



**Research Article**

**REORCHESTRATION OF CULTURAL CONSCIOUSNESS IN JOHN BARTH'S *GILES GOAT-BOY***

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**ARTICLE INFO**

**Article History:**

Received 7<sup>th</sup> December, 2017

Received in revised form 25<sup>th</sup>

January, 2018 Accepted 13<sup>th</sup> February, 2018

Published online 28<sup>th</sup> March, 2018

**Key words:**

Multiculture, discrimination, depression, ignorance, illusion, innocence, experience, disintegration, repressed desires.

**ABSTRACT**

This paper explicates the beliefs, customs, and ethics are relative to the individual within his own social context. Right and wrong are culture specific; what is considered moral in one society may be considered immoral in another, and since no universal standard of morality exists, no one has the right to judge another society's customs. The American society is multicultural, and there is no special culture to hang on. We can see an aching of past culture in most of the post modern writings. This paper reflects on the Barthesque dissemination of identity in terms of anonymity, pathology, control systems, fragmented society, and deflated myths. In *Giles Goat-Boy* John Barth explores how innocence versus ignorance and experience, the pejorative aspects of innocence, and ignorance is an illusion. The protagonist's frail struggle constitutes identity resulting in psychological disintegration. This paper concludes the observations elucidate the tension between order and disorder in reality.

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**INTRODUCTION**

Disenchanted and distorted by the sway of technology, man loses his individuality, and subsequently, identity, John Barth, the representative Postmodern American writer, depict the plight of contemporary humanity caught in, rather than sustained by, a culture that celebrates the carnivalesque of technology, dissolution of identity, and death rather than humanity and life. The theme of mythical revival is as old as the Socratic pronouncement: "Know thyself" Yet, from Oedipus Rex to Jacob Horner, this has been the undercurrent that enables the literary/critical text afloat, whirl or sink. However, the search for the self/identity has basically remained a monolithic phenomenon and narcissistic in its frame work from the Traditionalists and even to the Modernists. Although the Modernists were bewildered by the divided/disintegrated self, they still held firm conviction that the self can be integrated through an inner sense of unity. The Postmodernists who ruled out even this meagre contingency given to self, "Identity," "self" and "ego" in a postmodern slippery ground have multi-dimensions. Ego, in its original sense, is seen as a mask. The self is not seen as a separate entity that the individual can afford to be narcissistic about anymore. The boundary of the self is made visible only in contra-distinction with the other. Semantically speaking, the self is not to be found in itself but in the other. The conventional markers of these aspects are blurred. Hence "identity" has become a fluid concept.

Barth is selected for this study because of the congruity in his representations which converge on the theme quite paradoxical with respect to distortion of all structures, linguistic, cognitive, conceptual, and religious are necessary distortions of reality, though Barth never ranks these distortions. The American society is multi-cultured, and there is no special culture to hang on. We can see an aching of past culture in most of the post modern writings. This paper reflects on the Barthesque dissemination of identity in terms of anonymity, pathology, control systems, fragmented society, and deflated myths. The society is fragmented, the people ache for their identity, and their nihilistic mentality leads them to nothingness. Most of the inhabitants of America are migrated, and they have no special culture to hang on. In the multicultural society, they lost their tradition and faced the after effects like suicide, abortion, lack of love etc. Conflict between many of their inherited beliefs or rather tradition leads them to absurdity. This explicates that beliefs, customs, and ethics are relative to the individual within his own social context. Right and wrong are culture specific; what is considered moral in one society may be considered immoral in another, and since no universal standard of morality exists, no one has the right to judge another society's customs. *Giles Goat-Boy* marked a separate stage in Barth's career in which the range and direction of his interests changed. As with most issues concerning Barth, however, our understanding of this change is necessarily paradoxical. Cultures are worthy in their own right and of equal value. In his, *Giles Goat-Boy*, Barth is quite articulate about the philosophical problem he is intrigued with so as to make it the theme of the investigation by his protagonist-narrator, George Giles. The question George Giles asks is what Albert Camus called "the fundamental question of philosophy" in *The Myth*

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of *Sisyphus*, that is, the meaning of life in the world where man has lost his faith in God. The novel itself is presumably an attempt of the narrator to explain the process and the outcome of his Inquiry about the question of meaning of life.

