

Postmodernist Problematics in Jerzy Kosinski's *Pinball*

Irfan Mohammad Malik

Research Scholar

Department of English

University of Kashmir

Jerzy Kosinski was one of the promising novelists of the twentieth century America who achieved the status of a celebrity with his three successful hits *The Painted Bird* (1965), *Steps* (1968) and *Being there* (1971) but his suicide was taken as an act of betrayal on part of a writer. Like most of his fictional protagonists, he lived the life of a typical postmodernist hero; a displaced individual in a demonic landscape. Kosinski's fiction reflects man's inability to find his lost self. The tension exists between man's life as a series of events and his struggle to find some sort of meaning that may possibly connect these disjointed events. Kosinski once said that he created many disguises for himself and he did the same for most of his fictional protagonists.

Pinball (1982), Kosinski's eighth and bestselling novel is a rock and roll mystery set in the world of music. The novel is a typical postmodernist example in which the central protagonist, James Osten, like Kosinski himself, assumes a false identity in order to counter the ravages of a debasing and detotalised ethos of mass society. *Pinball* centers on the enigmatic intermix of all the postmodernist traits: sex, violence, and disguise, to depict "the emergence of new formal features in culture with the emergence of a new type of social life" (Jameson 1998: 1-20). As regards the thematic aspect of *Pinball*, like any other novel produced in Post-War America it takes cognizance of the deteriorating ethos of mass society that intrudes upon the freedom of individual self. The chief personages, and even some minor characters, in *Pinball* are victims of existential crisis, thus adopting disguise which guarantees them freedom. Structurally and thematically, the novel also reflects the sham security of wealth and mirage of success.

As a postmodernist novel, *Pinball* creates in the minds of readers a "model of postmodernism, a particular typology of culture and imagination" (Hassan 1985: 11). This typology can be conceived in terms of a mirror which reflects a culture that is totally anarchic, decreative and disruptionist with its fracturing impact on man's self and psyche. Like Kosinski's earlier novels, *Pinball* also seems to be replete with an "anti-formal, anarchic, and decreative culture" which is one of the prominent characteristics of postmodernist fiction (Hassan 1985: 12). Patrick Domostroy, one of the chief personages in the fictional society of *Pinball*, calls such society as a "free-wheeling media crazy society" (Kosinski 1982: 35).

Pinball, as an instance of postmodernist problematics, presents the protagonist as a displaced person in a chaotic landscape. The hero of the novel, James Norbert Osten, belongs to a rich family. His father, Gerhard Osten, owns a leading music company namely Etude Classics. Osten disguises himself as Goddard in order to escape from the intrusion of external elements upon the freedom of his self. A living legend, the biggest recording star in America, the heartthrob of millions and yet unknown:

Goddard has been the biggest recording star in the country. Yet he is still nothing but a voice and a name—a complete mystery. Nobody has ever seen him or managed to find out a least bit of information about him.

(Kosinski 1982: 17-18)

Goddard's identity remains a secret even from his most intimate friends, his lovers, and his own father. He manages to remain a voice without a face. Ever since his first big record was played on the air, all the magazines, newspapers, T.V and Radio stations made tireless efforts to unravel Goddard's identity. Goddard's whereabouts, his physical appearance continue to be a complete mystery. Andrea Gwynplaine, a voluptuous and veritable enchantress, who can go to any extreme to achieve her desired aim, indulges in orgiastic sexual encounters with Domostroy and succeeds in making him join hands with her for entrapping Goddard in order to unravel the mystery behind this legendary musician. Patrick Domostroy as a canny schemer weaves a net with Andrea to trap Goddard by forging letters stuffed with musical expertise and posting those letters with nude and sensuous photographs of Andrea. The anonymous letters are written on the stolen White House stationery to dupe Goddard and make him believe that such letters come to him from the daughter or the wife of some high official from the White House, who wants to remain anonymous. The legendary Goddard is hooked by this trick and is curious to know about her. Goddard is impressed by the final letter of the 'White House Woman', in which she admires his anonymity and considers it necessary for the composition of enticing and mesmerizing music. The anonymous woman respects Goddard's double existence and considers it most essential for his creativity:

You are right to shield yourself from all those who if they know who you were, would seek to alter the conditions of your life as well as the form of your art.

