

Vol II Issue II Dec 2012I

ISSN No : 2249-894X

*Monthly Multidisciplinary
Research Journal*

*Review Of
Research Journal*

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RNI MAHMUL/2011/38595

ISSN No.2249-894X

Review Of Research Journal is a multidisciplinary research journal, published monthly in English, Hindi & Marathi Language. All research papers submitted to the journal will be double - blind peer reviewed referred by members of the editorial Board readers will include investigator in universities, research institutes government and industry with research interest in the general subjects.

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SETTINGS IN THE NOVELS OF JULIAN BARNES

*(With Reference to Metroland Flaubert's Parrot, Staring at the Sun,
A History of the World in 10 ½ Chapters)*

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Abstract:

Julian Barnes as the contemporary British novelist of the era. He has proved himself to be one of the leading novelists of England and has been a prolific writer. He has produced ample literature and can produce more in future as he is a living writer.

KEYWORDS:

Settings, Contemporary, Literature, Philosophy.

INTRODUCTION

Life and Works :

Julian Barnes was born in Leicester, England's East midland, on January 19, 1946 in the family of a teacher. His father, Albert taught French at st. Clement Danes from 1937 onwards till his retirement in 1971. His mother, Keye, also taught French. His elder brother, Jonathan is now a Professor of Philosophy in Geneva.

He married Pat Kavanagh in 1979, and now lives with her in North London. Pat Kavanagh is a well known literary agent, and his marriage with her seems to be out of professional interest. However, he dedicated to her four of his novels. Besides, he has written under the pseudonym of Dan Kavanagh, four Duffy Novels. It seems that the pseudonym. Don Kavanagh, was derived from Pat Kavanagh, as there is apparent similarity between the two names. In a sense, their marriage was not fruitful as they are childless.

Julian Barnes was brought up in the family affectionately. During his childhood he sought education at city of London School which entailed an hour and a quarter each way by the train. He was in the contact with the other boys. He would play rugby and cricket.

His family was orthodox. So, during his school days he had to live almost exclusively within the family unit. He and his brother, Jonathan, developed a 'phobic reaction' to this orthodoxy. Julian Barnes comments about this,

"After my brother went to university he virtually never came home again". (Swanson. 1996:17).

His family belongs to typical middle class of London suburb. His life was devoid of sensational event. He inherited the culture of middle class family. For three generations, his family has been in the tradition of schoolmasters. The schoolmasterly attitude has been developed in all his personal and family details which were unsensational. Even in his speech he has been a quite prowling English drawl.

In his childhood his family moved to Northland in the North Western which is London suburb, while he was educated in city of school in London during 1957-1964. For that he commuted by train almost everyday. After his schooling, he joined Magdalene College, Oxford from which he graduated with honors in modern languages in 1968. He won a scholarship to study modern languages at Magdalene College, Oxford.

Title:SETTINGS IN THE NOVELS OF JULIAN BARNES

Source:Review of Research [2249-894X] GAJANAN N. KATKAR yr:2012 vol:2 iss:3

Thus, his family gave him education enough to enter the academic world culture of an Englishman and made him capable of smooth worldly dealings. The education proved to be the firm ground from where he has projected himself. During this period he has sought help from several persons with whom he has never been graceless. Nevertheless, he has not allowed them to over claim their help and obligation in launching him.

Julian Barnes has a brilliant career. While reading for graduation he served as an English teacher at a catholic school in Rennes in France during 1966 and 1967. After graduation, he appeared for civil service examination and was offered the government job of tax inspector that he declined. After graduation he studied Law and became barrister but he has never practiced law in the court. He explains it :

I took all the exams but I was getting more pleasure out of doing a round up of four novels for provincial paper than I was out of preparing what I might say defending some criminal. (Mosely, 1997:03)

It seems that he was attracted towards literary work in this phase. He joined in this phase the editorial staff of the Oxford English Dictionary that gave him opportunity to work as a lexicographer and enter the literary world. While working as a lexicographer between 1969 and 1972 he happened to meet several writers of his generation like Graig Raine, the poet, and Martin Amis, the novelist. He also shouldered the responsibility of reviewing books for the Times Literary Supplement in 1973.

