
Postmodern View of Socioeconomy and Politics in Absurdistan

America: a land of freedom, opportunity, and prosperity; a country that highly advocates the amalgamation of conglomerating cultures. Ironically, however, in Gary Shteyngart's novel *Absurdistan*, the Russians transcend Americans in their pursuit for wealth, status, and size. The protagonist, Misha Vainberg, is a 30-year-old Russian heir to a post-Soviet fortune. Having spent 12 years in the United States, he considers himself "an American impounded in a Russian body (Shteyngart 14)." As he experiences life from one country to another, Misha begins to develop relationships with people of different race, culture, background. These relationships not only test his character, but also provide readers a microcosmic view of the controversies he encounters. The element of post-modernism presented in this novel alludes not to a cultural and intellectual phenomenon, but to a corrupt and devastating trend with unmarked boundaries. By intertwining self-conscious playful critique of post-modernism and experimental neo-realist deployment of perspective, imagery, language, structure, and tone, Shteyngart is critical of post-modernism as a socio-economic and political trend. By depicting *Absurdistan* and other post-Soviet countries as post-modern through the eyes of Misha Vainberg and his relationships with a m?lange of people, Shteyngart also opens the eyes of his readers to the world of political exploitations, grave gender issues, class disparities, and influences of American in modern day Russia.

The novel opens with a prologue entitled "Where I'm Calling From." The first person narrator welcomes his readers into what he refers to as his "book of love, a book about too much love (Shteyngart, vii)." From the inception of the prologue, the readers travel with this anonymous narrator from varying time and place. Together, they soar from the year 1972 to the twenty-first century, from "a small village populated entirely by so-called Mountain Jews" to "the land at the corner of 173rd Street and Vyse (Shteyngart vii)." As the narrator soars "away from the ancient rabbi...over flattened Chechnya and pockmarked Sarajevo, over Europe, and over and over and over and finally toward and toward and toward, toward the tip of the slender island... (Shteyngart ix)," readers are reminded that this is not only a book about love, but a book about geography. This opening prologue is extremely crucial because Shteyngart introduces important elements of postmodernism that prove to be essential in understanding and interpreting the themes delineated throughout *Absurdistan*. According to *Postmodernist Culture*, one of the most striking preoccupations of modernist and postmodernist aesthetics is the question of time. Shteyngart utilizes this postmodern element of reducing time to a single element and flattening time into space to produce the effect of blurred clarity. By blending together the time of epic with contemporary time and forcing his readers to "view history and human life as an endless series of cycles (Connor 124)," Shteyngart is able to freeze time to the 2000s. By allowing his readers to traverse from place to place in this non-transient time, one can critique the reality that is being portrayed.

In order to grasp the many realities present in *Absurdistan*, one must have a clear understanding of the narrator and the relationships he develops. Apart from the prologue, the novel commences with an over-the-edge, honest, account of the narrator. With a first person narration, he introduces himself as "Misha Borisovich Vainberg, age thirty, a grossly overweight man with small, deeply set blue eyes, a pretty Jewish beak...(Shteyngart 1)." Misha is not only

unhesitant in relating his stories to his readers, but he also spares no details as he produces vulgar images from sexual encounters with women to an unsuccessful circumcision in a Hasidic home. From the first person narration, it can be noted that this straightforward perspective of situations and people returns readers to realism. However, because Misha is not an omniscient narrator and is rather subjective in his story-telling, the reality presented is rather skewed. One can already see the mixture of paradoxical postmodernism and neo-realism.

