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**Thesis Submitted For
The Requirement of the Degree of
Master of Arts in English Literature**

**A Study of Metafiction
In Dame Antonia Susan Byatt's *The Virgin in the Garden, Still Life,
Babel Tower, and A Whistling Woman***

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Abstract

The thesis examines *The Virgin in the Garden*, *Still Life*, *Babel Tower*, and *A Whistling Woman*, the novel quartet by the contemporary British author A.S. Byatt, with the aim to explore the use of metafictional techniques that is relevant to Byatt's novels. Metafiction, fiction about fiction and fiction writing, is a tendency that has been a part of fiction writings but it experienced a new revival in today's writings and criticisms. The thesis focuses on the theories of metafiction and discusses characteristics of metafictional texts; it concentrates on the metafictional preoccupation with reading, writing, and commenting. It also concerns with the structure of the novels, and intertextual references to various authors and texts as well as the metafictional characteristic of self-reflexive comments by intrusive narrator. The thesis also focuses on the relationship between fiction and reality; it explores the importance of stories and interacting of fictional characters with real-life personages. Finally it presents the conclusion; it provides the major findings which are fragmented plot, story or reality, and realistic novels or metafictional novels.

Keywords: characters and personages, diegetic world, hypodiegetic world, intrusive narrator, metafiction, self-conscious novels

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Chapter 1
Introduction

Chapter 1

Introduction

1.1. General Background

Dame Antonia Susan Byatt was born on 24 august 1936 in Sheffield, England. Although many of her novels take place in London, the contrast of the natural beauty of the Yorkshire landscape of her youth with its bleak resonance of working-class English roots, haunts her heroines. She was educated at Quaker school in York and at Newnham College, Cambridge, and Oxford where she studied as postgraduate. In 1972, she became

full-time lecturer in English and American literature at University College, London. In 1983, she left to concentrate on writing full-time.

A.S.Byatt's first novel, *Shadow of a Sun*, was published in 1964 and was followed by *The Game* (1967). Her most successful novel, *Possession: A Romance* (1990) won the Booker Prize for Fiction. Other important novels which are written by A.S.Byatt include *Angles and Insects* (1992), and *Biographer's Tale* (2000). Byatt also wrote short stories such as *Sugar and Other Stories* (1987), and *Little Black Book of Short Stories* (2003). Her published criticisms include two books about *Iris Murdoch: Degrees of Freedom* (1965), and *Iris Murdoch: A Critical Study* (1976), as well as *Wordsworth and Coleridge in their Time* (1970). Her latest book, *The Children's Book* (2009) was shortlisted for 2009 Man Booker Prize for Fiction. A.S.Byatt lives in London now.

This thesis focuses on four novels by A.S.Byatt, which are in the shape of a quartet, in the light of metafictional approach: *The Virgin in the Garden* (1978), *Still Life* (1985), *Babel Tower* (1996), and the final novel *A Whistling Woman* (2002). *The Virgin in the Garden*, the first novel of the quartet, is set in 1953, the year of the coronation of Queen Elizabeth II. It introduces the members of Potter family who live in Yorkshire. The eldest daughter, Stephanie, is a brilliant Cambridge graduate who frustrated her family's expectations of her by coming back to her hometown to teach at a grammar school. She further disappoints her intolerant father, Bill, by falling in love with the local vicar, Daniel Orton. The second daughter, the ambitious brilliant schoolgirl and an enthusiastic reader Frederica, is madly in love with Alexander Wedderburn, a young colleague of her father's at the English department. To celebrate the coronation of a new Queen, Alexander wrote a verse play about Elizabeth I, *Astraea*, and Frederica wants to be cast

for it. She also wants everyone around her to stop seeing her as a child, and she's impatient to grow up and gain knowledge of the world in general and of sexuality in particular. Finally, the boy Marcus mathematically gifted who lost his abilities when he tried to explain them to his father. Marcus is approached by an obsessive teacher, Lucas Simmonds, and what begins as an experiment ends up turning into an intense and awkward friendship with consequence for the two.

Still Life, the second volume of Byatt's quartet won PEN/Macmillan Silver Pen Award, is centered on themes of marriage, birth, and death. *Still Life* covers the mid-1950s; The Potter children are at the center of things; these are Frederica's Cambridge years while older sister Stephanie has given up academic world and settled into married life. Muddled brother Marcus also potters around, living with Stephanie and her husband Daniel when the book begins, and looking to get a grip on things. Stephanie, a gifted student, has some troubles adjusting to the boredom and routine of domestic life. When the novel begins she is pregnant, and by the end she has two small children, but it doesn't make for anything approaching complete fulfillment for this intellectual being. Stephanie isn't miserable, but her life has essentially been ruined, and Byatt punishes her for it in the end. A generous gesture, as Stephanie reaches out to help a lost, helpless creature, leads to her death. Frederica, on the other hand, is here a much freer spirit, unwilling to get tied down (at least until the bitter end). Before heading off to Cambridge she summers in France, and once at university she takes advantage of the overwhelming male to female ratio and has herself a swell old time. But even at Cambridge she doesn't get entirely be caught in the scholarly; among those she is attracted to be the extremely reasoning Raphael Faber who treats her in a completely unaccustomed fashion. Other

figures also figure prominently, from confused Marcus to Daniel's horrible mother to writer Alexander Wedderburn, whom Frederica loved desperately. Wedderburn writes a play about life of Vincent Van Gogh, *Yellow Chair*.

