A. S. BYATT’S POSTMODERNIST WORLD IN “THE CHINESE LOBSTER”

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Abstract

A. S. Byatt’s oeuvre instantiates many postmodern tropes, by dint of which her underlying thematic messages find a better way of being imparted to the audience. Albeit deemed one of the critically little-attended works of Byatt, “The Chinese Lobster” from The Matisse Stories (1993) stands as an epitome of postmodern literature. This hard-to-interpret story offers its thematics, this study suggests, in the guise of numerous postmodern elements whose investigation enables one’s mastery of how and why Byatt aims at alloying her thematic messages with an equal share of postmodernist discourse. In illustrating such postmodern elements, this paper’s arguments lean towards interpreting some salient postmodern features such as paradox, parody, irony, undecidability, and little and grand narratives in the story.

Keywords: A. S. Byatt, “The Chinese Lobster,” Postmodernism, Paradox, Parody, Undecidability

As a contemporary woman writer with a distinct voice in postmodern literature, A. S. Byatt deserves a large body of systematic research in recent critical studies. As a reason behind this assertion, one should suffice to say Byatt is not the writer to whom one can get privy effortlessly. One might rightly think that it takes a great deal of investigation and

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sophistication to generate a mild, if not thorough, reading of her oeuvre. Her underlying thematic messages need to be read, deciphered, re-read, and eventually fathomed. Her short story “The Chinese Lobster” is not an exception. A relatively little-known short story that has not been sufficiently attended to in literary scholarship, “The Chinese Lobster” was published first in *The New Yorker* in 1992 and subsequently as the final part of *The Matisse Stories* in the following year. The story can be regarded as an emblematic work in the postmodern arena by portraying the salient features of postmodern fiction in the light of its elusive characters and themes. Therefore, taking its cue from theorists such as Linda Hutcheon, Andrew Bennett and Nicholas Royle, this article examines particular elements of postmodern fiction such as parody, paradox, irony, undecidability, and little and grand narratives, which all constitute the central plank of the narrative in “The Chinese Lobster.” Through this analytical quest, one, this study suggests, could come to a better grasp on not only the stylistics of Byatt’s writing, but also, more importantly, the postmodern thematic aesthetics, which have equally informed the narrative of this short story.

Byatt’s story revolves around three characters’ fragmented texts, accounts, and aphorisms: Sitting in a Chinese restaurant, decorated with astounding objects, is Dr Gerda Himmelblau, the Dean of Women Students. Upon the knowledge of a complaint letter from Peggi Nollett, a graduate art student, she is about to meet Professor Peregrine Diss, a painter and a distinguished visiting professor (DVP) who was also the person accused in the letter. As Nollett puts it, he is acutely and relentlessly unforgiving and aggressive in criticising her dissertation—a study of Henri Matisse’s works from a critical viewpoint—and has, in her allegation, abused her sexually. Diss, in his defence, states that Nollett does not have the subtlest sense of art and all she has done is debase Matisse’s works out of misandry and laziness for proper study. He goes on declaring that she, taking into account the absence of seemliness in her appearance, would be the last woman to attract him, much less to have him think of sexually harassing her. In further discussions of Nollett’s state of mind, Himmelblau reveals the student’s struggle with anorexia and suicidal attempts. This part of the conversation dusts her memory of a once-spirited but now-deceased friend, Kay, whose life had become a never-ending series of suicidal acts following her daughter’s death. The only solution to Nollett’s problem appears to be in handing her dissertation over to a more compliant and sympathetic supervisor in the hopes of finding her the right path of academic pursuit. Without a resolution of this serious allegation, “The Chinese Lobster” leaves its readers with a perplexed mind flowing with questions as to what actually happened, what might come out of such text exchanges,
accounts, and aphorisms, and what they would do if they were in each character’s shoes.

