



## Credulity Toward Meta-Narratives: The Postmodern Jinx in Julian Barnes's *Flaubert's Parrot*

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### ABSTRACT

*Julian Barnes attained the pinnacle of the literary horizon with his litmus work Flaubert's Parrot in 1984 that at the same time parodies the postmodern literary genre and criticized the postmodern incredulity toward meta-narratives. The novel poses and playfully elaborates on questions about traditional understanding of history and the conventional concept of truth. Flaubert's Parrot, though a postmodern work emphasizes the existence of objective truth and the necessity to recreate Meta-narratives as the only guiding pole to human progress. The novel though placed in the postmodern ethos, its narrative trajectory at once flouts and defies conventions and at the same time establishes tradition and convention as anchorages for living in the post modern anchorless world. Barnes employs an array of techniques, themes and forms alongside a fusion of genres to question the postmodernist incredulity to meta-narratives. Julian Barnes is a post modernist because of his personal resolution to envisage human existence as if the objective truth is all times accessible, as if ultimate meaning is within reach. The age of post modernism is depicted as an age of deep faith and devout belief in the perpetual presence of the Truth and grand narratives, allowing one to fill one's life with narratives, instilling it with a sense of purpose. As a consequence, post modernism came to be presented as the only mechanism to guide those who place their hands on their hearts and are willing to assert, 'I believe towards a meaningful future'. Barnes's novel is pervaded with a longing for the no longer available stable meaning because the lack of any firm foundation breeds disappointment, anxiety and frustration. Most importantly, it creates the need to embark on some sort of pursuit that would make sense of one's place in the universe, help to understand one's personal tragedy or defy the increasingly relativist and ethically hollow world. The novel makes a reality, the famous Barnesian wisdom: History may not be 56 percent true or 100 percent true, but the only way to proceed from 55 to 56 is to believe that you can get to a hundred.*

KEY WORDS: meta-narrative- petite narrative- post modernism – post postmodernism-truth- relativism- transcendental signifier

Julian Barnes, a contemporary writer was a little known figure until the publication of *Flaubert's Parrot* in 1984. The novel, though placed in the post modern ethos, its narrative strategy at once flouts and defies conventions and at the same time establishes the need for tradition and convention as anchorages to live in the postmodern world. Barnes employs an amazing array of techniques, themes and forms alongside a fusion of genres to question the postmodernist incredulity to meta-narratives.

The publication of *Flaubert's Parrot* zeroed in the attention of critics, academia and pedants on Barnes for they saw in his prophet challenging and questioning the postmodern tenets which to many caused a crisis of legitimation., The novel poses and playfully elaborates on questions about traditional perceptives of history and conventional concepts of truth, questions frequently posited by the postmodernists. *Flaubert's Parrot* is typically a postmodern work but it is far from being strictly so, because alongside with its propagation of flexibility of meaning and multiplicity of truths. The novel emphasizes the existence of 'The Truth' and the requisite to create meta-narratives as the only guiding poles in human progress through the confused life that envelops the postmodern era. What the postmodernist had done was to deprive the world of a single anchoring centre and any certainty. This was the effect of what Lyotard calls "the Postmodern incredulity toward meta-narratives" (Lyotard 1984: XXIV). Barnes challenges this unsettling and decentring move. Even prior to *Flaubert's Parrot*, the postmodern tenets which left the contemporary man without a single anchoring centre were decried from a wide range of political and philosophical positions. Habermas argued that the project of postmodernity, with its moorings in the eighteenth century enlightenment faith in rationality, was still unfinished and required completion –not destruction. American Marxist critic, Frederick James, saw in the postmodern only the negative culture of late capitalism. For Jean Baudrillard, post modernity brought with it a crisis in how one can represent and understand the world around us. The relation between fiction and reality thus, became an enigma and question and many writers found it hard to represent the reality for there is no one constant measurable reality, there are only realities. No realm contains objective reality and objective truth, to postmodernists, but there is only relativism. Thus 'mimesis became problematic and questionable. Hence, many postmodern writers sought recourse in self- reflexive narration, sur-fiction meta-fiction, para-fiction etc to conquer the dilemma and to represent their anguish and ennui over the postmodern jinx and to express their inability to represent life in their writing.

