

## Fragmentation to Integration in Postmodern Novels of Susan Howatch

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**Abstract:** *The Postmodern condition has given rise to increased instances of paranoia, schizophrenia, fragmentation and disassociative personality disorders. Susan Howatch's St. Benet's Trilogy viz. The Wonder Worker, the High Flyer and The Heart Breaker highlight how childhood trauma and parental apathy could cause personality disorders in individuals. Focussing one's mind on spirituality and anchoring oneself in healing effects of other-centredness can help one cope with the demands and challenges of the postmodern period. Lasting integration can be achieved if we connect with our authentic selves. Making peace with ourselves will only help us to obtain peace with the outer world.*

**Key words:** *fissures, trauma, authentic self, integration, forgiveness*

*"The basis of healing is forgiveness – forgiving the person responsible for the hurts..."*  
Rev. Richard Holloway

### Introduction

The attributes of postmodern works are varied and in some cases contradictory. The changing and declining world is the recurrent theme in postmodern novels. Leading writers like John Cage and Kelly Link's works reflect fragmentation of the postmodern world through the content, style and structure of their pieces, be it music or texts. The characters in postmodern novels suffer from fractured personalities and their lives are full of contradictions but some novels do not mirror this fragmentation in their narrative style and content. The novelists themselves might be undergoing periods of uncertainty and division in their lives. But this entropy in their lives need not necessarily be reflected in their works. In some cases the works are chaotic and disorderly but the creators of such pieces are very secure and stable in their private lives.

Under what category does Susan Howatch fall? She has been publishing her novels since 1965 and for the last 47 years she has polished her craft to a high lustre. Her early novels, mostly gothic romances, mysteries do reflect the youthful vibrancy of a budding novelist but as she matures, she is like an old wine – smooth, mellow with a sharp caustic tinge now and then. Howatch's 1970's novels Penmarric, Cashelmara, The Sins of Fathers demonstrate the growing maturity of the novelist. Howatch reaches the summit of story-telling in The Wheel of Fortune

where she marries the excellence of multiple narration with the intricate plot of the saga of a family torn by guilt, remorse and redemption.

While writing these family sagas, Howatch herself was going through a divorce, uprooting herself and her small daughter from the United States of America to England. (Meyers1998) Howatch's ecclesiastical novel series written in the eighties explore the need for an anchor in the rudderless lives of postmodern human beings.

Is it necessary for a writer to go through all the courses in the University of Life before she can become a mature writer? Is it not possible for a creative artist to explore and express the varieties of emotions without experiencing them in real life?

Do the modernist and postmodernist periods hold the right to fragmentation and fractured personalities? Is it the prerogative of the modern and postmodern period alone? Did the earlier periods not have souls who were tortured and crippled? Before Freud talked of the convolutions of a human mind, did human beings not suffer from mental illness or disorders? I believe they did, but they were not aware of the psychological implications of it. Previously they were known as being possessed by devil or by evil spirits. Only the terms used to describe them were different as knowledge of the human mind and its significant role in human lives were not known.

### **Memory: Human Beings Vs Animals**

The main distinguishing feature between human beings and beasts is the ability to remember. As the animals live in the present, they have a life of simple happiness. On the other hand the sixth-sensed humans have to live with the trauma of the past and the wishes and aspirations of the future. The efficient memory of individuals causes neurotic suffering to them. Neurotic disorders are the result of repressed wishes and unconscious memories. If the innate ability to integrate contradictory aspects and tendencies into a coherent whole is missing, then the character splits into different personalities. This is the safety valve used by the brain to shut out unwanted and undesirable memories. Such a life can lead to a chronic feeling of inner loneliness and emptiness. Affected people live in an unreal, illusionary world compartmentalizing unwanted trauma of earlier memories. In cognitive psychology it is known as 'context dependence of memory'. (Anderson, J. R. 1983)

### **Fragmentation - Definition**

According to Webster's Collegiate Dictionary (2002) fragmentation can be defined as 1.'Separated into parts' 2. 'Incomplete'. What could cause this fragmentation in personalities? The root cause could be a traumatic past with lack of parental empathy and maltreatment or if one is brought up in a dysfunctional family by a strict authoritarian figure.

The postmodern society itself is fragmented and episodic in nature – the result of breakdown of family and community structure – pluralistic, mobile society where bonds between people are ephemeral; there are many adults without a sense of security in relationships. There are no preformed identity patterns or common worldviews. Human lives are far more random and lacking in cohesion. People with fragile egos and borderline dynamics are affected most as they need ideological and interpersonal stability. If there is no firm base, these individuals affect false selves.

