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***A hero-less (hi)story in Julian Barnes's *The Sense of an Ending****

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Plan/ Synopsis

Role of an individual as dialectical entity

Role or the havoc that souvenirs play in the interpretation of events

Agency to characters who are otherwise marginal, voiceless

Many post-Colonial writers like Achille Mbembe and Chinua Achebe have posited a new scholarship on history and memoir emanating from French and British Colonies. They have underlined the importance of the discourse of indigenous people- as opposed to that of colonial writers or historians who had wielded power over discourse for a long period. Even though fractured and sometimes inscrutable, the stories coming from the indigenous people have often resulted in the creation of reality that was missing in the otherwise powerful colonial discourse; it has, moreover, blurred the lines between personal and collective histories.

I am under no illusion that Julian Barnes's book is a post-Colonial novel, but its methodology can help to underline and locate some of the discrepancies in the past discourses and question the authority of historical writings by providing a counterpoint to it.

*The Sense of an Ending* was published in 2011. With this novel, Julian Barnes continues with his literary obsession with history- primarily with his obsession of messing up with history- and historical fiction that dates back to the publication of *A History of the World in 10 ½ chapters* in 1989, and *Flaubert's Parrot* in 1984. This novel- rather a *Nouvella* according to James Dalrymple<sup>1</sup>- is a fictional autobiography of Tony Webster, a sexagenarian who narrates the tale as an intradiegetic narrator. What makes it fictional? going by the definition of Phillipe LeJeune 'Recit retrospectif en prose qu'une personne réelle fait de sa propre existence, lorsqu'elle met l'accent sur sa vie individuelle, en particulier sur l'histoire de sa personnalité' (14, Lejeune, 1975). The definition, otherwise meant to investigate into real life stories, applies to *the Sense of an Ending* as well- right from the concept of retrospective narratives to the story of an individual's personality- except for the fact that Tony Webster is a cog in a wheel-fictional-narrator of this book, who has never existed. The narrator probes his own life, by analyzing his thoughts at the moment, by interpreting or re-interpreting the events that happened with him in front of his reader, thereby taking the autobiographical genre head-on, especially when he enters into the Augustinian and Rousseau's realm of guilt and repentance; of having discarded people in a past life, when he was a teenager at school, and when he was an adolescent at college. With this book, Julian Barnes diverts his quests towards a new style of writing, yet remaining strictly within the perimeters of fiction writing, as the American writer Jay McInerney says about Barnes, ' He reinvents the wheel [rather than] turning out a familiar product [every time he writes]' (2, Merritt Moseley, 1997).

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<sup>1</sup> This remark was made during the conference itself that there was an ambiguity about this work, especially due to its length (150 pages).

*The Sense of an ending* could also be read as narrator's take on the modern European history, a history whose study involves witnessing evolution through generational gaps between what the narrator has lived and what the present generation is living in terms of social evolution. The ambiguous nature of historical interpretation is highlighted in various ways: 'one line of thought according to which all you can truly say of any historical event is [...] something happened' (5, Barnes, 2011). History is thereby deliberately deprived of any megalomania in order to experiment with the idea of eliminating the centrality of any historical event, and rather positing the idea that history is like a lock with multiple combinations. It goes beyond any single narrative or person, or a historical character, and the discourse on 'history' goes beyond being historical or a-historical, it focuses on the vulnerability of the interpretation, or the lack of it, of any past event, personal or public.

And when it comes to the notion of democratic apparatuses in the book, it primarily operates on the level of placement of the characters in Webster's very own story; he is just as important as any other character and the vice-versa. From a very semantic point of view, he represents that particular event or character in history which is not supposed to be central; which remains marginal for the same reason as Tony Webster; to be a cog in the story, and not the wheel in itself.

The novel consequently becomes a ground for clash of varying perspectives on the notion of memory, and by extension, memoir. Those very perspectives are tested by raising doubts on their validity through a very personal and banal history. Thereby creating a doubt on historical discourses, which, as the narratives insinuate in the novel should be a democratic process involving victims, 'History is [mostly] written by the victors', or as Primo Lévi implied in his *Les Naufragés et les Rescapés* (Lévi 1989), the survivors, or as Achille Mbembe underlines in his book, *On the Postcolony* (Mbembe, 2001), 'the nature of historical truth in colonies has evolved thanks to the witness accounts that have provided a counter point to the prevailing colonial discourse'. By delineating this thorny issue of memory in relation to the beholder of the memory, Tony Webster manages to problematize the centrality of a dominant memory to the detriment of other 'marginal' memories.