The most conspicuous feature of “The Chinese Lobster” emerges as a series of paradoxes and contradictions unfold in the plot. In a similar fashion to her other postmodern novels and stories, Byatt seems to employ and sustain the technique of postmodern paradox in this story as well, following Linda Hutcheon’s conceptualisation. Hutcheon, underlining it as an indispensable component of postmodernism in *A Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction* (1988), extensively contemplates the matter of contradictions. Negotiating it in the postmodern discourse, the theorist clearly and recurrently uses this concept of paradox almost like a keyword to her discussions as well as other pertinent and impertinent arguments. To her, paradoxes and contradictions curiously act like the very meta-narratives\(^3\) whose denial or repudiation is what she, together with all the other postmodern thinkers, has striven for in all her canon:

I would like to begin by arguing that, for me, postmodernism is a contradictory phenomenon, one that uses and abuses, installs and then subverts, the very concepts it challenges – be it in architecture, literature, painting, sculpture, film, video, dance, TV, music, philosophy, aesthetic theory, psychoanalysis, linguistics, or historiography. (Hutcheon, *Poetics* 3)

In a manner embracing all literary and cultural productions, Hutcheon employs a generalised sense of contradiction/paradox. For her, the postmodern paradox acts as a powerful tool for re-visiting the taken-for-granted structures that need intensive interrogations and re-formations. In a similar vein, Byatt exploits this aspect in her framing the narrative around such a much-disputed figure as Henri Matisse (1869-1954).

“The Chinese Lobster,” as well as all the other Matisse stories in the collection, takes Henri Matisse as the principal figure around whom the plots and themes of the stories revolve, as the title of the collection dictates. Despite paying homage to Matisse’s artistic novelties and qualities as in Peregrine Diss’ case, the characters like Peggi Nollett do not abstain from tarnishing and discrediting the French artist even at a point of grotesque and blatant aspersions. In a manner to echo Hutcheon’s postmodern paradox, Matisse is used and abused, installed, and subverted to provoke awe and contempt in the story. Repelling and impelling the artist, Nollett believes that Matisse’s works are on the “distortions of the Female Body,” specifically “on certain Parts of the Body which appeal

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\(^3\) For a better understanding of the concept of meta-narratives coined by Lyotard, refer to Jean-François Lyotard’s *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* (1984).
to Men and tend to immobilise Women such as grotesquely swollen Thighs or protruding Stomachs" (Byatt 110–111). Connecting this so-called “sinister” approach to “the whole tradition of the depiction of Female Slaves and Odalisques” (111), the student voices her disgust of Matisse during her appointment with her dissertation supervisor, Diss:

*I told the DVP what my line on this was going to be … and he argued with me and went so far as to say I was hostile and full of hatred to Matisse. I said this was not a relevant criticism of my work and that Matisse was hostile and full of hatred towards women.* (111)

In contradiction with Nollett's vantage, Diss is an admirer of the French artist and responds to his student: “Matisse was full of love and desire towards women (!!!!!)”; as he believes that Nollett fails to understand this, she “ought to fail [her] degree” despite the student’s artistic interpretation and endeavour (111). Their paradoxical approaches to Matisse come to a tipping point in Diss’ discussion of Nollett’s works on the artist, in which she uses her faeces to shame his face:

*They have all been smeared and defaced. With what looks like organic matter – blood, Dr Himmelblau, beef stew or faeces. … Some of the daubings are deliberate reworkings of bodies or faces – changes of outlines – some are like thrown tomatoes – probably are thrown tomatoes – and eggs, yes – and some are great swastikas of shit.* (Byatt 118; italics in the original)

Diss, as a Matisse fan, finds such artistic and interpretative expressions by Nollett “appalling” and “pathetic” (118). For the advisor, the French artist is – in a fashion of overstatement – a heavenly being in his appraisal of oranges which “are the real fruit of Paradise,” and “Matisse was the first to understand orange. … Orange in light, orange in shade, orange on blue, orange on green, orange in black” (132). This postmodern ambivalence or conflict directly addresses Matisse’s dignity in two characters’ disputes over the artist’s approach towards women in his sense of art and artistic productions. Nevertheless, this paradoxical address stems from Byatt’s perspective of the painter as well.

