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**Theorising the Plural Equations within Masculinity: Demystifying the Hegemonic Discourse through Byatt's *Babel Tower***

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**Abstract**

Being a fiction based on a decade, set in 1960s A.S. Byatt's *Babel Tower* (1996) proceeds with the tale of Frederica which initiated in *The Virgin in the Garden* (1978), persisted in *Still Life* (2005) and found its culmination in *A Whistling Woman* (2002). Byatt exhibits her endowment for proficient and refined aptitude to admirable ramification for utter amusement. She concocts the generally uncomplicated communal matters of the epoch with the afflicted ethical convolution of her Victorian antecedents. With an intention of evoking the subversions of the conventionally established norms and attributes associated with masculinity, the paper makes an inquisitive study of the various characters in the novel. With the vacillating coalition of the eugenically entrenched gender dispositions, both masculinity and femininity gets vehemently overturned. The grand narrative of hegemonic masculinity gets deconstructed through this research endeavour. The study also examines the predominance of masculine potential within the female entities. Thus, it emanates yet another mode of subversion of discourses of gender and power considering the theoretical premises of masculinity as promulgated by Jeff Hearn in his essay "Man, Identity and Power" published in Felicia Ashé's *The New Politics of Masculinity* (2007) and *Masculinity, Psychoanalysis, Straight Queer Theory* (2008) by Calvin Thomas.

**Keywords:** Subverting hegemonic masculinity, destabilizing gender roles, reconstructing notions of sex and gender, locating femasculinity, plural and alternative masculinities, dissociating masculinity from maleness

**Introduction: Deconstructing hegemonic masculinity**

The very beginning of Byatt's work introduces us to a male character, Hugh Pink, a fellow mate of Frederica Reiver during her Cambridge days. We must not lose any opportunity that urges us to look into the incoherence, indefiniteness and fear of assertion of the male entity. His lack of strong masculine essence makes him too ineligible to be regarded as a conventional masculine entity. Masculinities have been defined as "configurations of practice within gender relations, a structure that includes large-scale institutions and

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economic relations as well as face-to-face relationships and sexuality” (Connell, *The Men and the Boys* 29). These expounded premises gets further enunciated as – “They are inherently historical; and their making and remaking is a political process affecting the balance of interests in society and the direction of social change.” (Connell, *Masculinities* 44) Hugh’s intense ease in being within his own solitariness, “walking along an avenue of ancient yews, stretched darkly over hills and across valleys” (Byatt 2), evokes his reserved, restrained and timid nature. Moreover, his immense incertitude become quite apparent through the mode of his wavering thoughts that “buzz round him like a cloud of insects, of varying colours, sizes and liveliness” (Byatt 2).

Having “recently made some sort of living” (Byatt 2), Hugh’s inappropriate ability of self-sufficiency and insubstantial efficacy becomes vivid to a great extent. Hugh’s masculinity gets challenged as he seems to be greatly conscious of his own inferior self. He remains greatly associated with obscurity and vagueness and provokes him persistently to survive within the oblivious and indefinite realm. This becomes extremely observant as he chooses to exist in the dark and “decides to strike off himself, into a shady path on his left” (Byatt 3). Hugh’s realization of his derogatory self springs up from his own consciousness of being “confused by memories of his own embarrassment and memories” (Byatt 4). This makes him too reticent and perturbed that “He does not speak.” (Byatt 4) This indeed evokes a disintegration of the masculine potential as the male entity appears to be too afraid to face the reality. Hugh’s unmasculine<sup>1</sup> identity surfaces as his intrinsic individuality seem to lack any speck of masculine boldness and courage.

Hugh’s inferior cognitive aspects appears to be too evident before Frederica’s “intellectually stylish” (Byatt 14) self. The latter deliberately evince Hugh’s subjugated and demeaned individuality by “rejecting assistance” (Byatt 14) from him. This also becomes vivid through his own depiction of himself as “callow creature then and you had so many of us half or altogether in love with you” (Byatt 75). Hugh’s eventual projection of his own “feel dead” (Byatt 75) realization only appears to materialize his lack of cognitive productivity. It seems to remain confined within the strong clutches of the deceased and disintegrated mental aspects. This remains a constant source of his consternation and fright: “the poem – I see as I write – is about Death in that sense too. You will see it doesn’t really have an end and that’s because I still don’t know why it got written – I will let you know if I find out.” (Byatt 75-76) The persistent repetition of “if” (Byatt 76), elicits the dubiety and bafflement of Hugh as well as his inability to construct an effectual cogitating mind. His failure to propagate concrete cognitive aspects compels him to remain within a thick smoke of ambiguity. This indeed emanates Hugh’s lack of control over his own thoughts and his uttermost irrationality. Thus, every aspect of masculine ingenuity gets ceased from him. It is

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Hugh's lack of cognitive countenance that creates a dilemma regarding his masculine rationality as "Hugh isn't very good at describing" (Byatt 81).

