

## Crisis of Classification: An Overview of Julian Barnes' Mainstream Novels

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### Introduction

Julian Barnes was born on 19 January 1946. Being a son of French language teachers, he had a chance to learn about French language and culture in his school days. From the early age of his life, he developed his interest in France, French authors and French history. Moreover, Barnes was known as a voracious reader. He read *Madame Bovary* at the age of fifteen and became the very much fan of Gustav Flaubert. Some scholars tend to compare Barnes' novels with Martin Amis, Ian McEwan, Ford Madox Ford and Graham Swift. In short, Gustave Flaubert, Ford Madox Ford, John Updike, Nabokov and Calvino influenced him in a little bit manners.

Julian Barnes, an author of international fame has received number of awards in his lifetime. Julian Barnes started his career as a novelist with his first semi-autobiographical novel *Metroland* in 1980 and won the *Somerset Maugham Award* for this outstanding novel in 1981. His third novel *Flaubert's Parrot* (1984) was shortlisted for the *Booker Prize* in 1984. This same book won *Geoffrey Faber Memorial Prize* in 1985 and *Prix Medicis* (France) in 1986. In 1991, Barnes' sixth novel *Talking It Over* appeared in the market and received the *Prix Femina Etranger* (France) award in 1992. Barnes was again shortlisted for the *Booker Prize* for his novel *England, England* in 1998. His tenth novel *Arthur and George* published in 2005. This book was also shortlisted for *Man Booker Prize* for fiction in 2005. He won the prestigious award Man Booker Prize for his eleventh novel *The Sense of Ending* in 2011. Apart from these, he was felicitated with *E. M. Forster Award* (1986), *Gutenberg Prize* (1987), *Shakespeare Prize* (1993) etc.

The present paper makes an extensive review of Julian Barnes' novels and provides plot summary of each novel in brief. The focus will be on how Barnes' novels defy the possibility of exact classification. Not all these novels can fall into the same category. These novels can be labeled as bildungsroman, historiographic metafiction, love prose and political novels etc.

### Julian Barnes: Crisis of Literary Identity

As an author, Julian Barnes has two-folded personality. He has written eleven "serious" novels with his own name and at the same time, he has published four "popular" fictions under the pseudonym Dan Kavanagh. Over the period of three decades, he has published fifteen novels including four detective fictions, three collections of short stories and essays. Most of the novels raise the question on Barnes' text – whether the book is a novel or collection of short stories or essays. His third novel *Flaubert's Parrot* raises the question about its form and *A History of the World in 10½ Chapters* reignites this same debate in 1989. Therefore, it is very difficult to define him as a novelist or essayist only. Similarly, it is also difficult to classify him as a traditional author or postmodern author. His novels namely, *Metroland*, *Before She Met Me*, *Talking It Over* and *Love Etc* reveal some of the traditional aspects in his writing. The author follows the traditional conventions of bildungsroman and love triangle in these novels. On the other hand, his breakthrough novel *Flaubert's Parrot* and *A History of the World in 10½ Chapters* illustrate the features of postmodernist fiction. These novels are highly experimental in the form and

technique and concerned with the postmodern philosophical notions such as the concept of history, the failure of getting absolute meaning, postmodern notion of truth, rejection of metanarrative, elusiveness of past etc. Many scholars have raised doubts on his literary identity-whether he is British author or European author. In an interview with Shusha Guppy Barnes says that:

In Britain I'm sometimes regarded as a suspiciously Europeanized writer, who has rather dubious French influence. But if you try that line in Europe, especially in France, they say, oh, No! You are so English. (qtd. In *The Art of Fiction* No. 65)

In fact, he is English Francophile. His novels *England, England* (1998) and *Arthur and George* (2005) focus on the theme of Englishness. On the other hand, his books namely *Metroland* (1980) and *Flaubert's Parrot* (1984) deal with French culture, language and French authors. It is very difficult to classify the novels published under the name Julian Barnes. From the debut novel *Metroland* (1980) to the eleventh novel *The Sense of Ending* (2011), Barnes has engaged with number of different themes. He has employed various literary techniques in his novels. Each novel is remarkably different from the earlier one. He has written two bildungsroman; *Metroland* and *Staring at the Sun*, two historiography metafiction *Flaubert's Parrot* and *A History of the World in 10 ½ Chapters*, two political novels; *England England* and *Porcupine*, two love novels; *Talking It Over* and *Love etc.*

