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Mapping the Concrete reality: A Search for Factual Life in A. S. Byatt's The Biographer's Tale

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Abstract:

The research paper aims to explore the concept of constructing an ideal biography in A. S. Byatt's novel *The Biographer's Tale*. It examines the writer's passion, through her character Phineas Nanson, to find a life full of facts and things in the incoherent contemporary world by tracing the textual remains from the past. It deals with the research journey of a modern scholar, an expert in poststructuralist theories, who becomes disillusioned with the modern-day academic atmosphere and decides to pursue a more meaningful life by writing a biography of a fictitious biographer. The study demonstrates the process of biography writing and the difficulties faced by the authors. The primary motif of Phineas is the arrangement of facts, but his conception of a unified self is undermined by the fragmentary documents he discovers in the process. Phineas's longing to obtain concrete and objective knowledge of the physical world brings the reader closer to the interlinked relationship between language, culture, and natural phenomena. The study highlights Phineas's realization of selfhood and his growing awareness of the role of imagination and subjective interpretation in constructing a life narrative that may come closer to truth than mere facts.

Keywords: postmodernism, metafiction, biography writing, historical knowledge, textuality.

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A.S. Byatt, best known for her the Booker Prize-winning novel *Possession: A Romance* (1990), produced highly intellectual, complex and erudite novels that demonstrate her immense knowledge of various fields including literature, literary criticism, philosophy, psychology, biology, anthropology and science. In her theoretical fiction, the self-conscious fusion of creative and academic ideas reflects her extensive knowledge and experience in academia. Richard Todd comments, "Byatt's own creative work reflects on the extent to which the writer is justified in drawing on the experiences of her own life" (5). In Byatt's view, it is not possible to separate the literary career from academic background. She admits, "I have myself always felt that reading and writing and teaching were all part of some whole that it was dangerous to disintegrate" (*On Histories* 92). A compelling and passionate storyteller, Byatt remained preoccupied with recuperating the literary and cultural past which considered more valuable and stable than the present. She consistently emphasized the necessity of a symbiotic relationship between tradition and contemporary narrative experimentation to deal effectively with the issues of reality, knowledge and identity crisis.

In her novel *The Biographer's Tale* (2000), Byatt focuses on the need to believe in the power of words to construct and represent the external reality. Through her character Phineas Nanson, she seeks to make sense of the chaotic postmodern world of abstract theoretical musings, which do not offer concrete solutions to the problems faced by modern scholars. The novel interrogates the nature of historical knowledge and challenges the fixed social and traditional objective interpretations by fusing realistic conventions and postmodern narrative techniques of ambiguity, paradox, pastiche, parody, intertextuality and self-reflexivity. It shows the representation of the historical events in literature as a resurrection or recreation of the past. In postmodern literature, there is a practice of writing history based on competing and contrasting stories rather than on an objectively knowable truth. Contemplating the extra-textual events of the past, postmodern fiction deploys innovative fictional techniques to

foreground the gulf between written text and ultimate truth. The new theorizing of history in postmodern literature emphasizes its literariness and its status as a narrative form. It is only through representations that we are able to know the past. In view of Munslow, "The genuine nature of history can be understood only when it is viewed not solely and simply as an objectivised empiricist enterprise, but as the creation and the eventual imposition by historians of a particular narrative form on the past" (2). The role of imagination enables the reader to know the multiple pasts leading him to perceive evidence as fictionally constructed, since all the ways and sources through which we engage with the past events are innately partial. Postmodern theorizing of history juxtaposes fact with imagination and reveals the marginalized, unknown and unwritten histories.