### **Depicting the unmasculine within masculinity**

Proclaiming himself as one of those "Masked Men" (82), Tony depicts his own obscured existence. His entire individuality revolves round vagueness and ambiguousness. Evoking his own inefficacy and his lack of insight and distinct perspective Tony expresses his own demeaned and inferior status. He finds himself belonging to the level of "*classless things*" (Byatt 82). It is indeed Tony's "mindless malice" that makes it "*so hard*" and "difficult to imagine" (Byatt 83) with proper rationality. This compels him to equate his own state to that of "a debacle" (83). It is with Tony's immense consciousness of Frederica's ability to "*work for Victory*" (Byatt 83) that make him realize his own inferior cognitivity more intensely. Depending on Frederica's intellectual vibrancy to acquire his own position within the cognitive horizon Tony evokes his own inferiority and rational lack. Furthermore, Wilkie's discernment of Frederica as "a married lady of substance" (Byatt 83) and her individuality "ingenious enough" seems to entirely overshadow his indistinct maleness. His detection of himself as otherwise unproductive and "still as stone" (Byatt 84) depicts his lack of existential worth. Being "distracted by your [Frederica's] face and your [her] presence" (Byatt 84), Tony seems to be totally dependent on Frederica. He desperately desires to attain her close affinity in order to acquire his own productive ability: "come back to us, come and see us, come and talk" (Byatt 85).

Moreover, it is also Frederica's "usual acumen" (Byatt 86) and "quick-witted and presentable" (Byatt 85) nature that raises a pertinent amount of questions regarding Alexander Wedderburn. His effectuality falls under the premises of doubt as his "not wholly satisfactory" (Byatt 85) self gets divulged. Hearn's theorization of men and masculinities deconstructs formulations of men as ontologically prior to the social constitution of gender. "His theoretical framework has also meant that he has prioritised a set of analytical issues across the concepts of men, power, knowledge and gender transgression." (Ashe 124) The male realization of Frederica's ineptness "make them want to" (Byatt 107) remain associated with her cognitive superiority. This further explicates their lack of rational aspects and realization of their bottom-rung status. The male entities being anxious to "Only Connect" (Byatt 109) [resembling "Forster's incantation 'Only connect'" (Byatt 310)] with Frederica substantiates her distinct potential. Thus, they are forced to exist as the feeble and powerless creatures. They are the males who continually find themselves within a "whole mess" which is "irretrievable" (Byatt 115). This in fact evinces their unorganized and dishevelled selves that are too insubstantial.

Their timid and trepid selves get totally elicited as "Alan and Hugh are more perturbed, but also less disposed to interfere." (Byatt 115) We observe their utmost fear to

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confront the challenges of reality and lack of a strong, ardent masculine voice. These impede them from interfering into the matters that are indeed a perennial source of their perturbation, only fuelling it up increasingly. Moreover, the males realize their own lack of worthiness within the vigorous realm of Frederica. This gets exceedingly discerned through their own assertion: “we thought we hadn’t any right to interfere” (Byatt 124). The manner in which the insignificance of the male entities gets proclaimed- “It is as though they had never come, never existed.” (Byatt 118), it becomes a tremendous validation of their menial and infinitesimal status.

A tremendous sabotage of the accepted norms of masculine potentiality gets vividly perceptible even through the character portrayal of Alexander Wedderburn. He appears to be too conscious of his ineffectuality and lack of significance: “the fact that I am not helpful, I am not useful” (Byatt 137). The dishevelled, incoherent and vague entirety of Alexander becomes greatly projected by means of his realization of his lack of vitality leading to “boredom”. His association with the “dusty” ambience evokes his “trapped” self within an obscure horizon. This is certainly far from being a sphere that can be considered to be illuminated and desirable enough: “He remembers, he summons up, a pervasive smell of trapped boredom, of brown linoleum and dusty windows, of slow, slow-ticking clocks and scratches and splutters of intransigent ink.” (Byatt 141) Alexander seems to compare his own lack of vigorousness and masculine virility to that of the “slow-ticking clocks” (Byatt 141).

