

Ain Shams University  
Faculty of Al Alsun  
English Department

The Sixties' Cultural Revolution in Britain as  
Reflected in A. S. Byatt's Postmodern Tetralogy:  
The Virgin in the Garden (1978), Still Life (1986),  
Babel Tower (1996), and A Whistling Woman  
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by  
Rania Mohamed Samir Lotfy El Khayat

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The thesis examines the Cultural Revolution in Britain in the sixties presented by A.S. Byatt in her tetralogy, with special reference to the postmodern elements in her work. The study aims to concentrate on how far the tetralogy focuses on the several attempts of the Cultural Revolution to dislodge the Establishment and everything it stands for. In addition, Byatt pays special attention to the religious dilemma of the sixties, and the effects of the Second Wave Feminism on the characters of the quartet.

The thesis is divided into an introduction, four chapters, and a conclusion.

The introduction serves the purpose of giving a brief outline of the focus of the thesis. It further gives a summary of the quartet, each volume on its own. After that, the introduction deals with the aims and goals that the study aims to achieve.

Chapter One, “The Sixties’ Cultural Background in Britain”, deals in detail with all the aspects of the cultural scene in Britain in the sixties with the radical transformations in social life, along with the political and cultural ones. Besides, the chapter provides an outline of the philosophical movements that contributed to the shaping of the cultural life in the sixties.

Chapter Two, “De-Establishing the Establishment in Byatt’s Tetralogy”, aims to tackle the way some cultural events of the sixties repeatedly attempt to de-stabilize the

Establishment in the quartet. Special attention is given to the abolition of censorship, youth subcultures and subcultural art forms.

Chapter Three, “Turbulent Faith in Byatt’s Tetralogy”, deals with religious faith in the sixties in Britain and how far the nation – and the characters of the quartet – was divided into two categories: secularization, and the ‘new age’ religion.

Chapter Four, “Feminist Issues in the Tetralogy”, is devoted to the female characters of the novel-sequence and the impact of the Women’s Liberation Movement on them. The female characters are divided into the subservient and those seeking self-assertion.

The Conclusion sums up the import of the thesis and demonstrates how Byatt manages to present the Cultural Revolution in her quartet.

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## List of Abbreviations:

The Virgin in the Garden (VG)

Still Life (SL)

Babel Tower (BT)

A Whistling Woman (WW)

Religion and Society in Twentieth-Century Britain  
(RSTCB)

The Death of Christian Britain: Understanding  
Secularization 1800-2000 (DCB)

A. S. Byatt's (1936- ) tertralogy deals with the fifties and the sixties. The first volume The Virgin in the Garden deals with the life of the Potters in the stability of the period when Queen Elizabeth II was crowned (1953). The British society was still tinted with conservative attitudes. The pace of the action is slow, taking place in many places related to academia. Frederica Potter is maturing both intellectually and emotionally.

The second volume, Still Life, still set in the fifties, takes Frederica further into the world of academia as she goes to France and then to Cambridge. Still the action is silent, but the theme that prevails is manifested in the conflict between the life of the mind and that of the hearth. Most of the female characters are beset with that conflict in their personal and academic lives. However, the two characters who are mostly tormented by this conflict are Stephanie and Frederica.

Babel Tower is mainly concerned with the cultural scene in sixties' London. Through Frederica, the reader is able to get a grip on the incredible multiplicity of cultural changes in the British society, in art, literature, censorship, shifting readership and new interests take the characters of the novel by storm. They are either swept by it, or they simply stand in resistance until it passes them over. Not only that, but the novel passes through the Moors Murderers and the abolition of Capital Punishment in Britain.



Finally, A Whistling Woman is set at the end of the decade. Frederica is compelled to leave teaching in Samuel Palmer's Art school after the students complained of the futility of the course and she takes on a new career in TV. On the other hand, there is a growing discontent in the students who decide to create an Anti-University near the fictional University of Yorkshire. Parallel to this form of anarchy, a new religious cult is being established by a charismatic neurotic leader. The final version takes place at the time of the Student's movement, the hippie communes, and the Women's Liberation Movement.

The aim of the study is to trace the cultural transformations in sixties' Britain and apply them to A. S. Byatt's Frederica Quartet. Special attention is devoted to the elements mostly stressed by the author in her quartet: the different attempts to de-establish the Establishment, the religious turmoil in that specific period, and the rise of the Women's Liberation Movement. Postmodernism is incorporated in the sixties and the thesis itself. For one thing, the beginnings of postmodernism as a movement lie in the sixties more than any other time. For another, Byatt uses several postmodern techniques in her quartet like parody, pastiche, collage and metafiction. Consequently, postmodernism is situated at the heart of the quartet both in form and content.

Chapter One in the study aims to present the cultural scene of the sixties in Britain. At the beginning, there is a

swift flashback to Britain in the Post-War period till the sixties to pave the way for the cultural transformations in the sixties. After the austerity of the late forties and early fifties, the Welfare State gradually offered the British people a breath of fresh air with a new affluence. New laws were loosened, in a campaign for some Reform Acts especially those regarding divorce, abortion, contraception, capital punishment, homosexuality and censorship.