The American historian and theorist Hayden White's comments on postmodern historiography are significant, as he characterizes history as a text and argues that literary and historical discourses share similar narrative devices, plot structures and characterization. He contends that the historians employ representational narrative tropes to depict processes and constructed versions of the past. In *Metahistory* (1973), he states that the historical work is "most manifestly…a verbal structure in "the form of a narrative prose discourse" that purports to be a model, or icon, of past structures and processes in the interest of explaining what they were by representing them" (2). Postmodern historiography offers multiple versions of history and stories told from different perspectives, all of which are available in textual form, and opens up history to the possibility of a wide range of counter- narratives. And these narratives cannot be deemed true or false on the basis of their relationship to a grand narrative; rather, they foreground the role of imagination and literary techniques in the construction of historical meaning, thereby leading to a sense of historical pluralism.

In *The Poetics of Postmodernism*, Linda Hutcheon describes that postmodernism finds its best artistic expression in contemporary historical fiction that she terms "historiographic

metafiction" (5). It denotes "novels which are both intensely self-reflexive and yet paradoxically also lay claim to historical events and personages" (15). This is a contradictory cultural enterprise marked by self-consciousness, contrariness and subversiveness and investigates the process of writing history, its relation with fiction, imagination, reality and identity. Hutcheon gives examples of many postmodern texts which are metafictionally self-reflexive and yet speak about real historical events. However, according to Hutcheon, this rethinking and reworking of the forms and contents of the past is not a nostalgic return; rather, it constitutes a critical analysis and questioning of received, so-called authentic versions of history (4). Historiographic metafiction is theoretically self-reflexive mode of writing that presents "history and fiction as human constructs" (5) and foregrounds the problems and challenges involved in accessing the real past. Hutcheon argues that it is not the case that the past is unreal; rather, it is available to us in a paradoxical and textualized form. In fact, self-reflexive historical fiction reexamines authoritarian, traditional forms of history and offers multiple interacting ways to look at past, confronting the reader with questions about "identity and subjectivity; the question of reference and representation; the intertextual nature of the past; and the ideological implications writing about history" (117). Historiographic metafiction emphasizes the constructedness and provisionality of history and reality, the self-consciousness about the writing process, and the blurring of boundaries between literature and history. According to Hutcheon:

> What the postmodern writing of both history and literature has taught us is that both history and fiction are discourses, that both constitute systems of signification by which we make sense of the past (exertions of the shaping, ordering imagination). In other words, the meaning and shape are not in the events but in the systems which make those past events into present historical facts. (89)

Patricia Waugh, in her book *Metafiction* (1984) lays stress on the increasing use of metafictional devices in postmodern fiction. She defines metafiction as "a term given to fictional writing which consciously and systematically draws attention to its status as an artifact in order to pose questions about the relationship between fiction and reality" (2). It highlights the representational nature of fiction, the play of linguistic patterns and "issues relating to the very possibility" of accurate communication and description. Metafiction challenges the traditional realist mode of representation and is important for "understanding the contemporary experiences of the world as a construction, an artifice, a web of interdependent semiotic systems" (9). Metafictional writing emphasizes intertextuality, self-reflexivity, fragmentation, contradiction and paradoxical nature of narrative. Self-conscious narrative draws attention to its innate artificiality and provisionality. It is through the postmodern metafictional narrative devices—such as intertextuality, self-reflexivity, playful use of language, irony, metaphor, parody, pastiche, allusion and the use of multiple genres and voices—that literature functions as a medium of cultural memory and the past. The past, therefore, can be known imaginatively, as its remains are fragmented, incomplete and subjective. In order to express the complex relationship between the past and the present, as well as between the external world and its representation, Byatt employs fictional and linguistic means that include a complex web of intertextuality, subtle contradictions, fragmentation, and the transgression of textual boundaries. This paper, through the protagonist's biographical research project in *The Biographer's Tale*, examines the possibilities and challenges involved in acquiring full knowledge of another person's life. It traces the research journey of Phineas, the narrator-protagonist, who decides to write a biography in order to escape postmodern theories and live a life full of facts, but ultimately fails even to collect basic information about his subject's life.