Similarly, as Misha recounts his relationship with his father, the element of post-modernism becomes critical in analyzing the corrupt trends in post-Soviet countries. As Misha speaks of his papa, there is a hint of sarcasm in his diction. In the chapter titled "Dedications," Misha starts by saying "First I would like to fall on my knees in front of the INS headquarters in Washington D.C, to thank the organizations for all its successful work on behalf of foreigners everywhere (Shteyngart 14)." This sarcastic remark not only exudes a dash of bitterness he feels towards his papa for murdering an Oklahoma businessman, but it also contributes to the satirical and witty tone throughout the novel. Likewise, as Misha is writing his love letter to the generals in charge of the Immigration and Naturalization Service pleading to let him back in America, he emphasizes on having been educated at Accidental College, a renowned Midwestern institution for the young aristocrats where "the virtues of democracy are often debated at teatime (Shteyngart 15)." By doing so, Shteyngart mocks the American institution. According to Frederic Jameson, author of *Postmodernism or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, the last few years have been marked by an inverted millenarianism in which forewarnings of the future have been replaced by senses of the end of ideology, art, social class. What once was the frantic economic urgency has now become "an increasingly essential structural function and position to aesthetic innovation and experimentation (Jameson 5)."

Accidental College is a symbol of absolute parody; it demonstrates the obliteration of a system. At Accidental College, students are taught that their dreams and beliefs would one day sway to their will. At Accidental College, Introduction to Striptease classes, Advanced Memoir seminars, and Overcoming Shyness and Facilitating Self-Expression lectures are taught in order to raise up leaders in the world. Through the utilization of sarcasm and pastiche, Shteyngart manifests to readers that not only is the socioeconomic reality postmodern even in the twenty-first century in the way that individuals have nothing to aspire to, it is also destined to fail because individual development and progress is nonexistent.

More importantly, the analysis of Misha and his relationship with his papa continues to support Misha's lack of individualism and independence. Aside from sending his son to attend Accidental College in America, Papa also insisted his son to be circumcised in New York. Any rational being would know that circumcision should be done at an early age, not when the child is already eighteen. Therefore, it can be inferred that the only plausible motive for Misha to become circumcised at his age is not for religious values and beliefs, but for social networking. The physical attribute of a circumcision is insignificant; rather, it is through this commonality of this Jewish tradition that brings the Jewish people together. Based on an article that examines the Jewish Social Network, author Rela Mintz Geffen writes that "proponents of networking meets the need of Jews wherever they are and enable them to climb on to the Jewish bandwagon as free riders." In addition, it is understood that the concentration of Jews enables the "initiation, support, and maintenance of institutional life including schools, shuls, kosher food markets and the like" (Geffen 3). The very presence of these cultural markers acts to unobtrusively promote identity maintenance of non-affiliated and marginally affiliated Jews who are constantly reminded of their Jewish identity. This subtle yet pervasive effect is evident in

cities like New York, where everyone in New York feels Jewish. For this reason, Misha's father understands that in order for his son to be as successful wherever he goes, he must become circumcised. This act of circumcision is the gateway for social connections and opportunities amongst the Jewish community in places all over the world.

These social networks, originally formed by his Papa and developed through the act of circumcision, prove to be critical as Misha is stranded in a tiny post-Soviet country of Absurdistan. In an act of desperation, Misha buys Belgian citizenship and a bogus passport in Absurdistan, a new country being forged out of a staged war between the Sevo and Svani peoples in a small territory between Iran and Russia. In order to survive, Misha must form relationships with the people he encounters. Through Shteyngart's graphic satire, the American dream is depicted as experienced by famished, newborn democracies. In an article titled "Institutional Competition and Post-Soviet Transformation," writer Aleksandr Libman comments that "economic openness and free relocation of capital and manpower have made post-Soviet countries active participants in global institutional competitions. The inefficient balance in Russia and many other countries, nonetheless, remains stable" (Libman 13). The reason for the erroneous and inefficient import of institutions comes from the predominance of peculiar relationships between authorities and the influence of informal institutions. It is ironic that the founding fathers of Absurdistan are actually gangsters who are secretly collaborating with an American corporation called Golly Burton. In fact, it is nearly impossible for Misha to discern between those who are morally just and those who are corrupt in Absurdistan. The truth that Absurdistan has absolutely nothing is unfolded before Misha's eyes; the bigger picture of Absurdistan is this: "There are supposed to be fifty billion barrels of oil reserves in the Absurdi sector of the Caspian. In truth, there isn't one percent of that left. The Absurdis have been lying to the investors from the start" (Shteyngart 306). It is then Misha discovers that he'd "been had. Utterly. Completely. They'd use me. Taken advantage of me. Sized me up. Known right away that they had their man" (Shteyngart 309). It has been disclosed to Misha that a scheme was devised so that the United States government would pour in billions of dollars into Absurdistan. An orchestrated war is set at the top of the Hyatt hotel, where Ukrainian gunman were hired to bomb sections of Gorbigrad in front of an international crew of TV journalists.