Despite the gloomy subject matter, Giles's recollection is full of comic renditions of life. Critics have praised and detailed his comic and satiric use of the mono-myth of the hero as well as the many allegorical levels of *Giles Goat-Boy*. But many have also found the book tedious and boring, largely because the mythic pattern, and thus the book's basic plot, are essentially known from the beginning; though Barth makes a mystery of some elements such as the identity of George's father, the course of his life is never in doubt. Of interest, given the book's long and often repetitive nature, are the details that make Barth's story unique: the evolution of his themes and techniques as they are woven in to new designs on this basic structural framework. Barth has said that he intended *Giles Goat-Boy* to be more than just a satire of the hero myth, that he aimed to "escalate the satire into something larger, darker, and more compassionate" (Meras 22). Beneath its satirical and mythical surface, Giles is indeed "something larger, darker, and more compassionate." And beneath the admittedly tedious working out of the rather formulaic plot lies a new and exciting step in the evolution of Barth's concept of love. In this fourth novel, Barth again addresses the connection between identity and intimacy, the difference between animal love and human love, the conflict between one's calling and one's personal relationships, and, as always, the desire for wholeness that may be gained through love. The myth of the hero, as it turns out, provides more than just a mere framework for Barth's concerns; its traditional themes of the hero's quest for self-identity and wholeness mirror Barth's own. As Joseph Campbell observes, "The passage of the mythological hero may be over ground, incidentally; fundamentally it is inward . . ." (29). In his archetypal journey, George struggles over much the same psychological terrain as Barth's previous protagonists, though taking a slightly different course, travelling toward a different destination.

The multiple frames surrounding the story of George's life and the questionable identity of its author make *Giles Goat-Boy* a more complex work than Barth's earlier fictions. In discussing Giles, it makes most sense to begin at the centre with the story of George, the Ag-Hill Goat Boy, and then work outward through the frames that not only surround the central tale but impinge upon it. Not surprisingly, George is cut from the same fictional cloth as the protagonists who have preceded him, especially the young Eben Cooke of *The Sot-Weed Factor*, but his story takes on a new appearance with the addition of two major metaphors: the translation of "universe" into "university," turning the world into a college campus, and the correspondence between the term for young goats and human children, making the young George a "kid" who spends his childhood as a goat. George's early identity and his gradual transformation from goat into man emphasize one of Barth's recurrent themes: the task of becoming fully human, accepting and coping with the things that set men apart from animals: the power of imagination, the awareness of death, and the ability to love singularly and passionately.

Though *Giles Goat-Boy*, like Barth's other novels, has its share of sexual couplings of all sorts, it emphasizes, as previous works have done, the difference between sex and love, and its bawdy surface covers a deeper investigation of intimate

relationships. Sex is easily understood by the goatish George; it is love and marriage that puzzle him. George's story, while chronicling his archetypal heroic adventures, also charts his emotional growth, observable in two converging lines of inquiry: his effort to understand the relationships (all of them problematic) of the couples he meets, and his attempt to comprehend his own involvement with Anastasia and their feelings for one another. George's path crosses that of three other couples, all examples of failed or perverted relationships that could serve as case histories for the course on "Problems of Modern Marriage" (457). As George tells Peter Greene, "I hadn't appreciated how curious marriage is, and I'm interested to learn now whether it's that way generally. The only other married folks I've met are Mr. and Mrs. Stoker and a Dr. Sear and his wife and their attitudes seemed a little different from yours and Mrs. Greene's, at least to me" (290). Anastasia explains that her marriage to Maurice Stoker "was strictly a business deal" (187) which turns out to be a sadomasochistic relationship; she becomes "the mistress of Stoker's every whim and craving the which, he hinted darkly, were as infinite in number as they were bestial in character" (188). Child's development occurs through his relationship with his love object his mother, so George's growth takes place through his relationship with his primary love object Anastasia, who often functions much like a mother. Not only does she represent the "Universal Mother" (Campbell 113) in the book's mythological schema, but in her personal relationship with George she performs the functions of the good mother, one of the most important being the "mirroring" she provides.

The descent into WESCAC is, in many ways, a return to the original symbiotic unity with the mother, embodied physically in the womb-like "belly" of the computer and the "oneness" George enjoys with Anastasia. But as her name, Greek for "resurrection" or rebirth, reveals, she also provides the means of George's psychological birth as an individual in his own right. Martin S. Bergmann points out that "love revives emotions that once belonged to the symbiotic phase," and observes that "The separation-individuation phase has its contribution to make to the capacity for love. It is during this phase that the child first learns to be separate in the presence of the mother" (Bergmann 33). George's relationship with Anastasia graphically illustrates this development. He is never more aware of himself as a separate person than he is with Anastasia when the "final shadow" disappears and he sees himself as an individual loved by her. Only then, secure in the knowledge of him, does he experience, in mature love, the feelings once active in the symbiotic phase. George is more successful than any of Barth's previous protagonists in satisfactorily resolving the issues of separation and individuation.