Thus, he began his career as a journalist and he became the literary editor of the New Statesman, and New Review in 1979. In the same year he became deputy literary editor for the Sunday Times. In 1975, he began to write a column in the New Review using pseudonym of Edward Pygge. He had also been television critic of New Statesman and The Observer and written a restaurant column for the Tatler using as his pseudonym 'Basil Seal', the name of one of Evelyn Waugh's characters. As he was busy in freelance writing, Julian Barnes resigned from all these activities on his 40th birthday. This is not quite true, as he still writes reviews for various journals, including The New York Review of Books, and has been The New Yorker's London correspondent since 1990, writing about politics mostly, but also about the fatwa against Salman Rushdie.

As a novelist of ideas, he was also criticized for keeping the structure loose. Mr. Barnes has always been seen focusing on the form of the novel which is probably regarded as his aim of novel writing. According to him, a novelist should have an unmoving ambition and faith in the novel as a work be regarded as a source of inspiration to experiment different techniques in his novels.

Though he was labeled as Francophile, he has been English in analyzing scrupulously and skeptically his own country so that he may have less disappointment when something terrible happens. He loves beef-eating, English science, English uprightness and pragmatism and that is being English in the real sense. He has led the active life of 27 years in the field of writing and published ten mainstream novels, four crime novels under pseudonym of Dan Kavanagh, two collections of short stories, and a book of essays. Besides, he has been a TV critic and produced Television movies. He has also produced cinemas on three of his novels. Barnes is also a well known review and article writer who has commented on various subjects.

Mr. Barnes, who is a soggy story teller, has a scholarly attitude which pervades through all his works. As a keen Observer of the life around him, he never writes about the fields unless he thoroughly ventures them. The scope of Mr. Barnes' knowledge can be seen in his works as various branches of knowledge like History, Psychology, Philosophy and Science and they are seen to be handled with great skill in his novels. Common element in Barnes work is a sustained interest in serious ideas and willingness to engage them in his fictions, to call a work "a novel of ideas" is sometimes to imply a deadening book, a distinguished treatise, a forum for disembodied figures little more than authorial puppets to exchange the author's thoughts with each other for the reader's benefit. Julian Barnes never writes a book answering this description yet he does write novels of ideas. As a modern liberal thinker aware of complexity, he writes books richer in the exploration of serious ideas than in the delivery of finality and doctrinaire answers.

As a contemporary novelist, Julian Barnes has shown tremendous interest in handling various subjects from simple suburban life to overthrow of regime. Throughout his career he has had professional attitude with which he made no compromise.

Personally, Julian Barnes is a man of company and man of friends. He is a source of support and assistance both moral & financial to his family members and relatives. Though he is childless, he has proved to be a warm and good hearted uncle to his nieces in London.

Being a moralist, he thinks that a job of a novelist is to understand a wide variety of people & put them in situations where there isn't any necessarily an easy answer. At the same time he is of the view that any life has both sides good & ugly.

He has been writing novels in the postmodern vein canvassing his stories in multinational settings. However, France has been his favorite obsession as he owns a house in France & Gustav Flaubert of Madame Bovary, his favorite author.

France is Julian Barnes's obsession that haunts him in all of his works. He admits publicly that he

loves provincial France. Because of this, he is labeled as Francophile. His attitude to France is interesting as he has accepted France as his 'another country'. He explains his attraction for France as a country to romanticise and idealise against England, his motherland. He analyses England with coldness but he doesn't analyse France with the same attitude. He loves to spend a lot of time in France though he has no house of his own to live there. He loved France and author Gustav Flaubert, the writer of the classic novel, *Madame Bovary*.

Julian Barnes loves good quality in everything. He is very meticulous in dealing with messiness of life. His life seems to be highly academic but based on practical view.

As mentioned earlier, Julian Barnes is a living writer whose ten novels have been published until now. Julian Barnes wrote 10 mainstream novels. *Metroland* (1980). *Before She Met Me* (1982) *Flaubert's Parrot* (1984) *Staring at the Sun* (1986). *A History of the World in 10 ½ Chapters* (1989). *Talking It Over* (1991). *The Porcupine* (1992) *England, England* (1998) *Love Etc.* (2000) *Arthur & George* (2005).

In addition, to these ten mainstream novels, he has also written four detective novels centered around the central character. Duffy, however, for these novels Mr. Barnes has taken the pseudonym Dan Kavanagh.

There are Duffy (1980) *Fiddle City* (1981), *Putting the Boot In* (1985).

He has also written two collections of short stories entitled *Cross Channel* (1990) and *The Lemon Table* (2004).

