

**THE POSTMODERN NOVEL: A STUDY OF THE
WRITINGS OF JOHN BARTH**

A Thesis

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By

Meenu Dutta

Reg. No. 41800556

Supervised By

Dr. Nipun Chaudhary

Associate Professor



LOVELY PROFESSIONAL UNIVERSITY

PUNJAB

2021

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Date: 30-07-2021 Dr. Nipun Chaudhary

Place: Phagwara Associate Professor

Lovely Profession
University, Phagwara

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Abstract

The thesis entitled: *The Postmodern Novel: A Study of the Writings of John Barth* explores the postmodern vision of John Barth who revolted against the traditional ideas and themes of Ernest Hemingway, William Faulkner and Joseph Heller. In the Introduction of the study, the main trends of postmodernism are discussed. The 20th century brought new challenges in the world; the World War 1, Depression, the emergence of the wave of skepticism and nihilism fueled by the pessimistic and nihilistic ideas of Schopenhauer, Nietzsche, Camus and Sartre brought revolution in the domain of American fiction. The emergence of the postmodern novel is the outcome of socio-political forces in Europe and America. The conspicuous feature of the postmodern fiction of John Barth is the vogue of absurdity and alienation; disintegration of self and loss of communication of language.

In the *Introduction* part of the thesis the conspicuous characteristics of the fiction of John Barth are discussed. In his fiction Barth depicted the themes of alienation, nausea and angst of the contemporary American society. He was greatly impacted by the writings of Fredric Jameson and Leotard who explored the main issues confronting the modern Americans. The postmodern American novelists were greatly impacted by the wave of nihilism and pessimism.

In the first chapter entitled: "Postmodern Themes of Alienation and Nihilism in John Barth's *The Floating Opera*" the main postmodern ideas of John Barth are discussed. John Barth rejected the traditional technique and style and employed postmodern techniques such as fragmentation, metafiction, inter-textuality and black humor to depict the emptiness of life. Jameson observes thus: "The last few years have been marked by an inverted millenarianism in which premonitions of the future, catastrophic or redemptive, have been replaced by a sense of the end of this or that taken together, all of these taken together. All of these constitute what is increasingly called postmodernism" (Jameson 30). Barth's novel *The Floating Opera* is circular and linear, and the novel is called fragmented narrative. Ziegler declares that "*The*

Floating Opera of John Barth is an early postmodern text about the son who instrumentalists his father in order to tell his own story” (20).

In the second chapter entitled: “Existential Dilemmas of Jacob Horner in John Barth’s *The End of the Road*”, the social, political and moral problems of American society are discussed. *The Floating Opera* (1956), and *The End of the Road* of Barth deal with philosophical and metaphysical issues despite their comic layers. The main narrative voice predominant in the novels is there is no purpose for living as both Todd and Jake struggle to explore the mysteries of life and death in the absurd and harsh universe. Both Todd and Jake suffer from the spiritual crisis that brings them near falling into the Pit. Barth published an article “The Literature of Replenishment” describing his vision and ideas of a postmodern novel. In this article Barth presents a historical background giving details of the characteristics of Cervantes’s famous novel *Don Quixote*. Barth believes that Cervantes should be considered as a model for the real creation of a postmodern novel.

In the third chapter of this study entitled: “Metaphysical Despair of Ebenezer Cooke in *The Sot-Weed Factor* of John Barth”, the postmodern ideas of John Barth are explored. Theorists such as Linda Hutcheon, Juen Habermas, Ihab Hassan, Fredric Jameson and Jean Francois Lyotard and Jean Baudrillard have given their own ideas of postmodernism. Barth belongs to a new school of postmodern writers who took keen interest in the old tales and mythologies expressing their fascination for fantasies and uncanny tales. They expressed their renewed love for pastiche, parody, inter-textuality and magic realism as their novels are dominated by the fictional landscape of the past. The plot of the novel *The Sot-Weed Factor* of Barth reflects a distinct phase of developing conception of the artist and his relationship to the world. Barth called the novel as “a seventeenth century-mock epic”. Barth stated thus: “I had thought I was writing about and it turned out I was writing about innocence” (Interview 11).

In the fourth chapter of the thesis entitled: “Subversion of Mythology in John Barth’s *Chimera*”, the unique theoretical and technical strategies of Barth’s fiction are discussed. His novels depict his passion for traditional story telling techniques. He highly appreciated *Thousand and One Nights* and the novel *Chimera*

is based on this classical tale. He follows his own techniques that he discussed in his essay *The Literature of Replenishment* (1981). His novel *Chimera* is full of the elements of meta-fiction; it is a fine juxtaposition of old and the new styles of writing. He wrote *The Sot Weed Factor* (1960), *Giles Goat Boy* (1966) and *Chimera* (1972) demonstrating his passion to revive the eighteenth century trends of fiction imitating the cultural value of art depicted by the classical novelists such as Fielding, Smollett and Stern. Barth heavily borrowed from writers like Boccaccio and Cervantes to depict the malaise of contemporary America.

In the fifth chapter of the thesis entitled: “Postmodern Meta-fiction of John Barth’s *Giles-Goat Boy*”, the complexity of the society; the tensions and anxieties of Americans trapped in the bog of illusion and darkness are explored. Replenishment in fiction can be achieved with the help of the elements of parody, irony, burlesque and comedy. To achieve replenishment, Barth made many innovations in the stylistic techniques. The novel *Giles Goat-Boy* or *The Revised New Syllabus* (1966) comprises a distinct phase in Barth’s developing conception of the novelist and his relationship in the world. Barth depicts the ambivalence of the universe in this novel. The religious ideologies which were a source of inspiration and peace have become outdated today.

In the *Conclusion* part of the thesis the postmodern vision of John Barth is discussed in detail. The main focus of this section is to explore and describe the social relevance of the thesis. John Barth came into the limelight with the publication of two essays *The Literature of Exhaustion* and *The Literature of Replenishment* *Postmodernist Fiction* propounding his own theories of fiction. In 1979, Barth argued that the conventions of art can be subverted, transcended and transformed and he advocated in his essays that the fiction must belong to the “literature of replenishment” and not to “literature of exhaustion”. Like postmodern writers Barth also believes that there is no absolute truth so facts and falsehood are interchangeable. The evolution of the postmodernist fiction is inspired by the nihilistic ideas: “Man is a skeletal individual, a personality split by considering the problems of sincerity and hypocrisy, conformity and dissent, commitment and

indecision, loneliness and complicity” (229). The characters of Barth are the victims of the mood of nihilism and pessimism. Barth’s novels open the eyes of modern man who is trapped in the abyss of darkness and despair. The real happiness can be achieved through the realization of the purpose of life. Pessimism, nihilism and negative thoughts are not the solutions of life. Man has to build up a connection with God and has to understand his place in the universe. Each novel of Barth is a thought provoking study of sufferings, loneliness and despair. Man has to find out the real meaning of life within himself brushing aside the negative thoughts and putting faith in the creation of God and Nature.

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Introduction (An Insight into the Contemporary American Society)

Ian Watt in his book *The Rise of the Novel* (1957) traced the socio-political forces that led to the evolution of the English novel. Watt opined that with the rise of the middle class in England the novel as genre became very popular. In the Victorian Age the novel flourished with the new experiments made by Jane Austen, George Eliot and Bronte sisters. With the rise of the industrial revolution in England, the realistic novel of Charles Dickens became extremely popular with the masses. The 20th century brought new challenges in the world; the World War1, Depression, the emergence of the wave of skepticism and nihilism fueled by the pessimistic and nihilistic ideas of Schopenhauer, Nietzsche, Camus and Sartre brought revolution in the domain of American fiction. The emergence of the postmodern novel is the outcome of socio-political forces in Europe and America. The conspicuous feature of the postmodern fiction of John Barth is the vogue of absurdity and alienation; disintegration of self and loss of communication of language. The philosophical ideas of Jean Paul Sartre and Albert Camus greatly impacted mind and sensibility of the great postmodern novelists such as Kurt Vonnegut, John Updike, Thomas Pynchon, Bashevis Singer and John Barth. Postmodern writers discarded the traditional themes and techniques of the realist novelists of the twentieth century. Darwin and Spengler propagated fear, terror and the haunting memories of death. The nuclear Holocaust further disintegrated the fabric of society. Man became rootless; he could wait only for the arrival of Godot who would never come to save man from his impending doom. Joseph Wood Krutch comments thus:

The contemporary American novelists were impacted by the image of the mechanical self. Sigmund Freud was a German thinker; his explorations of the unconscious gave new impetus to the thinking. The philosophers projected new ideas and contended that man is but an infinitesimal fraction of the energy that flows through the universe (Krutch 13).

The evolution theories were explored by Freud and Einstein discarding the traditional view of the Bible. Nietzsche expressed his nihilism thus: "God is dead and we have buried him long ago". Joseph Wood Krutch pointed out "the growth of, nausea angst, and alienation; growth of nihilism and loss of identity of modern man; that entropy and nihilism were forces that had dehumanized and deflated the heroes" (79). Erich Fromm repudiated the American novelists such as Hemingway and Faulkner who lacked "the awareness of the reality of death" (245). John Barth was the product of post World War cultural transformation. He closely observed the rising wave of pessimism and nihilism propounded by Schopenhauer and Nietzsche. The American youth came under the influence of these negative theories as they did not want to live since they had witnessed the gruesome scenes of barbarity in the war fronts. Barth didn't find any glamour in the novels of Ernest Hemingway, William Faulkner and Joseph Heller who celebrated the war glories in their novels. It is found that F. Scott Fitzgerald, Joseph Heller, and Norman Mailer wrote war novels depicting depressed souls. The main feature of the American novels of the "Roaring Twenties" is the awareness of death, destruction and the loss of self, experienced by the wounded soldiers. The Great War brought new cultural transformation and all the old values of the pioneers were scrapped in quest for money. There was no hope even from the religious teachers such as Ian Graeme Barbour and Emile Brunner. Barth expressed the mood of pessimism in his novel *The Sot-Weed Factor* thus:

The stars were: no longer points on a black hemisphere: that hung like a sheltering roof above his head; the relationship between them he saw now in three dimensions, of which the one most deeply felt was depth. The length and breadth of pace between the stars seemed trifling by comparison: what struck him now was that some were nearer, others farther out and others unimaginably remote. Viewed in this manner, the constellations lost their sense entirely (346).

The main problem of the contemporary man was his problem of identity in the war-ridden society. There was a technological revolution but man was lost in the crazy world of money hunting, throwing into the wind all the values of religion and culture. The American novelists projected him as a sorry product of social

conditions, sick and wounded; depressed and restless ready to commit suicide because he doesn't find any meaning of life. Thus, depressed and alienated and soulless people are created by Hemingway and William Faulkner in the Roaring Twenties. The postmodern novelists came under the influence of theories of surrealism and the philosophical ideas of Freud and Bergson. The existentialist philosophy of Jean-Paul Sartre, Albert Camus and Karl Jaspers further created pessimism as they believed that life is meaningless and all human struggles end in despair. No wonder, Sartre wrote *Nausea* (1938), *Being and Nothingness* (1943), *No Exit* (1944), and *Existentialism is Humanism* (1946) exploring the absurdity and nihilism. These works explored the absurdity of life enveloping the entire humanity. Sartre in his *Nausea* contends that death is inevitable in life and man can use his freedom to escape nausea and absurdity of life. He articulated his pessimistic vision thus: "Anything, anything would be better than this agony of mind, this creeping pain that gnaws and fumbles and caresses one and never hurts quite enough." (6). In his famous books *The Stranger* (1942), *The Fall* (1956), *A Happy Death* (1972) Camus concluded "that there is one truly serious philosophical problem and that is suicide." (6). Ihab Hassan comments thus:

Thus Sartre and Camus depicted the metaphysical despair of contemporary man. Man was considered as a lost intellectual groping in the darkness. The protagonists of Camus are lost and fragmented anti-heroes. They suffer corrosion of self always struggling to escape death and despair. They are like the neurotic protagonists of Kafka's novels living in a world that is directionless and meaningless (Hassan 56).

In this study all the major novels of John Barth are analyzed exploring the postmodern vision of John Barth. Like Thomas Pynchon, John Updike and Kurt Vonnegut, John Barth discarded the traditional techniques employed by Ernest Hemingway, Norman Mailer and William Faulkner. Barth realized during his early career that the postmodern world has grown very complex and hence the available stylistic techniques cannot articulate the contemporary malaise of life. He turned to the writings of Fredric Jameson and Linda Hutcheon. The reviewers and the critics of

Barth eulogized him for his concern for the American society. Like Thomas Pynchon, John Barth's novels are a study of fluidity of identity. A close study of the novels of John Barth reveals the concept of dissolution of identity. Barth intensively explores the American culture and the place of man in the American society. He is of the view that American culture is dominated by the electronic media and technology resulting in the loss of identities of the individuals. In this study the fluid nature of man's identity is explored relying on the theories of Erik Erikson and Norman Holland. Each character plays manifold roles creating tensions in the life of people. Barth has portrayed the jellied perception of self. The image of man is presented as jelly, amoeba, lot, blob, suggesting the formlessness. Characters assume many shapes; embody shifting personalities in Barth's *The Floating Opera*, *The End of the Road* and *The Sot-Weed Factor*.

