

## 'The Only Story' – A Postmodern Novel

Julian Barnes belongs to the generation of British postmodernist writers, and postmodernism is not exclusively a literary phenomenon.

Generally, postmodernism is a very paradoxical phenomenon. It is never either/or, it is always both/and at the same time. The contradiction would be the very second name of postmodernism.

### *Reflections on Postmodernism*[1]

#### **No Universal Truths:**

Postmodernists rejected the view which culminated with realism, that literature was a reliable source of universal truths, though such view was never before questioned. In the tradition of postmodernism this assumption is questioned. There are no universal truths, **according to postmodernism, there is no one constant, measurable reality, there are only realities.**

#### **that art imitates life is questionable**

The very assumption **that art imitates life is questionable;** it could be that life imitates art.

#### **Skepticism – Objective Truth**

There is a lot of skepticism, as a typical element of the postmodernist worldview. Postmodernists are also very skeptical about the modernist view that reality is to be found in its inner rather than outer manifestation. So, there are no clear definitions, there are no clear solutions. There is no realm that contains objective reality and objective truth, according to postmodernism, and in this context we speak of relativism, which is another typical postmodernist trait.

#### **cult of the genius**

Modernists also believed in the cult of the genius, which they inherited from the Romantics, according to which artists were the elite, hypersensitive persons who can grasp the ultimate truth, which was another idea of modernists that postmodernists rejected.

### **Construction or Revelation of Truth**

**Modernists still pretended that their novels were not constructs but that they somehow revealed the truth**, which again the postmodernist challenged. Even the notion of consciousness, personality, mind, were rejected by the **postmodernists, who claimed that consciousness was rooted in language which describes nothing but itself according to them. Thus, the world view constructed by the word 'love' is questioned in this novel. The word 'love' is supposed to give us a worldview of happiness, togetherness, blissfulness, idyllic, peaceful, harmonious, joyful, ecstatic, heavenly life. In this novel, 'love' shatters family life, it brings pity and anger, it makes people alcoholic and liars.**

Postmodernist literature is not only literature; they integrate philosophical, linguistic, anthropological theories of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, theories of human sexuality, which reflects the eclectic nature of the postmodernist literature. To postmodernists, language is another construct, a toy invented by human beings, not necessary for the purpose of describing the outside phenomena, but it is a play, signifier does not refer to the signified, but what we have is the constant play of signifiers. Language refers back to itself, especially in literature. **Per convention, when 10 people use the word 'tree' all ten of them may have a different image on their mind, which is the reason there can never be true communication.** According to postmodernists, one needs to be very careful using the language. Human mind, according to postmodernists, is not a constant, it remains in the state of constant flux, which proves their notion that there is no such thing as personality, because it is not a stable phenomenon, just a set of moods, which is never the same, even in the single day. They say it is a very delicate, phantom-like phenomenon called consciousness. Even our thinking is rooted in language, according to postmodernists, which means it is unreliable, because language itself is unreliable and provisory. We have the Post-Freudian approach according to which, the

unconscious is also rooted in language, which makes it highly elusive, just as the reality is illusive. Our view of reality, regardless of whether it is external or internal reality, is always subjective. Postmodernism is, on the other hand, very liberating and creative, because if there are just realities or truths all of them subjective, there are no borders or rules as to how to create or write. Freedom involves great possibilities, but also great pitfalls. Literature in postmodernism can by no means claim to represent the truth, it can only present one or two or three versions of the same story, which means that the author can deliberately play with the idea and offer several solutions, or endings. Even the interpretation of the work of art by the reader greatly depends on the reader's point of view, education, social standing, making it again, highly subjective.

In literature[2], postmodernism can be addressed in non-narrative and anti-representational ways. The conventional story can be replaced with an artistic approach, yet the reader's expectations can still be met by sticking to the traditional clear climax. Postmodern literary works have traits that are opposed to modernist writing, such as discarding traditional design and rejecting linear stream of consciousness. It is expressed totally in factual language rather than ambiguous phrases. This growth of postmodern culture in the postmodern world, in particular, began to reexamine global culture that comprises both western and eastern cultures. Such impacts can also be present in mainstream culture and in short male-female relationships like love, marriage, and so on.

Such cultural shifts sparked a social upheaval in the 1960s, resulting in the coining of a new term, postmodernity, which differed slightly from postmodernism and is thus regarded as part of a postmodernist movement. So the postmodern world emerged to draw and manage the economic structure, but the worth of value transcended the materials utilized, whereby sensuality has become a product but love has not. This level of quality was above and beyond what could be obtained for the price. Despite the fact that love was valuable, the materialistic economy neglected to provide assurances for it. To a certain extent, postmodernism induced skepticism about real love, as love has taken on a contradictory role in postmodern society. However, people were convinced by excessive materialism, in which their economy was driven by their desires, and they adored the exact opposite of their

ideal values. They were dissatisfied with their purchases. It felt like “I was on a never-ending treadmill of chasing down a goal” (126). Even a healthy relationship was not brought about by this materialistic items. Many marriages have expiration dates, such as divorce, single living, leaving, or abandoned partnerships between men and women. Relationships were tossed away in the same way that belongings were. As a result, most people became scraps, much like previous technology, and society abandoned them.

