pinball in which the main four players seek to enhance their existence and creative faculties through a Dionysian type of sexual indulgence, followed by a vortex of violence, Patrick Domostroy, James Osten. Andrea and Donna Downes, belong to a society that seems to reaffirm the capitalist principle that human beings are ultimately reducible to interchangeable objects.

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Existentially, as a matter of thematic analysis, Pinball does subscribe to the notion that the “Post-Second World War American Novel is not so much concerned with sociable feats and victories as with adamic falls and quixotic redemptions” (Baumbach 2). Every time Domostroy, Osten, Andrea and Donna Downes interact and go about the business of life, by turning their private universe into well-guarded fortresses through the practice of disguise, the ‘redemptions’ are made possible by music. James Osten, as Goddard succeeds in making himself invisible only through music includes the following lines from James Joyce’s *Ulysses* in his poetry: I am the boy That can enjoy Invisibility (36). While discussing Goddard’s music, Domostroy takes an example of his songs called as “Fugue”. In music. “Fugue” signified contrapuntal imitation, “but in psychiatry it pans a state of flight from reality” (50). Postmodern man, like Goddard; is also in a hideout and wants to° escape reality in order to preserve his self and identity. The importance of disguise is further emphasized when Osten, while buying a watch, boasts of his art of being invisible: “I’ve learned how to make myself invisible” (85). Like Ralph Ellison’s anonymous and unnamed hero in his famous classical novel *Invisible Man* (1954). Goddard may not have descended into an underground gutter or a manhole but all the same like this black young protagonist who assumes the image of a “hipster”, Kosinski’s hero equally assumes invisibility ‘in order to insulate his identity against the encroachment of a mass society’. The excessive indigence of Kosinski’s protagonists in Pinball, be it sex, music or intrigue, reminds us of the disruptionist, anti-formal, decreative and anarchic impact of postmodernism on fictional forms and narratives. All these protagonists live in a world which is based not on “Hierarchy” but “Anarchy”, not on “Centering” but “Dispersal” not on “Paranoia” but “Schizophrenia”, not on “Form” but on “Antiform” (see Hassan 1985).

In Pinball, the tension lies between man’s life as a series of disconnected events, and his attempt to find some kind of meaning that may possibly connect these disjointed events. Sex is projected as a vehicle for an intimate encounter, as well as an opportunity for self understanding. Kosinski’s fictional works, including Pinball, do become relevant by getting recognized in “larger discursive contexts”, something in tune with the agnosticism that postmodernism breeds. Taken in totality, the cumulative essence of Pinball as a postmodernist work signifies what postmodernist sociologists term as “excremental culture”, the Kafkaesque syndrome in which human beings may not turn into insects but all the same their existential predicament conveys essence of futility, chaos and nothingness, The world of humans like Domostroy, Osten, Andrea

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and Donna is a world in which the boulder of Sisyphus will go on rolling down unless a terrible tremor flattens the slope and everybody is relieved.

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