Rise of Postmodern Novel: Historical Perspective

In 1960s of America, a new wave of cultural transformation started and this cultural change was highlighted by Jean Paul Sartre who visited America. Fredric Jameson was greatly impacted by the liberal ideas of Sartre and he wrote *Marxism and Form* and *Postmodernism or The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (1990). Fredric Jameson brought a revolution in the postmodern culture and he established his name as a great postmodern thinker. In post-World War II America, many writers appeared on the literary scene who rejected the old conventional ideas; techniques and styles of Ernest Hemingway, Norman Mailer, Joseph Heller and made innovations in fiction. John Updike, Thomas Pynchon, Bashevis Singer, Vladimir Nabokov, and Kurt Vonnegut are among the most celebrated postmodern novelists. They highlighted the problematic nature of postmodernism. Jameson brought radical changes in the theory of art. His views on postmodern elements such as Black Humor, intertextuality, fragmentation, mastered irony, magic realism, pastiche and meta-fiction became very popular and the writers such as Thomas Pynchon, Kurt Vonnegut, John Barth, and John Updike employed these postmodern ideas in their fiction rejecting the traditional techniques of modern writers. This study is an attempt to historicize and reinterpret the texts of John Barth in the light of the growing capitalist society of America. Barth was deeply interested in portraying the bourgeoisie's repressive

practices. Jameson was outraged by the workings of the American institutions. American capitalism promoted the culture of greed, money-making, and profit-making. Fredric Jameson keenly observed the working of the capitalism of America and published several books to review and revise Marxian ideology for the healthy growth of capitalism. Ihab Hassan in his famous book *Toward a Concept of Postmodernism* (1987) contended that modernism is a part of postmodernism because the postmodern writers also use the techniques of modern writers. The postmodern writers differ from the postmodern writers in narration, symbolism, and meaning. Brian McHale published his book *Constructing Postmodernism* (1992) and argued that “Postmodernism is not a found object, but a manufactured artifact” (McHale 1). He further observes that “there is no such thing as postmodernism” (1).

Jean Francois Lyotard was perhaps the first writer who gave the name postmodernism for the first time. He analyzed the nature of knowledge and its role in society and explored the meta-narratives. Lyotard defines postmodernism as “incredulity towards meta-narratives” (Lyotard 24). He wrote *The Postmodern Condition* (1979) and realized that the growth of science and technology led to the growth of communication, mass media, and computer. Lyotard advocated the multiplicity of society and advocated surreal literary devices to articulate the complex nature of society. Lyotard’s *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* is considered as the Bible of the postmodern movement. He gave a new outlook on the knowledge that has arisen after the Enlightenment. Lyotard believes that cybernetics has come to dominate society in post-World War I. Lyotard calls meta-narrative containing the treasure of knowledge of old history. Lyotard comments thus, “Meta-narratives are total philosophies of history, which make ethical and political prescriptions for society, and generally regulate decision-making and the adjudication of what is considered truth. Meta-narratives roughly equate to the everyday notion of what principles society is founded on” (Lyotard 123).

Linda Hutcheon wrote *A Poetics of Postmodernism* and explained the postmodernist puzzle. She argues that postmodernism itself is paradoxical. She reiterates that postmodernism is both over-defined and under-defined since it has so many definitions. Linda Hutcheon in her *A Poetics of Modernism: History Theory*

and Fiction (1988) observes that post-structuralism and deconstruction are the main obvious theories that contributed to the growth of post-modernism (188). Hutcheon questions the de-centered nature of Hassan's definition. Hutcheon argues that postmodernism is "an open, ever-changing theoretical structure" (14). In Western Philosophy, Wittgenstein's philosophy in language, mathematics, and mind remained revolutionary. His philosophy has much resemblance with the postmodern culture and movement. Like Nietzsche, Wittgenstein is hailed as the real precursor of the entire school of postmodernism.

John Barth came under the influence of the postmodern theories of Jameson and Lyotard. The conspicuous characteristic of the fiction of John Barth is the articulation of the themes of alienation, nausea and angst of the contemporary American society depicted in imitation of the style of John Updike, Thomas Pynchon, Bashevis Singer, Nabokov, and Kurt Vonnegut. Barth was greatly impacted by the writings of Fredric Jameson and Leotard who explored the main issues confronting the modern Americans. The evolution of the anti-hero was a new feature of American fiction. Feeder Dostoevsky, Marcel Proust and James Joyce revolted against the realistic tradition of Shaw and Galsworthy. There are no certainties in life and the sufferings are inevitable. Victor Brombart in his book *Hero with a Thousand Faces* (1961) "traced the various stages of the evolution of the mythical hero but the traditional the conceptual hero vanished and absurd hero emerged. In the modern fiction man is depicted alienated from society lacking dignity and grandeur" (Brombart 5) Hassan observes thus:

The fiction of postmodernist writers of 1920's, depict man as a funny creature. He is a cog in a big machine. He has no identity and is portrayed as a cipher lost in the mundane world. The postmodern novelists such as James Joyce, Kurt Vonnegut, Bashevis Singer, Vladimir Nabokov and John Barth portrayed him as a sorry product of socio- economic forces. (Hassan 56)

The postmodern novelists depicted man as a cog in the machine, he is soulless and a neurotic being trapped in the abyss of darkness. The novelists of the post-war period were impacted by the theories of Surrealism and Freudian

Unconscious. Bergson too depicted the absurdity of human condition. John Barth wrote *Letters, Chimera* in which he deconstructed the Classical myths. He created Slothrop, Todd, George and Oedipa to depict the existential absurdity of human life. Barth's *Giles Goat-Boy* traces the mythical history of man's evolution and his place in the random universe.

John Barth and the Fiction of Nihilism

John Barth has created a galaxy of characters who live without any identity. The external forces bulldoze his identity as the contemporary man lives in chaos and Nietzsche's *Thus Spake Zarathustra* (1833) propagated the theories of nihilism. David Riesman in his seminal work *The Lonely Crowd* observes thus:

Man has no identity, no existence; he is a lonely wanderer in the crowd of people. He is alone in the universe. He is bound to the wheel of destiny and he cannot escape the terror of the absurdity of life. Death is inevitable to him and all his struggles and achievements lead him to despair. His birth is superfluous on earth. He is a waste product of nature and is thrown in the cosmic dustbin after death. His real worth is the ashes preserved in an urn (Reisman 23).

Ihab Hassan commented thus: "The novels of John Barth highlighted the real terror of absurdity. The protagonists of John Barth long for death as they attempt suicide to escape from the terror of the universe. Each character of Barth is horrified with the mystical anarchy and organized nothingness prevalent in the universe. He is baffled with truth that is abstract and uncertain" (Hassan 34). The novels of John Barth such as *The Floating Opera* (1956), and *The End of the Road* (1958) deal with the themes of suicide and abortion. Barth's novels *The Sot-Weed Factor* (1960), *Giles-Goat Boy* (1966), depict the cries of man, the mood of nihilism and pessimism. The very titles of the novels of John Barth are based on absurdity and meaninglessness of life and the futility of all struggles of man. Ihab Hassan explores the emergence of absurdity and nihilism thus:

Kierkegaard published *The Sickness Unto Death* and revolutionized art and philosophy by giving his philosophy of nihilism. He highlighted the growing anxiety

neurosis of people. He seriously took up the issue of the metaphysical despair of man. He propagated the idea that life is meaningless. The real nature of his struggle of life is futile. It is this type of despair, this sickness unto death which disintegrates man's self and the consequences are neurosis and schizophrenia of self (Hassan 6).

Giraud further highlights the absurdity of human beings thus: "Man's conflict between society and the forces of Nature and religion brings his alienation, nausea and angst. Man is a skeletal individual, a personality split who is forced to confront the problems of anxiety; alienation and indecision" (Giraud 229).

The evolution of the postmodernist fiction is inspired by the nihilistic ideas. Sophocles and Shakespeare created a galaxy of characters who dared to challenge the external forces. They were great heroes who suffered isolation but they used their loneliness to bring out the moral order. Hamlet was lonely but he dared to bring order out of chaos. But the characters of the postmodern novelists are neurotic misfits struggling in vain to bring harmony in society. The quest of the heroic characters of the classical tragedies was meaningful but the quest of the contemporary characters is futile leading them to loss of identity and despair. For example, the quest of the protagonist of John Barth is futile, he looks helpless and defeated. He is the "victim of despair and intolerable anguish; he cannot get rid of himself, cannot become nothing" (110). The Existentialists took inspiration from ideas of nihilism of Kierkegaard. Sartre presented the concept broken and fragmented self in his *Being and Nothingness* (1943). Slethaug Fogel in his book *Understanding John Barth* (1990) observes that "self of man is free to act but all his actions lead him to death and despair. Man is in fact trapped in a solitude from which there is no escape" (23). Sartre has "a very dismal and nihilistic view about man as he says man is always separated from what he is by all the breadth of the being which he is not" (17). Sartre comments thus: "Life is very uncertain and the struggle is futile as defeat is always imminent. Human reality is a figment of imagination. What is not determines what is. Thus, self confronts its own negation and ultimately disintegrates" (Sartre 17). Ihab Hassan points out that "The characters of John Barth are completely dehumanized individuals morally and spiritually. He is a dumb animal crying in wilderness in his futile quest for identity. He is tossed in the cosmic void to end his life in despair" (Hassan 54).

Difference between Modern and Postmodern Fiction: John Barth as a Postmodernist

John Barth is a postmodern novelist like Vladimir Nabokov, Flannery O’Conner, Bernard Malamud and John Cheever. The novels of John Barth are packed with postmodern characteristics. He reacts against the modern writers like Hemingway and Joseph Heller who give a fragmented view of history and subjectivity. Postmodernist writers react against the ideas of Enlightenment. Like postmodern writers Barth also believes that there is no absolute truth so facts and falsehood are interchangeable. Modernism puts faith in the ideas, beliefs and cultural norms of the west but the postmodern writers like John Barth and Nabokov reject all traditional values as they view life meaningless and all struggles of life futile ending in despair. The modern writers celebrate the adventures of World War II but the postmodern writers don’t find any heroism in the contemporary life as in the plays of Harold Pinter and Beckett there are anti-heroes. Hemingway, Scott Fitzgerald and Joseph Heller portray a unified vision of life and society but the postmodern writers see human experience ambiguous; fragmentary and internally contradictory. Beckett and Ionesco present a “jagged world view” The postmodernist writers sought inspiration from the writings of Georg Lukacs, Theodor Adorno and Fredric Jameson who explored the cult of postmodernism. Jameson writes: “in these circumstances indeed, there is some question whether the ultimate renewal of modernism, the final dialectical subversion of the new automatized conventions of aesthetics of perceptual revolution, might not simple be realism itself” (11). Authors of Post-modernism are not much concerned with social realism but use the techniques of Dadaism and Surrealism. Malcolm Bradbury avers thus:

After 1945 the novel showed every sign of reasserting its realistic potential, its moral and social concern, its sense of life as progress. The lessons of the great moderns...had been taken, but they were assimilated back into a spirit relative realism, and technical and epistemological questions were not strongly pressed (10).

Characteristics of Postmodern Novel: Black Humor in the Fiction of John Barth

Like Kurt Vonnegut, John Barth discarded the traditional literary devices employing a new perception of reality. His sense of visual acuity is unique as the witty style of Kurt Vonnegut is charming. The prose of John Barth has “the sharpness of a surgeon’s scalpel, the precision of a fine watch and focuses on the commonplace like the eye of an X-ray machine”. The eye of John Barth is very sharp and he sees with the eye of a bird. John Barth doesn’t depend on the reality of events of the past like Hemingway but he creates a new world as his vision is apocalyptic. Barth created a galaxy of characters mostly belonging to the middle class America confronting the uncertainties involved in a world of despair. His protagonists are rootless struggling in a world of science and technology and trapped in a godless universe. The post-modern writers such as John Barth, William Gaddis, Kurt Vonnegut and Bruce Jay Friedman extensively use irony, playfulness and black humor. John Barth portrays the modern world as a bleak, barren abyss where human civilization faces its decline. Barth uses black humor to diminish the disgust of the nihilistic modern life. In his novel *The Floating Opera* Barth employs grotesque allegory of mythical happiness and success in America. Barth depicts the quest of the American middle class of 1980s for happiness through black humor.

Intertextuality of John Barth

John Barth innovated many techniques in imitation of the writings of Fredric Jameson. The conspicuous feature of the novel of John Barth is technique of Intertextuality. T.S. Eliot used this technique in his famous work *The Waste Land*. He loaded the text with the allusions and the textual lines. An important element of postmodernism is its acknowledgment of previous literary works. He uses the original lines from the other texts of the novelists to intensify the thematic significance.