Despite the fact that his cognizance of Simon being his own son makes him to proclaim himself: “Alexander thinks of saying: I have a son who thinks he is another man’s [Thomas Poole’s] son. But he does not say it.” (Byatt 170) Alexander’s timidity and his realization of his cognitive inferiority cease him from attaining a place within the illuminated and superior intellectual sphere: “Alexander is not able to sit next to Agatha Mond, who is having a serious discussion in the front seat with Professor Wijn Nobel about the grammar evidence.” (Byatt 171) His cognizance of his own subservient status leads to his utmost fear and reluctance to follow his impulses: “He resists the impulse to put a fatherly arm round her shoulder.” (Byatt 181) His apparent recognition of the “bolt” (Byatt 181) fortitude of Frederica compels him to persistently acquire a position “behind her” (Byatt 180). The fact “Alexander comes to look for her [Frederica]” (Byatt 254) truly evokes her strapping individuality. This compels him to act adherent to her. Thus, it evidently makes him too apprehensive to withdraw from her potential horizon. It is his extreme degree of uncertainty and lack of confidence that forces him to cogitate on the fault in his derogatory “genes” (Byatt 183) that now rests within Simon.

Hearn argues that social, economic, symbolic and political structures produce gendered power imbalances (*Men in Public Eye*). “Differentials of power between men and women, Hearn contends, means that men collectively and individually, albeit differentially,

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benefit most from the social organisation of gender relationships. Hearn therefore argues that gender relations reflect the patriarchal ordering of society.” (Ashe 125) The stereotypical masculine attributes again appears to be detached from the manner in which the male entities get portrayed in Byatt’s work through the character of Simon, the son of Thomas Poole. We find him projected as “a natural quiet boy in a corner” who is “emotionally disturbed” (Byatt 141). Simon seems to be totally cognizant of his lack of existential worth and his subjugated status. He appears to be too timid, coy and unassertive to fall within the purview of conventional masculinity.

The accepted notion of masculinity yet again takes a vacillating stance as Desmond Bull’s maleness evokes a “Divided Self” (Byatt 228) that is latent within him. This makes him “momentarily disconcerted” (Byatt 229) and elicits his disordered self. We detect him is too discordant, baffled and incoherent to arrive to the seemingly potential horizon of rationality and distinctness. With such intrinsic essence he seems bereft of any speck of ambiguity. The perennial conflict and cacophony within the vague and muffled Desmond Bull compels him to remain “hidden” (Byatt 229). This makes him too afraid to encounter the reality. He attempts to sustain within an isolated and demeaned sphere of his own- “It’s a bit private” (Byatt 229). With this Bull appears to project his “junk” self by means of his own assertion: “I’m a bit of a schizophrenic.” (Byatt 229) Getting equated to a mere “row of stones”, Bull presents the thick mist of enigma that clouds his entire existence: “There are old paintings of mine struggling around under the black and white” (Byatt 230). Sustaining within a sphere that is brimming with antagonisms and contrariety, Bull seems to be totally conscious of his inferior and subjugated mode of survival. This persistently deals with “the black and white”, “Paintings that I [he] was too fond off and ones that I [he] rather loathed” (Byatt 230).

It is indeed Bull’s lack of rationality and cognitive insight that impedes him from repudiating the “baffled” realm. This compels him remain juxtaposed with “the mysterious/ordinary pebbles” (Byatt 231). Although he realizes that “they are no good”, he appears to be too “sombre” and “pale” (Byatt 230) to possess the ratiocination and vehemence to discard them. Being conscious of being “a human body in an abstract world” (Byatt 232), Bull appears to be too irrational and daunted to emerge from his puzzling air of opaqueness. He seems more at ease with his own sense of “impossibility” and his sustenance in the “abstract world” (Byatt 232). Bull increasingly suffers from lack of confidence and his non-cognitive, uncertain and insecure self. This increasingly infests him as he finds himself antipodal to the “clever” aspects of Frederica’s persona and her potentiality to “catch his thought” (Byatt 232). With his very confession- “masks are mine” (Byatt 232), Bull seems to overturn every aspect of established masculine notion that has by far been within the

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purview of definiteness and strong fortitude. Such a definitive ground that defies obscurity as too repugnant and detestable certainly makes him an object of “hate” (Byatt 232).

Within this expansive realm of faltered masculinity also comes the character portrayal of Rupert Parrott. He fails to satisfy the conventional norm of strong and great masculine physicality as he is described as “a small man” and “plump-cheeked” (Byatt 146). His “round, a little puckered, with soft lips drawn in” (Byatt 146) and the “fleshiness which make him seem slow” (Byatt 146-147) perspicuously evokes his detachment from the stereotypical masculine attributes. His physical aspects appear to generate an association with the feminine dictums. This substantiates as we discern him entirely devoid of the rough and stout ruggedness of masculine vigorousness. The defiance of masculine physical attributes within Rupert- “his pink cheeks pinker” (Byatt 301) - seems to propagate his association with feminine aspects, thus overthrowing the stereotypical dictums.