According to Lena Steveker, *The Biographer's Tale* is the example of biographic metafiction (2) a subcategory of historiographic metafiction, as it deals with the process of

constructing the life of another person. The protagonist in the novel strives to create a historical meaning through researching his biographical subject and, subsequently, discovers his own personal identity and selfhood. Biographic metafiction emphasizes the role of imagination and personal conflicts in historical research. It shows how a character's personal identity is linked with the reconstruction and representation of as much truth as possible about the biographical subjects. Although the complete and actual reality of another person's life is impossible for historians and biographers to access fully, it remains possible to reconstruct plausible narratives of that reality based on fragmentary textual and physical evidence. With this idea in mind, Byatt presents her characters as passionately engaged in the pursuit of truth, whether past or present. Her literary works reflect a strong inclination toward blending the art of storytelling and creativity with academic inquiry.

The Biographer's Tale is more like a research book rather than a novel that recounts the story of Phineas's search for facts about his biographer-biographee, Scholes Destry-Scholes. A common reader might find the novel to be chaotic as the fragmentary embedded texts, written by a number of authors, real and imaginary, belong to different subjects and areas, for example, biology, taxonomy, biography and entomology. The narrator, Phineas G. Nanson, demonstrates the complexities involved in writing an ideal biography. The beginning of the novel offers a critique of postmodernism by using one of its most used strategies, which she describes, "One of the interesting things about postmodern fiction is the way in which it can flickeringly and variously parody almost everything, for almost any purpose" (*On Histories* 21). At the beginning, Phineas refers to the boring and repetitive nature of artificial readings and the deconstructive methods being used in modern academic departments to interpret even a very simple statement or text of an author. He decides to deal with factual reality during a seminar in which "we were discussing, not for the first time, Lacan's theory of *morcellement*,

the dismemberment of the imagined body" (*BT* 1). He feels dejected with the abstract notions discussed in these seminars:

> All the seminars, in fact, had a fatal family likeness. They were repetitive in the extreme. We found the same clefts and crevices, transgressions and disintegrations, lures and deceptions beneath, no matter what surface we were scrying. (1)

Phineas feels "a true intellectual passion for coherence and meanings" and "a search for meaning" (100) which he realizes cannot be fulfilled through postmodern literary theory. He has become frustrated with it and says, "I've decided to give it all up. I've decided I don't want to be a postmodern literary theorist" (3). In many of her works, Byatt expresses her views on the postmodern critics and scholars who apply these theories to the original texts, deconstructing and manipulating them in order to support a fixed ideological system despite the destabilizing claims of postmodernism. They impose their own subjective opinions and interpretations on the texts. Postmodernism seems to have become a centralized and fixed system of thought in academic and literary circles. Such an attitude is reflected in Phineas when he explains his reasons for abandoning postmodern theory:

> One of the reasons why I abandoned—oh, and I have abandoned—post-structuralist semiotics was the requirement to write page upon page of citations from Foucault (or Lacan or Derrida or Bakhtin) in support of the simplest statement, such as that a scene of Shakespeare may be simultaneously comic and tragic—which earlier critics were able to say without all this paraphernalia. (114)

According to Byatt, the predominance of postmodern theory has stifled good literary practice, and this anxiety can be felt in many of her works. *The Biographer's Tale* can be considered a

post-postmodern novel as it revolves around the paradoxical study of postmodern theory and its impacts. It also exemplifies the impossibility of reconstruction of a coherent and true self, owing to the extreme self-consciousness and randomness in the postmodern sceptical world.

The novel revolves around its protagonist's biographical research and his banal existence in the complex and disintegrated postmodern world. The protagonist grapples with arid poststructuralist theories and the complex process of an art of biography writing throughout the novel. His longing for concrete facts leads to disillusionment not only with literary theory but also with literature itself. The narrator's continuous struggle to write about another person's life makes him self-consciously aware of the insoluble problems involved in narrowing the gap between reality and fiction, thus making the novel a compelling example of biographic metafiction. Biography writing was one of the most appealing literary genres for writers in the last decade of the last century. But both novel and biography in these postmodern times focus on the blurring of genres, the role of imagination and mixing of fact and fiction in order to have a clear and persuasive version of the true self rather than the purely factual one which the traditional biographies might have given us. The inclusion of imagination in the reconstruction of a person's life does not deny truth; rather, it establishes a closer relationship to it. After rejecting postmodern theory, Phineas turns to Ormerod Goode, one of the heads of the department and "an Anglo-Saxon and Ancient Norse expert, specialising in place names" (2). Phineas explains to him that he "felt an urgent need for a life full of things… full of facts" (4). Goode encourages him to begin a new life and suggests:

> The art of biography is a despised art because it is an art of things, of facts, of arranged facts. By far the greatest work of scholarship in my time, to my knowledge, is Scholes Destry-Scholes's biographical study of Sir Elmer Bole. But nobody knows it. It is not considered. And yet the ingenuity, the passion. (5)

The title of the novel refers to the genre of the tale and suggests a certain gap between the truth and its representation. It reveals contradiction and ambiguity, as there are two biographers in the novel rather than one. Phineas G. Nanson, a would-be biographer of the biographer Scholes Destry-Scholes, is impressed by him after reading his biography of the Victorian Sir Elmer Bole. Although Scholes is not well known among readers and has left very few traces behind, Phineas regards him as a capable biographer because of his "resourceful marshalling and arranging of facts" (15). Phineas is most impressed by the way Destry-Scholes made himself completely absent from the book and decides to find out the facts about his life and write a biography on him in the same manner. Initially, he feels reluctant about his biographical project. He thinks that biography is "a bastard form, a dilettante pursuit. Tales told by those incapable of true invention, simple stories for those incapable of true critical insight" (5). Phineas finds the biography "all very uninspiring" (6) but gradually he gets fascinated by the character described in the text who "crammed more action in one life than would be present to three or four puny moderns" (8). Destry-Scholes's biographical subject, Elmer Bole, is an equally fictitious Victorian polymath—an acclaimed translator, as well as an adventurous traveller and explorer—who lived a remarkably unusual life for his time. Phineas's dull existence, which he describes as "a fluid vacuum" (18), finds its counterpart in the "glittery fullness of the life of Elmer Bole" (18). As he continues reading the biography, he is struck by the "superiority of the form" and begins to wonder more about the author than the subject. He soon feels an urge to write a biography of Scholes Destry-Scholes, considering it the only "appropriate form for the great biographer" (26). In doing so, he embarks on a journey into the world of things and facts, distancing himself from the realm of abstract notions.

Phineas's biographical project initially appears enchanting and promising, but he soon realizes the uncertainty and futility of his research. His naïve belief in "the shining solidity of a world full of facts" (6) contrasts with his later experiences, which make him aware of the

problematic nature of facts—their limitations and their susceptibility to manipulation in direct narration. He gradually discovers that it is impossible to narrate a unified human life in a liberal-humanist manner, owing to the fragmentation, disintegration, and incoherence of human experience. The novel thus emphasizes the inevitability of the juxtaposition of fact and fiction in narrative accounts. It is a commentary on the art of biography writing as the narrator finds that what we think of biography may not necessarily be an account of factual events of the other person's life. Phineas's visit to his biographer's birthplace turns out to be entirely futile, as he finds out nothing there and begins to "feel trapped by this ordinary place" (32) and it reminds him of his own childhood. He feels an affinity with his subject which is a common thing in academic research. There is very little material on the life of Destry-Scholes. He could not gather even the basic biographical information about his life. His house is a common red-brick house now instead of "a substantial house, a house with an orchard, or anyway a big garden, where an imaginative boy might play, a house with gables and dormer windows" (38) that Phineas expected. At the beginning of the text, Phineas decides to live a meaningful and coherent life by freeing himself from the burden of deconstructing every text he reads. He sees a ray of hope for such a coherent and ordered life in the realm of biography, where the facts and events of a person's life are textually arranged by an author. However, the discovery of Scholes's personal belongings leads to his disappointment. He remarks, "I had hoped for heaps of documents—letters, drafts of further instalments of the lives of the personages—but there was nothing" (157). Destry Scholes turns out to be a mysterious man.