Pastiche

John Barth employs the tool of pastiche to articulate his cosmic apocalyptic vision of American life. In postmodern terminology pastiche means to combine, or "paste"

together, multiple elements. In most of his novels John Barth uses the tool of pastiche to effectively depict the themes of absurdity of the middle class Americans. He has “pasted” elements of previous genres and styles of literature to create a new narrative voice. Jameson defines pastiche in *The Cultural Turn* thus, “Pastiche is blank parody, a parody that has lost its sense of humor: pastiche is to parody what that curious thing, the modern practice of a kind of blank irony, is to what Wayne Booth calls the stable and comic ironies of the eighteenth century” (5). Thomas Pynchon, uses elements from detective fiction, science fiction, and war fiction. In *The Sot-Weed Factor* Barth loads the novel with the elements of fantasy and romance. Barth gives the apocalyptic view of the future of America as the novel is set in 1984. Barth uses the elements of science and fantasy and the novels have an affinity with the anti- Utopian warnings of Orwell and Huxley. Being influenced by Albert Camus and Sartre, Barth uses humor to portray America embracing pop culture. He creates a fictional world that creates the sentiments of the middle class Americans. Like Bakhtin, Barth uses the tools of irony, satire to burlesque the middle-class characters.

Meta-fiction

The fiction of John Barth is considered as meta-fiction and his *The Sot-Weed Factor* is epic in dimension. All the four novels of John Barth deal with the problems of four generations of people. Barth’s novels depict the gruesome picture of the world threatening the very existence of human beings and civilization of humanity. This terrifying view of the world was challenging for the philosophers and Barth set new traditions in the domain of fiction. John Irving’s *The World According to Garp* was hailed as a postmodern meta-fiction. James Joyce’s *A Portrait of the Artist* was in his mind when Barth wrote *The Sot-Weed Factor* and *The Floating Opera*. Linda Hutcheon in her *Poetics of Modernism: History Theory and Fiction* (1988) observes that “post-structuralism and deconstruction are the main, the obvious theories that contributed to the growth of post-modernism” (188). Hutcheon talks about “the novels of John Barth that fictionalize the actual historical events and characters. The hero of *The Sot-Weed Factor* is in Cartesian sense is a linear and rational thinker with the scientific approach to an irrational world” (188).

Magic Realism

Mo Yan got the Nobel Prize for literature for his new perception of reality. He wrote *Big Breasts and Wide Hips* employing the technique of magic realism. *The Midnight's Children* of Salman Rushdie is another historical example of magic realism. He relied on supernatural powers blending the incident of violence and the metaphor of nature. John Barth's "famous novels *The Sot-Weed Factor* and *The Floating Opera* are epitome of essentialist work of art abounds in fantasy and uncanny episodes. These novels touch upon all the important issues of the 21st century" (Hassan 77). The postmodernist American novelist John Simmons Barth was born in Maryland Cambridge on 27 May 1930. He entered into New York City and took music as his major subject. He entered into John Hopkins University in Baltimore and graduated in creative writing. He was promoted as a Professor at Pennsylvania State University in 1953. John Barth came into the limelight with the publication of two essays *The Literature of Exhaustion* and *The Literature of Replenishment Postmodernist Fiction* and propounded new theories of postmodernism. He wrote novels to explore the possibilities of creative art and made experiments in fiction. In 1979, Barth argued that the conventions of art can be subverted, transcended and transformed and he advocated in his essays that the fiction must belong to the "literature of replenishment" and not to "literature of exhaustion" Barth wanted to escape from the dead end in which American fiction found itself.

John Barth and the Themes of Alienation

John Simmons Barth realized very early in life that life is futile and meaningless and the existing values and traditions cannot help man to confront the existential absurdity. The horror and agony of the world wars; the Holocaust and genocide shattered man's faith in God and the waves of nihilism and skepticism engulfed the intellectuals and the writers such as T. S. Eliot, Nabokov and Bashevis Singer. Like Thomas Pynchon and Kurt Vonnegut, Barth wrote on the problems of alienation. Bernard Murchland in his book *The Age of Alienation* (1971) observes "that alienation has multiple manifestations disorders such as loss of self, anxiety, anomie, depersonalization, rootlessness, and meaninglessness, isolation and lack of

community” (Murchland 4). The religion and culture lost their appeal as man lost his faith in the old values. Fogel and Slethaug observe thus:

Both World War I and World War II radically changed the shape of European and American cultures and effectively dispossessed modern men and women of their belief in a universe laden with absolute values-God, tradition, reason, and individual intuition (8).

John Barth came under the influence of Robbe-Grillet and Burgess when he was a Professor in John Hopkins University because both the writers challenge realism depicted in the traditional fiction and drama of Arthur Miller. Both the writers “remind us of the factious aspects of our own existence” (John Barth 30). In his essays *The Literature of Exhaustion* (1967) and *The Literature of Replenishment* (1979). Barth indicated his distrust in the traditional exhausted values of realism and he made serious attempt in his fiction to refurbish novels with fresh themes and technique. Barth found that the American novelists like Salinger and Mary Mcarthy aligned themselves with the plot in 1940s. Saul Bellow and Flannery O’ Conner in the 1950s depicted the shortcomings of individual in their novels but followed the beaten track of their predecessors. Barth commented thus: “In the novels of Saul Bellow and Flannery O’ Conner, the narrative is more discontinuous and the chronology even more distorted” (2). The strongest influence came from the French existentialism as the hero is in search for meaning of life. Jacob is lost in the “jelly” mass in which modern society has been transformed. The sexual relationship between Jake and Rennie creates complications in the plot as Rennie goes for abortion and dies. The theme of death and the futility of life are typical existential themes structuring the plot of *The End of the Road*. There is a free discussion of the themes of existentialism, nihilism, absolute values and absolute chaos. John Barth was twenty six years old when he published his first novel *The Floating Opera* (1956) dealing with the theme of the fragmentary nature of life and art and fluid human existence. He believes that identity and reality are products of man’s imagination. Barth used his first novel to explore the fundamental questions of life and universe. He treats the themes of time and memory negatively. He rejects the traditional ideas about plot, character, space and style. He creates artifice rather than

imitate reality. He discards bourgeois realism employing the devices of absurd and fragmentation; substituting a “mythical” for a “realistic” disrupting the linear flow of events in the plot of *The Floating Opera*. Todd Andrews is confronted with the randomness of the universe and the arbitrariness and relativity of values. He has to struggle against the multiplicity of meaning. Barth deals with the question of life and suicide seeking inspiration from Albert Camus. Slethaug Fogel in his book *Understanding John Barth* (1990) observes that the central conflict of Todd’s life can be formulated as “the tension between the urge to live and the desire to die, between what human beings want to be and what they are, between subconscious sexual drives and conscious rational processes, between human violence and elaborate systems of justice, and between events and attribution of causes” (Fogel 25). Todd resolves the conflict at the end of the novel realizing that life and death are equally unmotivated. The reasons to commit suicide are as unjustifiable as the reasons to live. Todd Andrews develops a new approach to life based on irrationality. Todd is mentally disturbed because of the suicide of his father, and the broken relationships with Jane Mack and Betty June. He develops nihilistic attitude towards life and thinks of committing suicide to escape from the terror of existence. His participation in the First World War made him sick and despondent and he experienced metaphysical despair:

I was just stupefied. Cowardice involves choice but fear is independent of choice....But it was the purest and strongest emotion I’ve ever experienced. I could actually, for a part of the time it lasted regard myself objectively: a shocked, drooling animal in a mud hole (John Barth, *The Floating Opera* 63).

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Beverley Gross observes that “Barth’s *The Floating Opera* is an existential put on; all issues in Barth’s novels come down to some sort of game” (31). Todd loses faith in God and becomes a skeptic and nihilist. In his early life he believes that

the society is based on a stable system of human values but after his traumatic experiences his faith crumbles down and he is confronted with the absurdity of life. In Maryland he found that only stable things are beaten biscuits: “few things are stable in this world. Your morning stomach, reader, ballasted with three Maryland beaten biscuits, will be stable” (53). He is the victim of uncertainty of life which governs modern life. He carries out a project to explore the cause of the suicide of his father but his findings are depressing. Todd doesn't find any reason for living in this world. He believes that living is identical with action. He therefore decides to kill himself to escape from the absurdity of the world. He even decides to kill all his fellows and neighbors. He plans to blow up the Floating Opera; a showboat moored at Cambridge. His plan is the outcome of his frustration and despair. Todd struggles to find out “the rationality of the suicide of his father but it turns that it will take more life span than it takes a lazy Buddhist to attain Nirvana” (51). Barth observes that the resolution of a problem is never clear and distinct. The principle of causation governs the relationship between father and son: “father relates to son as cause relates to effect. Since the son originates from his father, he must turn to him as to the source of his own actions. Their communication would establish the link which illuminates the relationship between cause and effect” (20). Todd remains confused and bewildered and feels that it was predetermined. His research shows that intentionality doesn't form a basis for human activity and in human existence reason is helpless to solve the paradoxes. He faces the same dilemma when he sits to write his autobiography. In all his life he is haunted by the tragic suicide event of his father and at the end, he finds that life is meaningless and all the struggle of life is futile. His project of writing an autobiography seems to him futile; all his investigation is futile and his autobiography is therefore “doubly partial, twice biased, in the sense of being personal and incomplete, partisan and fragmentary” (Hassan 124). “His actions and opinions are inconsistent with the principles of Harrison and Jane” (1). Todd fails to remember the date of his abortive suicide, the exact weight of Jane and Harrison's daughter and the exact number of the spectators on board of *The Floating Opera*. He doesn't even remember the clothes his father was wearing on the day of suicide. Uncertainty of human existence is the main existential theme taken by John Barth in this novel. When Nietzsche declared the death of God he had two

contradictory ideas in his mind; the sense of denial and the sense of loss. He declared that there is no Absolute Truth of God. He expressed his pessimism because man has lost origin and center as he feels rootless today. John Barth was impacted by such nihilistic ideas of Nietzsche and wrote his second novel *The End of the Road* (1958) depicting the theme of alienation and human existence. The very title of the novel expresses a sense of loss and denial and the fear of impending decay. Barth had announced the death of the novel in his monumental essay *The Literature of Exhaustion*. The hero of the novel Jacob Horner makes the statement in the first page thus: "IN A SENSE, I AM JACOB HORNER" (John Barth, *The End of the Road* 1). Jacob Horner lives in a world where life is uncertain and the world is in chaos. In this chaotic world everything is deferred and fluid. Jacob experiences physical immobility at Pennsylvania Station. He is haunted by the sense of loss and the loss of absolute value. Jacob is described as "weatherless" as he ceases to exist like the old Greek heroes. He meets a Negro doctor at the railway station who prescribes for him "Mythotherapy." Jacob realizes that "human existence precedes human essence and that man is free in this universe to choose his own essence" (8). He feels that he can be cured from his immobility by the existential premises. Jacob meets "Joe Morgan in State Teachers College Maryland. He is also a professor of history believing in the continuity of history" (20). Joe heads "directly for destination, implying by his example that paths should be laid where people walk" (20). Joe's wife Rennie describes the attitude of Joe thus:

He is God...He is just God...He is noble, strong and brave, more than anybody I've ever seen. A disaster for him is a disaster for reason, intelligence, and civilization, because he's the quintessence of these things (123).

Joe is a typical modern man living in the world of chaos where everything is uncertain and unpredictable. His inertia is explained as he emerges as an imperfect man who fails to finish his doctoral thesis. And yet, "Joe is an imperfect man who never finishes his doctoral dissertation on history, Jacob imitates Joe but the Negro doctor advises him to get away from Joe and devote himself to create his own role" (87). Jacob thinks over his fate thus:

Joe was the Reason or Being, I was the Unreason, or Not-Being and the two of us were fighting without matter for possession of Rennie, like God and Satan for the soul of man (129).

Barth focuses on the theme of death and decay in the novel *The End of the Road*. Jacob remains puzzled till the end of the novel; he admits at the end to Joe Morgan thus:

God, Joe I don't know where to start or what to do! His voice remained clear, bright and close to my ear, Tears ran in a cold flood down my face and neck, onto my chest, and I shook all over with violent chill (197).

The plot of the novel is “packed with the crowd of ironies about Jacob who confesses to Morgan on the telephone: God, Joe I don't know where to start or what to do!” (197). Jacob behaves like the confused and bewildered characters of Beckett in *Waiting for Godot*; he represents modern man who remains confused and directionless and fragile to confront the absurdity of life. He fails to save Rennie; he fails to create a new value system. His beloved and baby die and he remains a silent spectator; helpless and inactive as the forces of darkness and nihilism destroy his happiness. “Perhaps I reflected what could eventually destroy both Morgans, after all, was lack of imagination. I glanced up at Lacocon: his agony was abstract and unsuggestive” (127). The characters of Barth are motivated to make the following observations in compliance with the existential philosophy: In this universe nothing has intrinsic value and the attitude of the people to things is irrational. There is no ultimate reason for valuing anything including life. Living in this world is identical to action and there's no final reason for action, for living Jacob Horner is not active like Todd as he is not serious to find out the cause. He simply recognizes that “when one is faced with such a multitude of desirable choices, no one choice seems satisfactory for very long by comparison with the aggregate desirability of all the rest, though compared to anyone of the others it would not be found inferior” (3).