Despite taking Matisse as the core subject of this collection, Byatt enables the standpoints of solid woman characters like Himmelblau and Nollett to dominate “The Chinese Lobster.” In doing so, the author re-evaluates the feminist critics’ attack on the painter due to his submitting women to the heteropatriarchal male gaze (Fernandes 205–
206). Byatt, as Isabel Fernandes asserts, “subjects her less obvious intratextual object, Matisse, to a process of indirect scrutiny” and, thus, “forces the reader to re-evaluate Matisse from a radically new vantage point” employing “the scattered references to the painter’s works and life” in the story (201). However, this “scrutiny” is playfully integrated into the other side of Byatt’s postmodern paradox in the text: Matisse and his art are revisited and acknowledged in terms of their artistic achievements. The author, “qualifying her praise of him” (201), pushes the reader towards teasing out Nollett’s and Himmelblau’s impasses in a critical manner. Byatt intends to warn or do justice to both camps – Matisse detractors and defenders – reasonably on a proper stance. This conflicting ambivalence is further substantiated in Christien Franken’s comparative analysis of Byatt’s written art and critical notions. Franken argues that “nothing is as authentic or central as her ambivalence” (xv). To achieve this sustained ambivalence, Byatt “constructs a double-speaking position” in her narratives, throughout which “‘the self as writer’ A. S. Byatt wins the argument over ‘the self as critic and philosopher’ and resolves the ambivalence” (Franken 16, 18). With a similar technique in “The Chinese Lobster,” neither does Byatt remain neutral, nor her voice is dormant, for she seems to render her words prone to partake of a sense of sympathy with Nollett, not to mention her frequent support for Matisse as in the case of Diss. Although this cannot be denied as a paradox, the sympathetic siding with Nollett outweighs the implicit Matisse support. Analytically read, Himmelblau meets all the criteria to fit the profile of being Byatt’s voice or persona: Himmelblau resembles Byatt in her indirect criticism of Matisse, as she, throughout the story, supports Nollet (who represents all the women who posed for Matisse and were distortedly painted by him) and contrarily shows a minimal reaction, if any at all, to Diss’ complaints of Nollett as well as his reverence for Matisse. Logically, Himmelblau is positioned akin to Byatt, Diss akin to Matisse, and Nollett akin to all the women who posed for Matisse and were unethically exposed by him, since Himmelblau – like Byatt – identifies with Nollett in suing Diss for the dishonourable deed he was claimed to have committed. Resembling the triptych structure of this story collection, Himmelblau, Diss, and Nollett hypothetically epitomise Byatt, Matisse, and the unethically exposed women in a tripartite framework. In dialogues and collaborations with one another, all three characters and their real-world doppelgangers engender a story in the same postmodern paradox.

In addition to her employment of the postmodern paradox in the story, Byatt resorts to other postmodern narrative techniques while situating Matisse in this triptych: parody and irony. Parody in the postmodern rhetoric is known to diverge from its conventional
definitions of imitating “the serious manner and characteristic features” of a work or “the
distinctive style of a writer or artist” to devalue “the original by applying the imitation to a
lowly or comically inappropriate subject” (Abrams and Harpman 36). Postmodern parody
develops distinct differences in a narrative rather than having the heavily ridiculing mode
at its core. To expand on this topic, Hutcheon straightforwardly diverges from previous
discussions regarding the concept and reconfigures it as such:

What I mean by “parody” here … is not the ridiculing imitation of the
standard theories and definitions that are rooted in eighteenth-century
theories of wit. The collective weight of parodic practice suggests a
redefinition of parody as repetition with critical distance that allows ironic
signalling of difference at the very heart of similarity. In historiographic
metafiction, in film, in painting, in music, and in architecture, this parody
paradoxically enacts both change and cultural continuity. (Poetics 26;
italics in the original)

Not only does postmodern parody attend to the enactment of change and constancy in
literary and cultural practices, but it also aims at social discourse, “us[ing] its historical
memory, its aesthetic introversion, to signal that this kind of self-reflexive discourse is
always inextricably bound to social discourse” (Hutcheon, Poetics 35). This way, this notion
acts as a strategy that distances itself from the traditional mockery and instead
incorporates diverse facets like culture, society, and politics. Including such historical
concepts enhances the postmodern parody’s satirical effect by adding a more didactic and
obvious performance to its aesthetics. Therefore, “this parodic reprise of the past of art,”
as Hutcheon reaffirms in The Politics of Postmodernism (2002), “is not nostalgic; it is
always critical” (Politics 93).