People suffer from fractured selves and go through the tribulations of life before they identify their true selves and find harmony. They understand that life is not a Utopian dream but it could be a heterotopian world where one could live with countless worldviews but follow one's own heart.

The Postmodern individual is not a single dimensional figure with a single taste and a single idea and value but he is multivalent, multi-tasking with many facets to him. Multiple personalities are vying with each other in him.

### **Postmodern metaphor and cinematic Detachment**

Jean Baudrillard in his *America* (1988) associates postmodern America's national derealization with film. Baudrillard states that "it is not the least of America's charms that even outside the movie theatres the whole country is cinematic. The desert you pass is like the set of a western, the city a screen of signs and formulas" (Constable 2004, pg. 44)"It is this sense of reality that has been completely pervaded by cinema, resulting in the apprehension of reality as film which is one of the key metaphors of the postmodern." (Constable 2004 pg.44)

Frederic Jameson in *Postmodernism, Or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, says the "sense of being condemned to the perpetual present [as being] emblematic of the postmodern condition" (2005 pg. 48)

Some of the postmodern individuals live in an illusory world far away from the world of reality. They delude themselves thinking that the world they live in is constant. They live in the surface without depth. This world of simulacra and hyperreality (Baudrillard 1994) appears so real that their personalities are fractured. The inferno of emotions leads to poetics of depersonalisation and alterity. There is a hellish sense of split self subject to existential insecurity in them. The subjects who have this ailment suffer from a disconnect not only from the exterior world but also from itself. Their mind becomes a wasteland with a heightened trepidation with regard to identity.

Postmodernists may call 'identity' itself as a social and cultural construct. They are threatened by 'dilemmas of the self'. (Giddens, 1991) Then what happens to this shattered sense of identity when the human subject becomes depersonalised or estranged from its sense of self?

Individuals become mere spectators of their own lives during moments of heightened stress. They unconsciously practice what T S Eliot refers to as 'Objective Correlative', (Eliot 1920) an estrangement from their selves while experiencing intolerable tragic pains in life. Perhaps this distancing from the self is required for the subject to bear this irreparable loss and to survive their tortured lives. As Simeon and Abugel quote for these depersonalized selves Milton's words 'The mind is in its own place', 'ring true with profound insight.'(2006 pg.5)

A diagnostic reading of Susan Howatch's trilogy reveals a close relationship between postmodern cultural and critical theory with the psychiatric disorder, emotional vacuity and spiritual bankruptcy of the characters.

### **The Wonder Worker**

In the first novel of the trilogy, *The Wonder Worker*, Alice Fletcher and Francie start with disintegrated personalities. Alice is obese using food as an anesthetic to escape from the self-hatred she suffers from. Alice Fletcher brought up by her rational aunt, is shy, bored and when she finds herself during lunch hour in St.Benet's Healing Centre, hardly foresees she would be drawn into the vortex of the mysterious, irrational world of Healing. The inhabitants of the Healing Centre are themselves waging a constant moral battle while they try to help others survive the maelstrom of modern life.

Francie is in an imaginary world of her own, disillusioned with her husband's frequent travels on business and her two sons leaving the nest empty. She is faced with midlife crisis looking for some excitement. Francie is exorcised by Nicholas Darrow to drive out the evil spirits residing in her. Alice Fletcher's soothing presence, acts as a balm on disturbed souls. She is healed of her urge to eat while she heals the obstinacy and cynicism of Father Lewis. She also heals the arrogance in Nick Darrow.

**There are three people who are on the edge of breakdown in *The Wonder Worker*.** They are Nicholas Darrow, when he was assaulted by self-realization, Francie under the euphoria of infatuation with Darrow and Stacy who committed suicide when he was accosted by Nicholas' wife.

Nicholas Darrow in his desire to 'fix things' and to anaesthetize himself from facing the collapse of his marriage to Rosalind, calls Francie to come to Westminster Abbey for evening service so that he can convince her that her infatuation with Darrow was futile as he very much wanted to remain married to his wife. Darrow felt himself omnipotent ready to handle any problems when he himself was wrought with obsession. As Rosalind describes Darrow is 'a power-junkie hooked on deliverance, crisis-addict mainlining on salvation.' (WW pg.233) When Francie arrived he immediately 'was sure she wasn't unbalanced merely in the area of her life which related to me. The euphoria made me start thinking again of manic-depressive psychosis. Or if

she was completely out of touch with reality, maybe I was seeing some form of paranoid schizophrenia' (WW pg 399)