Jacob is a weak character since he lacks the will power to adjust with the existential situation. When he finds himself making love with Rennie, he feels

trapped for his motives: “One can go a long way into a situation thus without finding the word or gesture upon which initial responsibility can handily be fixed...” (100). For Jacob life is uncertain and the episodes of life don’t follow any smooth flow like the currents of a stream. There is no cause and effect system in this world. For Todd and Jacob life is meaningless and the struggles of life end in despair. John Barth wrote his third novel *The Sot-Weed Factor* (1960) as an expanded parody of the historical poet Ebenezer Cooke whose innocence is in tatters as he spurns the sexual liberties of Mrs. Russecks and Ms. Toast. Mr. Ebenezer Cooke has been the first poet laureate of Maryland. The central metaphor of the novel is twin hood which unfolds the issue of identity and role creating ambiguity in the plot. Ebenezer expresses his dilemma and confusion in a letter to his sister Ann: “All Roads are fine Roads, beloved Sister, none more than another...to choose one, impossible!...I cannot choose sweet Anna” (John Barth, *The Sot-Weed Factor* 123) The novel *The Sot-Weed Factor* is a fictitious account of an obscure poet of the 18th century and his misadventures in Maryland. Ebenezer was born in America with his twin sister Anna and was brought up in England. He got education from his tutor Henry Burlingame III. Ebenezer wishes to become a poet and remain virgin in his life. No wonder, he resists the sexual advances of a whore Joan Toast. He goes to America to sing his new epical poem *Marylandiad*. He composes a satirical poem *Sot-Weed Factor* there; marries Joan Toast who falls in love with him and is afflicted with physical illness and psychic humiliations. Like Horner, Ebenezer “suffers from immobility and is characterized as consistently no special sort of person” (21). Soren Kierkegaard in his *Sickness Unto Death* observes that human beings suffer despair when they lack possibility. Ebenezer gets an awareness that his virginity is false and deceptive; the loss of virginity gives him mental torture: “What I prized before hath all but lost its point and when I think that soon or late it will come, this end to innocence you speak of, as sure as death will come” (670). Barth uses the metaphors of “pits” and “castle” to depict the antithetical possibilities of existence. The “pit” is a recurring image in *The Sot-Weed Factor* symbolizing uncertainty and irrational energy. Ebenezer knows that his innocence will soon vanish as absolute values are an illusion in the contemporary society. He realizes the truth that the “chaste and consecrated life may be lunacy. Ebenezer realizes that he is living in an uncertain and ambiguous world.

His quest is modern man's quest for certitude. He is confused by multiplicity of choices as he writes to his sister Ann: "All Trades, all Crafts, all Professions are wondrous, but none is finer than the rest together" (21). Like Todd Andrews, Ebenezer gets awareness of the world without certitude; he hears the "whistling of the black winds of chaos" and becomes sick of human existence. His tutor Burlingame tells him "Forget the word sky; It is a blinder to your eyes. There is no dome of heaven yonder" (366). John Barth investigates the causes of the downfall of Ebenezer and depicts his plight through the images of nature, sky and darkness:

Ebenezer felt bereft of orientation. He could no longer think of up and down: the stars were simply out there, as well as below him as above, and the wind appear to howl...from the endless corridors of space (366).

Ebenezer is engulfed in the abyss of uncertainty and absurdity of life; he lives in a chaotic world where it is difficult to make a choice and he feels "bereft of orientation". He says "I am a virgin and a poet; less than mortal and more; not a man, but mankind" (71). Ebenezer amplifies that "existence precedes essence" and that man is the sum of his actions. His ideal of virginity breaks down giving him depression and nausea. Ebenezer cries thus in desperation: "I had near slipped once again into the Abyss" (82). Ebenezer learns after a long series of disasters that the fate of man is terrible and his confrontation with the absurdity is inevitable. He concludes thus: "One thing is given man to know, whatever his sins, they must perforce be grievous, for terrible is the punishment he suffers, and unending" (609).

John Barth's novel *Giles Goat-Boy* recreates the myth of the modern existential hero as George emerges from the world of goats and creates history in the human world by his grotesque adventures. John Barth took inspiration from Joseph Campbell's *The Hero with the Thousand Faces*. Campbell discusses in detail the various stages of growth of the mythical hero who begins his journey indicating that individual mythic heroes are simply different faces. The heroes perform different roles according to the archetypal design. The critics and reviewers of John Barth had divergent views about *Giles Goat-Boy*. Webster (1966) dismisses the novel as "a

gluey mass of socio-comic belligerence that hardens into epoxy” (10). Denis Donoghue in *New Year Book Review* (1966) condemned it as “too long, too tedious, a dud” (17). Melvin Maddocks (1966) called it “cumbersomely allegorical story” (5). Peter Mercer (1971) eulogized “*Giles Goat-Boy* for its complexity and richness” (7). John Stark (1974) observes that Barth’s novel *Giles-Goat Boy* is “a capsule history of literature” (137). Barth uses the metaphor of university as the universe lacking in certainties and values. George is the main mythical hero of the novel who believes that “everything only gets worse, gets worse; our victories are never more than moral, and always pyrrhic; in fact we know only more or less ruinous defeats” (137). In the novel *The Sot-Weed Factor*, the main focus of Barth is on humanism but *Giles-Goat Boy* is a novel of heroic adventures turning into misadventures. George says: “There is no birth date, birth place, or ancestry to define me. I had seen generations of kids grow to goat-hood, reproduce themselves, and die” (117). He introduces himself thus: “George is my name; my deeds have been heard of in TowerHall, and my childhood has been chronicled in the *Journey of Experimental Psychology*” (4). George is a mythic hero firmly grounded in the milieu of the existential hero searching for value and identity. Barth uses the elements of allegory, archetypes and symbols to chronicle the journey of George. He belongs to the world of animals but soon he gets enlightenment during his third descent into WESCAC’s belly. He is coupled with Anastasia; George emerges as Oedipus like and sees “in the darkness blinding light!” (549).

George attains a vision of cosmic synthesis and moves toward ever greater awareness of the transcendental cosmic reality of life and the universe. George is a goat-boy and possibly a divinity. Patricia Merivate calls Giles “the best-known contemporary superman” George’s mission is to save the University from destruction. George dreams thus: “Suppose a man found out how to get inside of WESCAC and EASCAC and change their ATMs so they couldn’t ever hurt anybody! Would that be fair work for a hero?” (127). George has no knowledge and experience of the world and he is a symbol of innocence. George shifts roles from goat to human being and begins his journey to gain knowledge and awareness of perversity and “flunkedness.” He says: “I understood for the first time evil, and was

so impressed by the horror of it” (135). His tutor Max tells him that “Every man’s part goat and part Grand Tutor; it’s the goat part that does the dreaming” (79). George’s goatish part comes on the surface when he sees Anastasia standing naked on the bank of the river with her skirt held high. She represents woman as temptress as Barth comments: “Sturdy she stood there, feet apart and privates, bare as milch- man’s to the breeze, silently calling, croaker, croaker!” (152). George is entrapped by the evil forces as he admits: “In a bitter clear flash I saw the source and pattern of my ruin” (157). Barth creates a surreal landscape presenting grotesque characters struggling in vain to find out the meaning of reality and existence. Characters are heightened, exaggerated contribute nothing to the growth of humanity. The characters are abstractions representing ambiguous intelligence and mindless animalism. George is fathered by a computer and remained a goat for thirteen years. He is the compendium of three elements; the technological, human and the animal. George experiences failures repeatedly and concludes that the laws of the universe are harsh; He finds himself in “darkness, blinding light!” (549) and expresses his agony thus: “The campus wind was chill, but knowledge warned me, I knew what must be done, and that I would do it, all would come to pass was clear, hence my tears-but now they were for studentdom, not for me” (732). George realizes that it is the fate of humanity to fail, “to PASS ALL, FAIL ALL” (732). John Barth’s novel *Chimera* depicts characters fighting for survival in a harsh, universe confronting the challenge leading to death.

Barth’s *Chimera* is composed of three interweaving novellas. Barth gives the subversion of mythology in a postmodernist framework. Three important myths of Scheherzade, Perseus and Bellerophon dominate the plots of the novel. Jerry H. Bryant is of the view that *Chimera* is “a lecture on the nature of fiction, disguised as a kind of retelling of some very old stories” (213). He further observes that “*Chimera* is supposed to be ...an exploration into the possibilities of a new kind of fiction” (213). In each novella the hero sets out on a journey to escape the world of existential absurdity, boredom and stagnation. In the first novella Scheherazade confronts the fear of death and absurdity of life. She marries Shahryar to save women of her tribe from his vengeful decision to kill a virgin every night as a punishment for

the deception of his wife. Barth adds the name of Shah Zaman who is cheated by his wife. Barth has focused on myth, allegory and magic realism to explore the objective reality. Barth observes that the function of fiction is to give new thoughts and “the ideal of postmodernist will somehow rise above the quarrel between realism and irrationalism, formalism and contentism, pure and committed literature, coterie fiction and junk fiction” (303). Barth imitates the role of Genie in *Dunyazadiad* who travels from the present to the past. Scheherazade narrates a story to entertain the king and stall his decision to kill her. She has the magical narrative skill to trade a life for a story. Powell observes that in “John Barth’s *Chimera* the genie learned from *Dunyazade*, a new perspective is all that is needed to create new stories out of old ones” (230). Scheherazade uses the sources of science and mythology to save her life. She feels that “the real magic is to understand which words work and for what; the trick is to learn the trick” (7). Story telling is used as an effective weapon to get liberty and to gain survival. In symbolical terms Scheherazade is a modern heroine confronted with the dilemmas and uncertainties of life. She has to survive and for her survival she narrates a story every day. Man has to begin his struggle everyday and is bound to suffer endless torments in his life. The process of creation at any moment is a matter of life and death and the problem of Scheherazade is “publish or perish”. John Barth’s novel *Sabbatical: A Romance* (2011) is written in the sea tradition as Barth employs the sea voyage as a metaphor of journey of life. In the sea fiction, sea is depicted as God and the voyage of life symbolizes myth of life. In this novel Barth explores the dilemmas and uncertainties confronted by man in the chaotic universe. Evelyn Glaser Wohrer (1977) observes that John Barth’s fiction is to “explore the loss of human values and the struggle of man to survive in the callous and harsh universe. He uses the tools of parody and burlesque to explore the meaning and reality of life. Susan and Fenwick struggle to explore the existential reality” (Wohrer12). They recount the harsh and uncanny stories of their life which include mysterious disappearance, murders and multiple rapes. They examine their past to predict the future of their life. Barth focuses on the theme of deception. Fenwick has massive heart attack and Susan becomes pregnant and has to get her child aborted. Fenwick and Susan are caught in a situation where there is no escape. They have to bear the existential absurdity and malevolent forces like ordinary people. Internal and

shared parallels of theme and plot illustrate the single perceiving self as interpreter of a mysterious reality which can never be fully known.

Review of Literature of Past and Present

Aloni's book *Beyond Nihilism: Nietzsche's Healing and Edifying Philosophy* (1991) provides the latest analysis of the theories of nihilism. He contends that these theories after World War changed the mind and sensibility of the postmodern novelists. The Jewish Holocaust killed millions of Jews and people were terrified by the forces of violence and barbarity. Erich Fromm's in *Escape from Freedom* (1941) explores the meaning of Free Will and human consciousness. Man is alive physically but as he grows the external forces destroy his freedom. Ihab Hassan published the books *The Modern Self in Recoil* (1967) and *Dismemberment of Orpheus: Toward a Postmodern Literature* (1982) to analyze the theories of postmodernism.

Christian A. Gregory's article "Stranded Economics" investigates the postmodernist Marxian ideology of Jameson. His revolutionary ideas and thoughts generated huge interest in an entire generation of students and scholars. His postmodernism has become a brand name of the contemporary cultural scene. His discourses created great interest in the writers and thinkers of the U.S., Europe, and Asia. In 1991, Jameson published *Postmodernism* and synthesized disparate observations.

John O'Kane published the article "Postmodern Negative Dialectics" arguing that the cultural change began with World War I and the Bolshevik Revolution of Russia. In France Marxism took a new turn and all the Marxian ideas were reinterpreted and reconsidered by the Western theorists.

Christopher Pawling published *Popular Fiction and Social Change* (1984). He explored the forces of cultural change in America and the emergence of postmodernism. He discussed in detail the growth of postmodernist class consciousness.

Jack Anderson's *The Origins of Postmodernity* (1998) is an epoch-making book of criticism of John Barth. He argued that Barth was the product of socio-

economic forces. He employed the literary devices of postmodernism in his fiction to depict the alienation, fragmentation and absurdity of human life.

Maria Elisa Cevasco's *the Political Unconscious of Globalization: Notes from the Periphery* investigates the usefulness of the ideas and the cultural theories of Fredric Jameson. His critical tools are valuable for "cognitive mapping" in the postmodern world. The idea of space and time is predominant in postmodernism. Society is always flowing like a stream as lifestyles, fashions, and beliefs are always changing.