Phineas uses a traditional method by visiting the library instead of the postmodern electronic tools and manages to collect some original material—a few uninteresting letters, a packet of random documents that contains three biographical accounts by Destry-Scholes. This box of poorly typed papers is sheer disappointment for Phineas as it requires his strenuous efforts to put them in order. The random pieces of three biographical accounts in which the

subjects are identified only by their initials (CL, FG, HI), though he identifies them easily, cover fifty-nine pages of the novel. They are later revealed to be Carl Linnaeus, the eighteenth-century botanist and taxonomist; Francis Galton, a cousin of Charles Darwin, a traveller and a scientist with an interest in anthropometry and eugenics, composite photographs and fingerprints; and Henrik Ibsen, the Norwegian playwright. Phineas feels perplexed by the fragmentariness and generic diversity of these biographical sketches, which hardly conform to the traditional form of biography and raise questions about authorship. The documents do not give any clue about Destry-Scholes himself and show that the extracts are from the three men's notebooks, their scientific and literary works and the biographies written on them. They also incorporate some notes and comments by Destry-Scholes himself. Confused by the pieces of documents, Phineas contemplates the postmodern scepticism about the identity of a person. The excerpts from biographies prepared by Destry-Scholes are quoted extensively by the narrator as they are the only source of information about the biographer. He also shares his sense of helplessness with the reader in dealing with these random pieces of documentation, which serve as references in his attempt to give meaning to both his subject's life and his own. Confronted with such fragmented reality, he wonders, "Who is this 'you'? No one, or me, and I know what I think, I think" (100). His training in poststructuralist studies becomes evident, as he is compelled to question the notion of the self as a singular and coherent entity in the contemporary world.

The ironic narration illustrates that Phineas fails to understand that the self can be reconstructed through language and that no meaning is available outside the sign systems. He does not find concrete facts and things that can help him out in writing a direct biographical account. His conceptualization of biographical research as a means of accessing concrete reality is undermined by Destry-Scholes's fragmented materials. The scarcity of evidence becomes a major challenge for Phineas. The novel consistently highlights the narrator's

contradictions: despite his initial rejection of postmodern studies in favor of a unified self, he cannot escape his postmodern, split identity. As Jane Campbell observes, the novel is "both Byatt's most postmodern and her most traditional novel to date" (219). Despite his passion for meaning, coherence and objective reality, "Phineas's text both analyzes and demonstrates contemporary theories of authorship, language and genre, and it playfully destroys the idea of linear narrative" (219).

Byatt employs metafictional strategies of postmodernism in the novel to raise questions about the relationship between postmodernism and reality; in other words, the novel can be seen as a postmodern text about postmodernism itself. At the same time, her use of metafictional techniques, such as pastiche, respectfully and creatively reproduces the conventions of the Victorian period. In this novel, Byatt, through her character, attempts to revive the genre of biography, which was a respected mode of writing during the Victorian era. Her attitude towards postmodern theories is ambivalent as she explains in the introduction to her collection of essays, *Passions of the Mind*, "I have used recent literary theory where that seemed useful, though my temperament is agnostic, and I am a non-believer and a non-belonger to schools of thought" (2). The narrator in *The Biographer's Tale* shows his increasing dissatisfaction with the theory. He does not like the repetitive and frequent use of the poststructuralist concepts, which foreground textual indeterminacy, inaccuracy and uncertainty as an inseparable part of the textual analysis. Byatt incorporates incoherence, intertextual references and allusions to biographical history and postmodern theorists, an interdisciplinary approach, fragmentary narrative structure and self-reflexivity in the novel. The text is marked by contradictions, particularly in Byatt's representation of Phineas. Although he renounces theory in his search for facts and a unified, concrete self, his efforts are challenged when he encounters textual fragments that embody uncertainty. Gradually, he comes to realize that narrative is textually and subjectively constructed and can never be entirely factual. The novel

is extremely intertextual, deeply comic and self-reflexive. It illustrates the story of Phineas, whose biographical quest turns out to be autobiographical. Mariadele Boccardi says:

> *The Biographer's Tale* adopts the cloak of postmodern representational techniques and some ontological questions only ultimately to reject them in favour of a world without texts. (51)

Soon, Phineas becomes disenchanted with his research when he realizes that writers creatively and imaginatively manipulate material to fill the gaps between words and things. The more he wants to get rid of the postmodern theories, the more he confronts them at every step of his research journey. The language proves to be an inadequate means of expression for Phineas in his (auto)biographical research. The life writing projects are always incomplete and open-ended because the identity of a person is textually reconstructed. They always represent the partial truth and involve a process of investigating an endless chain of interdependent texts. The same is the case with Phineas's narrative, who goes on to examine the lives of the three personages whom Destry-Scholes once researched. He continues to follow his biographer's academic and professional pursuits and gathers a wealth of data concerning the lives of his subjects from various disciplines, which nevertheless does not shed any light on Destry-Scholes as a person. He wonders:

> Where would it stop? Linnaeus would lead to Swedenborg, Galton to Darwin, Ibsen to Strindberg or Shaw, and I would run like a ferret from library to library, shelf to shelf. There is no end to the pursuit of knowledge, no limit, no bound. (*BT* 120)

Thus, there is an unending process of collecting, ordering, analyzing and constructing the biographical data on an individual since every discovery leads to another set of associations and references. In order to find a unified biographical account out of the fragmented pieces by

imposing order on them, Phineas consults various texts that refer him back and forth to other texts, thereby creating further gaps and confusion. He feels unable to control the textual fabric of his research, as "the threads ran out all the time, from Linnaeus to Artedi, from Galton to Darwin and Pearson" (107), where "…no string has an end" (108). Phineas tries to make some connections as Destry-Scholes depicts Carl Linnaeus' journey to Norway in order to see the Maelstrom. It is just a fictional account by Destry-Scholes because Linnaeus never actually visited the place. Earlier, he speculates that the biographer might have gone to the North for the purpose of his research on his subject and might have drowned there. However, to his utter surprise, he discovers that Linnaeus' own record does not depict such a journey. He is told that Linnaeus fabricated this story and that it was "Linnaeus's little untruth" (131). Phineas thinks about Destry-Scholes, "who, it was beginning to appear, had romanced further what Linnaeus had already romanced" (131). This adds to the doubts about the reliability of Destry-Scholes's biographical account of Linnaeus and leaves Phineas confused about Destry-Scholes's views on an ideal biography: "A biographer must never claim knowledge of that which he does not know. Whereof we cannot know, thereof must we be silent" (26).

During his research, Phineas meets two women, the medical radiographer Vera Alphage and the bee taxonomist Fulla Biefeld and their scientific aptitude helps him to face the physical reality outside the textual world. Destry-Scholes's niece, Vera Alphage, has no memory of her uncle, but she provides Phineas with his uncle's belongings: some unusual objects such as a cork screw and a cheese grater, a shoe box full of random file cards, another one with photographs and a bag of 366 glass marbles together with a list of marbles. With a taxonomic approach, Vera tries to name her uncle's marbles, while Phineas attempts to interpret the index cards and integrate them with the biographical sketches of the three personages. He is unable to make any sense of them. He becomes aware of the limitless possibilities and unending associations that can be pursued indefinitely. Although he acquires abundant knowledge, he is

ultimately compelled to conclude that his new findings are of little use because of textual indeterminacy and uncertainty. He does not want to impose his own subjective interpretations on the cards and tries to perceive them according to Destry-Scholes. But his approach proves to be unviable as it does not reveal Destry-Scholes's purpose and interests. He seems unwilling to accept the randomness of the cards, which reinforces the fragmentary nature of life, as reflected in the numerous texts containing "intriguing, pointless symmetries" (98). His persistent efforts to uncover facts and tangible details demonstrate his reluctance to acknowledge that biography is constructed by the author, much like any fictional narrative. He gradually confronts the idea that biographical narratives are shaped by the author's subjective interpretation of available material, as no coherent or unified self can ultimately be recovered. But gradually he starts to understand that "it seemed impossible to reconstitute such an arbitrary system" (201). Phineas is unable to find meaning in the index cards and marbles found with Vera Alphage, as meaning is not inherent in objects but is constructed through language.