Youth, with extra money to spend, constituted their own culture and they imposed this culture- with all that it entails from music, apparel, books and magazines- on their society. There arose new subcultures such as the hippies and flower power, influenced by drugs and oriental mysticism. Fashion and music addressed youth mainly and even the singers and the fashion designers belonged to the young generation.

The sixties were influenced by many movements that intermingle together to form such a decade full of clashing ideas. Existentialism was significant for its stress on human individuality, humanist tendencies, as well as the stress of existence over matter. Marxism had its huge impact on the British New Left in the sixties and in some of the movements such as The Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament, the Women's Liberation Movement and the students' demonstrations of May 1968.

With a look at the cultural scene, it is found that new forms of art emerged such as pop art and optical art which depends on the optical illusions. These art forms were playful and youthful at the same time. Moreover, television invaded the lives of the people as they stayed glued in front of it and the number of people who started to own it rose rapidly each year of the decade.

Education in England took on a new turn, especially concerning primary education. A new approach started to be studied as to how to educate primary students in the traditional way or to give them more freedom. Another question bothered the pedagogologists as to whether students really need to know and memorize grammar rules or not. Whether rote learning should continue to prevail or not was another issue raised in the sixties along with other such concerns.

With the end of the empire after the Second World War, the British people lost all hope of regaining that imperial position of the world and that was accompanied by the realization that the US started to rule the world. The war on Vietnam attracted the attention of the world as people started to sympathize with the defenseless nation against oppression. Demonstrations sprang everywhere against the passivity of the British Government towards that aggression. After that the young people turned towards education and their general wrath to their government filling the streets

with their demonstrations in what is called the Students' Movement in 1968-9. These demonstrations prompted other minorities to take action such as the women and the homosexuals.

Chapter Two of the thesis deals with the most prominent feature of the sixties, mainly that of the various attempts at de-establishing the Establishment. Here A. S. Byatt focuses on three main forms of these features of the quartet: censorship, the hippies and the flower power, and the students' demonstrations of 1968-9. Concerning censorship, Byatt creates a parody of the trial of Lady Chatterley's Lover in Babel Tower. Babbletower is a novel-within-the-novel which is subjected to an Obscenity trial and wins the case on appeal at the end of Babel Tower.

Youth subcultures are pictured as destructive powers in the tetralogy. They all aim at anarchy and seek to violate all forms of the Establishment represented in the New University of Yorkshire in the quartet. Together they create an Anti-University near the NYU as a form of protest against the encumbering system of education in the university. Here Byatt merges the hippies with the students' demonstrations which partly seek to change the system of education. Frederica is driven to quit the art school where she teaches literature because the students deemed the course irrelevant to their major interests. Near the end of the quartet, these destructive students and hippies vandalize the university and nearly burn it to the ground.

Even art took a subcultural turn in the sixties and sought to subvert the authority of the Establishment, as clearly demonstrated in the two art forms 'skoob' and Happenings. 'Skoob' is an art form which involves the burning of huge towers of books. In the quartet, Paul Ottaker deliberately chooses books from Frederica's library that represent the symbols of high culture, a symbol of the Establishment. Happenings are artistic events without a scenario; everyone participates and does what he wants without planning. Mostly the participants are victims of various forms of psychedelia (drugs and music).

Chapter Three aims to focus on the state of religious faith of sixties' Britain as dealt with by the author in her novel-sequence. Britain, like most of the Western world, underwent transformations in that decade in religious faith. However, the sixties witnessed two main trends in religious belief. The first is secularization; for the first time in history people have really turned away from religion in their everyday life. The second trend is the turning away from Christianity to Oriental religions such as the Hare Krishna and Transcendental Meditation.

In the tetralogy, the characters may be divided into into three groups: complete atheists such as Bill Potter, Jude Mason, Rupert Parrott, Jacqueline Winwar and Luk Lysgaard Peacock. The second group comprises the agnostic characters: Frederica, the heroine, Stephanie (Frederica's

sister), John Ottaker, and Marcus Potter. Finally, the third group emerges in the fourth volume at the end of the sixties. This group consists of the people who form a sort of a religious cult under the leadership of Joshua Ramsden.

Chapter Four, the final part of the study, comprises the women issues of the quartet. Byatt is not considered a radical feminist, but a political one, meaning she is not set at annihilating the male from life, rather she focuses in how women can achieve equality with men. Her concern in this quartet is not to deal with feminism as a whole but with the Second Wave Feminism of the sixties. Moreover, she does not discuss the historical aspects of the movement but its effects on the characters of the novel-sequence. In other words, the women in the quartet do not march the streets demanding their freedom, but the effect of the movement is there in the development of the characters from the beginning of the quartet till the end.

Again Byatt divides her women characters into two main groups: subservient, and self-assertive. Most of the women characters of the quartet are suffering from the conflict between the life of the mind and the life of the body. The women characters of the novel that belong to the fifties all lose the battle, Stephanie being the primary example. As for those in the sixties, the struggle continues, and those who lose are those who die in the quartet.

The study seeks to tackle the sixties from a cultural perspective by analyzing the features of the decade in Byatt's tetralogy. Special attention is given to the subcultural elements of the decade and the tetralogy simultaneously; the condition of religious faith of the British society; and the issues related to the era of the Second Wave Feminism.