(Kosinski 1982: 17)

The 'White House Woman's' analysis of music is erudite and flawless. It is quite evident that the writer of these letters possessed profound knowledge and understanding of music, extensive expertise in modern music and most important—an uncanny intuition. The anonymous woman writes to Goddard that she loves him only for his music: "I will unfailingly detect a soul in you without a note of music to assist me" (Kosinski 1982: 175). By inventing the 'White House Woman' and by forging such intriguing letters, Andrea and Domostroy leave no option for Goddard but to find out this mysterious woman. While tracing the delicate lines of nude body in the photograph sent by the anonymous woman, a curious sensation arises in Goddard that he had seen such photograph before—long before he received it.

He studied the photographs again and again for hints that could lead him to her. His eyes traced the exquisite, harmonious, almost austere, lines of her body, searching in vain for the slightest clue to her identity.

(Kosinski 1982: 187)

Osten finally realizes that this photograph resembled a picture of his step-mother, Vala Stavrova, taken by Patrick Domostroy. A suspicion arises in Osten's mind that the 'White House Woman' is, in some way, connected to Domostroy. The nexus between music and disguise, between anonymity and nudity achieves new heights when Goddard, aroused by the curiosity to know the faceless nude woman in the photographs, discloses his own secret identity on encountering the sensuous Andrea and indulging in sexual orgies with her. For all the main characters in *Pinball*, sex becomes the practical manifestation of disguise. Patrick Domostroy, Andrea Gwynplaine, Jimmy Osten and the black beauty Donna Downes enact their individual as well as collective roles in a type of "sexual utopia in which everyone has the right to everyone else, where human beings, reduced to sexual organs, become absolutely anonymous and interchangeable" (Lasch 1978: 69).

A free and unrestrained indulgence in sex becomes a bizarre exercise for the postmodernist self, especially for practicing the "other self", that is the self in disguise. All

the four chief personages of *Pinball* play and enjoy the extraordinary game of sex as perfectionists—Domostroy and Osten together with Andrea and Donna form a postmodernist ecstatic mixture of man-woman demonic erotic interplay.

Donna Downes, a music student at Julliard, is Jimmy Osten's girl friend but holds Domostroy in great regard for his musical talent. Donna seeks Domostroy's help in preparing herself for the Chopin Competition—a cutthroat music competition in Warsaw. Towards the concluding part of the narrative Andrea and Donna virtually exchange their places vis-à-vis Osten and Domostroy. Jimmy Osten curiously searching for the 'White House Woman' aims at Andrea, who is introduced to him by Donna Downes. Andrea who is also expecting Goddard any time and because of the latter's anonymity, suspects every person who seems to come close to her. In order to find out the real identity of Goddard, Andrea puts Osten on her special high brand of pot, and during their erotic interplay, Goddard forfeits his anonymity by revealing his identity. Towards the climactic portion of the narrative, *Pinball* adopts the typical postmodernist blend of sex, music, violence, and disguise concluding in a mini mayhem. Andrea, her gangster friend, Chick Mercurio, and Domostroy's two hired hoodlums lose their lives. Osten and Domostroy are left to cope with the aftermath of the blood-spilling climax. Kosinski's novel becomes emblematic of postmodernist anti-totalising totalisation where violence remains the only reward for practitioners of music and disguise. The wheel comes full circle: Domostroy promises Osten that latter's second self as Goddard won't be made public. Osten retreats back to his life as Goddard, possibly retreating deeper into the realms of anonymity and Domostroy is left to brood over his helplessness.