#### **Bildungsroman: *Metroland* and *Staring at the Sun***

Bildungsroman is a kind of literary form that concerns with the all-round development of the protagonist. Julian Barnes employs the techniques of bildungsroman that depict the life of its protagonist from the early childhood to maturity. *Metroland* (1980) is divided into three parts: *Metroland 1963*, *Paris 1968* and *Metroland II 1977*. The first part *Metroland 1963*, presents the rebellious nature of Christopher Lloyd, a 16-year-old student and his friend Toni Barbarowski. Both of them do not like the suburban middle class life. They live in Metroland. In the second part *Paris 1968*, Barnes put forth the personal story of the young protagonist Christopher who is a man of twenty-one now. Christopher goes to Paris for his research work and falls in love with Annick. The third part of this novel titled as *Metroland II 1977* completes the circular structure of the novel. The 30-year-old Christopher comes back to Metroland suburbia where he had spent his early childhood. Here he has settled with his wife Marion into bourgeois life. The third part introduces the themes of fidelity and cuckoldry that will become major concern in his later works.

The structure of *Staring at the Sun* is similar to *Metroland* as the novel divided into three parts. The plot covers the duration from 1941 to 2021. The first part narrates Jean's childhood. She is an innocent, happy go lucky country girl in the beginning. Jean marries a police officer named Michael. Her married life is not happy one. Jean gives birth to Gregory, then leaves her husband and prefers to live alone. This the second part of the novel. Jean sets out for an open-ended quest for meaning. It is about her journey of search for a significant life. The third part is Gregory's quest for meaning.

#### **Historiographic Metafiction: *Flaubert's Parrot* and *A History of the World in 10½ Chapters***

Historiographic metafiction is a type of postmodern novel that mixes the fictitious events and historical facts. It rejects the traditional notion of the past and the truth as well as subverts the concept of history. Geoffrey Braithwaite, a biographer-cum-narrator of *Flaubert's Parrot* (1984) addresses that he has three stories to tell: Flaubert's, his own and his wife Ellen's story. Thus, the novel outlines the story of three different persons. Each story is concerned with the nature of past and the narrator fails to obtain absolute truth. The novel illustrates the illusive

nature of the past and inaccessible nature of truth, which are major concerns of historiographic metafiction. The first chapter entitled *Flaubert's Parrot* put the enigma before the reader. Geoffrey Braithwaite sees two stuffed parrots in two different museums. Both of them are claiming that Flaubert had placed them on his writing desk. Braithwaite sets out to discover the authentic bird. He is not successful in his effort and the novel ends with uncertainty. The narrator also presents his wife's story and his own story. Thus, the novel has three different narratives. The novel discusses some postmodern philosophical notions such as the history, the past and the truth. Many critics raise doubts regarding the form of the book. The book is partly biography, partly autobiography, overloaded with metafictional chat and literary criticism.

Julian Barnes' fifth book *A History of the World in 10½ Chapters* (1989) is neither the novel nor the history as its title suggests. The book can be described as a collection of essays, short stories or different prose pieces. The book opens with woodworm's revised account of Noah and the Flood and ends with the form of heaven. However, not all the chapters progress chronologically. The second chapter *The Visitors* narrates the hijacking of pleasure boat by modern Arab terrorists. The third chapter presents sixteenth century court matter between the bestioles and the inhabitants of Mamirolle. Chapter four is a fantasy of woman who travels on the sea in order to escape from nuclear west. The fifth chapter is divided into two sections. The first section recounts the shipwreck of the French frigate, the *Medusa*, in 1816, and the second section criticises the painting of the "*The Raft of the Medusa*" by Gericault three years later. Chapter six recounts a fictional voyage of an Irish woman to Mount Ararat where she dies. The seventh chapter titled as "*Three Simple Stories.*" narrates three different tales. The first story concerns a survivor from the *Titanic*, the second story is about the mythical figure Jonah and a sailor who was swallowed by the whale in 1891. The third story is the voyage of Jews from Germany to the USA and their returning to Germany. Chapter eight is a story about a modern film actor on location in the Venezuelan jungle. Next comes the half chapter, "Parenthesis," which is marked as an essay on love. Chapter nine recounts another fictitious journey to Mount Ararat by an astronaut in search of Noah's ark in 1977. The novel subverts the notion of history and presents views of marginalized characters. The book gives the message that there is no "the history", but there are histories. Barnes has mixed mythical, fictional and historical facts in this novel.