In addition, there are three collections of essays based on his life in London.

They are *Letters from London*. (1990-95) *Something to Declare* (2002) *The Pedant in the Kitchen* (2003)

AWARDS AND PRIZES :

As a writer Julian Barnes has won number of awards in his career like Somerset Maugham Award for *Metroland* in 1981, Geoffrey Faber Memorial Prize for *Flaubert's Parrot* in 1985 and Austrian State Prize for European Literature in 2004.

Besides, he has also won the French Awards like Prix Medicis Award for *Flaubert's Parrot* in 1986, Gutenberg Prize in 1987, and Chevalier de l'Ordre des Arts et des lettres in 1988.

His versatility can be seen in his winning of the awards like Prix Femina Etranger Award for *Talking It Over* in 1992 and in 1995, he won Officer de l'Ordre des Arts et des lettres Award. He has also won the Italian Awards like Premio Grinzane Cavour for *Flaubert's Parrot* in 1988.

In this way, Mr. Barnes has been felicitated in his own country and abroad. His greatness can also be proved in his successful attempt to receive the awards and prizes like Shakespeare Prize (Germany) in 1993, Commonwealth Writer's Prize (Eurasia Region, Best Book) for *Arthur and George* in 2006 and E.M. Forster Award (American Academy of Arts and Letters) in 1986.

Though he has not received the prestigious Man Booker Prize until now but three of his novels were short-listed for it, this may be regarded as a proof of his writing genius.

SETTING : METROLAND

Setting plays a significant role in the novel. Being a contemporary novelist, Mr. Barnes has used multinational setting in *Metroland* as the novel is about bourgeois in the English middle class. The novel sets in one of the suburbs of London called *Metroland* and Paris. Part I *Metroland*, 1963 is about the adolescent age of the protagonist, so there are the description about the adolescent excitement and curiosity about the unknown world. It is relevant to the theme of the novel.

I was lent a flat up in Buttes-Chaumont (the clanking 7 – bis metroline : Bolivar, Buttes – Chaumont, Botzaris) by a friend-of-a friend. It was an airy, slightly derelict studio-bedroom with a creaky French floor and a fruit machine in the corner which worked off a supply of old francs kept on a shelf. (16)

Part II Paris takes place in Paris, the setting for this part provides the feel of Paris as French quotation and phrases have been used consistently. This part is about the youth and romance of the protagonist, Paris is considered as a place of love and romance. The setting of this part helps the content of the novel.

There is for instance, France, as both a place and a psychological influence on the English. The protagonist not only goes to France in 1968 but even earlier, as an ordinary teenager living in *Metroland*, habitually uses French culture as an index of the short comings of suburban London. (Mosley : 18)

Part III, *Metroland II* again brings back the setting to *Metroland*. The difference is of time and not the place as the psychological development of the protagonist can be seen in this part as compared to part I.

The tone is an inevitable part of setting. *Metroland* is a novel about the development of a man who looks back at his past. The tone of a wiser man, without any mockery, has been used in the novel. The tone of the novel is assured and charming. Always acute about language, Barnes depicts a protagonist who is himself precociously verbal.

Like *Metroland*, the setting of urban life has been used for *Before She Met Me*, most of the action takes place in London of late seventies. There is consistent accuracy in the descriptions of the places in then London. There are also minute descriptions of the action of the characters which are brilliantly relevant to the story.

The narrator explains :

Barbara went away. Graham finished packing his clothes, his razor, a photograph of his parents, one of his daughter, then started to close the case. It was only half-full. All that he wanted was less than a caseload. He felt exhilarated at the discovery, lightened by it. He had once read a biography of Aldous Huxley, and remembered being puzzled by the writer's behaviour when his house in Hollywood was burnt down. (17)

The novel is a psychological thriller; most of the action takes place in the mindset of the protagonist. It plays a significant role in the provision of the setting to the novel.

Before She Met Me has been written in an amusing manner, there are number of humourous situations in the novel, but the murder of Jack Lupton and suicide of Graham make the comedy dark one.

SETTING : FLAUBERT'S PARROT

Like the previous two novels, *Flaubert's Parrot* also has the setting covering England and France. Gustave Flaubert is a significant French writer and *Flaubert's Parrot* has been used symbolically to view the life of the French novelist. The protagonist, Braithwaite, is curious to trace the authenticity of three of the stuffed parrots he comes across during his trip to France. In this expertise, the places he visits have been described so minutely to provide appropriate setting for the novel.

