



RESEARCH ARTICLE

Vol. 4. Issue.3., 2017 (July-Sept.)

INTERNATIONAL  
STANDARD  
SERIAL  
NUMBER  
INDIA  
2395-2628(Print):2349-9451(online)

SELF-CONSCIOUS AMALGAMATION OF HISTORY AND POSTMODERNISM IN  
A. S. BYATT'S WORKS

HARWINDER KAUR

Research Scholar, Dept of English, Kurukshetra University Kurukshetra  
Haryana, India



ABSTRACT

A. S. Byatt is one of the most ambitious and intellectual postmodernist novelists. Her works, through their postmodern narrative structures, negotiate their social, political, economical and individual issues repeatedly by linking them to the past. All through her fiction, Byatt uses literature as a medium that connects an individual to the cultural and historical past. She deploys postmodern techniques of intertextuality, references, allusions, parody, pastiche, self-reflexivity, metaphors, antagonism etc to link present with the past. Byatt is a novelist-cum-critic and through her novels shows her extensive knowledge of the literary past as well as the literary theory and criticism. The paper aims at recognizing Byatt's direct and indirect preoccupation with the past in the light of postmodernism. Her novels and stories are full of intertextuality and literary allusions to the fairytales, fantasy fiction, literary and linguistic theories and literary texts and history.

**Keywords:** postmodernism, history, intertextuality, metafiction, tradition

A great novelist, short-story writer, essayist, reviewer, journalist and respected literary critic, A. S. Byatt is one of the leading contemporary British writers. Being a good academic and scholar, it is obvious that her complex and ambitious fictional works are full of her intellectual and literary powers in both content and style. From the early stage of her career, Byatt is a critical story teller who does not separate the literary from the critical imagination and aims at a thoughtful and deliberate commingling of these two ways of seeing and describing the world. She is one of the most ambitious and intellectual postmodern novelists. *The Virgin in the Garden* (1978), and *Still Life* (1985), which won the PEN/Macmillan Silver Pen Award, are the first two novels of Byatt's Frederica Quartet. Byatt published her greatest best seller to date, *Possession* in 1990. The novel won the prestigious Booker Prize for fiction as well as the Irish Times Fictional Prize and was made into a very popular movie in 2002. She then wrote *Angels and Insects* (1992) and completed Frederica's Quartet with *Babel Tower* (1996) and *A Whistling Woman* (2002). Byatt's novel *The Biographer's Tale* was published in 2000 and *The Children's Book* in 2009. The latter was shortlisted for Man Booker Prize.

One can easily identify a variety of genres, critical trends, settings and themes in Byatt's literary and critical writings. But some of her occupations are evident from her earliest works, notably, the importance of narrative forms, accurate language, the representation of the past and the problematic relationship between fiction and reality. In the 1960s and 1970s, the critical studies, dominated by Leavisite liberal humanism,

placed 'life' above all considerations of form and patterns. As an academic, Byatt was very much influenced by Leavisite criticism but she started writing in an anti-Leavisite fashion that makes sense of her metafictional and meta-narrative gestures and of her highly structured and intellectually strict writing. According to Bently, contemporary British fiction deals with "questions about the nature of writing fiction and the role of language in that process" and "the way in which history and narratives of the past affect the present, and the problems involved in attempting to record that past accordingly" (qtd in Boccardi 2013: 25).

During the last two decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the British writers are interested in the description of history and their works are generally regarded as "new historical novels." They are basically concerned with the questions of how the past is represented in language. In her introduction to the anthology *Memory*, Byatt views all art as having mnemonic function and as a form of memory. In an essay titled "Memory and the Making of Fiction," she considers that personal memory and literature are closely interconnected. She argues that literary texts are "haunted by, and connected to, the memories of the dead, both the immediately dead and the long dead whose memories constructed the culture we live in and change in our time" (qtd in Steveker 79). By the time, Byatt's works received worldwide recognition, the term "postmodernism" had gained popularity to describe self-conscious approaches to narration and representation of the kind Byatt exploits in her work. In fact, postmodernism arose in a reaction to realist ways of judging novels in favour of the expectation that novels should challenge the aim of representing reality.

Postmodernism is a broad movement, developed in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century across philosophy, the arts, the architecture, and criticism which marked a departure from modernism and is defined by an attitude of skepticism, or distrust toward grand narratives, ideologies and various principles of Enlightenment rationality, including the existence of objective reality and absolute truth. The term "postmodernism" was used first of all by the historian Arnold Toynbee for a new historical cycle. Postmodernist thought is critical of all forms of totalization, essentialist notions of truth, knowledge, power, the self and language. The development of science and technology including network of mass communication and transportation in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century played a major role in reshaping human perceptions. A consequence of this modernity as an achieved reality is what postmodernists might refer to as de-realization. The main precursors of this notion are found in Kierkegaard, Marx and Nietzsche who are of the view that the society has become a realization of abstract thought which is artificial. Human subjects themselves experience this de-realization because commodities are product of their labor. In Nietzsche's view, the repetition of history in each age is an unhistorical moment that is its own--present as "new" and therefore the recurrence is a matter of difference rather than identity. What repeats is neither real nor apparent in the traditional sense, but is a phantom or simulacrum. In his book *The Postmodern condition: A Report on Knowledge* (1979) J. F. Lyotard says, "I define postmodern as incredulity toward meta-narratives" (xxiv). He views the postmodern condition in a derogatory way lamenting that the knowledge is no longer principal narrative. It has become information.