As this fabricated war continues, Misha realizes that things were much worse than they appeared. As thousands of dead or starving refugees lay in the streets, Misha lives and dines at a luxurious hotel. From the fabricated war to the harsh reality of the injured and the dead, these images are cleverly and beautifully paradoxical; they offer a provoking critique of the socio-economical and political reality of oil wars and war profiteering. Taking a closer look into reality, the company Golly Burton is a representation and a mockery of the United States corporation Halliburton. Halliburton Energy Services is a United States based oilfield service that operates internationally with over 70 other countries. In an expose titled "The Truth about Halliburton," author Peter Elkind discusses the serious matter of oil wars and war profiteering. Halliburton had signed a \$2.5 billion no-bid "Restore Iraqi Oil" contract that would have paid for the reconstruction of the entire country. Had the contract been fulfilled exhaustively, Iraq would have been able to export an abundant amount of oil from the northern oil fields. The truth, however, unfolded as oil fields were detected to be barely usable and access to international markets was severely limited. In fact, Halliburton failed to even dig and tunnel through the land since the underground terrain consisted of jumble of boulders, voids, and gravel, impossible for the kind of drilling Halliburton had planned. Therefore, it is apparent that there is a need for reciprocation; the relationships formed resemble a mutual form of giving and taken. Where the ruling class of Absurdistan is in love with the corrupt American company known as the Golly

Burton, Golly Burton in turn is in love with Absurdistan for the money it plans on making when the infrastructure of Absurdistan is rebuilt. By creating an allusion of Absurdistan and intertwining it with a neo-realistic delineation of America, Shteyngart is able to juxtapose the harsh political reality represented in both worlds. By juxtaposing the two companies, Absurdistan's Golly Burton and America's Halliburton, and interweaving postmodernism parody with neo-realism, Shteyngart emphatically critiques the reality of deceit and corruption. Likewise, through postmodern elements of characters that appear to be contradictory and deceitful, language that is unreliable, and knowledge as an illusion, everything delineated in Shteyngart's Absurdistan strives to be a United States replica in style, culture, and prosperity.

Another main issue Shteyngart discusses in Absurdistan concerns the matter of women and gender disparities. Most, if not all, of the women depicted in the novel are conniving and promiscuous. Rouenna, Misha's girlfriend, ends up cheating on him with a professor; Lyuba Vainberg, Misha's father's widow, ends up sleeping with Misha because they were both "lonely and lost (Shteyngart 83);" Nana Nanabragovna, Misha's 'mistress,' is daughter to Mr. Nanabragovna, the man who deceives Misha into working for SCROD. Scattered throughout the novel are prostituting women, young and old, from the East and from the West. Although these women differ in where they are from, their social and economic status, and their race and nationality, Shteyngart chooses to represent them in one fashion. These women are generally described physically in explicit terms; their sexual occurrences are frequently depicted with obscene and crude images. By specifically utilizing phrases like "open crevice of her two-fisted ass" and "the warmth of her oral cavity," Shteyngart is ultimately degrading the women as sexual objects. According to Linda Nicholson's *The Play of Reason*, poor and working-class women, women of color, and lesbians have finally been exposed and are no longer confined to the domestic sphere, as false extrapolations from the experience of the white, middle-class, heterosexual women.