This presentation makes an attempt to study the role of an individual as dialectical entity, having the capacity to reflect over the power structures like official history. This will also require an inquiry into the role or the havoc that souvenirs play in the interpretation of events, as a result maintaining tension between reality and imagination(s), which will bring us to underline the inclusive nature of this novel that provides agency to characters that are

otherwise marginal, voiceless, almost invisible except for the monologues and duologues of Tony Webster, and yet, paradoxically, very much perceptible due to this very reason.

#### Role of an individual as dialectical entity

Tony Webster introduces the book with this expression ‘I remember, in no particular order:’ And then he simply enumerates an act of masturbation of which, he was allegedly the author. A highly realistic description laced with some nonsensical reference to romantic poetry, ‘steam rising from a wet sink [...] another river broad and grey’ (3, Barnes, 2011). Rancière writes ‘l’objet banal dans une ambiance prouve sa réalité par le fait même qu’il ne sert à rien, et donc personne n’a eu de raison de l’inventer’ (19, Rancière, 2014). Webster’s sink thereby serves no other purpose but to underpin the hyper-reality of this otherwise ambiguous project. The narrator then defines time in his own way; ‘No, I mean ordinary, everyday time, which clocks and watches assure us passes regularly: tick-tock, click-clock’. The use of onomatopoeia reaffirms the banality of a romanticized viewpoint of time, and thereby a more pragmatic approach towards it. Time does not perpetrate any wounds or heal any trauma either; not at least for the protagonist-narrator, it just lets the event happen and lets the narrator narrate them to us.

Webster’s younger self belongs to the 1960’s. And that is where the story of his life begins. He has three more friends who get to speak from time to time in this otherwise monologist narration. His presence at the centre of narrativity- his own narrativity- does not however demean the magnitude of the other historical events that surround his discourse: The England of 60’s lurching between a sense of morality and emancipation that was also Micheal Houlebecque’s concern regarding France in his *Les Particules Elementaires* and in *Extension du domaine de la lutte* published much before this book: ‘the more you liked a girl, and the better matched you were, the less your chance of sex, it seemed. [...] You may say, But wasn’t this the Sixties? Yes, but only for some people, only in certain parts of the country’. A reflection on the society through a lens of hyper-subjectivity stemming from the reading of ‘high literature’ and due to the disconnect from the reality: ‘Look at our parents, were they the stuff of literature? At best, they might aspire to the condition of onlookers and bystanders’.

Tony Webster is the offspring of these bystanders and is narrating their stories to a larger audience, thereby refusing to just remain onlookers. Rancière considers this phenomenon as the age of ‘marginaux’ (21, Rancière, 2007); Andy Warhol calls it ‘15[0 pages] minutes of fame’. Webster openly accepts his role of a marginal character as in spite of the

fact that the story relies heavily on his narratives, the other characters take an equally important role; this idea will be dealt with in the last part of this article.

Tony Webster's marginality also resides in his manner of playing the role of 'an onlooker', he laughs at other's jokes and ends up making a fool of himself: 'Was he [his girlfriend's brother] the one who was younger than your father?' (31, Barnes, 2011). In Tony's opinion, this was supposed to be a good joke but it left his girlfriend dry who would otherwise easily giggle on others' jokes too. His biggest failing as a hero results from the fact that his idea of a love life was inspired from Shakespearian readings. 'We knew from our reading of great literature that Love involved Suffering, and would happily have got some practice at Suffering if there was an implicit, perhaps even logical, promise that Love might be on its way'(9, Barnes, 2011).

He deliberately keeps the 'L' in the uppercase, making it an inaccessible proper noun; a sort of a biblical god who is also addressed in capital, even in the third person; a deity that allegedly exists but inaccessible either due to its abstract nature or its absence. Tony Webster hypothesizes a clear demarcation between high literature and stark realism of 60's Britain, and of his own life which may only be as novel worthy as Albert Camus' Mersault in *L'étranger*. His pondering over love and his fear that 'Life wouldn't turn out to be like literature' metaphorically reveal a vision of life that was in direct contradiction to the fragile day to day reality; a reality that differed from people to people.

A similar treatment is reserved for history. Webster and his friends dramatize the notion of history by continuously harping on the adage, and perhaps the wisdom of that epoch, 'History is written by the victors', a factual error in form of a quote attributed to Winston Churchill, to which many post-colonial writers like Arundhati Roy, or Achille Mbembe would not agree as history has also entered into the realm of victims, or rather survivors. This remark fortunately made during their teens and not at the age of conscience, however somehow focuses more on the fact of 'writing' history, rather than creating it. And thereby, it is no more history we are dealing with but with the discourse that accompanies it.

