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Book Reviews

The Sense of an Ending (Julian Barnes): A Study of Self Reflexive Journey

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Collisions between worlds of imaginations and realities often create scope for introspection – a process of revisiting the past, and reevaluating actions with the support of memories and reconstructing a new perspective on the role of Time in Life. This new perspective throws new light on life, which has already been lived so far. When any immature action or behaviour of the past is realised, pricking of the guilty conscience is the only consequential feeling. If Time provides the chance to console the guilt stricken heart, or make amends for the guilty action, the remedy is most often found either in an apology or in self-inflicted punishment. If deprived even of these chances, the soul cries out loud but silent and one is left awestruck by the unresolved mystery of Time.

Introspection or an inward foray into the self is one of the predominant themes of the twentieth century literature. The twentieth century protagonist is developing an analytical aptitude towards his own behaviour and actions and is thus widening the scope of self-reflexivity or self-introspection. The inward journey of the protagonist almost always begins when his/her preconceived notions clash with the reality, that is life. The eventual revelations then, strikingly acquaint him/her to their own hidden self. This protagonist subsequently will either take an escape route, or suffer emotional breakdown, or may even renounce the world to seek spiritual association and/or enlightenment.

The Sense of an Ending by Julian Barnes is one such story that allows a protagonist, a scope for reflection on his past and his eventual assessment of life to his

final conclusion where he finds Time winning against Life. The book has striking revelations that leave indelible marks of irreparable scars of guilt followed by unforgiving remorse.

Theme

It is a story of four school-time friends, Tony Webster, Alex, Colin and Adrian Finn, who oscillate between pleasure and pain, loss and gain, mistakes and reparations and in due course, come to understand the dynamics of Time and Life. The text constructs a theory that it is only after unburdening the self from mental stress, that one can attain supreme happiness, which is much more essential than any amount of materialistic gain. Tony Webster, the narrator tries to gather the scattered pieces of his memories, weaves them together to prepare a rosary of beads, each progressively showing his gradual growth from a mischievous teenager to a mature man.

The story unfolds with Tony remembering a shy, intellectual, sincere, uncomplaining and less demanding friend Adrian Finn. Adrian's life was quite dismal as his mother had walked out on their family, leaving him to grow up with his father and sister. Adrian's friends find that his mother's unexpected desertion turns him philosophical and too pragmatic. Adrian's reaction to the sad news of one of their classmate Robson's suicide proves him very complacent towards life when he quotes Camus "suicide [is] the only true philosophical question." (p. 13) When Tony questions Adrian's mother's loyalty towards family, he remains silent. He does not show any disrespect towards her. He manages his grief complacent in the knowledge that every moment is going to become history. His complacency is the result of his belief, "History is that certainty produced at the point where the imperfection of memory meets the inadequacy of documentation." (p. 17)

In due course, these friends complete their schooling and begin new chapters in their lives – Adrian goes to Cambridge on scholarship, Tony to Bristol, Colin to Sussex and Alex joins his father's business. Despite promises to keep in touch, at least through frequent mails, their busy lives result in widening chasms of distance.

Tony goes on to narrate his engagements with girlfriends, break-ups, patch-ups, marriages and divorce. He begins this chapter of his story by introducing Veronica Ford, his first girlfriend. His visit to her family, makes him aware of a patriarchal set-up, with her father being "heavy-footed and heavy-handed" and her brother a "self-appointed judge" who tend to dominate Veronica and her mother. After a few months, when the friends decide to meet again, they get to meet Veronica. But this meeting proves tragic for Tony because his girlfriend Veronica and Adrian get attracted to each other. Tony receives a letter from Adrian informing him of the same and Tony and Veronica's relationship breaks up.

Tony moves on and hooks up with an American girl Annie and they spend three months together. Tony's mother's illness however brings him back home where he

receives news of Adrian's suicide in a letter from Alex. This shatters him and presents before him one more puzzle of life. He says:

Life is a gift bestowed without anyone asking for it; that the thinking person has a philosophical duty to examine both the nature of life and the conditions it comes with; and that is this person decides to renounce the gift no one asks for, it is a moral and human duty to act on the consequences of that decision. (p. 48)

After a year, when Colin, Alex and Tony meet again, he tells his friends about his marriage with Margaret, and her subsequent walking out of his life. She had agreed to share their daughter Susie's custody. He tells them of Margaret marrying one of her friends but when he leaves her, she wanted to reunite with Tony. He talks of denying the proposal discovering his enjoyment of his habitual solitude and taking responsibility as a single parent. After retirement, he starts serving patients in a hospital and then finds meaning to the life.