Pursuant to Hutcheon’s reconceptualisation, Byatt subjects the painter as well as
his works to postmodern parody in “The Chinese Lobster.” Byatt incorporates a kind of
parodic historicity and falls on the same page with Hutcheon, especially in her work
Possession: A Romance (1990), the most emblematic instance of historiographic
metafiction.4 Likewise, in The Matisse Stories, the existence of Matisse and in-passing
mention of the grand painters of the history render “The Chinese Lobster” historically

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4 Hutcheon coined the term “historiographic metafiction” (“Beginning” 12) in 1987. For a solid grasp over the concept, see chapter
7 of A Poetics of Postmodernism. In short, such works as Byatt’s Possession: A Romance, Hutcheon suggests, are a blend of
historical allusions to artists or art narrative and a fictional line of author’s self-reflexive innovation.
parodic enough in the postmodern sense: “She [Himmelblau] has heard him [Diss] lecture, on Bellini, on Titian, on Mantegna, on Picasso, on Matisse. His style is orotund and idiosyncratic” (Byatt 107–108). By dropping these names in this subtle intertextuality, Byatt invites late-twentieth-century readers to ponder these painters and their styles in portraying gendered bodies or objects of the gaze in their works while situating perceptions on Matisse in the story. The French artist, as a genuine part of the historical narrative of art in the story, is sufficiently discussed as the object of non-nostalgic parody in Diss’ account of his visiting Matisse in Nice:

I went to see him once, you know, after the war when he was living in that apartment in Nice. … I loved him and was enraged by him and meant to outdo him, … – which I never did. He was ill then, he had come through this terrible operation, the nuns who looked after him called him “le ressuscite.” (Byatt 132)

Byatt further embellishes Diss’ visit with factual details which quite resonate with Hilary Spurling’s biographical account (437–438):

The rooms in that apartment were shrouded in darkness. The shutters were closed, the curtains were drawn. I was terribly shocked – I thought he lived in the light, you know, that was the idea I had of him. I blurted it out, the shock, I said, “Oh, how can you bear to shut out the light?” And he said, quite mildly, quite courteously, that there had been some question of him going blind. He thought he had better acquaint himself with the dark. (Byatt 132; italics in the original)

Here, Byatt blends the linguistic paradox of light and dark with critics’ discussions of Matisse’s approach to women by reminding us of his fear of blindness, “or inability to paint” that would “haunt him at moments of great danger or disruption” (Spurling 353). Besides, Byatt must have known this terror because the painter used to read “The Light That Failed, [Rudyard] Kipling’s novel about a painter whose loss of sight plunges him into a downward spiral of destruction, despair and death” (Spurling 383). Both Byatt’s fictional Matisse and the real one curiously resemble Kipling’s protagonist, Dick Heldar, who is revered or despised by different groups of characters due to his artistic style and relations with women.

Such historical authenticity in the story is subverted for further interrogation of Matisse and his art. In her re-evaluation of Matisse’s life and works, for instance, Nollett
studies the painter’s relation with his wife Amélie and daughter Marguerite during World War II:

*I have a three-dimensional piece in wire and plasticine called The Resistance of Madame Matisse which shows her and her daughter being tortured as they were by the Gestapo in the War whilst he sits like a Buddha cutting up pretty paper with scissors. They wouldn’t tell him they were being tortured in case it disturbed his work.* (Byatt 112)

Accusing him of oblivion to the women’s tortures, Nollett acts as Byatt’s paradoxical and parodic critic of Matisse, who exclaimed not to have known such cruelties happening to them at the time (Spurling 423–424). In such ways, Matisse himself and some detailed descriptions containing him and his life add to this postmodern narrative’s historic and parodic weight.

“The Chinese Lobster” holds a serious tone of postmodern parody as opposed to the concept’s conventional aspect of humour or a sense of ridicule to which Hutcheon objects. Ridiculing Matisse in a comic tone with which the conventionalists might agree occurs very little if any at all. Nor does the same apply to his paintings. Instead, Matisse is the subject of a non-comic and severe conflict that jeopardises a student’s life as well as a professor’s job. Barely can one witness a comic line regarding Matisse, provoking a smile, much less a laugh. Apart from the serious situations resulting from the Matisse case in this story, Matisse’s artistic style is seriously parodied, as mentioned earlier. If this were a conventional parody, Byatt would have included some melodramatically ridiculed or overstated paintings of Matisse throughout her fiction, whereas she did include the original paintings ultimately in an intact form. All she is doing is invite the reader to re-read Matisse through a critical sequence of literary points rather than mocking or ridiculing him by virtue of comic or funny terms. Therefore, in short, the parody levelled at Matisse remains critical, non-comic, and historic.