Postmodernism represents a mixture of post-war styles and cultures typically characterized by certain stylistic features such as meta-fictional writing, a self-conscious and self-reflexive narrative, playfulness with language, the use of irony, parody and pastiche, the blurring of the boundaries between high and low cultural forms, representation of the past and problematic relationship between fiction and reality. It can also be identified as literary philosophy which implies that reality is understood as a discursive or linguistic construct, as the effect of signification and language.

One of the most important concepts of postmodernism is "return to history" that is revival of the cultural texts, theme, and styles which many post-war English novels deal with. In his book *The Contemporary British Historical Novel: Representation, Nation, Empire*, Mariadele Boccardi views that, the historical novel is "the genre where postmodernism manifests itself most clearly and that where it proves theoretically inadequate (2009:6). The challenge to the very notion of historical truth, the insistence that historical knowledge is always textually mediated and recognition of all narrative forms are identified by Hutcheon in her study *A Poetics of Postmodernism* (1988) as characteristic of the postmodern attitude towards representation and narrative generally, and historical representation and narrative particularly. In fact, she maintains that postmodernism disrupts such "cultural and social assumptions" as "origin and ends, unity,

totalization, logic and reason, consciousness and human nations, progress and fate, representation and truth,... causality and temporal homogeneity, linearity and continuity”(86). The representation of these post-modern concerns in literature creates a new kind of historical novel which she terms as “Historiographic metafiction” that denotes “novels which are both intensely self-reflexive and yet paradoxically also lay claim to historical events and personages” (5).

In *Possession*, Byatt uses a variety of styles and genres to form a “ghostly palimpsest of literary theoretical and intrusively biographical texts” (P ‘Introduction’). It is a multi-genred novel, a love story, parody, mystery, academic novel, comedy of manners, satire and historical novel. It is a novel which provides a reader with the pleasure of reading a text as well as critical approaches. Byatt uses a large cast of characters who contribute in the text by their poems, journals, letters and other forms of writing. The academic atmosphere of the novel presents the rivalries and complex relationship among the twentieth century scholars on the question of the “possession” of the manuscripts and research. It is a story of two contemporary critics and research scholars Roland Mitchell and Maud Bailey who set out to discover a secret love affair between two Victorian poets Henry Randolph Ash and Christable LaMotte. In this process they are possessed by their research subjects. The novel is replete with intertexts which further enhances the beauty of its textual fabric. Byatt was influenced by Umberto Eco as she makes it clear:

What changed everything was my reading of Umberto Eco’s *The Name of the Rose*, with its parodic mediaeval detective story. I owed a great deal to Umberto Eco. (P ‘Introduction’)

Byatt uses the third person omniscient narrator in the novel but the major portion of the novel covers the letters of Ash and LaMotte, extracts from Ash’s poetry and tales, parts of LaMotte’s epic poem *The Fairy Melusine* and fairy tales. It also includes Mortimer Cropper’s biography of Ash, extracts from journals of Blanche Glover, Sabine de Kercoz and Ash’s wife Ellen and other characters’ writings. It is a self-reflexive novel embedded with interweaving texts and at the same a critique of postmodernism under the structure of postmodernism. According to Alexa Alfer and Amy J. Edwards de Campos:

Its rigorous yet mocking mimicry of both Victorian and contemporary philosophies, genres and styles, its abundance of narrative parody and pastiche, and the unashamedly flaunted parallels of story and time all serve to foreground underlying questions of narrative playfulness and (meta-) historical representation and suggest strong- if perhaps suspiciously blatant- allegiances to the critical ideas concerning fiction, history and identity so fashionable in the late 1980s and early 1990s. (94)

The persistent representation of the past in contemporary fiction and the technical innovations in the novel are related to the historical novelist’s awareness that the past can be known imaginatively because its accessible remains are fragmented, incomplete and contradictory. Now the question arises that why the post-war and postmodern writers felt the urge to represent the past in their historical works. The confidence of realist narrative practice in 19<sup>th</sup> century and the confidence of the Victorian nation whose colonial expansion, its empirical glory and diplomacy are missing in present and located in the past. And this loss of national heritage, presented in the past, has drawn the attention of contemporary British novelists. A. S. Byatt is one of them whose novels, through their postmodern narrative structures, negotiate their social, political, economical and individual issues repeatedly by linking them to the past. Her historical and fabulous fictions are imaginative ‘resurrections’ not only of past men and women but also of texts. All through her fiction, Byatt uses literature as medium that connects an individual to the past--cultural past and historical past. In *Still Life*, a character claims that “[a] good memory [is] a priceless possession, an essential part of human culture ... It’s our link with our kind” (890).