By going to an extreme in his description of women and tying them to prostitutes and manipulators, however, Shteyngart critiques the social reality of Absurdistan. In an article titled 'Post-modernism as the Decadence of the Social Democratic State,' critic Gare notes that the postmodernism elements echoed throughout Absurdistan have "questioned all naturalism, foundations, universals, authority, the idea of autonomous subjects of ethics and politics" (Gare 2). Therefore, by utilizing the postmodern element that involves the demise of the ethical and a life without principles, the issue of gender expands into a bigger problem dealing with the injustice of the social system. In Absurdistan, women do not have social ladders to climb; in Absurdistan, a country that modernizes to be like America, all women are delineated as equal. Because everyone appears to be a crook, there is a certain level of predictability and monotony as well. The politics of gender and the Soviet paradox can be well understood in the article, "Neither Colonized, or Modern?" There appears to be a "Soviet paradox" that is evident in the combined and clashing operations of socialist paternalism that maintains and legitimizes women's presence in the public realm (through work, political representation, and education) with an economy and nationalities policy that effectively stalls the process of social transformation. In fact, post-Soviet gender beliefs and ideologies do not represent national traditions but serve in "signaling a break from Soviet past and creating new imaginaries of the nation that enhance social solidarity in post-Soviet societies (Kandiyoti 603)." From prostitutes at the Hyatt and male ordering bribes to passport prostitution and online pornography, the issue of gender dissipates as the issue of class in relation to ethnicity and religion accumulates. Class violence caused by civil war is not due to a class difference but rather a religious and historical struggle for material dominance. By emphasizing postmodernism elements of parody and the

absence of any single truth, Shteyngart demonstrates that the socioeconomic and political reality is still postmodern in the 21st century.

The closing chapter to *Absurdistan* ultimately leaves readers with many unanswered questions. The question that looms over most readers asks whether or not Misha survives. Because the novel is framed around the September 11 attack on the World Trade Center, one can see that Shteyngart is critiquing the war that is happening right now. This novel is themed around multiculturalism: different cultures being their own yet coming together. In *Absurdistan*, two groups of people have become enemies simply because of the footrest of the cross. They speak different languages and have different cultures, but they are integrated together, they live together, they are dependent on each other. By preserving their differences, though, there is no attempt to maintain or establish class differences. Therefore, with the September 11 framework, Shteyngart focuses on connecting people from different places of the world. This is a novel about civilians and local residence; this is a novel about people on the planes and people across the waters. More importantly, this is a novel about hope. As Misha closes his epilogue with "have faith in me. On these cruel, fragrant streets, we shall finish the difficult lives we were given (Shteyngart 333)," readers can cling onto hope in spite of the surrounding chaos because the arbitrariness and unpredictability of chaos is what will ultimately set everyone free. By intertwining the postmodernism ideology that there is no system with the reality of bedlam, there resides a sick and twisted hope in the inability to predict. "Post-modernity is the moral person's bane and chance at the same time, where in a world with no god, one must stand up straight and confront Chaos (Ojeili 3)."

Absurdistan is a novel of playful critique of post-modernism and experimental neo-realism. It offers offensive features of postmodernism -from obscurity and sexually explicit material to unconcealed languages of social and political boldness. Through the mixture of post modern elements like fragmentations and disorientations, disjointed time as represented by chapter division, failure of values and absence of absolutes, artful play, and knowledge as an illusion, with formal elements of tone, diction, and imagery, Shteyngart is able to strongly, yet subtly, critique the socioeconomic and political reality in modern day Russia. As we closely analyze the relationships the protagonist develops and take into consideration of post-modernism as a corrupted trend, we can finally see the world as it is: tainted with political exploitations, marred with gender and class disparities, and influenced by the culture and the mindset of American lifestyle.

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