Alongside the extensive use of parody in a postmodern narrative, irony has also invariably appeared to be an integral component of postmodern tropes, transcending its status to the best of its capacity. Hutcheon, in *Irony’s Edge: The Theory and Politics of Irony* (1995), despite her recap of various discussions on the concept of irony, feels at total liberty to theorise her notion of the term. She recurrently defines it as “transideological.” She believes that the transideological nature of irony is what constitutes its basis: Irony “can and does function tactically in the service of a wide range of political positions,
legitimating or undercutting a wide variety of interests” (*Irony’s Edge* 10). In her conceptualisation, irony is intrinsically post-structuralist due to its deconstructive, subversive, and re-constructive aspects. Interrogating the de/re-constructive nature of irony, she exemplifies two camps regarding this notion’s functional uses. The first camp, most audibly encompassing “feminist, postcolonial, gay and lesbian theorists,” includes the people who “see irony as a powerful tool or even weapon in the fight against a dominant authority” (*Hutcheon, Irony’s Edge* 26). The second one, though, is composed of members who are “on receiving end of an ironic attack (or missed the irony completely) or by those for whom the serious or the solemn and the univocal are the ideal” (*Hutcheon, Irony’s Edge* 26) and believe that irony aims at negation and destruction. Emphasising the inseparability of the two camps, Hutcheon claims that both sides are intertwined at their roots and that one cannot have the negating nature of the irony isolated from the affirming one.

In setting a relational mode between Hutcheon’s postmodern irony and “The Chinese Lobster,” a certain Matisse stands out, as is often the case with Byatt in *The Matisse Stories*. Byatt subjects Matisse to a specific ironic state in which Matisse meets the transideological expectations that Hutcheon demands. Nollett uses the power of irony to rebel against the authority, namely Diss, who is but an allusion to Matisse. In all likelihood, this is the first camp whose members are of feminist, postcolonial, gay, or lesbian identities. Nollett fits the profile here as she strives to stand up for her rights against a sexually harassing Diss. Himmelblau’s position as a member of this camp holds true as well, as she is doing her best as the dean of the faculty to protect the women students’ rights. Diss, however, is the other side of the irony on whom the attack falls. Therefore, he serves as the object of this transideological equation of irony, the very entity being destroyed and undercut. Byatt portrays this transideological situation in a manner to preserve her ambivalent status in the story, only by implicitly supporting the feminist cause with a brief reference during Diss’ conversation with Himmelblau to the plausibility of his sexual assault on Nollett, who should have left “the old scars, well-made efficient scars, on his wrists” (*Byatt* 132; italics in the original). However, barely can one detect explicit sympathies or siding of Himmelblau with a certain camp throughout the story, hence giving rise to an undecidable position.

As another salient feature of postmodernism, the notion of “undecidability” has to do with a sense that no absolute interpretation can be made from a work of art. In the words of Andrew Bennett and Nicholas Royle, undecidability “involves the impossibility of deciding between two or more competing interpretations” (249). This definition suggests
more efforts on the reader’s side to generate her/his relative stance regarding what s/he reads. Furthermore, the interpretation(s) and message(s) falling on the reader are not meant to be the only or the eventual one(s): “Undecidability dislodges the principle of a single final meaning in a literary text. It haunts” (Bennett and Royle 249).

“The Chinese Lobster” showcases postmodern undecidability in many respects. One certainly vivid realm within which undecidability operates efficiently in “The Chinese Lobster” is the accusation of sexual assault by Nollett. She, by means of her letters, solidly accuses Diss of sexually abusing her, saying:

Then the DVP got personal. He put his arm about me and hugged me and said I had got too many clothes on. … he grabbed me and began kissing me and fondling me and stroking intimate parts of me – it was disgusting – I will not write it down… The more I struggled the more he insisted and pushed at me with his body until I said I would get the police the moment he let go of me. . . . (Byatt 112–113)

This account, however, robustly runs counter to what Diss has to say in his defence:

Have you seen her legs and arms, Dr Himmelblau? They are bandaged like mummies, they are all swollen with strapping and strings and then they are contained in nasty black greaves and gauntlets of plastic with buckles. You expect some awful yellow ooze to seep out between the layers, ready to be smeared on La Joie de vivre. And her hair, I do not think her hair can have been washed for some years. It is like a carefully preserved old frying-pan, grease undisturbed by water. You cannot believe I could have brought myself to touch her, Dr Himmelblau? (120; italics in the original)

It is, thus, upon a very delicate plane that Byatt puts her reader when she creates this undecidable condition. Making a decision, then, is arduous, if not impossible. It all hinges upon whose side the reader is inclined to take, as Diss himself asks Himmelblau: “whose side are you on?” (120). Byatt deserts this delicate plane in a serious tongue-in-cheek manner.