The representation of the past is possible through memory which can be seen as the creative act of constructing the past--a productive ability of the human mind. There are two types of memories--personal memory and collective memory. Collective memory consists of cultural and literary texts, cultural and historical records such as institutions, paintings, museums and official records. A. S. Byatt makes use of both types of memories. But it is due to postmodern concepts of intertextuality, references, allusions, pastiche, parody and metaphors, etc. that literature functions as a medium of cultural memory and past. Byatt’s tetralogy and other novels exemplify the eminent role in the representation of the past. Byatt uses the

concept of intertextuality in abundance that enables her to deal with different literary texts in their novels that react not only to issues outside themselves but also to each other and thus form or transform their meanings.

Byatt has always been a “greedy reader” who weaves her many interests--biology, history, philosophy among them into her works. The results are novels with as she has often stated, “the whole world in them”, books that teem with characters and ideas. Her novels and stories are full of intertextuality and literary allusions to the fairytales, fantasy fiction, to literary and linguistic theories and to literary texts and history, most notably the Elizabethan and Victorian era. In her works, she often turns her attention back to Shakespeare, Romantic poets, William Wordsworth and Samuel Taylor Coleridge and Victorian writers such as George Eliot, and poets Robert Browning and Tennyson. In her writing, she is also influenced by Elizabeth Barrett Browning, Charles Dickens and Marcel Proust. Her feeling for the past combined in her work with pastiche and other forms of postmodern literariness has led to tag of ‘Victorian postmodernist’.

Apart from cultural texts and writers, Byatt also makes an extensive use of pictorial art which constitutes as a part of British cultural past. The second volume of Frederica Quartet, *Still Life* refers to the popular figure of memory, Vincent Van Gogh which establishes Byatt’s identity as a neo-realist writer. In fact, Byatt’s novels represent their protagonist’s identities as depending on British cultural past. It is very unfortunate that her earlier works received less attention of the critics and it is only with the publication of Booker-Prize winning novel, *Possession* that she claimed centrality to contemporary literature. In *Identity and Cultural Memory in the Fiction of A. S. Byatt* (2009), Lena Steveker examines that Byatt’s characters identify themselves in the light of cultural memory. In her book, she agrees that in Byatt’s novels individual identity and cultural memory are interrelated. The critics in wide range studies of contemporary fiction took a historicist and contextual approach to examine Byatt’s novels and critical works. They acknowledge that Byatt uses various narrative strategies associated with postmodern style, most notably, pastiche, self-reflexivity and intertextuality.

The analytic research and criticism on *Possession*’s status as postmodern novel proves applicable to Byatt’s other historical work or self-referential narratives. In *A Whistling Woman* as well as in her two biographic metafiction, *Possession* and *The Biographer’s Tale*, genre patterns are remarkable for their revisiting of the past. Byatt’s characters realize that their individual identity can be achieved only through the past. Although A. S. Byatt is best known for her reimagining of the Victorian past in *Possession* and *Angels and Insects*, there is growing interest in her tetralogy and other fictional and critical works. To conclude, it can be said that Byatt is very good at mixing the historical past with the postmodernism. She makes a fine use of postmodern devices and techniques of language, self-referentially, intertextuality, allusion, pastiche, parody and metafiction.

**Works Cited:**

- Alfer, Alexa and Amy Edwards de Campos. *A. S. Byatt: Critical Storytelling*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2010. Print.
- Boccardi, Mariadele. *The Contemporary British Historical Novel*. Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009. Print
- Boccardi, Mariadele. *A. S. Byatt*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013. Print.
- Byatt, A. S. *A Whistling Woman*. London: Vintage, 2003. Print.
- . *Angels and Insects*. London: Vintage, 1992. Print.
- . *Babel Tower*. London: Vintage, 1997. Print.
- . “Memory and the Making of Fiction.” *Memory*. Ed. Patricia Fara and Karalyn Patterson. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998. Print.
- . *Passions of the Mind: Selected Writings*. London: Chatto and Windus, 1991. Print.
- . *Possession: A Romance*. London: Vintage, 1990. Print.
- . *Still Life*. London: Vintage, 2003. Print.
- . *The Biographer’s Tale*. London: Vintage, 2000. Print.
- . *The Virgin in the Garden*. London: Vintage, 1994. Print.
- Connor, Steven. *The English Novel in History 1950-1995*. London: Routledge, 1996. Print.

Hensher, Philip. 'A. S. Byatt: The Art of Fiction No. 168.' <[http:// www.theparisreview.org/interviews/481/the-art-of-fiction-no-168-a-s-byatt](http://www.theparisreview.org/interviews/481/the-art-of-fiction-no-168-a-s-byatt)>

Hutcheon, Linda. *A Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction*. New York: Routledge, 1988. Print.

Lyotard, Jean-Francois. *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1986[1979]. Print.

Steveker, Lena. *Identity and Cultural Memory in the Fiction of A. S. Byatt: Knitting the Net of Culture*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009. Print.

---