A distinct nullification of the accepted yardstick of masculinity materializes through the concoction of the disparate gender identities of masculinity and femininity within a single entity. Such an analytical viewpoint can be anticipated through the character portrayal of “The head of Liberal Studies” who “is a large and handsome man, with what Frederica’s mother would have called a sweet face, bright blue eyes, great wings of groomed black and white streaked hair, and a soft smiling mouth.” (Byatt 161) The “sweet” and “soft” attributes juxtaposed with the “large and handsome” (Byatt 161) aspects brings about such a conventional gender scepticism.

The fact that men, “regardless of their social location will benefit, albeit at different points in gender systems, from their identities as men to the detriment of women” (Ashe 125), gets extremely subverted through the research endeavour. Nevertheless, it also becomes protuberant through the description of several male entities that seems to be in the list of members of the Steerforth Committee. It is through their character disposition that the conventional masculinity seems to dissociate from maleness. This becomes prominent through the depiction of Louis Roussel, the “psychologist” (Byatt 166) who “is a little man, dark and birdlike” (Byatt 171) lacking the robust and staunch aspects of masculine physicality. On the other hand, we can also observe Roger Magog, the “Freelance writer and teacher” (Byatt 167) who is too “vague”, “invisible”, “shabby” and “pale” (Byatt 171) to be concordant with significant distinctness and momentousness.

Furthermore, the stereotypical masculine notions get completely overturned by the very portraiture of Mickey Impey: “The Liverpool poet is very pretty, with a mane of buttercup-coloured curls, a sweet mouth, and huge innocent blue eyes.” (Byatt 172) We can even perceive the maleness of Mickey getting delineated with the assistance of the words “pretty” and “sweet” (Byatt 172). With such elucidation of his innate physical aspects we can detect an undeniable emanation of the essence femininity. This indeed results in his total



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dearth of masculine quintessence. Mickey's consciousness of his menial self gets perspicuously projected as he protrudes his fear of assertion. He even seeks permission from the "precise and professionally observant" Auriol Worth, "the headmistress" (Byatt 172) before speaking: "Can I say something to these kids?... Do you object?" (Byatt 179) This apparently reveals the paucity of masculine boldness and courage within "The Liverpool poet" (Byatt 172).

It is Mickey Impey's "fear" and his inappropriate "behaviour" (Byatt 180) that evokes his meagreness of existential worth. This even makes him "an excellent group irritant" (Byatt 181), a subservient being of utmost detestation. The male individuals thus gets delineated as "cowed, subservient" (Byatt 172) "baffling and pointless" (Byatt 177). This results in the perennial concomitance of maleness with bewilderment, vagueness, intimidation and inferiority. This certainly obliterates their existentiality from the masculine realm. It is also the very manner in which "they feel threatened" (Byatt 280) that the male subservience and their lack of masculinity become vividly perceptible.

In Hearn's work on masculinities the concepts of gender class and patriarchy "operate to expose how men become centred as a category." (Ashe 126) Such established norms get overthrown as we observe Frederica's lawyer, Arnold Begbie. He appears to occupy a place in the expanse of dwindling masculine potentiality as "His voice is subdued", "he murmurs". This appears to explicate his sense of inferiority by constantly "looking down" (Byatt 276). Begbie's substantiality arrives into a constant stream of dubiety as it gets contrasted with Frederica's "precise" (Byatt 278) attributes. Begbie's insubstantiality evokes through the fact that "she [Frederica] neither really likes nor really trusts" (Byatt 467) him. Moreover, it also surfaces by means of his irrationality and lack of cognitive preciseness. His innateness remains entrapped within the very circle of "fact and fiction" (Byatt 467). The established gender dictums which promulgate the fact that "the society they lived in was built on supposing" (Byatt 55) becomes entirely subverted with the gender role reversal. Hereby it becomes corroborated that the "male creatures puffing themselves up like gannets and geese will back down and look the other way" (Byatt 55).

Hearn's analysis of 'men's studies' of men casts doubt on Stoltenberg's suggestion that resistance to masculinity can be forged through the rejection of men's power. Hearn illustrates how men's resistances to normative gendered identities and gender power are produced through identities that are constituted within networks of power. "Men's identities therefore engender particular subversive strategies within particular contexts that impact on the political structuring. Overall, Hearn develops a more complex understanding of the political aspects of forging political resistances within the arena of gender power." (Ashe 134) The subversion of conventional masculine notion gets vibrantly overturned through Nigel as we observe his ineffectual, irrational, insecure and dependent attributes coming in

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contrast with Frederica's intellectual, rational, independent and superior ordeal. With such contrariness the stereotypical norms of masculinity gets subverted.