On the other hand, Adrian Finn, the future-Cambridge scholar in their school group has a radically different take on history, which probably explains how it was written in the first place; he therefore conceives a more pragmatic notion of history: 'History is that certainty produced at the point where the imperfections of memory meet the inadequacies of documentation' (17, Barnes, 2011). Finn disguises his own viewpoint by attributing this quote to a French historian, Patrick Lagrange. This strategy is meant to put more weight on his own quotation, unadulterated, yet in need of a theoretical background, even if it is a fake one. And

it works, mainly for the reason that the historian is French, and on a very dialectical note, it is 60's, and we are dealing with decolonization(s) and the post-cracking of a civilizational fabric, due to Fascism and Nazism, a fabric of which Europe was very proud of.

Julian Barnes's characters made an attempt to get out of a vacuum that was the result of historical discourses that were exclusive in nature; they are deconstructing, in spite of their naivety, the theoretical barriers that could have resulted in a homogeneous reading of history, or of history becoming the sole prerogative of historians and academics; for them memory plugs the hole that history cannot, or at least cannot in the absence of documentation.

Role or the havoc that souvenirs play in the interpretation of events

In her book on Julian Barnes, *l'Art du mélange*, Vanessa Guignery highlights the Postmodernist nature of Barnes's work : 'marqué non seulement par une remise en cause de des récits traditionnels et des notions de linéarité, de cohérence et de mimétisme[...]' (8, Guignery, 2001). This book was published almost a decade before *The Sense of an Ending*, and mainly focuses on analyzing *Flaubert's Parrot* (Barnes, 2008) by the same author. And yet, the notion of putting into question the notion of linearity remains central to this novel as well.

The narration starts somewhere towards his retirement on page 1, and it ends on page number 150, a very small novel, but the plot doesn't wind up, 'la fiction nouvelle est sans fin' (9, Rancière, 2014), it cannot end and it firmly maintains the ambiguity between an autobiography and fiction through a first person narrative, and even though those 150 pages formally declare the end of the book, the ambiguity becomes, by then, a fixture; the reader has been confronted with Webster's interpretation of the event, or the lack of it. Rancière's take on the modern fiction also symbolize an unending process as the book deliberately leaves many questions unanswered for the reader to ponder over, and to connect the dots.

To this notion adds up the questioning of centrality of memory; of a credible memory: Tony Webster's digging into the past almost always ends up with 'Still, it is my best memory of their exchange (19, Barnes, 2011). That is, when he is pondering over his youth, and not being a philosopher. This is a subtle manner of putting into question a thought process that loses credibility with the lapse of time. This is also a way of questioning the Proustian wisdom and ease with memory. On a more democratic note, this is a way of attributing the quality of remembrance to every Tony Webster, a sheer Postmodernist approach of inflicting lucidity when it comes to applying the faculty of memoir writing on a larger writership; or a simpler way of positing the rationale: Who can write a memoir? This notion appears to be

highly pertinent when it comes to the postcolonial writings. 'La spécificité historique de la littérature ne tient pas à un état ou à un usage spécifique du langage. Elle tient à une nouvelle balance de ses pouvoirs, à une nouvelle manière dont il fait acte en donnant à voir et à entendre' (15, Rancière, 2007).

This quote highlights the pervasiveness of literature when it comes to the image of the writer. And in Tony Webster's words a memoir is mainly a 'fabrication' of mind, something a fictional autobiographer is saying, and something that has been done since the time of Rousseau, '[...] when we are young, we invent different futures for ourselves; when we are old, we invent different pasts for others' (80, Barnes, 2011). This notion of invention is central to memoir writing, and it becomes thereby central to this literature. And in *the Sense of an Ending* we find Tony Webster deconstructing the notion of memoir, making it more accessible to the writers by the very fact that credibility is not central to it, it can be fractured and especially when it comes to encapsulating the presence of others in one's life. Webster's existence in the book is a mixed bag of banal souvenirs, 'Her father drove a Humber Super Snipe' (80, Barnes, 2011), a remark which emphasizes a simple paradox. He remembers the banality of his past in minute details, whereas when it comes to remembering something more considerable, he has recourse to imagination or fabrication, without even realizing it.