While *Babel Tower* continues the story of Frederica, begun in *The Virgin in the Garden* and continued in *Still Life*, it readily stands on its own. The setting is the 1960's, and it is a novel about that decade; intertwined are the stories of Frederica and her messy divorce from her completely unsuitable husband and *Babbletower*, a book from which readers are presented extensive excerpts. *Babbletower* is written by the obscure Jude Mason; it is a fantasy about a group of people trying to establish their own ideal community, by one of the characters. Frederica is to some extent responsible for getting the book published. It is soon banned on grounds of indecency, and a sizable portion of the novel is devoted to the court proceedings. There is also a subplot formed by following the work of a government committee which examines how English should and could be taught and learned at schools.

A Whistling Woman is the concluding volume of a quartet books centered vaguely on the character of Frederica Potter. *A Whistling Woman* is a novel of the 1960s. The focus now is on the very tail end of the decade; the novel begins in the summer of 1968 and the final chapter, the only one with a date line (January 1970), offers just a glimpse of a new decade, and of the future. The book begins with a story. Agatha has been telling a story, every Sunday, for some two years, to various listeners; first and foremost her own daughter, Saskia, and Frederica and her son, Leo. *A Whistling Woman* begins, without preamble, with the final episode, after which the story proper begins. Agatha's story eventually is also published as a book named *Flight North*. Frederica (who lives in the

same house with Agatha) will also publish a book which is largely made up fragments and called *Laminations*. Frederica's book gets the press attention, because of its author (a recognized TV personality by then) and its literary pretensions (Both the reviewers who liked *Laminations* and those who didn't referred to it as clever); in the end, however, it is the initially largely ignored fantastical *Flight North* that becomes the true success. The novel cycle ends with Frederica finding out about her unplanned pregnancy with the scientist Luk; Frederica and Luk look into the future, not quite knowing what to do next but assuring themselves that they “shall think of something” (573).

In all these four novels, that has been mentioned above, the trace of metafictional theory is clear. In general, metafiction is a term given to fictional writing which tries to pose questions about the relationship between fiction and reality by drawing attention to its status as an artifact. Metafictional writings explore both the fundamental structures of narrative fiction and the possible fictionality of the world outside the literary fictional text. According to Patricia Waugh, in her book *Metafiction The Theory and Practice of Self-Conscious Fiction*, the term ‘metafiction’ seems to have originated in an essay by American critic and novelist William H. Gass in 1970 (2). In 1960s there was a general tendency to know how human beings reflect, construct, and mediate their experience of the world; if our knowledge of this world is now observed to be reflected through language, and then literary fiction (worlds built entirely of language) becomes a useful model for learning about the construction of reality itself. (Waugh 3).

Metafictional novels tend to be structured on an oppositional principle and process: the construction of a fictional illusion (as in traditional realism) and the laying bare of that illusion; in other words, it installs and then subverts those constructions: it uses the

convention of the realism in order to criticize and blur its conventions. What it does is to reexamine the conventions of realism in order to discover – through its own self-reflection – a fictional form that is culturally relevant and comprehensible to contemporary readers. Thus, metafictional deconstruction has not only provided novelists and their readers with a better understanding of the fundamental structures of narrative; it has also offered radically precise and accurate models for understanding the contemporary experience of the world as a construction, an artifice, a web of interdependent semiotic systems; therefore, metafiction helps us to understand how the reality we live day by day is similarly constructed, similarly written. (ibid 9)

In all of the four novels one can find the traces of metafictional approach and criticism, but these techniques are mostly implicit and internalized within the text: structural incoherence, intertextual reference and bringing another words or works consciously to their own, awareness of the characters of the novels such as Frederica, Stephanie, and Alexander about their role playing, the readers are informed that characters are constructed and exist in the mind of their writer repeatedly, using the conventions of the realism in order to criticize it, blurring the distinction between fiction and reality (the nature of the reality and the reality itself is put into question), self-conscious narrating and storytelling of the characters especially in *Babel Tower* and *A Whistling Woman*, concerning with the process of reading, writing, and writing itself as in the four novels characters are concerned with writing books, poems, and plays.