### **Constructing the femasculine<sup>ii</sup>: Detaching masculinity from the male**

We are able to observe a gender role reversal. The more Nigel emanates as the unmasculine entity, the greater we are able to associate Frederica's individualistic aspects with the established masculine ideals. We can observe Nigel's obscure, oblivious and darkened self from the very initial point. Furthermore, we can notice "the dark" (Byatt 32) expanse of Nigel's rooms which defies and disintegrates every attachment with illumination and vividness. It is the "watchful sharpness" (Byatt 34) of Frederica that appears to vehemently undermine the shadowy obscure and oblivious self of Nigel. He appears to be too "dark" (Byatt 34) to be capable of emerging out to the blazing and radiant macrocosmic realm: "He is a dark man in a dark suit, a soft armour, with the blue shadow of a dark beard" (Byatt 34). Moreover, Frederica's "clever and independent and- and ambitious" (Byatt 37) individuality elicits her self-sufficient, independent and assertive self. This indeed becomes yet another deliberate derogation of Nigel's masculine potential.

Nigel's awareness of himself being "vulnerable to rejection" emanates his "panic-struck human" (Byatt 39) self. He is too afraid to lose the "fierce Frederica" (Byatt 39). Moreover, we find him totally dependent on her and this elicits his "small voice, a small, sad, honey voice" (Byatt 38). We also observe his eventual apologetic assertion: "'I'm sorry, Frederica. I love you.'" (Byatt 38) Nigel's immense dependency on Frederica and his fear of getting abandoned by her brings about the dubiety regarding the presence of any masculine aspects within his personality. This makes him too devoid of his maleness. He fails to get recognized as the superior sex in their marital relationship: "He concentrates on her. He wants her. He wishes to keep her. He chose her for the mother of his child. At this moment she is all he can see, all his senses are alert for her next movement." (Byatt 39) This not only evokes Nigel's inability to survive independently but also his perturbed self that is too timid and volatile. His tremendous awareness of the strong masculine potentiality of Frederica forces Nigel to address her by her name. Thereby, she emerges as "not a woman, not Woman, not mindless relief, but Frederica" (Byatt 40). This certainly exhibits her as the superior sex and evokes Nigel's desperation to survive within her potential horizon. He necessitates this in order to overcome his own existential-crisis and derive his existential worth: "'I want you, Frederica.'" (Byatt 39)

It is Frederica's strong masculine "roar of rage" (Byatt 79) that makes it too strenuous for Nigel to act coherently. He fails to even assert confidently: "He cannot quite think what to say next or to do next, and looks darkly about" (Byatt 79). Frederica's bold "unforgivable"



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(Byatt 79) attitude towards Nigel evinces his “silly” and “not too well defined” (Byatt 80) self. This clearly depicts his “failure” to have a rationalistic assertive ability “for Nigel is not a talking man” (Byatt 80). Nigel’s insensible and nonsensical projection makes it impossible to regard him as a potential masculine entity. He appears to be too “ridiculous” and “silly” (Byatt 81). This further proves his inferior and derogatory status before Frederica’s “staunch” rationality: “it makes him look ridiculous. She is upset by how silly he looked, reciting Hugh Pink’s words in that childish, finicking voice.” (Byatt 81) It is nevertheless, the strong and potential masculine gaze of Frederica- “she looks up at him, and watches him” (Byatt 87) which entirely benumbs Nigel’s male virility. It compels him to remain within “his still, dark silence” (Byatt 87). The “argumentative, passionate” and “clever” (Byatt 87) “ingenuity” (Byatt 88) of Frederica heavily suppresses the masculine innateness of Nigel. She makes him suffer from existential crisis and become conscious of his self-insignificance: “I don’t exist” (Byatt 88). Nigel’s projection as “the other sex” (Beauvoir xv-xxix) becomes profoundly pertinent. He seems to be totally dependent on Frederica for his own existence. He suffers from massive insecurity at the very thought of losing her close potential affinity: “I thought you might be planning something. I thought maybe you were going on with what you once said about going back to that place. I got it wrong.” (Byatt 88) This materializes Nigel’s consciousness of his lack of comprehending ability. His extreme willingness to confine Frederica within the “elastic cage” of “marriage” (Byatt 88) proves his own level of incertitude and insecurity.