Dieu I, was admitted by a gaunt, fidgety gardien whose white coat puzzled me. He wasn't a doctor, a pharmacien or a cricket umpire. White coats imply antisepsis and clean judgement. Why should a museum caretaker wear one – to protect Gustave's childhood from germs? He explained that the museum was devoted partly to medical history, then hurried me round, locking the doors behind us with noisy efficiency. (6)

Flaubert's Parrot contends with the other two stories apart from the one about Flaubert. One of the stories is about Braithwaite's wife, while the other is about Braithwaite himself. These stories take place in from of the recollections. For these two stories, the psychoanalytical views of the protagonist provide setting.

As mentioned earlier, the protagonist, Braithwaite, tries to prove the authenticity of the *Flaubert's Parrot*. He remains curious throughout the novel, so the tone of the novel is also curiously funny to match the story and setting of the novel.

SETTING : STARING AT THE SUN

Staring at the Sun has been written in conventional format as compared to *Flaubert's Parrot*. It is also written from a woman's point of view covering the period of almost hundred years. Though the novel was written in 1986, the story moves back from 1941 to 2021 when the computer revolution has already been existent. It has been equipped with every scientific and technological development like planes, war planes, rockets, moon landing and computerization. The setting of the novel is so appropriate that it has made the life of an ordinary protagonist Jean Serjeant dramatic and curious. The narrator describes the evolution of computer age as :

The General Purposes Computer was begun in 1998 after a series of government inquiries. Previously, in the late Eighties, there had been various pilot schemes which had sought to put the whole human knowledge on to an easily accessible record. The funlearn Project of 1991-2, with officially sponsored prizes and scholarships, had been the best known of these schemes. (144)

The novel is partly set in the future and epitomizes the role of computers, Barnes expected to see the words 'Orwellian Vision' appear in reviews. It is obviously like George Orwell's 1984. Mr. Barnes has mentioned the future references in the form of either information or Gregory's questions.

The story takes place in England and there are also references of China, an oriental country.

Merritt Moseley comments as :

It follows Jean's reflection on a book she learned of in China on the destructibility of the soul. China is another of the leitmotifs of this book, the site where the destructibility of the soul, the disappointment of Heaven (it was dusty), unanswerable questions, the Gobi Desert (Uncle Leslie term for a sand trap), a confusion between Asian and ancient (so that the aged Jean thinks of herself as an "Asian lady"), and an old Chinese greeting come together in a complex pattern of relationships. (Moseley : 106-07)

It is noted that *Staring at the Sun* is a story of life of Jean Serjeant, an ordinary woman, who is curious always to know about new developments and challenges in her life. The tone of the novel is also humorous as the story ends without any disaster or calamity in Jean's life. The tone of the novel is adaptable to the setting.

SETTING : A HISTORY OF THE WORLD IN 10 ½ CHAPTERS

As mentioned earlier *A History of the World in 10 ½ Chapters* is an experimentative novel in which there are ten different stories. The novel begins with the story of the woodworm who tells the story of Noah and the flood. This story is followed by the story of a cruise ship hijacked in the Mediterranean in the 1980s. there is also a transcript of a fifteenth century ecclesiastical trial of woodworms who damaged a bishop's throne and caused him injury. There is also a story of a woman who has survived a nuclear war. One more story is of the wreck of the *Medusa* in 1816 and a scholarly analysis of Gericault's painting of it. Another story is of a Victorian Irish woman's attempt to scale Mt. Ararat. There is also an essentially nonfiction about the Titanic, the St. Louis and a man swallowed by a whale, an account of a narcissistic actor making a movie in South America. There is also another attempt at Mt. Ararat featuring an American Astronaut and a dream of an afterlife. The half chapter 'Parenthesis' is about love.

But love isn't an atomic bomb, so let's take a homelier comparison. I'm writing this at the home of a friend in Michigan. It's a normal American house with all gadgets technology can dream (except a gadget for making happiness). He drove me here from Detroit airport yesterday. As we turned into the driveway he reached into the glove pocket for a remote-control device; at a masterful touch, the garage doors rolled up and away. (232)

A History of the World in 10 ½ Chapters narrates history of the world famous events, these events are either tragic or dark. The serious tone has been used to maintain the impact relevant to the setting.

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