The second part of the book has fewer actions. It provides Tony with enough scope to contemplate and discover the true meaning of life; most of the time hidden in wrong assumptions and misjudgments. It is more about accepting importance and power of Time as Tony says, "...time first grounds us and then confounds us." (p. 93) The author tries to show the infinite power of Time over Life. He also alerts the reader to the fact of life that if the value of Time is not understood, the mystery of its pace and progress will never be completely grasped. Tony then finds peace in getting engaged with the younger generation of his daughter Susie and her kids. Tony learns new emotions and discovers the truth of life with newer experiences.

Settled into a daily mundane existence, Tony is startled by one more challenge that life presents to him. He receives a solicitor's letter announcing him as the sole legal inheritor to Mrs. Ford's (Veronica's mother) estate worth 500 pounds. Tony remembers Mrs. Sarah as a woman who was "patronised by her husband, loftily scrutinised by her son, and manipulated by her daughter." (p. 64)

Mrs. Ford had mentioned in the letter that in nominating Tony as an inheritor, she is being purgative on behalf of her family's (husband, son and daughter) ill treatment towards him. The letter fills his life with turmoil. Tony takes the opportunity to re-read the letters that he had written to Veronica. He finds himself bitter to Veronica and Adrian. It pains him even more when he comes across a letter of Veronica telling him the story of her life – her drunken father's death from cancer, her mother's struggle as a single parent, her smoking addiction followed by a painful death. It fills Tony with remorse. With the intention of getting rid of his growing guilt, he phones Veronica, asks for her pardon and both of them decide to meet. Tony shares his life story with her, about his marriage with Margaret, Susie's birth, his divorce, being a single parent to Susie and a grandpa to her children. Veronica however, does not talk much about her life. Tony's belief of having suppressed memories of Veronica for forty years is a mere "figment of his imagination" according to Veronica. She also finds this thought repugnant and only oriented towards earning sympathy of the listener. Veronica appears much

more realistic to Tony in dealing with relations. But sentimental and judgmental Tony says:

I thought I could overcome contempt and turn remorse back into guilt, then be forgiven. I had been tempted, somehow, by the notion that we could excise most of our separate existences, could cut and splice the magnetic tape on which our lives are recorded, go back to that fork in the path and take the road less travelled, or rather not travelled at all. Instead, I had just left commonsense behind. Old fool, I said to myself.... no, I was an odder old fool, grafting pathetic hopes of affection on to the least likely recipient in the world. (p. 131)

In old age, when Veronica and Margaret have already walked out of his life and Susie is busy, Tony engages himself mostly with visits to malls and pubs. On one such visit, he meets a man whom he later recognizes as Adrian and Veronica's son. Tony is aghast as he tries to gauge Veronica's pain as a single parent to this child. Now, he blames Adrian "who had got his girlfriend pregnant, been unable to face the consequences and had 'taken the easy way out' (p. 140). This remorse strangely reminds him of Robson's suicide, whose girlfriend also might have suffered social injustice, and maybe had also given birth to a child that she had probably raised single handedly. Tony is aggrieved at the thought that Robson may also have committed suicide after making his girlfriend pregnant. Tony's mind gets crowded with apologies not only for Veronica and her son but also for Robson's girlfriend and her child, i any.

These many revelations demystify Tony's understanding of Life. He comes to the realisation that Life is totally under the control of Time. These revelations clear all his doubts, sentiments, judgements, apprehensions, assumptions and help him explore a new meaning to life. He utters in his mind:

What did I know of life, I who had lived so carefully? Who had neither won nor lost, but just let life happened to him? Who had the usual ambitions and settled all too quickly for them not being realized? Who avoided being hurt and called it a capacity for survival?...One whose self rebukes never really inflicted pain?...I endured a special kind of remorse: a hurt inflicted at long last on one who always thought he knew how to avoid being hurt-and inflicted for precisely that reason. (p. 142)

This monologue is followed by him writing a letter of apology to Veronica and her son and wishing them good luck. Having expressed these cauldrons of boiling emotions, he finds himself settled again. He tries to resettle back into his life and its daily routine with his daughter Susie and her children. But Tony's respite is momentary as he comes to know that Veronica died before receiving any of his letters. He is overwhelmed with dejection and the thought of Veronica's children only deepens his guilt further.