Nigel’s lack of masculine virility becomes enormously palpable. His incapacitated physical potential comes in contrast with Frederica’s masculine strength and “capacity for rage” (Byatt 89): “She sinks her teeth into it [Nigel’s skin] as best she can. She tastes blood.” (Byatt 90) Nigel’s masculine presence falls under a certain dubiety. He seems too impotent to counter Frederica’s robust and violent actions. We observe this through a vigorous impulsive vociferation from Nigel as a reaction to Frederica’s violent actions- “Bitch” (Byatt 90). This too seems to be contested and curbed off by Frederica’s strapping articulation- “Bitches bite” (Byatt 90). Nigel eventually falling “half on the bed, half on the floor” (Byatt 90) perspicuously depicts Frederica’s immense physical strength. This appears to be too strenuous and robust for Nigel to challenge. Frederica gets portrayed as “a creature to whom impotence and indecision are painful” (Byatt 90). She enunciates “real hatred for Nigel” (Byatt 91). It is within his self that she indubitably discerns these undesirable and floundering attributes. Nigel’s “composed silence” appears to be in direct contrast with Frederica’s “howls of rage” (Byatt 92). This makes him too timid and impotent a being to exist beside her. Nigel’s subordinate, and menial self gets portrayed in direct contrast with Frederica’s superior presence. He seems too “isolated” (Byatt 92) and suffering from identity crisis. This ceases him to acquire a place within the expansive realm of Frederica. Her vitality gets

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nonetheless equated to that of “the sky”: “without identity, isolated from the spread of the sky” (Byatt 92).

Nigel’s lack of assertiveness- “perhaps he never speaks” (Byatt 113) evokes his lack of masculine voice in its extremity. Nigel’s confession to Frederica- “I don’t feel sure of you” (Byatt 117), “I was a bit scared of you. I’m frightened you might find me boring... and want to go off, or something” (Byatt 117) certainly promulgates his insecure, dependent, timid and perturbed self. We find him suffering from existential crisis and uncertainties. His maleness falls under the purview of an immense level of ambiguousness. This happens the very moment he realizes himself too timid and impotent to stop Frederica from abandoning him: “His eyes are full of tears. They run on to his cheeks.” (Byatt 120) Frederica’s immense realization of Nigel’s cognitive inferiority and ineffectuality provokes her further to regard him as too incapacitated to exist beside her: “Nigel has no words, and I cannot do without them.” (126)... “He does not write letters himself: language is not his medium.” (Byatt 375) The way in which Frederica seems to exercise “Her grip on him” (Byatt 129) truly evokes her superior commanding authority. She totally controls the subsidiary self of Nigel vehemently forcing him to exist as the inferior sex. Nigel gets projected as “the opposite of everything – so faded, so – so discussy and not doing” and “a total fool” (Byatt 143). Moreover, we can discern his utmost fear to emerge into real space: “a cross-legged prisoner in a padded cell in a dunce’s cap” (Byatt 148). Being associated with the projection of an entity adorning “a dunce’s cap” (Byatt 148), Nigel’s own cognitive self gets overshadowed by an ignoramus essence. The more Nigel’s “arguments” appear to be “a nonsense in her [Frederica’s] world, the greater we are able to ascertain his irrational and vague existential status. It is Nigel’s utter “confusion” (Byatt 380) and inability to acquire a cognitive potentiality that makes him lack a “voice” (Byatt 376) of his own. This in fact subjugates his comprehensiveness to “unrelated scraps of languages, from apparently wholly discrete vocabularies” (Byatt 380). We find him incessantly requiring Frederica to “rearrange” (Byatt 380) them. We can detect Frederica’s immense “distaste” (Byatt 382) of Nigel’s lack of cognitive aspects. This thrusts her to vanquish his insignificance to nothingness: “quickly, quickly she had torn the pages out of the book, ripped them into scraps and flakes, and ground them down amongst tea-leaves and sprout-peelings in the bucket under the sink” (Byatt 382). Frederica strongly proclaims her marriage with Nigel as “Union of Opposites” (Byatt 383). Her extreme regret regarding her decision taken “out of some desire” (Byatt 383) confirms Nigel’s inferior status.

### **Deriving the non-masculine<sup>iii</sup>narrative: Perceiving the queer**

“The new politics of masculinities can be viewed as only subversive of power.” (Ashe 134) The established notions of masculinity get totally superseded by an alternative theory the very moment when we reach out to the character depiction of Jude Mason. He gets

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represented as a mere “living creature” (Byatt 163) who has “hooded eyes and a thin mouth, a head clothed and veiled in long iron-grey hair” (Byatt 164). His maleness arrives to a pertinent question as “Frederica’s eyes focus on the genitals, which a swing of hair-curtain, accidental or deliberate, reveals to be male, rather small, clouded by iron-grey pubic hair.” (Byatt 164) We can detect that “The creature holds out a bony hand” and has his maleness remain “clouded” within the persistent “grey”ness. It becomes “impossible to see whether this is a man or a woman” (Byatt 164). His unrefined and uncultivated “grey”ness remain submerged within the “frisson of distaste” (Byatt 164), Jude seems to materialize his subjugated and abhorrent status that is extremely capable of making him the inferior sex.