His ideas greatly impacted the contemporary writers who wrote on the themes of alienation and absurdity of life. Hassan theorizes "a vision of the postmodern fiction. He stresses that the main features of modern fiction are discontinuity, cruelty, violence and radicalism. The subversion of forms is the main tool of his theories" (Hassan 123). He believes that "silence creates void in the life of a protagonist. Sufferings of the modern protagonist are multiplied; he suffers from the torments of madness ecstasy and mystic trance" (123). Madden's *American Dreams, American Nightmares*. (1971) traces the social-economic forces that brought about the Cultural Revolution in America. All the critical essays are written to document the main currents and trends of American society. Soren Kierkegaard's *The Sickness unto Death*. (1946) is a revolutionary work that changed the history of art and literature. Most of the great writers of the postmodern period were impacted by the philosophical view of Kierkegaard. Heidegger, Kafka, Barth, Sartre and Camus took the challenge and wrote on the main issues of death, alienation, fragmentation of life and absurdity that gripped the psyche of the American people. They wrote on death, angst, neurosis and sickness of the soul. Albert Camus's *The Myth of Sisyphus and other Essays* (1961) brought revolution in art and literature. He explores the conflict between sense and the soul of man. He explored the existence of absurdity and futility of life and the place of man in this universe for the first time. Joseph J. Waldmeir (1980) in his *Critical Essays on John Barth* talks about the literary devices of postmodernism employed by Barth in his fiction to explore the absurdity of human existence. The book is a collection of essays written on the various issues of John Barth. Manfred Puetz (1976) in his article "John Barth's *The Sot-Weed Factor*: The

Pitfalls of Mythopoesis” published in *Twentieth Century* observes that the writings of John Barth deal with the serious issues confronting the American Society. His novels are epitome of postmodern fiction as he belongs to a new school of philosophical thought with a passion to put life in literature. The later works of Barth explores the dangers inherent in mythical stories. His novels *The Floating Opera* and *The End of the Road* depict the pessimism of American society. Marjorie Worthington (2001) reviewed Barth’s novel *Lost in the Funhouse* and observes that Barth has used all the literary devices of meta-fiction. He has shown his interest in the technique of intertextuality and used this technique in structuring the plot of the novel. He borrowed the ideas from Linda Hutcheon who observed that the postmodernist literature is characterized by intense self-reflexivity and the fiction of John Barth depicts self-reflexivity in abundance. His novel *Lost in the Funhouse* is a meta-fictional novel. Beverly Gross (1968) in her article “The Anti-Novels of John Barth” published in *Chicago Review* observes that it is not so simple to read the novels of John Barth since he loads his stories with so many classical and mythical allusions. His novel *The Sot-Weed Factor* can be understood only if one has the adequate knowledge of *Paradise Lost* and *War and Peace*. His works are profoundly difficult and dense. His novel *Giles-Goat Boy* is a mythical history of the modern age. The hero is a mythical character omnipresent and a man with many masks. The fiction of Barth deals with the paralysis of the modern age. Thomas Le Clair (1973) in his article “*The Floating Opera: Death and the Craft of Fiction*” published in *Texas Studies in Literature and Language* observes that John Barth was influenced by James Joyce and Leo Tolstoy employing the techniques of disguises and illusions in the plot of *The Floating Opera*. He has given multiple visions in one single plot flowing like a stream and touching upon all the important issues afflicting the modern man. The hero Todd Andrews is a protean character who narrates his manifold experiences from his youth in Maryland to his joining of the army in an unconventional and mythical language. Linell B. Wisner (2010) in his article “Archaism, or Textual Literalism in the Historical Novel” observes that the elements of archaism are predominant in the novels of John Barth. William Blake and Ezra Pound used this literary device and Barth employed archaism in his novels that are meta-fictions. Thackeray’s *Henry Esmond* (1852) and Scott’s *Ivanhoe* (1819) are

good examples of archaism. Barth's *The Sot-Weed Factor* is full of archaism and classical allusions. Barth came under the influence of Georg Lukas's *The Historical Novel* (1937) and the ideas of Linda Hutcheon about "historiographic meta-fiction" and he wrote his novels using the technique of archaism.

Cristina Garrigos (1994) wrote an article "Barth Meets Borges in the Funhouse" pointing out that the works of John Barth and Jorge Luis Borges share clear affinities. Barth imitated the narrative techniques and themes of Borges in his novels. Barth questions the nature of reality and explores the possibilities of fiction offering as a medium to explore the paradoxical reality. His novel *Lost in the Funhouse* is an important example of this imitation. He has given the fragmentary view of the world in this novel depicting his vision of life through images and symbols. Goetz Egloff in his article "Treating the Fiction of Forms: Metafiction in John Barth" observes that John Barth deals with the fiction of forms. Barth discarded exhausted topics of fiction and revived meta-fiction.

Barth wrote stories and novels consisting of thoughts as "equivalent of essence in being". He anticipates issues of subsequent decades as well as issues of being and art. He depicted the complexity of life using new techniques and stylistic devices to enrich his stories. Qassim Salman Sarhan in his article John Barth's "Dunyazadiad: A Postmodern Reading of an Eastern Frame" has reviewed Barth's famous novel *Chimera*. He observed that Barth employed frame-tale technique of the ancient literature in his fiction. In each "novel of Barth there is a set of embedded stories encircled by a larger framework thus creating a pattern of stories and highlighting the relationship between the story teller and the audience" (13). His novel *Chimera* is the best example of this kind of novel. Mahsa Hashemi (2013) observes that John Barth's authorial presence is important in his novels. He writes about death and explores the mystery of death in his novels. He uses art as a medium to defeat death. His treatment of the modern man's engagement with death has made him a prominent novelist. His characters use many strategies to avoid death and straddle to survive in a harsh society. He creates "characters who are either writers or expected to write stories of their lives. These characters need to narrate themselves in order to avoid their disappearance into nothingness" (Hashemi 21). Carolyn W.

Brumbaugh (1977) reviewed John Barth's famous essay *The Literature of Exhaustion* in the context of his review of the novel *The Sot-Weed Factor*. Barth imitated 1708 poem of Ebenezer Cooke and observed that literature has an eternal source of entertainment for all times. Barth created a complex novel in writing *The Sot-Weed Factor* and used all the elements of parody and satire to expose the dullness of the contemporary American society.

Harold Farwell (1974) in his article "Tenuous Affirmation: The Absurd Unending Possibility of Love" published in *Georgia Review* observes that in the novels of Barth there is unique sense of discovery. In the novels of Barth there is a strange ambiguity of love for he believes that man is so much lost in making money in America that he has no time to make true love. He has regarded love as the essence of the absurd. Barth doesn't deny the power of love and insists that love has the redemptive power. Judith Friedrich (1996) in his article "Variations on Life Fiction and Autobiography in John Barth's Four Novels" published in *Hungarian Journal of English and American Studies* observes that in the postmodernist fiction of John Barth there are many stylistic variations which often confuse the readers. In each novel he depicts the heroic struggle of the protagonist to find his voice and identity. There is a treasure house of technical knowledge in each novel of Barth as he exploits many sources from ancient literature. Barth also uses autobiographical elements to achieve variety and modernity.

The Research Gap in the Past and the Present Research

There are few stray research papers dealing with the Existential vision of John Barth. There is no full length study on the topic "*The Postmodern Novel: A Study of the Writings of John Barth*". The conspicuous feature of this study will be the analysis of the postmodern vision of John Barth and his unique approach. Beckett was a prominent playwright whose *Waiting for Godot* is a seminal work in the domain of existentialism. But John Barth goes a step forward as he depicts his existential vision employing the postmodernist techniques such as intertextuality; magic realism; fragmentation and meta-fiction.

Objectives of the Proposed Research

- 1) To define the causes of the gradual evolution of nihilism, and skepticism after the World War II in America.
- 2) To interpret and reinterpret the malaise of the contemporary civilization and the impact of the theories of nihilism on John Barth.
- 3) To relate the theories of postmodernism of Fredric Jameson on the characters of John Barth.
- 4) To appraise the evolution of new postmodern themes of John Barth.
- 5) To formulate the cause of alienation and loss of identity of the characters of John Barth.

Research Methodology

In this study the guidelines of the latest 8th edition of MLA style sheet have been observed. The comparative study of all the important novels of John Barth will be quite fruitful for the scholars of John Barth. The main focus of the study will be on the themes of absurdity and alienation depicted by John Barth in his novels. Barth believes that life in the present world is full of challenges and uncertainties. He was impacted by the philosophical ideas of Albert Camus, Jean Paul Sartre, Soren Kierkegaard and Burgess. Beckett's plays and the emergence of the Theatre of the World in Europe gave guidelines to Barth who took up the issues of nothingness, nihilism and absurdity in his novels. The original works of Camus, Sartre will be consulted and data will be collected from the famous libraries of India. The study is knowledge based and no field work is required and the data is analyzed relying on the theories of postmodernism.

Main Tools used in the Thesis

- 1) The texts are analyzed and the data of the texts is examined relying on the theories of post-modernism
- 2) Comparative analysis is done in detail to highlight the main themes of John Barth

- 3) The theories of Nihilism, Absurdity and Existentialism are discussed and applied in the analysis of the texts of John Barth
- 4) The sources used in this thesis are acknowledged in the Bibliography and the page numbers are given
- 5) The study is knowledge based and no field work is done. The primary sources are investigated through the lens of postmodernism

Following Novels are taken in this Study:

- 1) *The Floating Opera* (1956)
- 2) *The End of the Road* (1958)
- 3) *The Sot-Weed Factor* (1960)
- 4) *Giles-Goat Boy* (1966)
- 5) *Chimera* (1972)

Chapter – 1

Postmodern Themes of Alienation and Nihilism in John Barth's *The Floating Opera*

The American fiction took a new turn when John Barth started writing. He was a serious novelist as he devoted himself to find the solutions of the existing problems of life confronted by the contemporary Americans. John Barth rejected the traditional technique and style and used postmodernism techniques such as fragmentation, meta-fiction, inter-textuality and black humor to depict the emptiness of life. Fredric Jameson observes thus: “The last few years have been marked by an inverted millenarianism in which premonitions of the future, catastrophic or redemptive, have been replaced by a sense of the end of this or that taken together, all of these taken together, all of these constitute what is increasingly called postmodernism” (Jameson 30). Barth's novel *The Floating Opera* is circular and linear, and the novel is called fragmented narrative. John Hawkes comments thus:

When the writer began to write he assumed that the true enemies of the novel were plot, character, setting and theme. Certainly many subsequent authors have done their best to sledgehammer these four literary cornerstones into oblivion. Either plot is pounded into small slabs of event and circumstance characters disintegrate into a bundle of twitching desires, settings are little more than transitory backdrops, or themes become so attenuated that it is often comically inaccurate to say that certain novels are about such and such (Hawkes 126).

This chapter explores the struggles of Todd Andrews to confront the randomness of the universe and his eventual alienation depicted by John Barth. His first two novels *The Floating Opera* and *The End of the Road* deal with the struggles of the protagonists who confront the existential reality; death, absurdity of life and alienation. His characters suffer as they find the absence of absolute values and by the extension the objective truth. *The Floating Opera* of John Barth is replete with

postmodern techniques and themes. Josh Toth argues that “The Floating opera might readily be identified as the first work of American postmodernism” (Toth 20). Ziegler declares that “*The Floating Opera* of John Barth is an early postmodern text about the son who instrumentalists his father in order to tell his own story” (20), therefore *The Floating Opera* is the first important postmodern novel. John Barth claimed that *The Floating opera* is a “nihilist comedy. The novel is a narrative about death and how death impinges upon the consciousness of the narrative protagonist of the novel, Todd Andrews an alienated figure as he keeps an account of his life in what the audience will understand” (John Barth, *The Friday Book* 134). The element of fragmentation and dissonance found in James Joyce’s *Ulysses* and Virginia Woolf’s *Mrs. Dalloway* are traceable. In imitation of James Joyce, Barth introduced the postmodern themes depicting the malaise of the American society. Barth’s novel cannot be understood without an awareness of the tradition of formal experimentation in the form of fiction that preceded him. Linda Hutcheon opines that the evolution of the “subjective realism” of Joyce and others shifted the focus of attention away from “product” to “process” for those novelists intent on expanding genre. The inner processes of the character’s mind became more important than the verified events he perceived. John Hawkes observes thus:

Being a postmodern John Barth depicts the world as fragmented, troubled, having undergone countless disasters beyond understanding. Plot, character, setting and theme are not important for John Barth but his primer concern is to transfer ideas or dialogues with readers to perceive each other (126).

John Barth’s *The Floating Opera* is written with special plot pattern without chronological order; the challenge is to the readers to find out where is the beginning and the end of the novel. The language is unique as there is special structure as he uses so many short sentences with special capital letters; Barth uses so many exclamation marks and so many dashes depicting the fragmented pattern of the style of the novel. Dos Passos introduced new stylistic techniques in his novels such as *Manhattan Transfer*, *The Big Money* and *Adventures of A Young Man* introducing the

News Reels”, “Biographies” and the news borrowed from the old newspapers. John Barth imitated and used old advertisements in the novel with capital letters. Some critics consider *The Floating Opera* as an existential novel. They point out that Todd is an existential hero belonging to the class of characters of Samuel Beckett and Edward Albee. He is a symbol of the plight of modern man but the critical analysis of the text reveals that Todd is an existential character in reverse.