Through Geoffrey Braithwaite, a medical scholar and an amateur, the protagonist narrator of *Flaubert's Parrot*, Barnes fuses the postmodern interpretations of history with the necessity of establishing a saving ethic system which characterizes the British New Humanism. For, the age of postmodernism with its undermining irony hopelessness, pessimism and the sense of the looming end could not but leave the world in a state of despair

characterized by a propagated state of the simulacra and the subaltern, hybridity, uncertainty, absence and anti theoretical inconclusiveness. Consequently, “man found himself to be nothing but a helpless gnat and a meager accident in the surrounding magnificence of life, eternally pushing in the direction of its own expansion and thrashing in an unknown direction for unknown reasons” (Becker 284). Postmodernism tends to destroy the very notion of meta-narratives which provides cultural praxes some legitimation. The Postmodernists rejected any form of overall totalizing explanations. As a result, relativism in philosophy rhizome in knowledge decentredness of life, indeterminacy of meaning, aporia etc crept into the contemporary world causing a crumbling of the hitherto held beliefs and conventions. Postmodernists challenge our subjective experience of truth, knowledge and history. As a result, there can never be one history or truth. On the contrary, there is a plethora of histories and truths which never can be comprehended objectively. The onus of postmodernism coerces writers to set aside all totalizing concepts of knowledge, meaning or truth and analyze how and why these sources come into history. As Lyotard argues what governs postmodernism is incredulity toward meta-narratives. To Lyotard meta-narratives are a form of ideology that functions violently to suppress and control the individual subject by imposing a false sense of totality and universality of meaning or a self of desperate things, actions and events. Meta-narratives thereby, aim at legitimating knowledge and governing institutions behind it.

Though Julian Barnes is grouped in postmodernist genre, his fiction is much more than that, because against the postmodern tenets his works manifest apparent faith in the existence of the truth, the obtainability of meaning through a fundamental revision of old meta-narratives empowering the individual with a certain degree of optimism for the future. In an interview with Vanessa Guignery, Barnes confesses: “It is no good just lying back and saying well we will never work it out, and it is no good saying of course we understand history – what we should do eventually is believe that truth is obtainable” (65). Despite his indulgence in postmodern techniques, Barnes is something more than a postmodernist. He is a post-postmodernist because of his resolution to envisage human existence “as if the objective truth was all times accessible, as if the ultimate meaning was within reach” (Alan 166). The age of postmodernism is portrayed as an age denying deep faith and devout belief in the perpetual presence of the Truth and Grand narratives, allowing one to fill one’s life with narratives, instilling it with a sense of purpose. Post-postmodernism is often presented as the only mechanism to guide “those who place their hands on their hearts and are willing to assert, I believe” (Turner 6). The world has already seen the crisis of reason and incredulity toward the working of reason. “Faith [in its turn], always was the strongest competitor of reason’ (Turner 6). Hence, Post-post modernism is offered as the only panacea available to humans in the future “to temper reason with faith” (Turner 6) in the Truth and to revive hope amidst the ruins of postmodern relativity. Though, inspired by the postmodern themes, Barnes does not dwell on eternal indeterminacy, defferance or historic nihilism but attempts to unite the desperate and subjective discourses of a culture into totalizing concepts. The never-ending search for objectivity, propped up by the self-conscious construction of meaning-generating narratives, based on the acceptance of the fact that Truth does exist somewhere, makes up the leitmotif of the post-postmodern epoch. Indeed, Braithwaite’s devotion to Flaubert: “his work, his research, his collecting and sorting of information are perhaps meant to provide an anodyne objectivity” at least to keep him busy (Moseley 79), and to provide him with a guiding narrative or a group of narratives, that would enable him to go on in the chaotic world. Barnes’s work celebrates the fabulatory energy to believe and to start anew in the world of chaos, going side by side with a never- ending endeavour to perceive the objective truth. Thus, the writer never constrained by the heritage of past conventions, manages to create a voice of his own, a form of his own, employing rehabilitating truth as a goal and safeguard himself against the dangers of beguiling relativity. Through a series of investigations and rummages into the nature of truth, the notion of the ultimate truth once again gets solidly constructed all over again in his novels.