Moreover, Jude’s fear to promulgate his real identity and remain “veiled” (Byatt 164) can be deciphered. This represents his identity crisis which compels him to get himself addressed by the name “Jude Mason” (Byatt 165). Certainly, this is “Not his real name” and this tremendously posits him as “a mystery man” (Byatt 165). Jude’s acute preference of “Nietzsche” (Byatt 165) substantiates his existential crisis. It also generates his incertitude and agitation to confront the reality. This is the realm from which he persistently desires to “vanish” (Byatt 165). Frederica’s very decipherment of Jude as “something awful” (Byatt 165) brings about his insignificant and appalling status. Jude’s awareness of his own inferior status appears to be prominent enough. We find him too dependent on Frederica’s superior cognitive essence. Her individuality is too illuminated to radiate the worthlessness of his dismal self: “I will say nothing at all, if you let me sit quietly in this corner and listen to you.” (Byatt 326) It is Jude’s detachment from the potential intellectual realm that makes him find his own “isolated” zone of comfort in the obscured “corner” (Byatt 326).

Frederica’s boldness to “screw your [Jude’s] courage” (Byatt 439) and suppress his voice- “I think you should shut up.” Byatt, *Babel Tower* (470) validates her strong masculinity. She is potential enough to vehemently undermine Jude’s maleness. Jude’s subordinate cognitive status gets increasingly subjugated as it gets attached to something crude- “savage intelligence” (Byatt 439). It is undoubtedly Jude’s own admittance of inappropriate male physique that fuels up his subjacent masculinity: “And that my shins are not proportionate – at some moment, from some angles – with each other or with other parts of my anatomy.” (Byatt 441) Jude evokes his inappropriate individual vigour to get regarded as a male entity as he concedes: “I am a poor bare forked thing, and such as I am, I am, and as such you must e’en take me, for a man” (Byatt 473).

Hearn also defines studies that “expose the way in which gender connects with other forms of power to produce subjugated forms of masculinities as potentially critically engaged with men’s identities” (“Theorizing Men” 797–98). He argues that these kinds of approaches to men’s identities engage in the practice of “alterity” (798). “Alterity involves a move from ‘internal uncertainty, to reconstituted positioning, and thus a modified subversion of men’

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(“Theorizing Men” 798). Through this strategy, men are interrogated as other... They subvert dominant forms of masculinities by exposing how their constitution requires the relational subjugation of other men’s identities and they expose the processes through which those identities are subjugated. These studies, Hearn argues, operate as “a form of resistance to dominant formations of men,” and subvert categorical essentialism (“Theorizing Men” 799). Other critical strategies for men include “exposing the relationships between men, power and gender through alliances with feminism, as well as subverting and challenging gendered relationships at public and personal levels.” (Ashe 133)

It can be distinctly suggested that queer is the opposite of everything that dominates. It is intrinsically transgressive, challenging and subversive. Alan Sinfield writes in his book *Cultural politics – Queer Reading* (1994), “the key proposition of queer theory is that wanting a coherent identity is both an intellectual mistake and a timid refusal to take on board the breadth of sexual potential.” (x) “Queer is by definition whatever is at odds with the normal, the legitimate, the dominant. There is nothing in particular to which it necessarily refers. It is an identity without essence. ‘Queer’ then, demarcates not positivity but a positionality vis-à-vis the normative” (Halperin 62). It primarily deals with exploration of the contesting of categorization of gender and sexuality; identities are not fixed – they cannot be categorized and labeled – because identities consist of varied components and that to categorizing by one particular characteristic is certainly wrong. Moreover as “the logic of the sexual order is so deeply embedded by now in an indescribably wide range of social institutions, and is embedded in the most standard accounts of the world, queer struggles aim not just at toleration or equal status but at challenging those institutions and accounts.” (Warner xiii) Such eccentricity can be perceived through the inherent queerness of the male characters. This certainly confirms their ‘non-masculine’ gender identity which destabilizes the hegemony of conventional masculine standards. This becomes relevant enough through Frederica’s comprehension of Alan: “It is with Alan that she has best negotiated real friendship, she considers, without any danger of falling into sexual abjection, instability, or bullying. She has wondered from time to time if he is queer.” (Byatt 82) Nevertheless, it is also the extreme degree of incertitude and obscurity within Daniel that evokes his insignificant and pointless self. This equates his floundered masculine aspects to the thick smog of ambiguity. It compels him to consider himself as a “queer” entity: “I see people singing in the streets, and they look queer, which makes me realise I am.” (Byatt 86)