John Barth’s Postmodern Novel: Theme of Death, Nihilism and Alienation in *The Floating Opera*

John Barth depicts the themes of postmodern novel. Nihilism is a central metaphor in the plot of the novel *The Floating Opera* of John Barth. He claimed that he was the inventor of the doctrine as he introduced his philosophical ideas in his famous novels such as *The Floating Opera* (1956), *The End of the Road* (1958) and *The Sot-Weed Factor* (1960). Barth realizes that people strive for things that are meaningless and worthless as the universe is in chaos. There is no certainty in life and in universe. All the material things of the world are inconsequential and money is merely paper. In the novels of John Barth nihilism is a central metaphor controlling the activities of the characters. John Hawkes further avers thus:

Barth has developed the nihilism theory with great acuity; he has a fine sense for perceiving and drawing out the implications of philosophical views. The central character Todd Andrews of *The Floating Opera* defends nihilism, and no answer to his argument is presented in the novel (Hawkes 127).

The novel *The Floating Opera* is an assertion of the truth of nihilism, as the events of the novel and the life of Todd is futile and meaningless and his perception of life is nihilistic. Todd Andrews is the central consciousness of the novel who explores the futility and absurdity of life. He is the main eye of the camera and all events are linked with his life. His life is devoted to the exploration of life and its meaning in the absurd and chaotic universe. Todd struggles to explore the mystery of life and suicide and says: “Living is action and there is no final reason for action, there is no final reason for living” (223). He is pessimistic, nihilistic and hates God

and religion. His nihilistic attitude is expressed when he says “that if there is no reason for any action, there is no reason for taking one’s life” (223). Barth’s *The Floating Opera* is a comedy of existential absurdity. Todd experiences the fears, the debilitating angst and the nihilistic despair in his life. Barth’s anti-hero Todd explores the futility and the purposelessness of the struggles in the random universe. Barth’s famous essay *The Literature of Exhaustion* praises writers like “Robbe-Grillet and Borges because they rejected epistemology of realism and remind of the fictitious aspect of our existence” (Barth 30). Barth’s novels demonstrate a similar distrust in the traditional exhausted values of realism. Barth attempted to put new life in literature and to refurbish literature with new themes and techniques. John Barth deals with the theme of fragmentary nature of life and art and the uncertainty of human existence in *The Floating Opera*. He contends that identity and reality are products of our imagination, an idea which becomes a central motive of his aesthetics. The novel *The Floating Opera* is an account of the desperate attempts made by Todd Andrews to explore a sensible design for his life. The first chapter of *The Floating Opera* is “Turning My Piano” in which Todd introduces himself as a contradictory personality:

I can predict myself correctly almost every time, because opinion here in Cambridge to the contrary, my behavior is actually quite consistent. If other people (my friend Harrison Mack, for instance, or his wife Jane) think I’m eccentric and unpredictable, it is because my actions and opinions are inconsistent with their principles if they have any; I assure you that they’re quite consistent with mine (John Barth, *The Floating Opera* 1).

Todd explains the significance of the title of the book and does several gracious things: “like a host fussing over a guest, to make you as comfortable as possible and to dunk you gently into the meandering stream of my story” (2). Todd has positive view of writing as he says: “I’ve never tried my hand at this sort of thing before, but I know enough about myself that once the ice is broken the pages will flow all too easily” (1). Todd also explains the meaning of his name that is “death” and the main theme of the novel is also death. Irony plays dominant role in the

opening of the novel as Todd says: “I’m inviting you to, not a baptism” (2). He wants the readers to read the book and doesn’t want them to get involved. He is not sure even about the title of the book he is writing:

Now then, the title, and then we’ll see whether we can’t start the story. When I decided sixteen years ago to write about how I changed my mind one night in June of 1937, I had no title in mind. Indeed, it wasn’t until an hour or so ago, when I began writing that I realized the story would be at least novel-length and resolved therefore to give it a novel title. In 1938, when I determined to set the story down, it was intended only as an aspect of the preliminary study for one chapter of my Inquiry, the notes and data which fill most of my room (5).

Todd is confronted with the failure of realities while coping with the drama of human existence. Todd struggles to achieve national standards and finds the essential randomness of the universe, the dominance of abstract values and multiplicity of meanings:

In Todd’s life, the central conflict is “the tension between the urge to live and the desire to die, between what human beings want to be and what they are, between subconscious sexual drives and conscious rational processes, between human violence and elaborate systems of justice, and between events attribution of causes (Fogel 25).

The novel *The Floating Opera* is the story of Todd Andrews who is a bachelor and lawyer by profession. He is confronted with the problem to explore the nature and mystery of truth. His uses mask to explore the futility of life and reality and this absurdity motivates him to commit suicide. He participated in the World War I where he experienced the death and destruction and genocide of the innocent people. He comes to the conclusion that man is a victim of emotions, fear and despair: “I was just stupefied. Cowardice involves choice but fear is independent of choice...But it was the purest and strongest emotion I’ve ever experienced. I could actually, for a part of the time it lasted regard myself objectively: a shocked, drooling animal in mud hole” (Barth 63). John Barth’s *The Floating Opera* is his first novel

and the plot is focused on the quest of Todd expressed thus at the end of the novel: “The truth is that nothing makes any difference, including that truth. Hamlet’s question is, absolutely, meaningless” (251).

Todd Andrews was born in 1900 and he is portrayed as a self-conscious child of the century that started two global wars, the nuclear bomb, the crash of the market and global depression. Todd is confronted with the “valueless values” of money capitalism growing in America. The killing of a German soldier is touching as Todd shares intimacy with the enemy before killing him. He describes “his brief spiritual brotherhood with the German soldier as liberation from the artifices of family and nation” (66). Like Septimus of Virginia Woolf, he is a shell-chocked hero. He observes thus:

When the waves reached my hip and thighs I opened my sphincters, when they crossed my stomach and chest I retched and grasped; when they struck my face my jaw hung slack, my saliva ran, my eyes watered (63).

Mikhail Bakhtin observes that this comic image of defecating from fear is a grotesque debasement of fear itself. According to Bakhtin: “Todd embraces an enemy soldier that leaps into his trench, reduces the soldier to the same fear he has recovered from, then lays his gun aside. The two soldiers are laughing, kissing and hugging each other” (77). But when Todd experiences fear he swings into action: “For the space of some hours we had been one man, had understood each other beyond friendship, beyond life, as a wise man understands himself” (66). The moment of love and brotherhood is short lived as Todd bayonets the German soldier: “How could I be certain our incredible sympathy did not actually exist only in my imagination” (67). As Todd Andrews tries to solve this paradox he develops a new approach to life based on the irrationality of human existence. He has multiple experiences of life and several incidents teach him that life is governed by chance and reason has no role to play in the success of life. He broods over the suicide of his father, the heartrending death of the German soldier, his relationship with Mack and Betty June. These events are not the result of any rational plan but the outcome of

unthinkable strategies and ideas. Todd is upset by human brutality and irrationality. Foggel observes thus:

The protagonist –narrator Todd Andrews runs up against existential paradox upon contradiction in an attempt to find a rational meaning to both life and death. Todd seeks to find the rationale for life in an irrational world. His quest is futile and funny as he assumes responsibility for his life and the lives of six hundred and ninety-nine of his town people in attempting to blow up “The Floating Opera (66).

Todd Andrews is a funny character; a caricature created by John Barth and his heightened sense of man’s background anxiety is nothing more than Barth’s satiric ploy. Tony Tanner (1967) argues thus:

John Barth’s fiction takes its point of departure from Wittgenstein’s proposition that the world is all that is the case. This sentence recurs in varying forms throughout his work and often serves to pose a basic problem for his main characters who, in one way or another, are fairly saturated with the author’s own existentialist thinking (Tanner 102).

Todd is aware that absolute values are an illusion and that man is malleable. His own life is a long chain of cinematic dissolves which create psychological tensions in his mind. He behaves like a neurotic as he doesn’t find any meaning in life. His masks are fragile as they do not help him to explore the real Truth of this unversed. Barth comments thus:

Todd struggles in life to bridge the gap between inference and reality by means of a finely honed leap of lucidity and insight. Todd concedes that all goals and objectives have no intrinsic value, merely a relativistic one....advocacy, jurisprudence, even justice...have no more importance than, say, oyster-shucking. (71)

Todd concludes that “processes persisted in long enough tend to become ends in themselves. He breaks with existentialist philosophy and accepts the world as it is and is going on without any rational reason for doing so” (50). He feels depressed by

the feeling of skepticism and nihilism. This feeling gives birth to a vehement notion of skepticism. When he is in danger he experiences purely physical sensations divorced for rationality and morality. In the early life Todd believes that society is based on a stable system of human values but after the horrible experiences of war his faith crumbled down. The only stable thing, he believes is Maryland beaten biscuits: “few things are stable in the world. Your morning stomach, reader, ballasted with three Maryland beaten biscuits, will be stable” (Barth 53). Ziegler observes thus:

For Barth the constitution or resolution of traditional values is dependent on the relationship between father and son. This relationship is seen by him as representative of the principle of causation: father relates to son as cause relates to effect....Since the son originates from his father, he must turn to him as to the source of his own actions: Their communication would establish that link which illuminates the relationship between cause and effect (Ziegler 20).

Many critics express their concern on the extreme nihilism of *The Floating Opera* basing their arguments on the principles of Todd. Fogel has also expressed his concern for the nihilistic quality of the plot of the novel. He avers thus: “Some critics find the nihilism as extreme as Samuel Beckett’s. Others play down that philosophical leaning and look instead as does Charles B. Harris to “the presence of psychological probing or as Harold Farwell does to such moral values of love a creative attempt to be free from the prison of the self...as noble an affirmation as is the artist’s comparable attempt to transcend his limitations in his art” (Fogel 28). John Hawkes and Tatham LeClaire observe thus: “Whatever else *The Floating Opera* may be concerned with the art of artistic creation; the novel is about nihilism; but it is also about love and art...Set in a modern context, *The Floating Opera* gives a sense of the existential angst and world weariness” (Fogel 28). Todd is mentally disturbed by the “sense of the existential angst and world weariness” as he struggles to achieve a guiding principle as he loses faith in the absolute truth. Todd spent two years in examining documents and questioning people. He realizes the futility of his efforts and struggles. Todd faces the same problem in the process of writing his

autobiography too since his task is to give an account of himself and to comment on the title of the book. His readers make irrelevant interpretations. Todd is presented as a worried person who devises strategies to confront death: "I used to have a kind of sub acute bacteriological carditis, with a special complication...what that means any day I may fall quickly dead, without meaning-perhaps before I complete this sentence, perhaps twenty years from now" (5). He writes and goes on piling the facts about the mystery of his father's suicide but he fails to come into the conclusion. He resorts to narration in order to bring order in his chaotic world. He takes the help of art with a view to resolve all contradictions. As Barth observes: "art is long, in its aggregate anyhow, and life short" (*Further Holidays*, 75). Todd assumes a god-like status as he says: "Where were we? I was going to comment on the significance of the viz. I used earlier, was I? Or explain my piano-turning metaphor? Or my weak heart? God heavens, how does one writes a novel!" (2). He believes that death is the only real aim of life. He is emotionally detached from Jane and Harrison Mack and even Jeanine. Todd has cynical attitude of love and sex. He sees no relationship between the two:

The truth is that while I knew very well what copulating is and feels like. I'd never understood personally what love is and feels like....Is this thing a fact of nature, like thirst, or purely a human and civilized invention?....As for copulation, whether between humans or other sorts of animals, it makes me smile (34).

Death is not the end for Todd, it is the cause, the motivational factor inspires him to explore the mystery of death. He says: "To hell with the brotherhood of man! Social justice is impossible to achieve, irrelevant if achieved" (23). Todd assumes "the mask of a story teller and attempts to create a fictional universe in which layers upon layers of narrative, moving back and forth in which he creates order of linearity, with the gesture of eternity, it is all gesture of temporality" (51). In his chapter "Calliope Music" he presents two voices (172). He "writes his journal in order to gain a private personal perspective on his own problem and an aspect of his father's suicide. If he could understand or justify his father's action, he might be able to understand his own suicidal drive and his reason for not blowing up himself"

(Bown 1). Todd thinks that he knows much about himself but in fact all his conjectures prove wrong. He decides to form the autobiography by picking randomly parts of the material related to given periods of time. He comes out to the conclusion that all the rational investigation is futile since the final version is based on random selection and his autobiography is therefore “doubly partial, twice biased, in the sense of being both personal and incomplete, partisan and fragmentary” (Hassan 124). Todd is disturbed to know that obtaining objective knowledge, even about himself, is impossible. He finds a contradiction between his view about himself and the views of the people about him and this contradiction decides the nature of objectivity. Harrison and Jane are of the view that Todd is eccentric and unpredictable. The reason for this ambiguity is the fact that his “actions and opinions are inconsistent with their principles” (1). His ventures fail and he is not able to trace out and find out the cause of his father’s death “as causation is never more than an inference; and any inference involves at some point the leap from what we see to what we can’t see” (218). His main aim is to shorten his leap but the distance between the visible and invisible can never be eliminated completely. The narrator does not nourish the illusion to leap “the gap between fact and opinion” (Barth 219). His purpose is just to make it narrow as possible and “if Todd can no longer discover final reasons for anything, this implies that the chain of causation is broken. Yet there are still meanings. In fact, meanings come to substitute for reasons for facts” (Ziegler 23). Todd Andrews is the main narrator in *The Floating Opera* and the chief concern is to find out the main cause of his committing suicide. He is extremely interesting character; his comic vision, idiosyncrasies and absurd approach to life excites the interest in the novel. His narrative conveys the ambivalent attitude of the narrator as Barth introduces the elements of Black Humor where the comic is threatening and the absurdity of life is menacing. Todd’s life and his behavior are enigmatic, ambiguous and bewildering as he lacks certainty of life. His opinions are contradictory; his emotions and decisions are baffling. He is in conflict as two opposing forces victimize him. He is caught between life and death, tragedy and comedy and order and chaos. Todd’s consciousness is caught in the whirlpool of pessimism, nihilism and uncertainty. He is a modern writer since he was born in 1900 and is confronting the uncertainties and fears of the modern age. He

experiences the nihilistic despair and feels depressed. Todd has lost faith in life and in the values of society. His whole narrative is directed on the issue of his suicide; to explore the cause of the suicide of his father and the main cause of the loss of faith in the value system. Todd describes the “way he decides and attempts to commit suicide. He fails in his attempt and he assumes that he may die at any time as a consequence of his weak condition of heart a kind of sub acute bacteriological endocarditis with a tendency to myocardial infarction” (Barth 5). The main project of Todd Andrews is to build a coherent structure loaded with certain meanings. The main inquiry project deals with the cause of the mysterious suicide of his father. The other inquiry project is entitled “self-inquiry.” With these inquiries in his mind, he begins his quest to explore the realities about human condition. He aims to assert the rationality underlying human experience by finding reasons for the suicide of his father. But it turns out that it will take “more life span than it takes a lazy Buddhist to attain Nirvana” (Barth 51). It is beyond the power of Todd to comprehend the real motives of his father’s suicide. The suicide has been predetermined by an external force as the free will operates in the universe. He believes that reason doesn’t work in his research project as reason fails to provide explanation for human existence.