Francie told Nicholas that Rosalind had confessed to her how Nicholas had to hypnotize her to get 'some decent sex.' Nicholas realized his marriage had collapsed not because of his wife's adultery or due to the 'mud-slinging rows' but his wife had told this 'deeply disturbed woman' details which should have been revealed only to a professional. This was the final nail in the coffin of their marriage. When he saw 'how shallow she (Rosalind) was, how unreliable, how utterly lacking in integrity', it was like looking into a mirror. It appeared strange that he derived security from a woman 'who could offer no security at all.' Darrow' had been obsessed with an image\_\_\_\_how typical of the 1980s preoccupation with "style"!(WW pg 399)

When he looked at Francie, 'in Francie's shining eyes I finally saw my own insanity reflected.' (WW pg.410) This was a moment of revelation.

'The earthquake roared again, the ground breaking open with a volley of whiplash cracks, and at my feet I saw the abyss open up to reveal the unspeakable, indescribable darkness churning below.' (WW pg.404) At last he had seen the 'unreasonable demands, the violent pursuit, the mental and physical oppression' he had inflicted on his wife. Nicholas had been doing what he had been sermonizing against! All along Nicholas was self-centred, running away from the duties of a husband and a father while serving society under the guise of a priest.

Lewis warns Alice about not being blinded by illusions of Nicholas' love 'Nicholas is so destabilised at present that he's taken to throwing common sense to the winds.'(WW pg.524)

Stacy too was dejected and wanted to lash out at the world by his terrible 'act of rejection' (WW pg.467) - suicide. Stacy's basic problems were 'the homesickness, the alienation, the concern about his job, the worry that he might be letting Nicholas down, the difficulty about finding a steady girlfriend.' (WW pg.467) 'He was just hung up and horribly depressed' (WW pg.468)

Rejection by both the parents in infancy in Alice Fletcher's case, intellectual and spiritual arrogance of Nicholas Darrow and Stacy's obsession with his sisters were the determinants for their fragmentation.

### **The High Flyer**

In High Flyer, Carter Graham has a life plan according to which she has to have an enviable job, an apartment in a high-rise and she should marry a handsome, financial bigwig all before she is thirty five! She achieves all this but soon her dream marriage turns into a nightmare with her husband being associated with Elizabeth Mayfield. The sinister Mayfield has a malign influence on people who cross her path. When Carter comes in direct contact with Elizabeth Mayfield, she experiences the hell of a stranger invading her psyche, and confesses to Eric Tucker 'My mind

has been hacked.' Mayfield has implanted the virus in Carter's mind that she would throw herself down from her 34<sup>th</sup> floor balcony. (HF pg.197)

What kind of hold does she have on her husband Kim? Carter realizes Kim is not only lying about his past but about his present as well and she has to contend with a web of deceit, corruption and lies. Carter is in a labyrinth of uncertainty when Betz is economical with truth. How much of what Kim says is true? How dependent is he on Mrs. Mayfield?

Kim remains a fragmented personality with Mayfield wielding too sinister an influence on him and he is not able to find his true personality. He is doomed by disintegration to self-destruction. Kim Betz lives a lie. His personality has fissures which are smoothed over most of the times but the fissures are more pronounced other times. Then the split personality takes over. When he feels whole, fully integrated, he is like a dolphin. When his personality is in discord, he is like a shark.

When he commits suicide, Carter has to unravel the answers herself. She comes close to collapse, nervous breakdown trying to find the reasons. She is enfolded in a blanket of unconditional love, understanding and patience by the St. Benet's team. She also understands that reason and logic cannot answer her queries and that some things are beyond explanation.

"The difference between a crime of evil and a crime of illness is the difference between a sin and a symptom." (Gladwell, 2010) So was Kim evil or just suffering from illness? Carter finds her right mate in Eric Tucker and also learns that she has been punishing herself with a tough life just to pay back her parents. She turns her back on her high flying career and finds satisfaction and a rewarding life fundraising for the Healing Centre. Kim remains a benign presence in her mind and an important part of her past.