Barnes’s novel is a clarion call for the reinstitution of meta-narratives as the only way to combat the rootlessness of the contemporary world and to rescue mankind from the continual deferral of significations; enabling men to attain the transcendental signifier. The resurrection of belief in meta-narratives endows man with an effective tool to combat the barrenness and rootlessness imposed by postmodernism, to create life narratives on which to project all their individual qualities, to feel at last powerful and renewed and finally overflowing with meaning and sense of purpose. Credulity towards meta-narratives provides men with a sound way to affirm themselves. As Becker comments” “instilling meta-narratives provide the self- transcending life process which gives one’s self the larger nourishment it needs” (Becker 157). It enables humans to eschew the centrifugal cocoon of modernism and the incapacitating freedom of postmodernism.

Julian Barnes’s fiction, though, considered a postmodern work, employing a variety of genres, be it a bestiary, a chronology, an encyclopedic entity, an epistolary form, or a biography, is inscribed with a general framework of what Amy J. Elias calls “paratactic history” (123) of Flaubert’s life utilizing “juxtaposition, linear disjunction, de-perspectivised space” (Amy 123) to force different temporal planes into “textual proximity with each other. The novel emphasizes the existence of the Truth, the transcendental signifier and credulity as opposed to the postmodern incredulity toward meta-narratives as the only guiding pole in human progress in the postmodern scenario. The novel combines the postmodern themes of the relative truth, unstable history and multiple discourses with the significant foundation of a redeeming ethic system that can free man from the ills of postmodernism. The comment made by the stark postmodern writer, Ruth Hayho seems logical in this context:

I think I’ve come around to believe that we need meta-narratives after all to form a coherent moral and epistemological framework. My reason for taking up the retrospective theme of redeeming modernity is to explore the possibility that meta-narratives could be a helpful vehicle of reflecting on the self and history the other and are not necessarily totalizing expressions rooted in essentialist philosophy (Hayho 424).

Barnes was haunted by the postmodernist claims about the relativity of truth and the multiplicity of truths. Barnes asks, then how a novelist could portray truth, what is the relationship between fiction and reality because novels are believed to be a true portrait of life “a transparent window on the world “ as Henry James remarks. “Books” Barnes claims “are where things are explained to you; life is where things are not” (*Flaubert’s Parrot* 168). Barnes indeed is a postmodernist in his narrative techniques. Post modernism is considered non narrative and anti- representational. The traditional linear plot is often subverted with the jumbled up stream of conscious narratives and digressions and above all, a conclusive ending is often absent in postmodern writing. Postmodernism demands readers to recognize a page as a page and the novel as an object. Postmodernist writing is anti humanist, anti- representational,

non-linear, stream of conscious, anti-realist etc. Barnes embodies all these narrative trajectories. It is not in form but in theme that Barnes stands apart from his contemporaries. Like the postmodernists, Barnes is not self-consciously and unremittingly anti-humanist. This stand vexed Ian Gregson, who remarks:

This is an obsessive theme and characteristically postmodernist in its anti-humanist tendency- a point which becomes clearer if it is contrasted to the value placed upon love by classic realist novelists. The centrality of its role in novels by Jane Austen or George Eliot for e.g., is tied to a celebration of the human capacity for imaginative sympathy and self-transcendence, and the narrative linking of love and marriage reinforced to assume a social stability based upon individual happiness. Postmodernists desire contrasts starkly with this humanist concept. It is an anarchic force that tears selves apart (6).

