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## **‘Our old letters, of poetry and other things’: Letters and Journals as Strategic and Thematic Ploys in A. S. Byatt’s *Possession***

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### **Abstract:**

Known for her sophisticated, erudite yet widely popular writings, A.S.Byatt is a maverick in the field of contemporary British fiction and scholarly criticism. *Possession*, that won the Booker Prize in the year 1990, is undoubtedly the most experimental and colourful fiction in Byatt’s oeuvre. In this novel, Byatt plays an intellectual game by including a number of genres like poetry, fairy tales, letters, diary entries etc. Each of these genres plays their particular role in the polymorphous structure of this fiction. This paper, endeavours to explore the significant strategic and thematic roles the private inset texts i.e. the epistles and journals, play in the vast expanse of the novel. While strategically they help the novel to attain a postmodern metafictional status and to resuscitate the Victorian milieu directly, in contrast to the modern time, thematically they explore multiple aspects of love, obsession, creativity and autonomy.

**Keywords: Metafiction, dissolution of genres, direct re-creation of Victorian era, fragmented representation, feminine creativity and autonomy.**

A.S.Byatt, a central figure among the post-war British fiction writers, has successfully managed to elevate herself above the contemporary literary mainstream by virtue of a vast range of brilliant literary references, unparalleled intellectual subtleties and a masterful handling of complex plot construction. She is one of those extremely talented writers who succeeded in achieving goals what we often consider to be mutually exclusive, by making her fictions sensual and intellectual, widely popular and critically accredited, romantic and realistic, at the same time. Though Byatt’s work was well appreciated to a significant group of English readers, for a long time, it is *Possession* for which she was awarded the Booker Prize in 1990, that cemented her fame as a literary giant with its spectacular, world wide success. Written in the tradition of experimental, postmodernist metafiction, the novel represents a multi-layered plot that contains two passionate love stories- one between the Victorian poet Randolph Henry Ash and the poetess Christabel LaMotte and a parallel relationship between Roland Mitchell, a devoted Ash scholar and Maud Bailey, a descendant of LaMotte. “Conceived on this double temporal axis of past and present”(Desblache, 89), *Possession* explores a wide panorama of thematic issues like the nature of obsession, creativity, love, female autonomy, repression, the gap between experience and its expression, to name only a few. Byatt infuses this story about poets and literary scholars, with intertextual and literary references that take into account the discourses of folklores and fantasy literature, postmodern literary and linguistic theories besides a most compelling literary history of the Victorian era.

Thus by addressing the history of a past era as a constructed narrative, a mere *story*, the truth and reliability of which is questionable, *Possession* bears the hallmark of what Linda Huchon has termed, 'historiographic metafiction'(295). To achieve this goal, in Byatt's own words,

Possession plays serious games with the variety of possible forms of narrating the past – the detective story, the biography, the medieval verse Romance, the modern romantic novel, and Hawthorne's fantastic historical Romance in between, the campus novel, the Victorian third person narration, the epistolary novel, the forged manuscript novel, and the primitive fairy tale... (as quoted in *A.S.Byatt's Possession*, 27)

Clearly, while Byatt was using these literary pastiches, she was, "self consciously engaged with the act of (re)interpretation, (re)discovery and (re)vision concerning the Victorians" (Heilemann and Llewellyn, 4). Her this pick-and-mix approach towards using multiple genres, attests to the fact that she uses all these genres in order to serve as, to borrow Hilary M.Schor's words, "a series of strategies for the deployment of *and the debate over matter*" (238, emphasis original). Of all these 'strategies', the most intriguing is probably the incorporation of letters and journals, both of which are generally private and subjective in nature. This paper will try to focus on their multifarious roles as strategic, and thematic instruments in this carefully constructed Neo-Victorian novel.

The presence of these two almost obsolete personal genres into the vast expanse of the novel is all pervasive in numerous ways. Byatt, who, deliberately on principle, always resisted the restriction of categorization, once in an interview said:

The nice thing about a novel is that everything can go into it, because if you've got the skill between sentence and sentence, you can change genre, you can change focus, you can change the way reader reads. And yet you can keep up this sort of quiet momentum of narration. (as quoted in *A.S.Byatt's Possession*, 24)