Todd fails to resolve the paradox of suicide of his father assuming that rational objectiveness is in fact not much different from imaginative speculation. Todd fails to remember the exact date of suicide of his father which poses threat to the validity of all other details he remembers. He doesn’t exactly remember the details about the clothes of his father wore on the day of his suicide. The confusion is created in the plot with the presence of uncertainty and the central inquiry is wrought in confusion. He invites the reader to approach the novel in the way he looks at the name. The more he tells about himself the more inconsistent Todd becomes. He also gives true details about the diseases afflicting him. He is suffering from multiple deficiencies such as chronic infection of the prostate glands, fillings and crowns in his teeth and an atrophied muscle. Nevertheless Todd continues to be rational and puts faith in the subjective responses. Todd adopts the rational attitude but cannot avoid the inconsistent ideas. His attitude towards love is ambiguous as he cannot form a definite meaning about love. He distinguishes it from copulation but it seems

impossible to differentiate one's love for one's wife, one's mistress and parents. Todd admits many times that he loves a woman, not because he really does so but because he knows she wants to hear that. So words can be used not to express genuine feelings and want facts, but to create a reality that is removed from true experience. "I was not and am not interested in the truth or falsehood of a statement" (36). Todd puts faith in communication; he chooses communication to understand the nature of reality. Ziegler observes thus:

Through narration Todd hopes to base communication on common inference instead of an individual understanding. Todd believes that his reader cannot help but share his own subjective evaluations since the reader by accepting the role of interpreter of a text has already voted for opinion against fact. Todd takes care of his own opinions always appear in the garb of rationalizations (Ziegler 22).

Todd finds a large gap between a signifier and its signified, between world and word. The contradictory ideas don't trouble him because of his conviction that there is no absolute truth: "Things that are clear to me are sometimes incomprehensible to others-- which fact occasions this chapter, if not the whole book" as he states in the chapter "That Puckered Smile" to assert that these are not particularly true (Barth 68). He observes the face of Betty June and tries to understand her smile when they meet for the second time in a brothel and she tried to kill him with a broken bottle. Todd expresses his speculations on the implications of the smile as he tries to understand Betty's motivation to kill. He is baffled by many possibilities and is able to extract a number of possible meanings from a single fact. Betty is a prostitute, she has come after many years of prostitution to see essential grotesqueness of the whole business of life. He assumes the possibility for a third reason; she may have laughed at the thought of earning money for giving him "nothing more voluptuous than a rubdown" to earn money (Barth 67). The moment Todd kills the soldier he passes from the stage of innocence to that of "a devil-may-care." During the "battle of the Argonne Forest in World War I, Todd is forced to spend the night in a shell crater with a German soldier. Though they initially struggle they subsequently kiss, embrace and engage each other in "a private armistice" (32).

Todd slays a soldier in a fit of panic:

It is fear which prompts Todd both to embrace the German soldier and to bayonet him. This experience shatters his sense of reason leading him to a resolute denial of the ultimate rational justification for moral values and actions. Todd responds to the assertion that life has no intrinsic value with the claim that nothing has intrinsic value (Barth 69).

When Betty June cuts him with a broken bottle the “drunken animal” residing in him turns into a “saint” who is alarmed by the rapacious presence of mortality. His father’s suicide marks a new stage in his career of changing masks. He becomes a “cosmic cynic” with “no schedules, no demands, no jealousy, no fictions—all was spontaneity and candor” (Barth 161). Todd believes that in a world deprived of stable values, writing is a pleasant way of spending time. The writer has an obligation to satisfy the reader too: “Like a host of fusing over a guest, he is supposed to please him, to make him as comfortable as possible, to drink him gently into the meandering stream of the story” (Barth 2). Todd’s prime concern as a writer is to entertain and to provide pleasure that is to create funhouse and this idea is developed in the next novel:

Now, come along with me, reader, and don’t fear for your weak heart; I’ve one myself and know the value of inserting first a toe, then a foot, next a leg, very slowly your hips and stomach, and finally your whole self into my story, and taking a good long time to do it. This is after all, a pleasure-dip I’m inviting you to, not a baptism (Barth 5).

The fact that Todd has decided to write the Inquiry proves that he has found a way out of the existential paradox. He has managed to break through the nihilistic position and solve the conflict and resolve contradictions. Todd at this stage lives in a totally irrational world where the only governing power is arbitrariness. He comes to the conclusion that all struggles are meaningless because all pretensions for adherence to rational system fail. Harris observes that “Todd Andrews, like so many artists of his and past centuries, has confronted a world suddenly grown threatening

in its inscrutability. His dilemma recapitulates that primal dilemma when ancient man, confronted with the printed void, called a world out of nothingness” (Harris 29). His experience justifies once more the common belief in the urge to organize the essential chaos into units of logic and meaning. It justifies once more the impulse to write to fill in the blanks, to go on constructing stories. Todd’s awareness of the impossibility to bridge the gap between world and words is a result of the realization of the inadequacy of language. The name Todd for example can be spelled with one or two d’s. Barth writes: “Todd is the German for death, and this book hasn’t much to do with death; Todd is almost Todd—that is almost death—and this book, if it gets written, has very much to do with almost death” (3). Todd is able to reveal “almost death” but not Death, almost truth, or one aspect of truth not the whole Truth. Todd gives an insight to his plan of suicide thus: “Light Step! I wanted to dance across the hall! My opinion? My opinion? SUICIDE! Oh, light step, reader! Let me tell you: my whole life...” (16). He provides one point of view leaving lacunae for many others which treat the same issue from a different perspective. He faces multifaceted nature of reality but he is not discouraged and continues his *Inquiry* project. Todd is aware of the potential failure of his project but he continues his process of writing as he declares: “It doesn’t follow that because a goal is unattainable, one shouldn’t work toward its attainment...processes continued for long enough tend to become ends in themselves, and if for no other reason, I should continue my researches simply in order to occupy pleasantly two hours after dinner” (Barth 102). Lionel Trilling argues thus:

If the whole is seen as confused rather than as orderly and rational, as in George Eliot’s words, peremptory and absolute, the human relation to it need not be fixed and categorical; it can be mercurial and improvisational. Perceiving his masks are simply roles that are no more justifiable than more values or actions. Todd is able to aver suicide (Trilling 57).

Mc Connell also supports the arguments of Trilling and observes thus: “Todd’s continued existence is dependent upon a kind of gamesmanship which denies any human authenticity. But the self-consciousness that guides Todd toward

this understanding effectively denies the validity of any action. Frank Lentricchia remarks that this type of “self-consciousness can lead to paralysis and despair” (Frank 57). Todd is able to resolve the conflict by the realization that life and death are equally unmotivated. The reasons to die are as unjustifiable as the reasons to live. The determining power of his life is uncertainty and ambiguity but he continues pursuing the meaning of his existence of life. Todd is a self-conscious storyteller who is aware of the limitations and therefore he constructs his story on speculations rather than certainties. Reality offers him alternatives that are discordant with his own plans, a conflict which is due again to the lack of causality of life. Todd fails to destroy “The Floating Opera”, a showboat that is in Cambridge for a performance. This incident teaches him the lesson that it is impossible to name all the forces that regulate his life. He plans to kill not only himself but also all the spectators including the Jacks and their daughter Jeannine. But in spite of his calculations, the boat does not blow up because the gas does not explode for reasons as vague as reasons for Todd’s father’s suicide and Betty’s puckered smile. He formulates his fifth principle: “There is no final reason for living or for suicide” (Barth 245). Todd has prepared a list of principles based on his experiences of life in the random universe. He has observed that the cause of any human act is elusive and obscure:

Nothing in life has intrinsic value. The reasons for which people attribute value to things are ultimately irrational. There is no ultimate reason for valuing anything including life. Living is action and there is no final reason for action (106).

This list of principles culminating in the idea that there is no reason to live or to die seems to reflect Todd’s commitment to a “stable” approach to life. But Todd continues to be a nihilist and goes on changing his perception of life being confused and bewildered. No philosophical thought satisfy him completely. His confession about the changing nature of his philosophies shows that that there is no internal logic in the principles he has formulated. Todd describes his life as a carnival of changing identities which demand the formulation of new principles. He has to assume and perform different roles in his life as the situations go on changing. Todd sees no irrationality in changing his principles as there is nothing certain and

permanent. He accepts each philosophical stance and each mask is real with “life-or-death” significance until another idea crops up. Todd believes that his mediated suicide is the best and final solution to come out of the riddles of life. Fogel remarks: “His firm adherence to principles is however, the rhetoric that he uses on the reader, one of the strong assertions that he usually has to recant or at the least qualify; his changing philosophical stances or masks are provisional” (Fogel 37). Todd remarks thus:

My whole life, at least a great part of it, has been directed toward a solution of a problem, or mastery of a fact. It was my heart that had made my masks, not my will. The conclusion that swallowed me was this: There is no way to master the fact with which I live (105).

This leads him to follow nihilistic attitude to life and he thinks he has got a cause to commit suicide and this is the only alternative left for him. He recollects his first sexual encounter with Betty June Gunter and his failure. Todd tries to philosophize his experience and comments: “Nothing, to me, is so consistently, profoundly, earth-shakingly funny as we animals in the act of mating” (Barth 124). This incident of his youth gives him an opportunity to rationalize his action and to find out the rational basis for his action: “the second of two unforgettable demonstrations of my animality only confirms this way” (124). Todd is “a modern man believing in reason insisting on the absence of intrinsic value in human existence. He persists imposing a rational cause for a “single human action” (124). He comments: “there is no will-o-the-wisp as elusive as the cause of any human act” (218). Todd defends his mission of life and says: “It doesn’t follow that because a goal is unattainable, one shouldn’t work toward its attainment” (219). Todd adheres to a “principle of the limited inconsistency in his daily habits” (125). His unorthodox behavior reflects “a philosophical position of mine, or at least a general practice, it is based on his understanding that there is no ultimate rational justification for these habits” (57). But his adherence to the habit of “habit breaking” is an expression of strength and freedom of Todd Andrews. He tries to impose an order on the chaos of life demonstrating his ability as a rational modern thinker. He struggles to bring discipline in his “chaotic life in the random universe imposing a rational order on his

existence through self-control” (125). Todd has to assume multiple identities to govern his chaotic life. These are small but significant changes designed by him as he realizes, “to hide my heart from my mind, and my mind from my heart” (223). Todd assumes new identities very carefully as he marks: “And each time, it did not take me long to come to believe that my current attitude was not only the best for me, because it put me on some kind of terms with my heart, but best in itself, absolutely” (224). Todd is like Eliot’s Prufrock, a confused and bewildered modern man who can stick to one decision. As the plot progresses, he goes on changing his decisions and making new formulations and principles. He is cynical, skeptic, nihilistic and pretends to be a philosopher as he tries to justify his actions on moral grounds. John Barth has invoked the procrastinating nature of Shakespeare’s Hamlet who gets killed because of the dilemma of “to be or not to be.” Todd also invokes the famous seven ages of man as given by Shakespeare in his poem cynically exposing the routine life of man and its futility debunking and parodying Jacques of Shakespeare’s *As You Like It*. He is hostile and cynical to all the speeches of Shakespeare’s characters as he finds life redundant and all struggles leading to despair. He observes that “Hamlet’s question is absolutely, meaningless” (251). He continues his quest and reopens his inquiry commenting on his future:

It occurred to me, for example, that faced with an infinitude of possible directions and having no ultimate reason to choose one over another, I would in all probability, though not at all necessarily, go on behaving much as I had hitherto, as a rabbit shot on the run keeps running in the same direction (Barth 254).