### **The Heartbreaker**

We have Gavin Blake a classic example of a person whose personality is fragmented. He is tortured by low self esteem and crippled by self-doubts that he thinks Elizabeth Mayfield is the only woman who loves him and believes in him. When she picks him up from the gutters and makes him a successful 'leisure worker' catering to London's business bigwigs, he thinks he is truly doing a social service supplying to the needs of the gay. He provides essential relaxation to stressed out city guys and they pay him megabucks for the service. He is an upmarket leisure worker. Elizabeth Mayfield convinces Gavin Blake who is a heterosexual that there is plenty of money, power and panache in being a gay prostitute. Gavin Blake ran away from home after his brother Hugo died because he thought that his parents wished it was him who had died instead of Hugo who was gregarious, good in sports, charming and social. He felt he was a waste, useless and not wanted by anybody. He creates a false self to block off the pains of childhood. He was not good at escort work as he could not bear to see women being pathetic. But while servicing men he did not consider them as persons but loads of meat or flesh. He does not realize that

many men fall for him, making fools of themselves and that he breaks hearts and damages lives. Gavin Blake wantonly courts this unreal life to anesthetize his true pains. He uses opera to anesthetize his mind. "Isn't it weird the tricks your mind can play when you're stressed almost out of your skull?" (HB p.282)

To relieve the unbearable stress Gavin Blake resorts to self-inflicted injuries. (HB pg.352) There is no true emotional interaction between him and his clients. Blake is in deep denial about his life of a prostitute. His clients are just flesh to be satisfied for money. That is why he gives each one of his clients a nick name. (eg. Chicky Dicky, Mr.Moneybags, Iowa Jerry and Mr.Charisma). Even though the profession he has chosen to make megabucks involves constant physical contact, there is no real emotional connect. The only person who penetrates this barrier is Richard Slaney who shows Blake a window to another world which he inhabited earlier.

It is ironical that while living the life of a prostitute like Blake does not get genuine touch - care - share contacts. Gavin becomes a social recluse when he has a nervous breakdown. Gavin's fragile self-esteem is exploited by his manager Elizabeth Mayfield and she uses him for enhancing her bank balance in addition to satisfying her desire for the dominatrix game. Elizabeth Mayfield gets her high through wielding power. She has psychic powers but she uses them for wrong purposes, to dominate other people. Blake already low on self-esteem and riddled with self-doubts, falls a victim in her hands. He is a mere pawn in the checkerboard of a dominatrix game she plays with Asherton. He is just an animal with no thoughts or ideas of his own. His job is to do as he is told. After an encounter with Asherton he says, "I'm left feeling shit-scared and subhuman, like a circus animal who's messed up a trick in the ring and can think of nothing but the trainer with the whip." (HB pg.64)

He recalls that the only time he felt 'so unified, so all-of-a-piece' (HB pg.19) was when he went sailing with Richard down the Solent towards the Needles. He captures the lost paradise of his childhood past. A chance connect with Carta Graham makes him long to establish contact with his lost world. They are destined for a long, profound spiritual journey which heals both of them. Gavin Blake takes a long time to come out of his nervous breakdown and to come to terms with his dubious past. The St.Benet's team treats him with respect and dignity and helps him become his true self.

### **Establishing Emotional Connect**

The postmodern age is ephemeral. The books, films, artifacts and architecture are fragmented. As literature is the mirror of life, the people of the postmodern age are also full of conflicts and contradictions. The scourge of alienation, isolation and disconnectedness in society is far bigger during the late 20th and early 21st century. When posed with life's real challenges like pain, loss, heartbreak, insecurity, anger, the youngster's minds are not equipped to deal with it. Emotional buffers are shrinking and there is no intellectual sharing of vulnerabilities. Touch, tears and

feelings are ways of sharing emotional contact time and as this is in short supply, emotional energy of the youth gets manifested and released in violence. Their troubled minds close their doors against anything positive.

Howatch with her wonderful grasp of the human psyche writes of the spiritual and moral struggles of her characters with psychological sophistication. Her novels reiterate the words of Dalai Lama "We can never obtain peace in the outer world until we make peace with ourselves." (TOI, pg.10) Immersing oneself in spirituality would lead to the road to integration.

### Conclusion

Howatch presents the modern day illnesses of depression, obesity, anorexia, nervous breakdown suffered by her characters and how Christianity and the Church help them to integrate their personalities. How's the Church relevant to the postmodern times and the contemporary reader? Corrosion of Character can be avoided if one acknowledges ones responsibilities and obligations, roots oneself in spirituality.

People who have been physically and mentally abused have warped relationships. Howatch herself went through a period of 'trying to hold my divided self together'. (Myers 1998) Hence Howatch succeeds in peopling her novels with characters who have many personalities uncomfortably sharing one hapless body. The team in St.Benet's help the divided selves to find their authentic selves.

The St.Benet's team has a solution for integration from fragmentation. The key determinant is forgiving those who cause the damage. The quality of mercy can be achieved by 'centring the mind in times of prayer.' Or in psychological jargon it is 'No urge to self-destruct can withstand the power of the drive to integration when the drive is properly channeled.' (HF pg.251)

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