Hearn notes “how white, heterosexual men located in higher social strata of society benefit more from established systems of gender power than other groups that face disadvantage or discrimination due to cross-cutting identities such as race, class or sexuality (see also Hearn and Collinson 1994).” (Ashe 125) The queerness of the ambiguous males encompassing the potential dynamic horizon of Frederica appears to be vibrant enough. She

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seems to be conscious enough of their masculine lack. We find her cognizing the fact that “Homosexuals, negroes, and Conservative Ladies are human beings” (Byatt 98). We can observe Frederica’s discernment of the equivocal males encompassing her as queer entities. She perceives that “it is impossible to see whether they are a man or woman” (Byatt 164). The queerness becomes more vivid as she cogitates on the fact that “it is odd when Civil Servants wear dresses that reveal the movements of their bottoms and the backs of their knees, like schoolgirls, or female commanders of cartoon spaceships.” (Byatt 180) Frederica seems to have detected the queer psyche of the inefficacious male entities. We can observe her cognitive insight attempting to create an analogous conjunction with several existential beings. They indeed evoke the similar degree of outlandish eccentricity. Furthermore, with the depiction of Mr. Griffith Goatley, Frederica’s Counsel who demonstrates “a beautiful pale skin and beautifully manicured hands” (Byatt 484) the queer idiosyncratic essence within the males in the fictional cosmos becomes axiomatic.

As we delve into the fiction more, we can observe a distinct promulgation of the theoretical notion of “otherness” (Byatt 310). This becomes evident even through the minor characters- “Mr Wilcox’s attraction of otherness” which makes them more “obtuse” (Byatt 310) individuals. We can locate that the males “so passionately desire *connection*” (Byatt 310) with the queer characteristic traits. We can also observe that “They want to experience an undifferentiated All, a Oneness, body and mind, self and world, male and female.” (Byatt 310) Similar “abrupt changes of identity from space to space” becomes even conspicuous through the portrait of “a series of collages – balloon-breasted bearded men in fishnet tights and stilettos wrestling or embracing giant carrots and stuffed rabbits” (Byatt 439). We find them hanging in the great exhibition studio at the Samuel Palmer School during the “June end-of-the-year” (Byatt 439) Dip Show. Such representation of queerness becomes even perceptible through “The bird-man” during Paul Ottokar’s performance. We observe that “At regular intervals the bird-man raises and lets fall his wings/arms in an impotent way.” (Byatt 442) As “the bird-man begins a virtuoso imitation of a hen laying an egg” (Byatt 442), the queerness in him becomes apparent. He appears to conjoin as well as defy the masculine and feminine characteristic traits. This exudes him as an entity that is capable enough to subvert the conventional notions of masculinity with his bizarre Intersexuality. The male happens to promulgate the activity of procreation that remains incessantly adhered to the female. The manners in which the males get equated to the “snails [that] are hermaphrodite” (Byatt 463) evoke their queerness. It also “inexplicably” makes them “more banal, more ordinary” (Byatt 463) creatures. Such extent of queerness within the males emphatically makes them the entities who emerges “nor as an equal” to masculinity or maleness “but as something in between” (Byatt 245). They potentially challenges and supersedes the established stereotypical dogma of masculinity.

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## Conclusion

It is in fact the male realization of the tremendous aspects of faltered masculinity within their persona which seems to bring about their obtuse individuality. It keeps them isolated from all the established gendered notions. Thus, it brings them to a void space where there appears a juxtaposition of both male and female crippling the established gender identities. The more the idea of oneness spreads, the more gender-specific characteristics are undermined. In modern situations, men are unable to escape gender dominance; instead, they must create a politics of transgression by creating gender defiance via the inner depths of culturally constructed subjectivities. These subjectivities can maintain gender domination. Besides, certain characteristics of subjectivity can be used as the basis for transformation and reinvention.

The subversion of masculinity can also be observed through detachment of the males from every physical norm that brings about the maleness in them. They appear to evince their detachment from every masculine attribute and eventually, get themselves more associated with a gender identity which can be regarded as extremely unmasculine. With their immense desire to evince the queerness of their personality they certainly contest their masculine outlook. This makes them an object of ridicule and subordination. Nevertheless, it also depicts their non-masculine identity which appears to be extremely unfit to conform to the gendered notions of masculinity or femininity.

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## Notes

<sup>i</sup> unmasculine: gender identity that acts in opposition to conventional yardstick of masculinity in males

<sup>ii</sup> femasculine: identity that affixes the intrinsic essence of hegemonic masculinity to the very entity of the female

<sup>iii</sup> non-masculine: absolute negation of established dogma of masculinity; nullification of the hegemonic ordeal



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