1.2. The Argument

The thesis attempts to investigate the exercise of metafictional theory, the major trend of postmodernist writings, in the four novels of A.S.Byatt mentioned above. Metafiction or the art of self-conscious narrating, according to Patricia Waugh in her book *Metafiction The Theory and Practice of Self-Conscious Fiction*, exists in all novels: “metafiction is a tendency or function inherent in all novels” (5). She also adds that metafictional writers “explore a theory of fiction through the practice of writing fiction” (ibid 2); therefore, she has defined metafiction as “fictional writing which self-consciously and systematically draws attention to its status as an artefact in order to pose questions about the relationship between fiction and reality”(ibid 2). Linda Hutcheon, a well-known postmodernist critic, in her book *A Poetics of Postmodernism* has suggested that metafiction can be defined as “fiction about fiction- fiction that includes within itself a commentary on its narrative and/or linguistic identity” (2). These critics and scholars put the emphasis on the ways in which metafictional texts pose their obsession with texts; obsessions such as constructing, reading, and interpreting texts, as well as constructing, reading, and interpreting reality. Thus, this thesis tries to find these aspects and the other traces of metafictional approach in the four novels of A.S.Byatt.

One of the most important characteristics of metafictional texts is their self-reflexivity, their awareness of themselves as fictional constructs. Both Hutcheon and Waugh suggested that metafictional texts deliberately reflect upon their own structure and language. Byatt tries to show that Frederica, one of the key figures of the four novels going to be analyzed, compared herself to the other and aspired to be real-life character; for example she wants to be Mary Queen of Scots, a historical figure. So far the fictional

characters think and talk about real-life characters and personages; but in metafictional texts real-life characters and personages may step into the world of fiction. In the four novels, one can find examples of real-life personages appearing in fiction, which combine the diegetic levels and blurring the boundaries between fact and fiction.

Another central trace of metafictional approach which can be found in these four novels is that metafictional texts self-reflexively comment on reading, writing, and interpreting process, in order to prove that every interpretation is necessarily subjective and a re-reading, by interrupting the narration and giving comments on it. Both Hutcheon and Waugh explained that one of the defining characteristics of metafictional texts is choosing the issues of reading and readers, writing and writers as their subject matter, and including readers and writers as their characters.

Another central trace of metafictional approach, which can be found in these four novels, is that there are characters who write books, plays, poems, book reviews, and articles. Creating characters who are writers and describing them in acts of writing point to the metafictional feature of thematizing activities and taking writing as a subject to be examined. In these novels written by Byatt, characters frequently comment on their own writing, writing styles, and authors who have influenced their writing and writing techniques.

Finally, the last important metafictional perspective which this thesis tries to discover is that these novels, generally all metafictional texts, systematically and self-consciously draw attention to their status as artifact in order to pose questions about the relationship between fiction and reality. These texts provide a critique of their own methods of

construction; they examine the fundamental structures of narrative fiction, and they also examine the possible fictionality of the world outside the literary fictional text.

1.3. The Most Important Questions to be answered in the Thesis

The present thesis is in search of links among metafictional concepts in the light of keys found in these four novels: *The Virgin in the Garden*, *Still Life*, *Babel Tower*, and *A Whistling Woman*; this study endeavors to counter some significant questions which form the basis for this study. They are as follows:

- ❖ Are the metafictional concepts applied to characters, and plot of these novels?
- ❖ How does Byatt achieve to “self-reflexivity”, “self-conscious realism”, and “world within world” in her novels?
- ❖ What is reality? What is fiction? And how does Byatt apply these notions of fiction and reality?

1.4. Review of Related Literature

Byatt’s novels, *The Virgin in the Garden*, *Still Life*, *Babel Tower*, and *A Whistling Woman*, discussed and debated among literary critics; in what follows, the thesis offers a brief overview of aspects that a number of studies have emphasized about Byatt’s work.

Olga Kenyon in her book *Women Novelists Today: A Survey of English Witting in the Seventies and Eighties* suggests that Byatt “writes for adults with empathy, intelligence,

humor, seriousness and passion which place women firmly in the great tradition” (59). Kenyon is particularly interested in Byatt’s fusing of tradition with twentieth-century realism. She takes a closer look at *The Virgin in the Garden* and *Still Life*, tackling Byatt’s female characters, metaphors, humor, the historical background, and, most prominently, various aspects of language in the two novels. She also refers to Byatt’s intertextuality, “the complex web created by interweaving from other texts, other discourses, other cultural associations” (61). Kenyon further comments on the wide range of Byatt’s knowledge, greatly apparent in the intertexts she uses, leading to the idea that “the world she maps is vast, from prehistory to modern physics” (82).