Domostroy and Osten, the two heroes in *Pinball*, are the denizens of a demonic human world sickened with violence, crime, and sexual perversion. Both the heroes—one old, publicly known and failed and the other a voice without face but successful—embody the plight of the composer faced with the problem of incessant creation. Both use music to disguise their identity: since music does not reveal the composer and thereby camouflages the postmodernist self. Jimmy Osten as Goddard becomes an antithesis and alter ego of Patrick Domostroy. Both nurture a series of affairs with women, and these relationships suggest Kosinski's belief that sex plays an important role in artistic creation. Both Andrea and Donna, in turn, become involved with Domostroy and Osten, so that all the four characters pair off in different ways and each new pairing explores and evokes a new dimension of the relationship between emotional experience and inspiration that finally drives the artist to objectify that experience through art. Patrick Domostroy and Goddard represent for Kosinski the forms of artistic achievement and both combine between themselves what can be termed as "dispersal that needs centering in order to be dispersal ... Yearning for transcendence" (Hutcheon 1989: 49).

Jimmy Osten is specimen of a typical postmodernist self, characterized by its solitariness while operating in the social context. Osten, as mysterious Goddard feels propelled "by his inwardness, his immediate feel of self, his involvement with his personal struggle toward his goal" (Weinberg 1970: 15). In other words Osten's mysterious existence as Goddard symbolizes postmodernist "self-reflexive experimentation, its ironic ambiguities and its contestations" (Hutcheon 1989: 43). The paradoxical and contradictory existential construct of postmodernist living gets manifested in Osten's objective as Goddard, to make his creativity immortal while keeping his secrecy intact. Osten's inner life has so far produced a single inspiring relationship with Leila Salem, the wife of the Lebanese ambassador to Mexico. His brief love affair with Leila manages to fuse the ideal aspect of his creativity with the physical nature of experience, catalytically releasing a spurt of his creativity. When Osten receives Domostroy's anonymous letter he thinks that Leila herself has written to him, but the display of musical expertise in the letter makes him realize that the

writer is too knowledgeable to be Leila and thus a “sense of entrapment came over him” (Kosinski 1982: 167). Osten begins to track down the mysterious ‘White House Woman’, as he thinks that knowing her would help him create better music. He dreams about the faceless nude of the photographs, he thinks of her as a partner with whom he could share his life not only as Jimmy Osten but as the legendary Goddard as well. Osten fantasizes how he would drive her to his ranch, pretending that he was lost:

He would stop at the main house, and they would get out as if he had never been there before, he would open the door for her—to the New Atlantis and to his entire past.

(Kosinski 1982: 268)

Andrea, Osten believes, will make “the perfect partner to share his creative secret” (Kosinski 1982: 269). Ironically, the way out of the prison of mystery is to let someone else in, and this is symptomatic of the paradoxical, contradictory self-reflexiveness of postmodernist existence.

In real life, Jimmy Osten, in spite of his being the legendary Goddard, is as alone as his elderly counterpart, Patrick Domostroy. When he reads his first forged letter from Domostroy, Osten feels that his life of anonymity is “a prison with no exit” (Kosinski 1982: 92). Domostroy and Osten, both postmodernist individuals face the same dilemma: creativity is enhanced by a stimulating partner and endangered as well. On discovering the ‘White House Woman’, Osten’s fantasizing about Andrea—his vision of a partnership in passion is shattered, his tongue almost torn out, and his life threatened. On the other hand, the affair between Donna Downes and Domostroy does result in a new surge of creativity in Donna and eventually she wins the concert. The last sexual-cum-musical encounter between Donna and Domostroy harmonises the musical rhythms with the waves of sexual impulse:

Within minutes, her music was out of breath 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 to come only from the music sheet over the key board, as separate from the pianist as she was from the instrument she played.