Undecidability in “The Chinese Lobster” is evidently felt in how the whole issue of Nollett’s complaint would be resolved. Initially, there are talks of Diss’ job loss and severely unpleasant consequences that may befall him. Himmelblau tells Diss: “I am very much afraid that … you will lose your job, and whether you do or don’t lose it there will be disagreeable protests and demonstrations against you, your work, your continued presence
in the University” (Byatt 121). However, the ending lines of the story develop a somewhat different position, and Himmelblau’s fair resolution seems to lie in finding a sympathetic supervisor for the art student: “There is a simple solution. What she [Nollett] wants, what she has always wanted, what the Department has resisted, is a sympathetic supervisor” (Byatt 133–134). The ultimate resolution tends to remain in the dark and undecided though, as the narrative offers no clarity on how this academic conflict will be settled.

Undecidability is instantiated anew once our analysis veers to the realm of characters of “The Chinese Lobster.” All characters seem to be lost, unstable and undecided. Psychologically, the characters sway between the past and present or are trapped in liminal spaces, leaving them with traces of traumatic events whose reminiscence haunts them. This, in turn, renders the critical reading of the characters so harsh as to resort to the term undecided. One character whose undecidability seems to be more tangible than the other characters is Himmelblau. In fact, Himmelblau’s undecidability concurs with the ambivalent voice of Byatt herself. One could infer that the ambivalence of Byatt might have given rise to the undecidability of Himmelblau who, this study claims, is the voice of Byatt. The undecidability that has permeated Himmelblau’s soul regarding Nollett’s case and consequently the believability of her account in accusing Diss of sexual abuse or the opposing defensive words she hears from Diss does but leave her utterly undecided. The obscurity of this situation is, in all probability, conveyed to the readers as well. The undecidability in the alleged actions and testimonies of two sides, Nollett and Diss – even three sides with Himmelblau, has enough impact to be imparted to the reader, as the textual undecidability makes readers oscillate between their decisions to side with either party. Seldom would a reader, albeit sophisticated in reaching a verdict, get a vivid clearance on deciding upon the characters and their various psychological layers by which they are shaped.

Once a critic or a reader tries to take one side in the deadlock of “The Chinese Lobster,” s/he will realise that the attempt to take side requires a central argument or a centre of values. Nonetheless, the postmodern is decentering and is meant to interrogate the centrality of all the previously assumed knowledge by linguistic and structural subversions and re-installations of the past concepts. For instance, Bennett and Royle render the term “decentering” efficiently omnipresent in their postmodern jargon in its challenges to “the logo-centric,” “the ethnocentric,” and “the phallocentric” (256). That is why, in a manner to subvert the taken-for-granted centres, postmodernism encompasses a series of words that precede the prefixes “de-” and “dis-,” including “deconstruction,
decentering, dissemination, dispersal, displacement, difference, discontinuity, demiystification, delegitimation, disappearance” (Hassan 309). However, at the very heart of it obviously comes decentering, and “The Chinese Lobster” has ample use of this strategic tool in the testimonies of its characters.

In the story, the authority of the words, which according to Jacques Derrida reflects Western philosophy⁵ and canon, is ironically censured and attacked by the random linguistic misspellings that Nollett makes throughout her letter to Himmelblau. The misspelt words could be interpreted in many other ways, of course. Some might attribute them to the mental breakdown and unbalanced state from which Nollett is suffering. Some may also relate it to the undecidability of the characters. However, a detailed look at Nollett (as she might be the emblem of the women whom Matisse in his works unethically and distortedly exposed) suggests the obliteration of all the previously constructed and revered linguistic rules (metaphorically an allusion to the highly revered artistic state of Matisse in the previous literature), whose destruction, or in better terms deconstruction (an allusion to Derrida’s deconstruction which falls on the same page as the decentering of postmodernism), comes at the very shaken and fragile hands of Nollett, hence the shaken and misspelt words. Put simply, those misspelt words could be the very questioning of the logocentrism against which postmodernism stands; the very principle to which Nollett and many other people like her steadfastly, in a spirit of rebellion and protest, object and which Himmelblau, as Byatt’s voice, aims to clarify. Some instances of such misspellings are illustrated below:⁶