The book ends with these remorseful lines by Tony, "There is accumulation. There is responsibility. And beyond, these, there is unrest. There is great unrest." (p. 150)

Analytical Approach

The author wins our philosophical vote for proving that ‘Time’ either missed or misjudged may fill one’s life with nothing but remorse. The layers of revelations about Veronica’s lifelong struggle as a widow and a single parent to two kids leaves Tony shattered. Tony feels helpless for not being able to unburden himself of the guilt of misjudgments about Veronica’s relation with Adrian. Adrian committed suicide leaving Veronica pregnant and Veronica died leaving a young daughter and a disabled adult son. Tony says:

The fact that the young me who cursed Veronica [to have a child] and the old me who witnessed the curse’s outcome [her child is disabled] had quite different feelings – this was monstrously irrelevant... Time’s revenge on the innocent foetus. I thought of that poor, damaged man...[avoiding] my presence...I was a man against whom backs should be turned. If life did reward merit, then I deserved shunning. (pp. 138-39)

Tony seems to be waiting for some general law that can punish him, give him retribution for what he perceives as his crimes. He desperately needs some spiritual associations that can lessen the heaviness of the guilt that he is enveloped in. His heart is filled with guilt and remorse. He is bemused to find the discrepancies between his triumphs and turmoil, trials and tribulations, knowledge, experiences and achievements, pre-defined judgements and the striking revelations. As he said once:

And that’s a life, isn’t it? Some achievements and some disappointments.... “He survived to tell the tale” – that’s what people say, don’t they? History isn’t the lies of the victors....It’s more the memories of the survivors, most of whom are neither victorious nor defeated. (p. 56)

The trio of Tony, Veronica and Adrian gives the reader a chance to gain an insight into human nature. Barnes presents a group of young friends, their abrupt decisions, misjudgements and the eventual inability to solve their puzzled life. The axiom by the 18th century British poet, “Proper study of mankind is man” holds true when a drastic change is noticed in Tony’s thinking and evaluation patterns. Adrian’s suicide, Tony’s remorse and Veronica’s struggle as a single parent to two kids prove what Tony says in the beginning:

We live in time – it holds us and moulds us...Is there anything more plausible than a second hand? And yet it takes only the smallest pleasure or pain to teach us time’s malleability. Some emotions speed it up, others slow it down; occasionally, it seems to go missing – until the eventual point when it really does go missing, never to return. (p. 3)

But, reality is less depressing than illusion irrespective of whether it brings reward or penalty. That is a secondary matter. It is relieving, refreshing and cathartic. A normal human being would not like to live a life full of fallacies. Confession holds its own therapeutic importance. Hamlet could not kill Claudius without proper knowledge,

Lady Macbeth could not sustain “the smell of blood” and had to confess “all the perfumes of Arabia will not sweeten this little hand” (Macbeth: Act 5 scene 1). These kinds of confessions demand a brave heart and a strong mind.

Narrative Technique

The book has a first person narration by Tony Webster. The author successfully portrays the narrator-protagonist’s limited self and reflexive self; his imaginative and real worlds. The author shows how the reflexive self filters the emotions of the limited self and eventually prepares the limited self to accept the truth of life. The author’s schematic element of dividing the book into two parts bears a metaphorical significance in showing transformation of a narrow mind into a broader, much more reflexive one.

The opening portion of the book unfolds in the backdrop of London of the 1960s. It introduces the protagonist-narrator Tony Webster, as an intellectually arrogant and carefree person in his young age with a casual approach towards life. The second portion of the book is a little longer and portrays Tony as being reflective towards whatever he did in his young age. The author describes how disillusionment and hurt becomes instrumental in developing self-reflexivity in Tony.

The first part narrates the action in motion and the second part narrates Tony’s reflections on the same actions. The first part provides us a chance only to know what Tony and his friends are involved in their youth. But in the later part, Tony starts giving a summation and his reflection on the summation of his assumptions, miscalculations, misjudgments and misconceptions about Life and Time. It is in the later part that Tony is found surrounded by remorse and regret.