Barnes's fiction, in Lawrence Lerner's words is "a striving for semiotics rather than mimesis" (33) accomplished by a profound emphasis on the paramount importance of the ultimate truth and human values despite the postmodern attempts to rebuff the notions, for "if perception is not wholly, it does not follow that it must be wholly subjective: that would ignore the more complex possibility that it results from an interaction between the external world and our method of perceiving" (Lerner 35). Barnes, following his postmodern counterparts abandons the linear narrative. His novels are stories without a proper beginning, middle or end: "Traditional Happy Ending; Traditional Unhappy Ending; Traditional Half and Half Ending; Deus ex Machina; Modernist Arbitrary Ending; Cliffhanger Ending; Dream Ending; Opaque Ending; Surrealist Ending; and so on" (*Flaubert's Parrot* 89) as Barnes comments have their due place in his novel. Yet his novel deviates from the postmodern form. Braithwaite, the narrator protagonist, advocates the necessity of having just one finale, to add up to the realistic character of the work. Having two endings, in his mind, "is never real, because the reader is obliged to consume both endings... the novel with two endings does not reproduce reality: it merely takes us down to diverging paths" (*Flaubert's Parrot* 89). His novel is not anti-representational; a linear narrative exists in his novel though not in the traditional style. Whereas postmodern novels are anti-humanist, Barnes is not, though we do not ever find the traditional concepts of love and its fulfillment in marriage in his novel. His sole focus, anchored by love, is solidly founded on human imagination.

Disconcerted with the postmodern negation of truth, Barnes parted with the postmodernists in his themes. Though *Flaubert's Parrot* in no way subscribes to the conventional love stories, it is highly humane. The novel lacks a proper beginning or end, coherent characters or linear plots; its entire focus remains firmly on humanity. Barnes in his novel attempts to resurrect meta-narratives after its post-modern death, no longer as a social project with claims of transforming the world, but as a new intensity of life experience and a broader horizon for the individual. As Turner remarks, "the modern age of one way one truth is gone, the postmodernist age of 'anything goes' is on the way out. Reason can carry us a long way but it has its own limits, so let us embrace post-postmodernism" (8). Thus, Barnes's novel as he says in "The Pedant in the Kitchen" is the master dish that is prepared according to uncertain recipe of postmodernism through the self-reflexive fuss" (Turner 3). Post-postmodernism provides, despite the psychosomatic crisis of postmodernism, the mind with a tool to instill the otherwise meaningless life with meaning and value through a set of newly constructed meta-narratives "affording a natural fetishization of man's highest yearnings and strivings" (Becker 155).

Julian Barnes's novels and short stories show "a proclivity for hybridity advocating multiplicity and decompartmentalization, blurring and challenging the borders that separate existing genres, texts arts and languages. Such a subversion of generic conventions is combined with an oscillation between the celebration and the iconization of the literary past and both strategies manifest themselves as possible modes of replenishment of the cultural legacy"(Guignery Vanessa 65). Barnes's fiction demonstrates a clearly postmodern reorientation especially in his rejection of the postmodern postulates by establishing the tall claim that credulity towards meta-narratives is the only cure to make one's existence meaningful in this present chaotic and anarchic universe. Barnes, thus, embarks upon his method of story-telling through a distinct set of novel meta-narratives without the illusion of a full story. *Flaubert's Parrot* highlights the fusion of the postmodern interpretation of history with the necessity of establishing a saving ethic system, which characterizes the British new humanism. For Geoffrey Braithwaite, the protagonist, reality means not the identification of an ultimate structuring plan or finding absolute meaning, but his openness to get involved in the search for meaning and in the attempt to recuperate the past. Geoffrey Braithwaite, aware of both the impossibility of the past to be integrally regained and the fact that discourses only approximate the disparate data of history, argues that the degrees of imagination as to the past, the line of reality must never be discarded, since it limits our fabulatory capacity. Barnes's reaction to the historical relativism is not a contemplative one; on the contrary, it is one of uneasiness since the novelist is concerned with the human constants that confer universal signification to existence against the variable masks of transitory discourses. Barnes attempts to fuse the postmodern relativity, instability, dissemination, multiplicity etc., with the significant foundation of a redeeming ethic system based on the strong buttress of meta-narratives. *Flaubert's Parrot*, through its protagonist, Braithwaite, searches for meaning in a meaningless universe, assails to recuperate the past and attempts at conferring universal signification, when there is no such a thing, to existence against all attempts at demeaning true existence. Braithwaite a former physician and a widower, searches for a detailed understanding of his much admired hero- Flaubert: his life and works. Though Braithwaite is in possession of diverse documents, anecdotes and evidences connected with Flaubert's existence, he is not satisfied for though Flaubert died a little more than a hundred years ago "all that remains of him is only on paper: papers, ideas, phrases, metaphors, structural prose which turn into some mere sounds only" remarks Braithwaite (*Flaubert's Parrot* 2). The protagonist rummages the past to have solid evidences that would prove Flaubert's existence. He desires to know him intimately to have a profound insight of his genius. As the quest for the real parrot continues, the novel becomes a pretext for unfolding the tragic story of the protagonist's late wife, Ellen. Despite having a husband, children loves, job, friends and what are called interests, she committed suicide, because she was the victim of postmodern depression and the all pervading sense of rootlessness and ennui. Braithwaite, hence, creates his own Flaubert, his own Ellen and his own self, so as to avoid the beguiling trap of relativity. "After all, isn't it typical of the human mind to invent missing narratives and fabulate guiding life-meanings when threatened by chaos and turmoil" asks Mosley Merrit (79). Braithwaite's discovery of the stuffed parrot "Loulou", the source of Flaubert's inspiration for *Un Coeur Simple*, thus becomes for Braithwaite a direct testimony of Flaubert's existence and "the emblem of the writer's voice" (*Flaubert's Parrot* 12). Barnes here reiterates that history, a form of meta-narrative, can be convalesced and instituted as a proof of that envisages logical truth. By resurrecting the past, Braithwaite, genuinely desires to engage with Flaubert's pre-