He asked me why I had not written more of the dissertation than I had and I said I had not been very well. (110)

I mean to connect this in time to the whole tradition of the depiction of Female Slaves and Odalisques. (111)

But I had written some notes on Matisse’s distortions of the Female Body with respect especially to the specifically Female Organs. (111)

… and undermining and dismissive and unhelpful even if no worse had

⁵ Derrida’s denial of the Western philosophy (Derrida 27–73) is based on rejecting the logocentrism. He believes that the signified meaning of a word is never present in a pure sense, hence its undecidability. The consequent undecidability is no doubt a postmodern element.

⁶ The selected misspelled words have been accompanied by the sentences in which they appeared in order to give the reader a better contextualised grasp. To pinpoint the words, original italics are removed and misspelled were emphasised.
hapened. (111)

The more I strugled the more he insisted and pushed at me with his body until I said I would get the police. (113)

In addition to apparent reiterations coming from Nollett’s shocked hands after the alleged sexual assault, the above misspelling becomes a revolt against the phallogocentric and ordered/organised stance of her supervisor as well as a manifestation of the subverted artistic installation of female-male, marginal-central dichotomies.

In doing so, Byatt permits the proliferation of “different, heterogeneous discourses that acknowledge the undecidable in the past” – the narrated past of Nollett and Diss in this case – rather than imposing a homogeneous, linear network of “causality and analogy” (Hutcheon, Politics 66). This way, she opposes grand narratives – totalising and comprehensive thoughts of Western literature and philosophy including concepts such as God, death and religion – which have come to an end in Jean-François Lyotard’s viewpoint, as teleology, at the very heart of the obsolete grand narratives, plays a less critical role in the postmodern tropes. Instead, the postmodern prefers to emphasise little narratives, whose implications are less totalising and absolute. To further approach the postmodern dialectics of “The Chinese Lobster” in the province of little and grand narratives, three distinct trajectories are open to our advancement.

The first trajectory concerns the structural grounds upon which Byatt bases her writing, in that Byatt, knowingly or unknowingly, does her best to give rise to individual and local narratives of a community. She creates a personal Nollett suffering from both mental and physical pains, a Diss who suffers from delusions of grandeur as well as contempt to a student’s art, and eventually the dean of women students who stands in the middle of both. All these seem not to abide by the previously totalising narratives whose heroes or heroines typically reflected the glorious values of death or life and honour or dishonour. One might find here nothing more than a detailed personal account of a conflict between a professor and a student, whose value, to the postmodern eye, seems to outweigh the cliché-ridden and totalising values of the modernist or classic perspectives. In “The Chinese Lobster,” the teleology one might seek in these little narratives loses its meaning in the strongest of the terms, inasmuch as no justice is expected to surface in the story; nor an ending, or a resolution in better terms, to the stereotypical evil is heralded. In fact, rarely is the classic evil stereotype – or the whisper of the diabolic seduction for that matter – felt through the story, much less the story’s coming to an end or justice. All there is to be
seen is the local and specific “little narrative” of a woman whose personal conflict with a professor has tangled a knot, which consequently implicates the reactionary measures of another professor striving to untangle the very same unpleasant knot.

The second course one might take in addressing the grand and little narratives of “The Chinese Lobster” has to do with Byatt’s stylistics of writing. With postmodern little narratives in mind comes a certain espousal of detailed descriptive writing rather than the cursory holistic style: a style which stands against the ideals of putting on a pedestal the heroic or the epic dimensions of the plot, as was often the case with modern or classic writers. What Margarida Esteves Pereira writes in “More than Words: The Elusive Language of A. S. Byatt’s Visual Fiction” reveals this particular issue further:

In her “Introduction” to *The Oxford Book of English Short Stories* (1998), A. S. Byatt justifies some of her choices of stories, because they contain what she, using Henry James’s phrase, calls “solidity of specification.” In her words “solidity of specification” may be defined as a detail in characterization provided by the exhaustive description of the objects, or at least of those objects that are important for the narrative. For Byatt it is this detailed description of an object, which she refers to as “the thinginess of things,” that enhances the dramatic effect of the narrative. (211)