Through studying his subject's life, Phineas becomes aware of and constructs his own identity. In his narrative, he plays the role of a scholar as well as a writer. Everything he finds, collects and investigates becomes part of his personal account of memory. He broods on his incomplete biographical project towards its inevitable end, "I now wonder whether *all* writing has a tendency to flow like a river towards the writer's body and the writer's own experience?" (248). An individual's personal experiences of the outside world help him to consider the experiences of other people according to his own perceptions and knowledge about the world. Campbell uses the term "metamorphosis" (223) to explain Phineas's character development as he starts to reconnect with concrete reality through nature and his physical relationships with his two lovers, Fulla and Vera. He learns to write about his sensory experiences. At the end of the novel, his writing has developed to the extent of doing the "difficult but not Linnaeus made

a taxonomy of smells, too" (*BT* 219). Phineas uses "synaesthetic metaphors" (219) to describe the difference between them:

> Vera's scent, which I thought of as silvery…Fulla's…which I thought of as golden… Vera…is a darting silver fish, a sailing moon in an indigo sky, quicksilver melting into a thousand droplets and recombining. Fulla is gold calyx strenuously spread in gold sunlight, Fulla is golden pollen clinging to bee-fur, Fulla is sailing fleets of dandelion clocks. (219)

Metaphorically, Phineas's physical relationships can be regarded as epiphanic, as they bring him closer to the real world as opposed to the abstract world of theoretical musings. They highlight the fullness of human experience in Byatt's fiction, since they allow the mind to extend to the natural world outside the texts. Phineas's efforts to know other people and his sexual relationships with two women lead him to his self-discovery. He experiences the physical reality through bodily sensations. Fulla turns out to be a divine woman for Phineas as she helps him in his transformation into a mature person. Her straightforward connection with nature and the non-human reflects her acute physicality. She plays a major role in Phineas's awakening of the natural world as well as his own physicality. His increasing awareness of the natural world can be considered as a fulfilment of his passionate desire to live a life full of facts. His decision to abandon the postmodern theories in favour of writing a biography does not come up as a practical alternative. During his biographical research, he faces the same problematic issues that postmodernism presents in the academic world: inadequacy of language, indefiniteness of textual meaning, uncertainty and incoherent self, unending interconnections between texts and questionable ultimate authority of the writer. He ultimately abandons his biographical project on Destry-Scholes as well:

> I thought I would give it all up. I said I had come to the conclusion that literary scholarship was pointless, and so had embarked on biography, which was a form of history, and now thought that was pointless too. (276)

These metafictional comments suggest that Phineas ultimately finds meaning and fulfilment outside the academic world. He decides to stop writing: "I must stop writing and put away this notebook" (301). The protagonist now turns to the exploration of the natural world and becomes an amateur observer of insect life. He shifts his focus from poststructuralist theories to biographical research, and finally to the natural world, in search of unmediated access to the referent. He concludes his text with a well-known quotation from Sir Philip Sidney: "Nature never set forth the earth in so rich tapestry as divers poets have done…. Her world is brazen, the poets only deliver a golden" (qtd. in *BT* 259). But he does not agree with the poet and says, "The-too-much-loved earth will always exceed our power to describe, or imagine, or understand it" (259). Phineas realizes that meaning, like narrative, is constructed through language, and that even scientific facts are represented through linguistic means. The reality and knowledge of past lives are never unmediated; they are accessible only through narrative techniques, however partial such reconstructions may be. Thus, the novel engages with the problem of accessing the reality of the past through textual and extra-textual remains. Ultimately, Phineas comes to recognize the significance of narrative construction, acknowledging that reality can never be accessed in an unmediated form.

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