(Kosinski 1982: 249)

In any case, whatsoever, Donna Downes is a postmodernist woman par-excellence, the epitome of demonic fusion, an apocalyptic union of sex and innovative creativity. Domostroy sees in Donna a version of himself as artist: both are spiritual exiles, practicing their art in an alien language. Donna’s luring presence at the keyboard of piano makes her appear to Domostroy as more than a 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 replenished by her.

(Kosinski 1982: 220)

It is another illustration of an artist’s need for experience of passion to create lasting musical compositions. Jimmy Osten produced successful rock compositions, when he fell in love with Leila, and now Domostroy hopes to recover belief in himself and his creativity by falling in love with Donna.

. Jerzy Kosinski, ostensibly though, repeatedly establishes in *Pinball*, that uncertainties of a self in the chaotic, anarchic society are sought to be neutralized and rendered into something creative and artistic through the medium of sexual fusion. The excessive indulgence in sex coupled with episodes of violence, reflect in *Pinball*:

an unfeeling detachment among human beings who are envisioned as things and to whom we cannot and need not relate, except to use them as objects for the discharge of our narcissistic aggression”.

(Aldridge 1983: 15)

For instance, Domostroy becomes a sexual victim of Andrea as she exploits him to reach Goddard; Osten, as Goddard, sexually uses Andrea, only to ascertain the extent of threat to his existential invisibility. Osten and Domostroy both use Donna as means to intensify their ability to compose. In this sordid drama, only Donna retains some gentility and truth, as she develops relationships with the two men, precisely to learn more and more about creative music. Her passion is to become a musical virtuoso, which she eventually succeeds in. Domostroy and Osten together with Andrea and Donna are the denizens of a society that seems to reaffirm the capitalist belief “that human beings are ultimately reducible to interchangeable objects” (Lasch 1978: 69). This is the legacy of deculture, a prominent feature of postmodernist consumer society. Postmodernist deculture bases itself upon the ethos of mass society—a chaotic landscape where individuals like Jimmy Osten and Domostroy find themselves adrift. The fictional society in *Pinball* reflects Kosinski’s idea of a postmodernist society in which reason is reduced to mere calculations, and can impose no limits on the pursuit of pleasure: “on immediate gratification of every desire no matter how perverse, insane, criminal, or merely immoral” (Lasch 1978: 69). The novel reflects a nightmarish landscape, a decreative, anarchic culture where individuals have been overpowered by demonic Eros. However the eccentricities and wanderings of Kosinski’s maverick heroes are quite relevant, if viewed and analysed in the context of postmodernist culture.

Excessive use of sex in *Pinball* has been criticized and Kosinski has even been accused of being pornographic in his fictional narratives. However, the fact remains that Kosinski projects sex as a means for intimate encounter as well as an opportunity for self-understanding. Every sexual encounter of Kosinski’s fictional heroes becomes an important episode in the evolutionary process of their self-awareness.

Like any other novel produced in Post-War America, *Pinball* reflects the deteriorating social milieu that intrudes upon the freedom of individual self. The chief personages, and even some minor characters, in *Pinball* are victims of existential crisis, they feel insecure thus adopting disguise, which guarantees them freedom and security. *Pinball* concerns itself not so much “with social defeat and victories as with adamic falls and quixotic redemptions” (Baumbach 1965: 2). In the novel, there are repeated illustrations to substantiate the argument that the main personages Domostroy, Osten, Andrea and Donna interact and go about the business of their life, securing their private world by wearing disguise. Moreover, the so called ‘redemptions’ are made possible by music. For instance, the narrator while describing Domostroy’s emotional condition being dictated by music, points out that the man was guided by auditory, and his art was music. In case of Jimmy Osten and Donna Downes as well, music replaces the countless “encounters and collisions of men and objects with a mystical fusion of sound, places and distance, of mood and emotion” (Kosinski 1982: 10). Jimmy Osten, as Goddard succeeds in making himself famous yet invisible only through music. Osten includes the following lines from James Joyce’s *Ulysses*, in his poetic composition:

I am a boy
That can enjoy
Invisibility

(Kosinski 1982: 36)

Osten's preference for anonymity and a life full of freedom is repeatedly reflected in the novel. While analyzing Goddard's music, Domostroy and Andrea discuss the personages who seem to have influenced him. Domostroy thinks that the mysterious musician's and composer's melodies, harmonies, rhythms and musical forms, would reveal more about him. He takes an example of one of his songs, called "Fugue": "In music *Fugue* signifies contrapuntal imitation, but in psychiatry it means a state of flight from reality" (Kosinski 1982: 50). Goddard, as a postmodernist individual, also hides himself and wants to escape from reality in order to preserve his self and identity from the encroachment of mass society. Disguise provides Osten freedom and security to the extent that he boasts of his art of being invisible: "I've learned how to make myself invisible" (Kosinski 1982: 85).

Jimmy Osten loves his anonymity because it guarantees his freedom, and he loves his freedom because it allows him to be anonymous. While in seclusion in the New Atlantis, Osten as Goddard was really at home:

a disembodied spirit floating in a mysterious continuum, a mystic possessed by melody, as removed from the natural world as music itself. He had hung as his motto on the white sound proofed wall: *ognun suoi il segreti*—"Everyone has his secrets."

(Kosinski 1982: 139)

Osten's denial of a public self constitutes the ultimate affirmation of his private self. Executing his famous public image and identity—the Goddard self—by altering his real singing voice, Osten remains happy to be Jimmy Osten and not Goddard. The disguise as a postmodernist weapon is complete. Contrary to Goddard's disguise, the demonic nature of Andrea's disguise, while executing her criminal plan with Domostroy, gets reflected in her address to her former lover:

they all failed to find out Goddard. So I zeroed in on you, Domostroy, because—for all of your music and experience—you are a loser and I knew I could get you cheap. Furthermore, you're such a cold, calculating, obscene son of a bitch that I somehow sensed you'd be mean enough to flush Goddard out.

(Kosinski 1982: 74)

Andrea's words are spoken moments before her brutal killing during the climatic episode of violence. In *Pinball*, self-in-disguise thus symbolizes social evil, or the fact of evil itself. *Pinball* concludes with one of the main characters dead, another unmasked, the third one away from the scene of action, and the fourth one (Domostroy) playing with a pinball machine. Domostroy, like Jimmy Osten and Andrea Gwynplaine, plays the game of deceit and deception which are essential instruments of a postmodernist self in disguise.

Sex, violence and disguise, being the intrinsic components of postmodernist ecstasy in *Pinball* also suggest the disruptionist, anti-formal and anarchic impact of postmodernist culture and society on fictional forms and narrative patterns. The fictional personages in *Pinball* belong to a chaotic world which is based on "Anarchy", "Dispersal", "Schizophrenia" and "Anti-form" (Hassan 1985: 11-12). Life has become meaningless and absurd for Kosinski's protagonists. They live their lives in bits and pieces, a series of disconnected and disjointed events. In *Pinball*, Kosinski emphatically shows the attempts made by his protagonists to find some sort of meaning that may possibly connect the scattered events of their otherwise disjointed lives. In addition to this, most of the fictional personages in the novel can be described as the contemporary counterparts of Sisyphean figures engaged in agonizing tasks of attaining self-awareness, identity and sense of

belonging. For Domostroy, Osten, Andrea and Donna the “boulder” keeps on “rolling” and there is no remedy unless some terrible tremor flattens the slope. The central protagonists in *Pinball* finally end up as rebel-victims, identifying with the Kafkaesque syndrome of existential problematic. Their existence is an ironic one and their existential predicament centers on futility and chaos. *Pinball*, to put it finally, establishes Kosinski as the playboy of detotalised and demonic postmodernist existence; an existence that assumes meaning only in terms of the eccentric and the bizarre.

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