Typically for Barth, the emphasis falls on the men George, Sear, and Greene, and as might be expected, they share certain similarities. Each exemplifies the theme of *Giles Goat-Boy*: the journey from self-ignorance to self-awareness, the growth of a fragmented psyche into a whole and integrated self. And each is thus characterized by one of the major metaphors of taboo: the difference between "seeing" with the eye and "seeing" with the understanding. Finally, each illustrates the connection between knowledge of one's self and the ability to love and be loved. The presentation of Kennard Sear and, even more obviously, of Peter Greene, reflects the paradox that lies at the heart of *Giles Goat-Boy* thematically and technically. Both

men are obvious parodies, stereotypical characters, and yet beneath this seeming shallowness, they convey deep emotional truths. We are thus simultaneously confronted by the "unreality" of the exaggerated parodies while forced to acknowledge the validity of the feelings they express. Not only are the parodic elements necessary as part of the satire of *Giles Goat-Boy*, but they also provide some distance from the emotions of marital failure and middle-age distress which find their first, controlled, expression in this book; in *Lost in the Funhouse* and *Chimera* they will be dealt with more directly.

Peter Greene, as his name implies (green, naive), is a parody of American innocence, whose childhood satirizes everyone from Huck Finn to the young Abe Lincoln (271). His resulting condition combines the feelings and philosophies of Todd Andrews, Jake Horner, and Eben Cooke. He experiences "periods of impotence," and a "sense of futility" and takes to "rocking in a chair" (282). No longer believing in the Founder (God), he realizes that "Nothing in the University mattered in the long run" and attempts suicide by taking an overdose of sleeping pills. When he wakes the next morning, he, like Todd Andrews after his failed suicide attempt, he turned one of Barth's famous corners:

Nothing had changed: there was still no Founder, nor any sense in the University . . . there was still no more reason, ultimately, to heed the summons of his bladder and children than not to. Yet all these truths had a different feel now; he kissed Mrs. Greene and left the bed, still utterly uncertain how his life was to be managed and heedless of its course, but with a new indifference to this indifference. (283)

*Giles Goat-Boy* emphasizes the fragmentation of the psyche that all humans experience, attested to by the myths of all ages. While Eben attains wholeness only through a symbiotic reunion with his twin, George achieves a greater wholeness of the self, enabling him to unite with Anastasia in a mature sexual relationship. Since identity is one of George's major problems, it seems appropriate that his enemy, the anti-Giles Harold Bray, is a creature (perhaps not human) in the nature of Henry Burlingame, though more sinister. While Bray, too, has "several roles attributed to him under different names and appearances" (370), he literally wears masks that peel off only to reveal another mask. Like the onion that has no core beneath its layers, so Bray seemingly has no real self beneath his many masks.

Even the larger elements of *Giles Goat-Boy* such as the boundary dispute between East Campus and West Campus reveal the intra-psychic conflict that underlies the story. The two computers EASCAC and WESCAC; "from a special point of view it might be argued . . . were brothers or even the hemispheres of a single brain" (95).

And the philosophies they espouse pit the selflessness of the Student Unionists against the selfishness of the Information lists. As aspects of "a single brain" they not only illustrate the need for wholeness through the reintegration of polarities but illuminate the relationship between self and other. Selflessness, in the extreme, leads to loss of the self through merger with others, while selfishness may result in individual isolation. The question of personal wholeness and the issues of separation and fusion are thus intimately connected and never more so than in the relationship of George and Anastasia.

Feeling as though "my mind must crack," George finally explains, "I gave myself up utterly to that which bound, possessed, and bore me. I let go, I let all go; relief went through me like a purge" (709). The same acceptance is required of "this thing from Sub-Departments of Sentimental Literature, this love" (671), and of the mind boggling prospect of being loved. As Menelaus will make even clearer when his situation with Helen repeats that of George with Anastasia, it is impossible to know why one is loved; one can only let go of the need for rational answers and accept the irrationality and absurdity of love, as of life. Having been vouchsafed insight both philosophical and personal and having attained a sense of personal identity and wholeness, George goes farther than any previous protagonist in his development. Yet his emotional life, too, leaves much to be desired. After his moment of illumination in the belly of WESCAC, the symbolic Axis Mundi or World Navel of the mythological cycle, life is never again so bright.

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### How to cite this article:

Soumy Syamchand and Selvaraj A (2018) 'Reorchestration of Cultural Consciousness in John Barth's Giles Goat- Boy', *International Journal of Current Advanced Research*, 07(3), pp. 10905-10907.  
DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.24327/ijcar.2018.10907.1871>

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