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Dissolution of Self of Paul and Susan in *The Only Story* of Julian Barnes

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Abstract

Julian Barnes is a postmodern novelist who employed the postmodern techniques such as fragmentation; pastiche and intertextuality in his novels. Barnes realized that an individual struggles to forge an identity in the postmodern society but he becomes the victim of internal and external forces. Barnes's novel *The Only Story* is about the protagonist Paul who is an old man reflecting over the story of his life and recalling the romance and love that defined his life. In the novel, Paul's experiences in his life deconstruct themselves leading to a decay in his personality as while narrating the events of his life, he uses the first person 'I' for himself in the beginning of the novel, later on he shifts to the second person 'You' and towards the ending of the novel, he shifts to the third person 'He', illustrating his frustration in his love story. He found himself trapped in his emotions feeling much sad. He thought that his love-story had lost the true meaning. He felt dissociated and pathetic due to his romantic journey with Susan, who was an elderly woman. No doubt Susan fell in love with Paul but she couldn't continue her love-story with the same zeal instead she became alcoholic and depressed. Paul's best efforts to help her overcome her desperation didn't bear fruit and it led Paul to feel disappointed and disintegrated towards the end of the novel. Laing has talked about the loss of self in his *The Divided Self* (1960) and Ihab Hassan discussed the cause of disintegration of self in his *The Modern Self in Recoil* (1967). Barnes was also influenced by the theories of Jameson as he presented the fragmented view of Self. Barnes rejected the ideas and theories of Enlightenment. Barnes believed that absolute truths are fragmented ideas and there is no ultimate reality.

Key Words: Dissolution, postmodern, fragmentation, pastiche, absolute, intertextuality, identity

Julian Barnes is a postmodern British novelist who depicted the wounded psyche of the middle class people. The nihilistic ideas eventually led to the deflation of Self and no wonder a new age emerged which propagated the idea that Truth is an illusion. Mind and Soul are meaningless as the soul lost its transcendental value. Luhmann talks of double consciousness in his theory of self. He maintains that self is often viewed as interpersonal, composed of a repertoire of relational selves" (81). C. E. Izard (1972) propounded the famous theory of a pattern of Self claiming "that emotions are complex patterns of bodily processes, experiences, expressions, behaviors and actions, and such they are individuated in patterns of characteristic features" (Izard 15). Barnes wrote his novel *The Only Story* (2018) depicting the heart-rending journey of Paul Roberts and Susan

McLeod who suffer from the sin of moral transgression. The main focus of the novel is the only story of Paul who joins the tennis club and meets a forty years old woman Susan McLeod. She is beautiful and charming and is famous as “the Scarlet Women” in the area. She lives in a small village far away from London; her neighbors are orthodox people but she enjoys the love of her two grown up daughters and the beautiful environment of her beautiful home. Paul is a nineteen years old young boy full of enthusiasm and vitality and an impressive personality. The story of Paul’s relationship with Susan begins when he falls in love with her and feels passionate about her. Both of them start enjoying each other’s company and begin a love affair. Their conversation proceeds on familiar matters, joking with nicknames using private slang and sharing moments of subversion. Their relationship does not seem to last long being a transgression of the kind which can only exist in a mythical or a fairy tale, but the story of the novel moves in a different direction where around halfway to the story, one doesn't find any doomed first love and a disregard to social norms. *The Only Story* is based on a love that cannot be explained. It proves to be disruptive and catastrophic for both the persons involved in the relationship but still it manages to acquire a significant position in their lives. In this novel, Barnes not only deals with the pain and suffering experienced by the persons involved in the relationship due to their unconventional love story but also the carefree nature of love is taken into account, “I was nineteen, and I knew that love was incorruptible, proof against both time and tarnish” says Paul while describing his feelings when he fell in love with Susan and while he reflects on that love over a span of decades, he puts forward a question, “Would you rather love the more and suffer the more, or love the less and suffer the less? That is, I think, the real question” (Barnes 89). Paul’s passion for her has a threatening effect on his life leading to his expulsion from his home. But he remains true to his feelings for Susan. He possesses a notebook of maxims and goes on crossing out those which no longer serve him, but there is the one maxim he holds on to and can relate to, “Every love happy or unhappy, is a true disaster once you give yourself over to it” (34). Paul and Susan continue to keep their relationship a secret even as their love grows passionate. Paul realizes that love is antithetical to all other concerns of practicality in life, but he does not care, as his devotion to Susan keeps on growing. Paul eventually comes to know that Gordon is an alcoholic who often beats Susan. Therefore Paul graduates from college, he and Susan move to London to live together. Paul explains the situation to his parents by writing a note. Susan and Paul decide to move in a rented accommodation together in London. Paul wants Susan to divorce Gordon, but Susan finds herself unable to do so. Ultimately Paul discovers that Susan has become addicted to alcohol. Paul advises Susan to stop drinking, but Susan can’t give up the habit of drinking. Paul finds himself unable to help her in any effective manner. Susan’s state of mind begins to decline, apparently due to the excessive alcohol intake. When Susan’s mental health starts deteriorating, Paul tries to help her by making her visit a psychiatrist in a hospital. But unfortunately, none of his efforts prove to be effective. As Susan begins suffering from major delusions and her mental faculties are affected severely. Paul records her neurotic condition thus:

“What makes it unbearable, what makes you so exhausted and depressed after twenty minutes in her presence that you want to run outside and howl, is this: though she can't name you, never asks you any questions or answers any of yours, she still, at one level, registers your presence and responds to it. She doesn't know who the fuck you are, or what you do, or even your fucking name, but at the same time, she recognizes you and judges you morally and finds you waiting” (156).

As the novel progresses, Susan's health begins to deteriorate. She divorced her husband and had married Paul in passion. She flouted all norms of social taboos and betrayed her grown up daughters also. She told Paul that her husband Mr. Mcleod was a chronic drunkard and she had been leading a hellish life with him. Susan found the excuse and deserted her daughters who stood by the side of their father and remained committed with him. They stopped talking to Susan and Mr. Mcleod too became angry and aggressive. Meanwhile Susan turned into a neurotic woman in Paul's house. Susan realized her stupendous folly in marrying Paul and deserting her family in blindness of love and sex. She was a mature woman being older than Paul but she failed to act decisively and continued her relationship with Paul and her decision made her marriage fall apart leading to the dissolution of her personality. Being unsatisfied in her marital life, she tried to find pleasure in the company of Paul. But her adventure turned into a misadventure as she felt guilty and shameful. Being guilty she felt lonely and alienated as Paul was away most of the day in London. He was a young boy who was forced to shoulder huge responsibility; he had to work hard to pull on and to feed Susan in London. Susan would recollect her time which she had spent with her family and in her garden. She suffered from depression and frustration and guilt was heavy on her psyche. Laing argues that the fluid self is the outcome of psychological forces. The characters of Barnes are dislocated people; their displacement results into the dissolution of self. Laing observes thus:

“The fluid Self is a psychological and historically dislocated being. He speculates that there is a break in the sense of connection which men have long felt with the vital and nourishing symbols of their cultural tradition—symbols revolving around family, idea systems, religions and the life in general” (Laing14).

Paul and Susan of Barnes confront uncertainties and obstacles everyday leading to disintegration of self. They discard old values and rely on falsehood, duplicity to survive and flourish in society. Susan cheats her husband and daughters and it leads to her ruin and disintegration. The frequent shuffle in the ideology of the characters reveal their greed, lust and sexuality. David Laing argues that self is in fact a symbol of an organism. Identity of a man today is not solid and stable which is considered inborn. Self is known as an individual's symbol of organism and similarly, identity is not a hard tag which somebody gets with birth. Self of the person keeps declining and disintegrating as it involves “the process of thought reform” and eventually this process leads to the fluidity of self. Feelings and beliefs get a new turn and as a result the values are sacrificed in relational contacts with the spouse, friends and relatives. The process of shuffling of identity is a continuous changing process as Laing observes thus:

“Our civilization represses not only ‘the instincts’, not only sexuality, but any form of transcendence. Among one-dimensional men, it is not surprising that someone with an insistent experience of other dimensions, that he cannot entirely deny or forget, will run the risk either of being destroyed by the others, or of betraying what he knows” (Laing 13).

Paul divorced Susan Mcleod who had become a chronic drunkard. Barnes employs the force of irony and soon Paul discovers that Susan had become a chronic addict; she drinks and tells lies in order to hide her guilt. In desperation she becomes alcoholic to escape from the harrowing memories of her past which afflict her. Ultimately Paul discovers that Susan has become addicted to alcohol. Paul advises Susan to stop drinking, but Susan can't give up the habit of drinking. Paul finds himself unable to help her in any effective manner. Susan's state of mind begins to decline, apparently due to the excessive alcohol intake. When Susan's mental health starts deteriorating, Paul tries to help her by making her visit a psychiatrist in a hospital. But unfortunately, none of his efforts prove to be effective. As Susan begins suffering from major delusions and her mental faculties are affected severely. Paul records her neurotic condition thus:



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Paul also became a depressed person; he had lost everything; his parents and dreams. His life had become hellish as he had to work day and night in the most expensive city of London. He knew that Susan's health was deteriorating but now he was worried about his own health. He made a decision and decided to send Susan back to her daughters. He recollected the golden days he enjoyed in the tennis court of the village. But all was gone now the old memories haunted him. One day he took Susan and visited the village. He had already made a request to her daughters to look after their sick mother as she needed their company. They consented as there was nobody to resist. Their father had expired and they were alone. Paul looked at the tennis court and got mentally disturbed. He describes the scene of change thus:

“He imagined the village tennis courts replaced by a spread of the finest modern boxes, or perhaps a more lucrative clump of low-rise flats. He wondered if anyone, anywhere, had ever looked at a housing development and thought. Why don't we knock them all down and build a nice tennis club, one with the latest all-weather courts? Or maybe-yes, why don't we go further and lay some proper old-fashioned grass courts, for tennis as it once used to be? But no one would ever do, or even think, that, would they? Things once gone, can't be put back: he knew that now. A punch once delivered can't be withdrawn. Words,

once spoken, can't be unsaid. We may go on as if nothing had been lost, nothing done, nothing said, we may claim to forget it all, but our innermost core doesn't forget because we have been changed forever" (162)

Paul decides to move out of the house where he was staying with Susan, and he engages a friend to look after Susan. Paul then dates another woman for a few months, but his relationship does not last long and eventually fails. Paul again moves back to stay with Susan to take care of her. A few years later, Susan's daughter Martha agrees to take over the responsibility of looking after Susan. In his later years, he settles into a life of quiet routine, contemplating the many contradictions of love, including both the fulfillment and the suffering it presents. *The Only Story* of Barnes is a poignant tale of love of Paul and Susan. In his later years, he settles into a life of quiet routine, contemplating the many contradictions of love, including both the fulfillment and the suffering it presents. Paul is detached not just from himself but from the notion of love as he assumes love as more like a philosophical question than an emotion that he experienced. He is influenced by the emotions of love but he only observes it rather than experiencing it. He observes thus:

"He was at ease with the world, watching other people's lives develop. No, that was too grand a way of putting it: he was observing the young get cheerfully drunk and turn their minds to sex, romance, and something more. But though he was indulgent-even sentimental-about the young, and protective of their hopes, there was one scene he was superstitious about, and preferred not to witness: the moment when they flung away their lives because it just felt so right-when, for instance, a smiling waiter delivered a mound of mango sorbet with an engagement ring glittering in it's domed apex, and a bright-eyed proposer fell to bended knee in the sand[...]The fear of such a scene would often lead him to an early night"(Barnes 145).

And after a gap of fifty years, he still blames himself for making his first love as the only story of his life and how the same did not allow him to create any other story of his life by giving any further opportunity to himself. Paul is guilty of holding onto his only story for longer than is healthy. The novel thus examines and analyses how the individuals while in relationship with others cannot retain their individualism despite doing many efforts. As while associating with others one naturally gets involved into the personality of the others. The individuals are definitely not able to stay in a distinct identity if they get related to other people due to the interchange of thoughts and ideas. One's identity certainly gets dissolved while in a relationship. Hence it becomes a little contradictory to aim at discovering the individualistic aspects of one's identity while one gets related and interacts with others and it leads to a collective identity of the people. To conclude, the novels of Barnes depict the truncated life of the individuals. The characters are trapped in the abyss of darkness and suffer multiple psychological ailments such as depression and trauma. As the plot progresses we find that the characters suffer from psychological anguish. Lucas (1951) observes thus:

“We are prisoners –inside ourselves. We are all irremediably alone. All the paradises whose gates real life seems to throw wide before the feet of youth are merely dreams, the only real paradises are the paradises we lost, the paradises of memory. For we can never imaginatively anything we already possess' ' (Lucas 349).

Kafka depicted a world of chaos and disorder in his novels and Nabokov and Pynchon employed postmodern strategies to project the isolated self. Many critics have explored the nature of dissolution of self and it is found that Barnes employs cultural symbols to depict the disintegration of the Self of the characters. Identity plays multiple roles in the life of the characters of Barnes. It is essential to comprehend the nature of identity. Marcia (1994) observes that “identity refers to a coherent sense of one’s meaning to oneself and to others within that social context. This sense of identity reflects an individual’s continuity with the past, a personally meaningful present, and a direction for the sense” (70).

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