*Possession* is the most inclusive and colourful of Byatt's novels. From the very beginning, she uses her 'skill' to 'change focus', to liberate her creation from the straitjacket of some particular genre. Undeniably, the letters and diary entries written by different characters in the story help Byatt to attain this goal. To begin with, Byatt subtitles *Possession* as 'A Romance', hinting at the fact that in spite of being basically a novel, the book will be much like the loosely structured medieval romance quest where fantasy and reality, possible and probable – all lie side by side with each other. Further, Byatt inserts a long quotation from Nathaniel Hawthorne's Preface to *The House of Seven Gables*, as an epigraph, which also states the fact that, 'When a writer calls his work a Romance, ...he wishes to claim a certain latitude,... which he would not have felt himself entitled to assume, had he professed to be writing a Novel' (*Possession*, Epigraph). The huge body of personal correspondences and journals, intricately interwoven into the text and decorated with original poetry, quotations from different texts, very effectively, save the fiction from falling into the category of traditional novels, where the story telling method is usually linear and chronological. Most importantly they never threaten the flow or balance of the story because except a

few quotations, they are all products of pure imagination- part of the story. While dissolving the boundaries and hierarchies of genre, these fragmented texts also draw our attention to the self-conscious, metafictional quality of the work. The sudden disruption of narration by the third person omniscient narrator, immediately compels the readers to muse on the nature of such fictional representation of the Victorian past. It reminds them that all of these are merely a part of a fictional narrative. In spite of being completely relevant to the main plot, these inset texts successfully interrupt and retard the action only to emphasise the need for the readers to involve themselves consciously with the process of creation and to become a part of it. The ample amount of letters and journals are aptly distributed from the very beginning to the very end of the novel but while letters are rarely presented in answer to each other, the diary entries are almost always incomplete- only giving us a hint of the truth. According to Lucile Desblache, 'This allows the author to play with the fragmented and reconstructible nature of texts, and contributes to establishing the simultaneously fleeting and solid structure...' (Desblache, 91). In this context, we must remember that letters and diary entries are basically an open form. We do not expect them to tell a complete story. They are spontaneous and the reader can never forecast how they are going to end. It is this unpredictability and fluidity that makes them so intriguing as forms. Yet, in spite of all, letters and journals are essentially private, meant for a particular person or for nobody at all- only a means of connecting with one's self. We hear an echo of this awareness about the essential nature of letters in Roland's thought:

Letters, Roland discovered, are a form of narrative that envisages no outcome, no closure. ...Letters tell no story, because they do not know, from line to line, where they are going. ...Letters, finally, exclude not only the reader as co-writer, or predictor, or guesser, but they exclude the reader as reader, they are written, if they are true letters, for *a* reader. (*Possession*, 130-131. Original emphasis)

This spirit of postmodern complexity and openness permeates the entire text.

Strategically also, the insertion of fragmented letters and incomplete journals, always keeps the reader on the edge of narrative curiosity and passion. In stead of gradually preparing the readers with descriptive third person narration, the narrative, sometimes takes an unexpected turn by bringing some private information before the reader or simply by not confirming the suspected information. As the letters and journals are not part of the usual third person narration, this presentation or omission never creates a gap or imbalance into the main plot. If we consider *Possession* to be a romantic quest, then epistles and journals are the starting and finishing points. The immense web of action and subsequent revelation of the shocking truth about the lives of two eminent Victorian poets begin when Roland Mitchell steals two unpublished letters of famous Victorian poet Randolph Henry Ash. As the third person narrator describes:

Roland was seized by a strange and uncharacteristic impulse of his own. It was suddenly quite impossible to put these *living words* back ... He looked about him: no one was looking: he slipped the letters between the leaves of his own copy of the Oxford Selected Ash, ... (*Possession*, 8. My emphasis).