Barnes' novels are devoid of any forced optimism. The properties of postmodern words may be justified by novels that reflect reality or fiction. In today's postmodern era fiction, true 'reality' is not portrayed. This is like a statement of fact, similar to how a crystal reflects our image's truth. In several of Barnes's stories, the primary characters reflect genuine images as a fictitious image rather than revealing their true attributes. As a result, several of Barnes's characters affect the image and thinking of Barnes.

Indeed, several of Barnes' works follow an unmistakably postmodern narrative structure, bringing important characters to the point of fabulation (as in *Metro Land*) and addressing the issue of the quest for absolute fact. One such search may be both insightful and perplexing, but it culminates in an understanding of the importance of fabulation for the framework of stories trying to instill down-to-earth meaning into everyday life.

Love is the emotional structure of one's society, and it is formed on sex indirectly. Love produces the polished form of culture and sex. Love, like sex, is riddled with ambiguity, existing in both natural and non-natural forms, implying that it exists beyond the abstract level and is difficult to explain. Love is an inexorable source of anxiety, though possibly a deeper dread for being soaked through, the fear of failing. The concept of eternal love is buried within the body, rather than being external as an ironic word suggests. Researchers and philosophers have observed that the postmodern sensual movement is dismantling the links that bind eroticism to sex on one hand and love on the other. Love selection is also founded on sex determination, which is the process of assigning healthy individuals to attributes such as selectiveness and faithfulness. If this planning is done free, the cross-cultural world will shift dramatically. The pleasures of sex with sensual meaning are encouraged in postmodern culture.

## Postmodernity[3]

In order to understand Barnes's novels, we need context. Barnes has often been categorized as a postmodernist, and an exploration of what, exactly, that term contains is a useful point to begin a discussion of how his texts function. Postmodernism itself invokes innumerable definitions, depending on the field and the scholar. In *Postmodern Literature*, Ian Gregson provides an apt summation for the literature student:

. . . for many of the American literary critics who brought the term postmodernism into circulation in the 1960s and early 1970s, postmodernism is a move away from narrative, from representation . . . the complexities of the term can be reduced this far: humanizing narratives are anti-postmodernist for these purposes, and the move is very much away from representation.<sup>3</sup>

Postmodernism, then, as this necessarily reductive definition suggests, can be taken as non-narrative and anti-representational. The traditional linear plot is often, if not always, replaced with a far more abstract form, and further, traditional literary elements such as a conclusive ending which satisfies the needs of both reader and character are often absent. Postmodernism defines itself against the narrative linearity of the realist novel. As literature defined as —modern|| often steps away from a conventional structure, focusing instead on stream of consciousness rather than story —Virginia Woolf is a particularly good example here — so does postmodern literature. Yet postmodernism goes one step further, insisting that readers recognize the page as a page, and the novel as an object. Barnes himself often abandons traditional narrative form, as Flaubert's *Parrot* exemplifies. It is not a story with a beginning, middle and an end, as an Austen or Eliot novel is. Yet here we begin to see the ways in which Barnes strays from the postmodern form; for however non-traditional his novels may be, they are not anti-representational. A narrative exists, though in an untraditional form. To distinguish Barnes from a more recognizably postmodern novelist, one must look not only to form but also to theme. The themes of the postmodern novel are selfconsciously and unremittingly anti-humanist. This impulse distinguishes the postmodern novel from both its realist and modernist predecessors. The issue, Gregson explains, is its departure

from the realism of the traditional novelists, and the humanism of the modern writers: This is an obsessive theme and characteristically postmodernist in its anti-humanist tendency - a point which becomes clearer if it is contrasted with the value placed upon love by classic realist novelists. The centrality of its role in novels by Jane Austen and George Eliot, for example, is tied to a celebration of the human capacity for imaginative sympathy and self-transcendence, and the narrative linking of love and marriage reinforced a sense of social stability based upon individual happiness. Postmodernist desire contrasts starkly with this humanist concept: it is an anarchic force that tears selves apart.<sup>4</sup> Here we find further evidence of Barnes's departure from postmodernism; Barnes, though his novels and stories in no way fulfill the traditional conception of love stories culminating in marriage – the so called —marriage plot<sup>1</sup> of many realist novels – is nothing if not humanizing. His novels may not contain satisfying conclusions, coherent characters, or linear plots, but their entire focus remains firmly with humanity. His novels are anchored by love and human imagination, and this in itself puts him on the margins of postmodernism. He is neither one thing nor the other

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[1] <http://newenglishliterature.blogspot.com/2012/02/julian-barnes.html>

[2] <https://www.xisdjxsu.asia/V17111-37.pdf>

[3] [http://www.julianbarnes.com/resources/archive/Abigail\\_Dalton\\_Thesis.pdf](http://www.julianbarnes.com/resources/archive/Abigail_Dalton_Thesis.pdf)