Byatt in “The Chinese Lobster” pays excellent homage to specificities, descriptions, and detailed illustrations. Descriptions of the restaurant, Diss, the lobster, eating manners, and clothing are, to name but a few, among the elements which call the attention in this story. As an instance of the specificity in postmodern stylistics and bearing in mind that the lobster – be it literal or figurative – possesses an essential bearing to the title of the story, one must have a proper reading of the part where Byatt details the lobster at the outset of the story:

In the middle, in the very middle, is a live lobster, flanked by two live crabs. All three, in parts of their bodies, are in feeble perpetual motion. The lobster, slowly in this unbreathable element, moves her long feelers and can be seen to move her little claws on the end of her legs, which cannot go forward or back. She is black, and holds out her heavy great pincers in front of her, shifting them slightly, too heavy to lift up. The great muscles of her tail crimp and contort and collapse. One of the crabs, the smaller, is able to rock itself from side to side, which it does. The crabs’ mouths can
be seen moving from side to side, like scissors; all three survey the world with mobile eyes still lively on little stalks. From their mouths comes a silent hissing and bubbling, a breath, a cry. The colours of the crabs are matt, brick, cream, a grape-dark sheen on the claw-ends, a dingy, earthy encrustation on the hairy legs. (106)

The colour of the lobster and later the nuances of the colours of the crabs, the location of the crabs, their hissing sound, and the kinaesthetic delicacies informing the whole descriptive lines are among some of the stylistic staples of Byatt’s narrative which could strike a close chord with the postmodern little narrative stance, strengthening the effect of Byatt’s narrative and the offerings thereof. This characteristic and exclusively detailed description of the lobster and crabs does not end here. Byatt trims her story with such nuances and complexities of description when need be.

The third way, also the last line of argument here, is targeted at Matisse once more. The little narratives constantly attempt to question and perhaps annihilate the very essence of the fact that there is a grand scheme of narratives, one that has never been deconstructed or challenged. If Matisse in “The Chinese Lobster” serves the story as an allegorical grand narrative or an echoing voice of the art and its history or a flashback to the grandeur of the golden age of art, all this is shattered by Byatt’s occasional, yet destructive, censuring of Matisse in the guise of Nollett’s complaints of both the artist and Diss. Matisse happens to be questioned and scrutinised in much the same way as Byatt seems to deconstruct the whole line of the “grand narrative” of art history.

Byatt elusively opts for a lobster as her story’s title as well as her detailing the lobster’s position in the display case. Byatt portrays “a live lobster flanked by two live crabs. All three, in parts of their bodies, are in feeble perpetual motion” (106). Later, she speaks of their bubbling, hissing, and crying. The lobster is barely moving, and the crabs are crying. This should be rightly evocative of how Nollett and Diss flank Himmelblau. The undecidability befalling Himmelblau in helping the complex case of Nollett and Diss leaves her with very little room to move, as the lobster is shown to be heavy in its movements. Though, as depicted, lobster gets decentered at times from the very centre where it was flanked but falls back again to the trap. Thus, it is hypothesised hereby that the lobster and crabs indicate Himmelblau and Nollett-Diss, respectively. Crabs cry out for the undecidable and decentered lobster whose movement or decision is trapped by its own struggles to perceive and untangle the tangled crux. The fate of the flanked and decentered
lobster is vague in much the same way as the fate of Himmelblau, and by extension, the fate of the vexing case whose resolution she has been trusted with is at the mercy of her own cognition and diagnostic senses.

Byatt, by dint of masterfully apposing a myriad of postmodern narrative elements in “The Chinese Lobster,” presents her artistic achievement in portraying the controversial issues of arts, perspectivity, women’s problems and challenges in much of the contemporary academy in the world. Employing the postmodern paradox and parody delicately, she enables multiple perspectives on Henri Matisse to be debated on elusive grounds. Her double-edged and playful position as Himmelblau acts as the binding transideological endband of clashing ironies of Nollett and Diss, while she does not waver from her ethical position. This paper, thus, has made an effort to offer a better reading of Byatt’s rather hard-to-interpret story, which has inextricably laced many undecidable staples with the newly born little narratives in the postmodern discourse.

WORKS CITED