So, the letters, the 'living words', literally possess Roland, as well as the readers. Ash's two unfinished drafts to Christabel LaMotte transform into a recurrent motif and symbol of obsession to know more. Henceforth begins the quest. This quest, ultimately reaches its final destination when with the help of Mrs Ellen Ash's journal, they discover the final letter of Christabel LaMotte, hidden inside Ash's grave. In between, the insertion of missives written by different Victorian characters and journals by three Victorian women- Ellen Ash, Blanche Glover and Sabine de Kercoz turn the readers into a voyeur, peering into their secret, innermost thoughts and feelings. As Roland feels, while reading Ash's letters, that, 'Ash had not written the letters for Roland or for anyone else but Christabel LaMotte' (*Possession*, 470). Thus the incorporation of these texts give a glimpse of a different world, of different time, the information of which are not shared, but served in their authentic form. Apart from some very rare occasions, Byatt always uses epistles or journals in her, 'attempt to connect a bygone time with the very present that is fleeting away from us' (*Possession*, Epigraph). In this process too, in stead of maintaining a linear chronological order, the writer places them as they are discovered or consulted (in case of the journals) by the present day scholar turned detectives. As for example, in Chapter-5 we are introduced, rather unexpectedly to Ash and LaMotte's initial and final letters, but not with the entire corpus of their correspondence. Their short and cryptic nature only reflects the nature of information they provide. Though the last piece of the puzzle is already out, the readers can never get the complete picture, unless they can gather each and every piece of the puzzle. Immediately the novel develops the quality of a detective fiction where one clue leads to another and finally to the ultimate answer. By providing Ash and LaMotte's letters as they are, Byatt infects her readers with the obsession from which the 20<sup>th</sup> century scholars are suffering. Needless to say, that, such a representation of the love letters titillates the readers' imagination and leaves all the narrative possibilities absolutely open. While the readers eagerly wait for further correspondence, the narrative casually shifts into present day third person narration. Such a shift does not destroy the credibility of the novel only because letters, being an open form, are capable of allowing such gaps or distances between the different temporal levels within the same narrative. Readers patiently wait for the access of further information and concentrate on the present day narration. Two different temporal levels could be maintained in the same novel only because of the strategic help this form provides. With traditional third person narration it would have never been possible.

The entire love story between Ash and LaMotte and the way it changed their lives, as well as the lives of people closely associated with them, are depicted by means of either letters or journals. Though the letters give us an original account of the initial stage of their affair, make the readers witness their burning passion for each other closely, they fail to provide us any further knowledge, when LaMotte stops all correspondence with Ash. The readers become a party to the aftermath of this secret, passionate but short affair only through Sabine de Kercoz's journal. It is through Sabine's journal we get to know about the pregnancy of Christabel. Sabine's journal, in stead of dwelling on her own thoughts, depicts the emotional and physical condition of Christabel in details. Conveniently, Sabine's journal begins after Christabel takes refuge in their house in Brittany and ends abruptly after Christabel gives birth to Ash's child. Once again the readers become clueless about what happens to the child or whether Christabel ultimately responds to Ash's passionate

plea not to end their relationship. Mrs Ellen Ash's journal again shares the information about the final letter of Christabel written to Ash just before his death. Though Ellen's journal indirectly hints at the fact that the relationship between Ash and LaMotte was never resumed, it never reveals anything about the content of this last letter. It is with the discovery of the last sealed letter, buried with Randolph Henry Ash, every piece of the puzzle, falls into their place and finally reveals a poignantly tragic love story. Byatt, through Blanche Glover's journal also allows us a different angle of this love affair. Blanche, who in all possibility had a lesbian relationship with LaMotte, blames Ash, to be precise, his reciprocated love for LaMotte to be the reason of her pain, misery and subsequent suicide. Thus these inset Victorian texts uncover multiple perspectives of the love story, that forms the heart of the novel and is the pivot of actions.

Being a form of personal communication, meant for a particular reader, letters, strategically deny the complete access to knowledge. There always remain gaps in the 19<sup>th</sup> century characters' comprehension. Hence Christabel never knows that her final letter, as well as her prayer for forgiveness, never reaches the hands of dying Ash, Ash never comes to know about the fate of his child and Christabel's declaration of unwavering love for him, (though in a post script added to the novel, we find Ash meeting his daughter, about which meeting, nobody ever comes to know anything), Ellen Ash, who could not bear to open Christabel's letter to her husband, never knows about the fate of her husband's illegitimate child. Such strategic gaps not only make the story more poignant, but also emphasise the fact that a gap between the reality and our comprehension of it, is inevitable. Together, they probably only forms the part of a greater strategy because to borrow David Cowart's assertion, 'art now is expected to "reflect" that fragmentation, indeterminacy...' (*Literary Symbiosis*, 42). Except the 19<sup>th</sup> century lovers' letters to each other, which comprise the major and most important portion of the entire corpus of correspondences, there are a few letters that they write to some passive recipients ( for example, Ash's letter to his god child Sophia or Christabel's letter to Mrs Cropper). While the recipients are unimportant to the sequence of events, the letters always highlight some delicate information about their writers, of which, the recipients can hardly make any sense. Only the readers and 20<sup>th</sup> century scholars can decode these messages and can use them successfully to complete the entire picture.