Another central element to the book is the notion of multiplicity of memories; memory being not only the privilege of the central character, but also that of his friends, his ex-girlfriend etc... 'I imagined asking for their memories and their corroboration. But they were hardly central to the story; I didn't expect their memories to be better than mine' (108, Barnes, 2011). Tony Webster did not do it, he never went to 'Them' in order to corroborate anything, but he tacitly underlines the fact that there cannot be a souvenir more credible than the other, no matter the status of the character. Secondly, his very own credibility as the torchbearer of memoir requires a thorough investigation and understanding on the part of the reader: '[...] et les narrateurs-historiens n'hésitent pas à faire partager au lecteur leurs difficultés à rendre compte du passé et leurs interrogations sur le statut volatile de toute connaissance' (9, Guignery, 2001).

This is the point where we come across Julian Barnes the author making visible his invisible presence through a discourse on the Western notion of memoir: 'Mental states can be inferred from actions' (44, Barnes, 2011), when it comes to History, and 'you can infer past actions from current mental states' (44, Barnes, 2011), when it came to private life. And yet, we understand that a memoir constitutes both history and private life, even though the former has more weightage in it.



Thus, Webster's monologues as well as his 'Duologues' (19, Guignery, 2001)- the fact that he also knits his conversation with his friends and his girlfriend in the past- have a role to play less in digging his own past but, by deliberately creating a sense of ambiguity, he makes the reader participate in his memory gaps, as a matter of fact, the reader is left to his own devices to believe him or just wait for others to corroborate his version. This process involving a direct contribution of the reader even within the premises of the personal life of the narrator-protagonist aptly revives "La mort de l'auteur" by Roland Barthes, who was of the opinion, in 1967, that the author is no more the creator of a work, the baton has been passed on to the reader who does not only consume but also produces a reading that involves his/her own interpretation.

Agency to characters who are otherwise marginal, voiceless

In his book *Politique de la littérature*, Jacques Rancière, puts forward the idea that a literary democracy is also rooted in the idea of obliterating a certain notion of hierarchy among words, which eventually leads to the same action when it comes to 'Sujets Nobles et sujet vils [...]' (17, Rancière, 2007). For Julian Barnes words play a similar role, his college pass out characters never make an attempt to transcribe a discussion with any refined form of language. Even if the narrator-protagonist has the monopoly and agency over his past, he, not at any point, makes his reader conscious of any complexity that a language can attain: 'Pee in there in the night if you want to [...] I couldn't tell if he was being all matily male, or treating me as lower class-scum'. He transcribes the past dialogues the way he imagines he had heard them.

Another peculiarity of our anti-hero, or the non-hero is that his existence is immaterial to the progress of the novel. In spite of the intradiegetic nature of his narration, he lacks omnipresence, which entails to a certain extent some important event taking place beyond his realm, and to add to his torment, he usually discovers some important events at the same time as the reader- for instance the tragic death of his friend, his ex's father's and mother's-lacking the privileges of an omnipresent narrator, and thereby being inclusive, involving the reader in his quest, thereby making the whole structure of his memoir more democratic.

Our narrator-hero thereby never gets a prerogative of his own. And yet, he surfaces as protagonist precisely as Jacques Rancière implies in his *Le fil Perdu* (26, Rancière, 2014) 'n'importe qui désormais peut éprouver n'importe quel sentiment.' This strategy adopted by the writer in the creation of this character recreates the modern fiction, a genre that could eventually operate even without a credible narrator, a real *n'importe qui*. Rancière's take on

the question of sentiments and its democratic nature in the modern fiction furthermore advocates proper division of expressions and feeling among various characters, instead of a trickledown effect as it used to be the case in 'high literature'. Tony Webster's sentiments are therefore not of paramount interest in his own tale. He needs to deal with those of people surrounding him as well.

This sense of unsteadiness of the principal character is also relevant to the distribution of roles; Tony Webster is certainly not a Noble, and we also see a deliberate attempt, on the part of the writer, to deprive him of the prerogative to be the hero of his own story. His friend, Adrian Finn commits suicide at the prime of his youth and meets a tragic end in the story. The revelation of this death right in the middle of the plot seizes the crown from Webster and the reader remains transfixed to the cause of this death till the end of the book.