postmodernist notions of an objective style and his belief in the possibility of pure words and stories that proved stability to history and his-story. Barnes's postmodern novelistic praxis is thus, not to dwell forever in indeterminacy and linguistic or historical nihilism but to engage history, even while dramatizing the difficulties of doing so. The textuality of historical narratives can ultimately be productive intellectually a perhaps, a political liberating process.

The narratorial voice which introduces himself as "Julian Barnes" warns that abandoning the belief in truth inevitably leads to "beguiling relativity" (*Flaubert's Parrot* 244). The plurality and incompatibility of ideas dramatized in Barnes's novel testify their dialogic character. These texts display their awareness of the postmodern concept of truth and play within it, more often seemingly endorsing it than not. Postmodernism is more concerned with assessing the human condition and documenting the demise of grand narratives than with seeking foundations on which to build new systems of thoughts that would accommodate ethics and values universally shared by humans and restore lost meaning. Barnes's *Flaubert's Parrot*, is pervaded with a longing for the no longer available stable meaning. The lack of any firm foundation breeds disappointment, anxiety and frustration. Most importantly, it creates the need to embark on some sort of pursuit that would make sense of one's place in the universe, help to understand one's personal tragedy or defy the increasingly relativist and ethically hollow world. In his article entitled "Julian Barnes and Popularity of Ethics", Mathew Pateman places the author of *Flaubert's Parrot* in opposition to post modernism, in so far as he attempts to "reinvent legitimating formulae in an effort to arrest our fall into beguiling relativity (189). The predominant concern of Barnes's novel, as Pateman argues, is to examine, "the potential for an ethical formulation in the light of the breakdown of legitimating narratives" (180). Braithwaite believes in the humanist illusions that the postmodernism rejects. He is taken up by the author as the example of the old way of thinking, a person who believes firmly in the power of meta-narratives to save the postmodern world from its fragmented nature and redeem humans from frustration. rootlessness, decentredness, indeterminacy and relativism. In his search for the Truth, Braithwaite fabricates multiple truths, instilling his otherwise pointless, wrecked and chaotic life with a sense of purpose. At the end of the novel, he flees from the room of dusty Amazonian parrots, "quizzical, sharp-eyed, dandruff-ridden [and] little cranky" versions of the truth (*Flaubert's Parrot* 190). He advocates the pressing necessity of the belief in objective truth, love and authenticity to avoid the danger of postmodern relativity. Thus, *Flaubert's Parrot*, as Guignery comments, makes a reality the famous Barnesian wisdom: "History may not be 56 percent true or 100 percent true, but the only way to proceed from 55 to 56 is to believe that you can get to a hundred (65).

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