As a contrast to the 19<sup>th</sup> century epistles, Byatt introduces a small number (only eight) of factual, formal letters, which are neither passionate nor private. They are sometimes merely a traditional formal means of communication (the official University letters to Roland), sometimes a tactful strategy to evade unpleasant situation (Fergus Wolff's letter to Maud, his former lover), or sometimes a desperate effort to send a message when all other means did fail (as can be found in Blackadder's efforts to communicate with Roland). Thus they never become anything more than a tool for communication. Together they never form a story. They never mirror the emotions, feelings or thoughts of the writers. Perhaps they only highlight our fractured, fragmented postmodern existence, our incapability of connecting with another soul, our incapability to love passionately. As Roland points out- 'we never say the word Love, do we- ...so we have to make a real effort of imagination to know what it felt like to be them,...' (*Possession*, 267). Probably this is the reason why none of the present day characters feels the necessity of keeping a journal. Journals

are means of connecting with one's self. But their time has taught them to see them selves as, 'a crossing place for a number of systems, all loosely connected' (*Possession*, 424). Again the third person narrator muses: " He (Roland) had been trained to see his idea of his 'self' as an illusion, to be replaced by a discontinuous machinery and electrical message network of various desires, ideological beliefs and responses, ..." (*Possession*, 424). Therefore, while the absence of journal is pregnant with so many implications, the presence of letters in our modern world is, only, to quote Lucil Desblache, 'part of a strategy to consolidate the unity of the fiction within its generic diversity' (Desblache, 92).

Written in response to John Fowles's 1969 novel *The French Lieutenant's Woman*, Byatt, in her work, wanted to represent the Victorian world in a completely different manner than Fowles. She, once in her book titled *Passions of the Mind*, criticised Fowles's deconstructive game with the narrative pattern which encourages the readers to question the reality of the fiction in a too direct manner, as, 'a programmatic denial of the reality of any.' (174) She, therefore, adopts the technique of recreating the Victorian world, by echoing the experiences of Victorian characters, with their own words, i.e. with the help of the letters they wrote to each other or the journals they used to keep. Thus unlike Fowles's narrator, who causes self-conscious distance between his fictional world and the readers' belief in this world, Byatt wanted to strengthen rather than to undermine the readers' faith in the poetic truth of the novel. She very strongly clarifies her intention in *On Histories and Stories*, when she says, 'Writing Victorian words in Victorian contexts, in a Victorian order, and in Victorian relations of one word to the next was the only way I could think of to show one could hear the Victorian dead' (46-47). One can easily understand where does the insertion of Victorian missives and diary entries fit in this scheme. Byatt's attempt to resurrect the Victorian voices encourages the idea that our access to the Victorian past, as represented in the novel, is not merely textual. Thus, the epistles and journals produced by people who lived in the Victorian era, evoke a perfect context to the Victorian world, in the recreation of which, the readers also, willingly take a part, even with the awareness, that they are reading a postmodern pastiche, by a postmodern writer. And it successfully creates what Byatt demands to be, 'a kind of whole which contains thinking and feeling all at once' (As quoted in *A.S.Byatt's Possession*). Through the epistles and diary entries, Byatt, successfully establishes a connection between their long dead writers and modern readers because these inset texts permit the fiction to speak for itself. No wonder, that, only on three occasions the Victorian world is narrated by a third person omniscient narrator, while the rest of the entire Victorian world is resuscitated through the epistles, the journals or the poetry of direct first person narrators. In this way even while granting us direct access to the past, *Possession*, takes resort to more than one form through which the Victorian age is reawakened. For this purpose, letters and journals are, without any doubt, two very potent tools.

Apart from controlling the sequence of the events and keeping the temporal unity and diversity of the narrative intact, the correspondences and diary entries effectually play the role of a platform, where multiple ideological issues are freely discussed. They infuse the work with thematic essence, some of which are Victorian, some are modern and some are perennial. The first thematic issue that recurs throughout the whole body of letters and diary entries is the multiple aspects of