The theatrical tragedy belongs to Adrian Finn, even if he is mentioned on some rare occasions in the novel, his diegetic presence keeps haunting the tale, Tony Webster acknowledges this reality by stating that '[...] the novel was about character developed over time[...] whose life so far contained anything novel-worthy was Adrian' (15, Barnes, 2011). This is a highly self-referential remark, in the wake of Webster's consciousness that his own life would have been unworthy of any classic literature. Webster's definition of literature stems from a reading of pre-60's era, 'literature was all about heroes and villains, guilt and morality [...] or [even] theoretical or lachrymously autobiographical' (15, Barnes, 2011). And he unconsciously performs a repair of this phenomenon by not being at the centre of anything but the narration.

Adrian Finn, Tony's wife and girlfriend possess their own agency and manage to easily dethrone Tony as the main character. The novel does not delimit at any point of time or narration the supremacy of Tony, as discussed previously; even his monologues are duologues, which question the notion of individuality in terms of autobiographical writings. The bioç, or at least the narrative bioç, are a creation of multiple events and characters. Tony's life is thereby a microcosm of that individuality that loses all sense of dialectic inside a vacuum. His control over his own life is far less complete than he can think of. His opinion that his parents' life was that of just onlookers and Adrian's life was worthy of a novel tacitly puts him somewhere in between, a little bit more tilted towards his own parents' life than towards Adrian's.

Ironically, he still remains the narrator, not the same narrator as that of *The Great Gatsby*, Nick, who is attributed the mission of narrating somebody's life, and neither the narrator of Jeanette Winterson's *Why be happy when you can be normal?* (2011), in which

Winterson never loses the sight of her own life as compared to Tony Websters, the fictional autobiographer, who relies on others' presence for his life to carry some meaning. The dichotomy proposed by Rancière 'Les rois devaient parler en rois et les gens du commun en gens du commun' (18, Rancière, 2007), vanishes from the novel, as the 'secondary' characters have the same kind of eventful life, if not more, as the protagonist narrator.

And yet, we are listening to Tony Webster, and not to Adrian Finn or any of the secondary characters: 'chacun peut reprendre à son compte, soit pour s'appropriier la vie des héros... soit pour se faire écrivain soi-même' (21, Rancière, 2007). The strength of the whole narrative strategy thereby lies in the fact that Tony Webster is Rancière's 'gens du commun', and it is the same gens du commun that permeates the high culture inside a novel that has a promising historical beginning, and appears to be in the same lineage as Barnes's *A History of the World in 10 ½ chapters*, and it ends up as a personal tale of travail issues ranging from emotional breakups to family feuds, as the narrator has aptly pointed out in one of the passages "Birth, and copulation and Death" (6, Barnes, 2011), as if preparing the incipit for the novel, and positing the fact that it would not be a 'high literature' dominated by Shakespearean Caesars and Othellos and their problems related to running a realm. Webster's little skirmishes with his girlfriend and his conjugal life have nothing extraordinary; even his divorce was 'peaceful' in his own word, he keeps meeting his ex-wife for lunch and minds his grand-children during weekends. A regular guy! And yet, this very banal existence of the narrator puts him apart, makes him peculiar; he can narrate and analyze his own self and corroborate memories of different people in order to construct a collective memory.

The cinematographic interpretation of this novel that was released in 2017 and was given the same title posits this work in the open ended debate on Brexit. The movie ends with the birth of Webster's grandchild- in the novel she had existed throughout the latter's narrations. One can also hear the talks on Brexit on a radio playing in the background in the beginning of the movie. The movie is made by Ritesh Batra, a moviemaker who originates from India and is currently based in England. The child's birth towards the end of the movie is a deliberate attempt to allegorize Brexit and to underline the point that some artists emanating from the Commonwealth do not perceive Brexit through the European prism. It symbolizes a new beginning for those Commonwealth writers for whom the post-Brexit-referendum is a new phase to negotiate with, which is not essentially a negative one.

To conclude, I want to add that this highly fictionalized tale of human life revives the memory of arguments put forward by Michael Rothberg in 2009, in his book, *Multidirectional Memory, Remembering the Holocaust in the age of Decolonization*. He was answering to an

accusation that the Holocaust memory has swallowed other histories in Europe, mainly that of Colonization and Slavery; Rothberg's take on this argument was that 'ongoing processes of decolonization and movements for civil rights in the Caribbean, Africa, Europe, the United States, and elsewhere unexpectedly galvanized memory of the Holocaust'. As a result, instead of memories competing with each other, they provide a pedestal to each other in order to ferment as collective memories. Rothberg's viewpoint on history and memory by this means somehow becomes a macrocosm for Julian Barnes's fictional narratives on clashing memories.

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