### **Political novels; *England England* and *Porcupine***

*Porcupine* (1992) is a short novel about the fall of liberalism and communism in Eastern Europe. The novel presents the story of the trial of Stoyo Petkanov. The novel is a combination of historical reference and political aspect as well as it is a mixture of history and fiction. The book can be termed as a serious realistic novel about politics. Barnes himself defines the novel as political novel that discusses the weakness of liberalism and communism. Bulgaria became a communist state in 1949. Todor Zhivkov was the head of the communist party and later found guilty. The reader can come across to the similarities between real life figure Zhivkov and fictional character Petkanov. In the novel, Petkanov was party leader and head of the state for thirty-three years (32) whereas in the history we see Zhivkov as the communist party leader in Bulgaria for thirty-five years. The charges against of these characters are same such as deception, mismanagement and misuse of the power.

Julian Barnes was once again shortlisted for the *Man Booker Prize* for *England, England* in 1998. The structure the novel *England, England* reminds us the structure of *Metroland* and

*Staring at the Sun*. The novel is divided into three parts in chronological order. The novel has two story lines: the first is the fictional biography of Martha Cochrane who is born in the lower middle class family. After graduation, she attempts to enter the business world. At the age of forty, she entered the final project of Sir Jack Pitman. She blackmails Pitman to expose his monthly visits to a high-class brothel and holds the post of CEO for a few years. Then she leaves her lover Paul Harrison. After some years of aimlessly travelling the world, she re-enters the real Britain. It is there, somewhere in Wessex, that she spends her final days. The second story line is about Sir Jack Pitman's project of draining England. The *England, England* becomes major tourist attraction and a sovereign state in its own right. In the course of novel, Pitman becomes "Island Governor" but in reality, he wants to run the government on the principles of the free market.

**Love novels: *Talking It Over* and *Love etc***

*Talking It Over* (1991) recounts the story of three characters. Stuart Hughes and Oliver Russell are close friends since their school life. Oliver falls in love with Gillian who is the wife of Stuart. Stuart left for United States. Oliver and Gillian went to the France. The major themes of the novel are love, memory, jealousy and betrayal etc. The novel proceeds through first person narration and it consists of three major narrators. *Talking It Over* is marked for the plurality of voice, which can be labeled as polyphony. Three characters introduce themselves. The novel proceeds through the narrative technique of skaz. The term 'skaz' denotes a type of first person narration that is marked up with the characteristics of the spoken rather than the written word. *Love, Etc* (2000) is the sequel to *Talking It Over*, in which Barnes takes us back to the three characters namely, Stuart, Gillian and Oliver. Here Barnes depicts darker side of human being. *Love, Etc.* presents madness and horror. Oliver was disinherited. Stuart worked as a supplier of organic food in America and became rich man. Finally, he came back to London to take revenge upon Oliver. Julian Barnes uses the same narrative technique of addressing the reader directly. All the three characters have their own version of truth and love.

To sum up one can say that Julian Barnes' literary output rejects the categorization in terms of genre, theory and technique. David Sexton Higdon describes Barnes' writing in appropriate manner as following;

Barnes writes books which look like novels and get shelved as novels but which, when you open them up, are something else altogether. (Still Parroting On about God, Sunday Telegraph, 1989)

### Works Cited

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