Byatt’s realist methods have interested also Kathleen Coyne Kelly who offers chronological close readings of Byatt’s novels and places Byatt in the framework of realism and postmodernism. As constant themes, Kelly in her book *A.S. Byatt* outlines Byatt’s “preoccupation with the artist, the imagination, and the impossibility of love and the inevitability of loss” (14). Kelly comments on the works’ formal characteristics, authorial comments, the interest in how readers read and writers write, as well as the preoccupation with intertextuality. (ibid 91-95) Indeed, the richness of Byatt’s knowledge has led to the idea that her books in themselves are monumental intertexts, her work being “the vast intertextual web that includes everything that she reads and thinks and sees” (ibid 116). Kelly regards intertextuality as one of the dominant features that associate Byatt’s works with the postmodern, which is characterized by “the ability to range over a number of periods and places and to create and amalgam of styles and moods”(6).

Kelly offers ideas into the complexities of Byatt's writings by analyzing the tensions between realist and postmodernist modes of writing in Byatt's works; she notes that "Byatt is a realist novelist who questions the project of realism; at the same time, she is also a postmodern novelist who questions the postmodern project" (76). Kelly argues that Byatt's works move towards a more complicated vision of realism, as Byatt draws the reader's attention to difficulties of representation, to "the thing to be represented and the process of representation itself" (ix).

The concern with representation, realist and self-conscious modes of writing has been emphasized also in Richard Todd's *A.S. Byatt*. Todd points out that the reader might be tempted to regard several of Byatt's novels as representatives of social realism, while he posits that, for example, *The Virgin in the Garden* "is enriched beyond measure when the reader surrenders to its status as fiction about post-war English society that is unconditionally embedded in the cultural background designating that society" (17).

In connection with "the old" and "the new", Celia Wallhead, similarly to Kenyon, discusses Byatt against the realist and postmodern background. She notes in her book *The Old, the New, and the Metaphor* that Byatt is an author who stands "at the fore of the impulse to reconceptualize realism in the wake of modernist and postmodernist critique" (19). She points out that Byatt views realism as "a family of writings that share a certain cognitive attitude to the world" (ibid 19). For Byatt, realism is "a technique for discovering more about reality, for describing the world as it is" (Wallhead 60). Wallhead thus sees Byatt as standing in the mainstream of realism while also exploring postmodern alternatives of self-reflexive awareness of texts as verbal constructs. (25)

Thus, Byatt's works have given rise to a number of critical studies that emphasize the high believability, the "realness" of Byatt's characters, their verbal minds and love for reading and the passion they find in thinking and feeling deeply. The studies highlight Byatt's preoccupation with the process of writing and the relationships between the imaginary and the real. Most notably, the studies foreground Byatt's simultaneous use of realist conventions and postmodern techniques which challenge and extend both modes of writing and offer insights into the meaning making processes.

The present author hopes to add to the scholarly discussion of Byatt's works by taking a close look at the quartet, a thorough account of which as a unit has not yet appeared. In particular, the thesis focuses on the use of such metafictional techniques that seem to be especially pertinent to Byatt's writing and appear to be among the most prominent features that contribute to her status as an author who successfully "merges realism and experimentation"(Kelly 76).

1.5. *Thesis Outline*

Chapter one of the thesis is the introductory chapter. In this chapter major issues related to the thesis are explained and discussed. The researcher presents information about Byatt, major works and critical studies. Also her works on metafiction and her style of writing is discussed. In this chapter the general strategy of the thesis would be explored.

In chapter two of the thesis a complete study of metafiction is presented; some of the issues related to metafiction are explored: reading and readers, writing and writers, commenting and commentators, intertextuality, fiction, and reality. In this chapter the

researcher tries to define metafiction, self-conscious realism, and realist self-consciousness.

In chapter three of the thesis three strategies of the metafictional texts which they are explained at the chapter two of the thesis are applied to the novels; these strategies follow as: characters as readers, characters as writers, and writing process.

In chapter four of the thesis another aspect and strategy of the metafictional texts are applied to the novels which is concerning with form and structure of the novels. The idea of concerning with form is related to the idea of intertextuality, multiple textual levels, and structural incoherence.

In chapter five of the thesis the relationship between fiction and reality is applied and examined in the four novels; in this chapter the notion of fiction and reality is put under question; it is questioned that fiction is reality or reality is fiction.

The last chapter, chapter six, of the thesis is devoted to summing up which provides a brief account of the whole thesis, findings, and ideas for further research. The implications of all four novels are explored in this part as well.

1.6. Methodology and Approach

Although the coinage of the term ‘metafiction’ in the 1970s is generally attributed to the American critic and novelist William H. Gass, Waugh in her book *Metafiction The Theory and Practice of Self-Conscious Fiction* believes that “metafiction is a tendency or function inherent in all novels” (5); She continues “although the term ‘metafiction’ might