Character Sketches

A closer scrutiny of the life-stories of Tony, Veronica and Adrian shows that all three of them are courageous and act in accordance to their minds and hearts. They respect the flow of Life and remain loyal to their emotions.

Veronica is straightforward, clear, committed and consistent in relationships. When she was with Tony, she tried her best to understand him, gave him enough scope to understand her but some unbridgeable gap developed and with the entry of Adrian in her life she decided to walk out of Tony’s. She stayed committed to Adrian, despite his suicide and the gamut of eventual problems in her life, raised a son with disability and a daughter single handedly. Her first child’s mental illness did not discourage her. She took enough care of him, and still became a mother a second time around. Adrian committed suicide probably to escape these stifling responsibilities when both these children were very young. In her later life, when she had a chance to meet Tony, she again gave him time to understand her but finding a lack of compatibility, walked away.

She is loyal to her emotions. She accepts her relations with Adrian and tells Tony about her discomfiture with him. Once she accepts the relation with Adrian, she is

loyal to it, even after Adrian's death. She is more balanced in her role of a mother. She does not allow any situation to take control of her. She balances herself in happiness and miseries. She is bound to her children throughout her life. She has the courage to accept the reality of life.

Adrian, the most shy among all of his friends, falls in love with Veronica and courageously expresses his emotions before both of them. His suicide which is not substantiated by the author with any ocular reason, leads us to roam around the facts that his compatibility with Veronica may not have been strong, or maybe that he may not have been relieved of the stress that his mother's walking out of his life had put him in. Or may be that his feeling of guilt of developing relations with his friend, Tony's girlfriend may have been eating away at him. Or, the worst assumption could be that he was afraid of being abandoned by Veronica the way his mother had abandoned him. In any of these cases, Adrian would wish to unburden himself and not finding any way out, committed suicide.

Tony faces more unsympathetic challenges from life. His is a dignified, loyal and humble character. He respects every relation he is involved in. He respects Veronica and Adrian's relations. He maintains distance. He could have approached her after Adrian's suicide, won her sympathy and also could have re-tied the torn cord of friendship. Not only this, he approaches her later in his life when he comes to know that she has raised a disabled child single handedly. When they meet, Veronica again decides to live alone and he writes letters of apologies to her. It shocks him to learn of her demise and the fact that she had not read any of his letters of remorse. He is almost devastated when he comes to know that Veronica had also left a daughter behind her. Tony's guilt stricken soul is full of remorse. He is by far the worst affected character by the mysteries of Life and Time.

On a deeper note it may be said that Veronica was more realistic than Tony and Adrian. She mindfully took a call of her heart, balanced herself in misery and happiness and gave a tough fight to all the adverse situations that she faced.

Conclusion

Julian Barnes, the twentieth century writer, presents a psychoanalytical study of the stages of life and the consequential maturity that comes with age. Tony Webster is baffled by the roles of Life and Time. It is in his old age that he is left only with remorse and regret. Marcel Proust, the 21st century French Novelist, is true in stating his belief:

We are all 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 have lost, the paradises of memory. For we can never see imaginatively anything we already possess. (Lucas 1951: 249)

Something that Tony and Adrian could not see in Veronica was the fact that she was a realist. It is only after losing all his friends, knowing about the struggles of Veronica's life, and comparing his beliefs with the actual reality, that Tony is regretful. He learns to respect Life and Time in the twilight of his life. The irony of Life today is well presented in a poem quoted by Sir John Davis.

We seek to know the moving of each sphere,
And the strange cause of th'ebb and flow of Nile;
But of that clock within our breast we bear,
The subtle motions we forget the while.

We that acquaint ourselves with every zone,
And pass both tropics and behold the poles,
When we come home, are to ourselves unknown,
And unacquainted still with our own souls. (Lucas: 18)

The Sense of an Ending successfully shows how self-reflexivity demystifies self-obsession and helps justify the sense of loss or being deprived of the expected result from Life. Self-reflexive approach explores Life beyond the self-established codes of justifications.

Notes

1. Julian Barnes, *The Sense of an Ending*, Jonathan Cape (UK) and Alfred A Knopf (US), 2011.
2. W. Shakespeare, *Macbeth*, ed., A.R. Braunmuller Cambridge University Press (India), 2008.
3. F.L. Lucas, *Literature and Psychology*, London: Cassell & Company Ltd., 1951.