feminine creativity and autonomy. It is only too obvious that, Byatt, as the part of a generation of post-war women, who strove to balance their family and career with great difficulties will portray women who somehow reflect this sort of identity crisis. In her Preface to *The Shadow of the Sun*, Byatt wrote that all her novels, 'think about the problem of female vision, female art and thought' (as quoted in *A.S.Byatt's Possession*, 9). In *Possession* too, Christabel LaMotte, the central Victorian character, is a woman who desires to be defined and comprehended only by her creative literary work. That is why, when Randolph Henry Ash, in his first letter to her, pleads for further acquaintance, she denies any personal acquaintance, but agrees to discuss her work with him. She demands, 'I am a creature of my pen, Mr Ash, my pen is the best of me' (*Possession*, 87). Significantly, Byatt always believed that the self of a writer can be accessed only through her work, as she said about Iris Murdoch, with whom she used to have a formal relationship, that, 'She knew I knew her secret self, which she had made public in her novels. And I knew I knew it...' (as quoted in *A.S.Byatt's Possession*, 9). Even though Christabel continually defines herself in terms of her creativity, she is well aware of the way, 'productions of the female pen' (*Possession*, 180), are welcomed in a male dominated Victorian society. They are treated as casual pastime of young ladies until, 'sweeter and weightier responsibilities' (*Possession*, 180), are assigned to them. But for Christabel, it is not a pastime, but a need, which is, 'like the spider's need who carries before her a huge burden of silk which she must spin out- the silk is her life, her home, her safety- her food and drink too' (*Possession*, 180). Christabel considers her autonomy, her solitude, to be the condition of her creativity. She rejects domesticity, comfort or even love for the sake of this precious identity and creativity rather than to keep honour untainted. So she argues, 'The core is my solitude,...that you threaten, without which I am nothing- so how may honour, how may morality speak to me?' (*Possession*, 195) If for Christabel her autonomy is the core of her existence then for her friend Blanche Glover, 'to live according to certain beliefs about the possibility, for independent single women, of living useful and fully human lives...without...help from the outside world, or men' (*Possession*, 307), is the ideal state of living. That is why when her 'experiment' (*Possession*, 307) fails miserably, she chooses to die rather than to live her life as a dependant. Ellen Ash, the domesticated, subjugated, passive wife of literary genius Randolph Henry Ash, is the ideal Victorian woman. Quite expectedly, the necessary acceptance of female inferiority forms the centre of her existence. But interestingly enough, besides insignificant domestic details, her journal also records her realisation, that, 'in chess the female may make the large runs and cross freely in all ways- in life it is much otherwise' (*Possession*, 228). After reading LaMotte's *Melusina*, she perceptively appreciates its, 'virtues' which are, 'far removed from those expected of the weaker sex...' (*Possession*, 120). She contemptuously, alienates herself from conventional patriarchal women when she writes, 'her (LaMotte's) description might be a little *strong* for some stomachs, especially maidenly English ones, who will be looking for fairy winsomeness' (*Possession*, 121 original emphasis). Ellen, denies to be a typical Victorian woman with a pretentious delicacy and prudery. Adrienne Shiffman quite correctly realises that:

...Ellen exploits her own awareness of the constructed nature of the notion of Woman as the "weaker sex". Ellen locates herself, as reader, outside the collective Majority of "general public" who perpetuate such ideological constructions; ... (Shiffman, 98)



Though in the novel's context, Sabine de Kercoz's diary entries basically serve the purpose of filling in the gaps created by the total absence of correspondence between the two Victorian lovers, they too show a similar longing for an independent identity as a creative artist. In the opening entry of her journal, Sabine writes- 'This is the book in which I shall make myself into a true writer; here I shall learn my craft...' (*Possession*, 335). Thus, in this novel, missives and journals provide all these women an intimate space to voice their hearts' desire. The major portion of the missives being written by two very talented poets, they continually revolve around the different aspects of creativity, language and their intertwined relationship between them. Apart from bringing before us contemporary Victorian issues like the clash between science and religion, the new scientific discoveries, an overwhelming interest in almost all the spheres of learning, the personal epistles and diary entries also dwell on delicate themes like the nature of possession, the natural impulse to achieve autonomy, nature of true love and many others. Whereas the Victorian letters show such a dazzling thematic variety, the present day letters only give hints of a chaotic, fragmented existence, the essential core of which can never be reached.

In these ways, the personal letters and journals play a huge role as a narrative, strategic and thematic ploy in this sensual, emotional and intellectual fiction titled *Possession*. If we read the novel as a detective fiction, then the final answer can be found only in Christabel's last letter to Randolph Ash. If we read the novel as a romantic quest, then the holy grail of this quest is the discovery of letters and proper comprehension of the journals in right context. If we read the novel simply as a love story, then too, the throbbing, beating heart of the two lovers find expression mainly in their letters. Christabel hid the letters, in stead of burning them and composed a poem as a clue to their location, only with the hope that one day somebody will restore their letters, where, their, 'trusting minds which recognised each other', are captivated forever. Though none of the letters or any of the journals is as moving as those exchanged between Christabel and Randolph, but together they make us feel, think, wonder and argue about the essential nature of human existence, leading us towards a better understanding of life. Strategically and thematically, the letters and journals complement and complete the unified, nuanced world of *Possession*.

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