Barth tries to use religion as a weapon to solve the riddles of life and to seek salvation for Todd as the last attempt in his struggle of life. The image of the “running of rabbit” is very effective as Todd believes that man’s life is an endless struggle. Each man in this random universe is a “running rabbit” in one direction. In this part of the novel John Barth refers to the existential philosophy of Jean Paul Sartre who advocates the absence of God. Barth also demonstrates the meaninglessness of human existence through the futile struggle of Todd Andrews. At the end of the novel Todd says: “There’s no final reason for living or suicide” (230).

Following Sartre, Todd expresses “his cynicism and nihilism of life and puts faith in the futility of human existence” (230). She is unable to explain why she wants another cup because she has no solid ground. In the real activities of life there is no certainty and we go on making choices randomly. Barth borrows from Nietzsche’s Zarathustra and points out the tragic vision of human existence. Todd’s final “position is volatile and his consideration of values less than absolute is postponed at the end of *The Floating Opera*: But that’s another enquiry and another story” (252). Todd is trapped in opposites and he tries to bring harmony and balance. Like Hamlet Hawkes observes thus: “Todd tries to put his house in order, harmonizes discordant elements. Contradictions operate in his life as wheels within wheels. There is a conflict between the mirrors and the masks, the tension between irrational force and rational order and form which constitute his identity” (56). Todd is able to hide the ludicrous and destructive with the help of disguise. Todd Andrews is like Jake Horner of *The End of the Road* of John Barth as both heroes express their anxieties and share the belief that there is nothing valuable in the world. They are also related by their emotional hollowness and intellectual mediocrity. Todd suffers from corrosion of self and as the plot progresses he goes on sinking and sinking deeper and losing his self-confidence. He finds nothingness like the hero of Beckett hiding an inner void in his life. Todd finds universe empty of direction and meaning. Todd says: “I’m fifty-four year old and six feet tall, but weigh only 145 and am writing this at 7.55 in the evening of Tuesday, October 4, 1955, upstairs in the dormitory.” (155). He admits that he is living in a valueless society and doesn’t mourn the devaluation of what was once prized. Todd gives an insight into the ennui that follows the type of intellectual and emotional experiences that Todd has. Like Jake everything looks illusive and meaningless for Todd as he says: “Everything, I’m afraid, is significant, and nothing is finally important” (6). He is caught in a trap, he longs to know the truth but he is misguided and becomes the victim of nihilism. As he admits:

So, I began each day with a gesture of cynicism, and close it with a gesture of faith, or, if you prefer, begin it by reminding myself that, for me at least, goals and objectives are without value, and close it by demonstrating that the fact is irrelevant. A gesture of temporality, a

gesture of eternity. It is in the tension between these two gestures that I have lived my adult life (50).

Todd's comments are of a typical postmodern anti-hero living in the world of darkness and despair. He is just a cog in the machine and is depicted as a funny creature in the random universe. Barth was aware of the trends of the Theatre of the Absurd and the main themes of nausea, absurdity and angst depicted by the European and American playwrights. Beckett in his *Waiting for Godot* and Edward Albee in his *The Zoo Story* depicted man as a victim of internal and external forces. The Greek and Shakespearean heroes had the potential to change and transform society by the force of their characters. They dedicated their life for the welfare and survival of the society. But unfortunately the characters of John Barth lack vision of life and fail to give any direction to society. Todd belongs to the category of anti-heroes of postmodern novels. He says thus:

I am not a philosopher, except after the fact; but I am a mean rationalize, and once the world has forced me into a new position, I can philosophize like two Kants, like seven Philadelphia lawyers. Beginning with my new conclusions, I can work out first-rate premises (167).

Self-consuming principle of Todd is stated in the chapter "a raison de Coeur" as he states that he must be for an objective truth about things. Todd tells that man must not be deluded in life. He must be able to face up to things as they are. He believes that an illusion is equivalent to delusion. At the end of the novel Todd is able to shun all illusions and proudly remarks: "it is the mastery of my fact" that is final: "My whole life, at least a great part of it, has been directed toward the solution of a problem, or mastery of a fact" (15). After a long journey of fact-finding he comes to the conclusion that "there is no way to master the fact with which I live" (222). He had employed a stance that "I thought represented a real and permanent solution to my problem" But his stance failed as he is visited with a revelation: "I awoke, splashed cold water on my face, and realized that I had the real, the final, the unassailable answer; the last possible word' the stance to end all stances" (224). He sums his achievements thus:

To realize that nothing makes any final difference is overwhelming, but if one goes no farther and becomes a saint, a cynic, or a suicide on principle, one hasn't reasoned completely. The truth is that nothing makes any difference including that truth (246).

Todd is a creative writer and his reasoning goes beyond reason. Richard Boyd Hauck (1971) points out that

Todd is a blend of reason and imagination; his ultimate purpose is to find out the cause of absurdity of human existence but in his struggle he fails like the anti-heroes of Becket who remain waiting for godot that never appears: What the man who is conscious of absurdity must do, if he is not to commit suicide; he is to convince himself that an acceptance of what he must accept is an act of free will. This decision is in itself absurd creation, for it has no rationale. The resignation, since to be conscious is to risk being afflicted by the sense of meaninglessness, and unconsciousness is an escape from that sense (Hauck 7).

Todd realizes the inevitable mortality of human beings at the very start of his journey; he is confronted with the transient nature of his life. He comes to know that the absurdity is inevitable and he cannot escape it. It is a recurring reality giving tortures to human beings. At the end of his journey he finds that he is alive, and that perhaps he will live to see the next day. It is this that inspires such gestures of eternity in him and he begins writing his book *The Floating Opera* in his life and begins his Inquiry. He gets awareness during his quest that all goals and objectives are without value. Man does not die when there is no reason of living; man exists almost in spite of such reasons. It is foolishness to make extravagant claims for the absoluteness of the end products of reasoning processes. Todd suffers from many diseases; he is acutely sensitive to his mortality; he has heart trouble, "doubly so, literally so" (48). Todd is always haunted by the fear of death because he knows that any moment he can collapse and die. He confronts death almost daily and it is a peculiar ongoing confrontation with death. Todd finds himself on the brink of the

void; he has explored the mystery of death devoid of values and a natural phenomenon. He fails to “register victory over the chaos of his life. His life is devoid of a qualified victory of the imagination over chaos. His fight with “utter despair, a despair beyond wailing” (220), ends in a qualified truce. His conclusions about the futility of life and subsequently of suicide do not indicate a positive affirmation of life. They can make efforts to escape death and extinction from this wonderful planet. Todd argues that in the absence of any active choices for living, he has to live for the time being. His quest of life leads him to comprehend the real operation of the random universe. He says that “that’s another inquiry and another story” (247). Todd develops another paradoxical view arguing the quest for the meanings of life and reality are important and each individual must continue the struggle to explore the truth throwing away all the deceptive illusions. One can see in Todd’s return to his “inquiry” a return to the quest for those facts which explain events, even when they are illusory and deceptive. However, the search is no longer motivated by the anxiety to “complete the task,” to render up something whole and integral in the face of the void. Todd presents himself as a learner: “Todd feels compelled, and admits to learning to write about the day when he is, in a very literal sense, change his mind. Todd’s intention is to find the cause of the suicide of his father and he says that the nature of my purpose is to “make as short as possible the gap between fact and opinion” (215). Todd Andrews preaches the people to be practical and in his own life he expresses his visionary existential plan of life and society. Todd experienced the multiple scenes of death; he killed the German soldier in cold blood in Argonne Forest while he fought in World War I. His father lost money in the market crash and committed suicide. This incident shattered him and Harrison’s father also killed himself. His own fatal heart condition is giving mental agony as he fears his collapse at any time. Todd contemplates on the inevitability of death and says:

This fact; that having begun this sentence, I may not live to write its end...that having slumbered, I may never wake, or having waked, may never living sleep-this for this thirty-five years has been the condition of my existence, the great fact of my life (Barth 49).

The thought of death as a possibility, the great fact of life which no human being can escape makes him think about his mortality and builds in his mind the nihilistic feelings. He is sure that all talks of salvation in this life are deceptive and misleading. The novel *The Floating Opera* is a metafictional novel dealing with multiple themes and multiple issues. Barth parodies the art of writing picturing sense of loss and demise. Joseph Francese believes that in “fictional narratives, unable to know the world, the author forfeits the right to impose meaning on the text” (49). Federman and Francese argue that in the text “the center of gravity supposedly shifts from the producer to the consumer of the text” (Francese 49). Barth says: “to fill in the gaps they’d have to use the imaginations, or ask more attentive neighbors or hear the word passed along from upriver or downriver” (Barth7). Todd frankly admits that “he doesn’t care about anything but is concerned about his own pleasure of telling the story: perhaps I would expire before ending it (the story); perhaps the task was endless, like its fellows. No matter. Even if I died before ending my cigar, I had all the time there was” (252).

To conclude, John Barth’s first novel *The Floating Opera* is a typical postmodern novel as the writer has used most of the postmodern techniques to structure the plot. He rejects the traditional techniques and follows the techniques such as fragmentation; intertextuality; parody, pastiche and formlessness in the plot construction. Todd Andrews is an-antihero struggling to find an order in his chaotic world. His suicide project is a hoax but through his quest he comes to the conclusion that there is no certainty in life and man has to live in a valueless society.

Chapter – 2

Existential Dilemmas of Jacob Horner in John Barth's *The End of the Road*

Emergence of Nihilism, Existentialism and Absurdity

John Barth discarded the themes and style of employed by Ernest Hemingway and William Faulkner. The metaphor of “the end of the road” symbolizes the decline of civilization and the death of human values. Each novel of John Barth is devoted to explore the malaise of postmodern man as his name is associated with postmodernism. After twenty four years of publication of his first novel *The Floating Opera* (1956), *The Floating Opera* and *The End of the Road* of Barth are considered companion pieces written in 1995 and they are different from the rest of the fiction of John Barth as he deals with philosophical and metaphysical issues despite the comic layers. John Barth was well aware of the contemporary philosophical theories of nihilism, existentialism and absurdity. The two World Wars; the Great Depression and the pervasive vogue of the skepticism and nihilism propagated by Schopenhauer and Fredrick Nietzsche's *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* (1833) inspired Beckett and Ionesco to evolve new ant-theatrical techniques to depict the existential realities of life. Kierkegaard published his thought provoking book *The Sickness unto Death* (1946) and revolutionized art and philosophy by giving his philosophy of nihilism. The conspicuous feature of the American fiction is the loss of self. R. D. Laing and Sypher Wylie have discussed in detail the deflation of self. It is averred that the Greeks were in harmony with Nature and God; they enjoyed harmony and integrity of life as their life was free from the anxieties and tensions of life. The Greeks and the Elizabethans believed that man is the creation of God as there are divine elements in his soul and mind. The modern philosophers contended that all these religious ideas were illusive and meaningless. Jean -Paul Sartre, Albert Camus and Karl Jaspers propounded the Existential philosophy and brought revolution in arts and literature. The Existentialists argued that failure is an inevitable fate of man. Albert Camus and Sartre propounded the theory of Existentialism as Sartre contended that “Existence precedes Essence” and he turned down the Platonic theory of ideas. But in all the major novels of John Barth one finds the pervasive

corrosion of self. John Updike, Thomas Pynchon and Kurt Vonnegut took the challenge and made drastic changes in the themes and plot structure of the novels. Barth came under the influence of Albert Camus who wrote *The Myth of Sisyphus*. He was swept by the tide of the Theatre of Absurd. No wonder, the American writers depicted the existential absurdity. After the World War II the writers were confronted with the bewildering problem of corrosion of self since reality became fluid. War and the Depression of 1930 had brought out skepticism in the world and the wave of antagonism spread everywhere. The Holocaust and the mass killings of the Jews in the concentration camps of Auschwitz led to the decadence of faith. Darwin's *Origin of Species*, Spengler's *The Decline of the West* and the laws of Kepler brought out the concept of the machine-man.

The contemporary postmodern novelists were influenced by the image of the mechanical self. Sigmund Freud was a German thinker; his explorations of the unconscious gave a new impetus to thinking. The philosophers projected new ideas and contended that man is but an infinitesimal fraction of the energy that flows through the universe. Freud and Einstein propagated the scientific and rational view of the evolution of man. Religion, rituals and traditions were scrapped and no wonder in all the novels of John Barth the protagonists suffer the loss of self and they emerge too fragile to confront the existential reality of the modern World. This chapter is an explication of the forces that bulldoze his personality and dehumanize him.

The main narrative voice predominant in the novels is there is no purpose for living as both Todd and Jake struggle to explore the mysteries of life and death in the absurd and harsh universe. Both Todd and Jake suffer from the spiritual crisis that brings them near falling into the Pit. Todd thinks of suicide and Jake removes himself from life to live in the Doctor's hospital. Barth published an article "The Literature of Replenishment" describing his vision and ideas of a postmodern novel. In this article Barth presents a historical background giving details of the characteristics of Cervantes's famous novel *Don Quixote*. Barth believes that Cervantes should be considered as a model for the real creation of a postmodern novel. Barth discussed his perception of a postmodern novel and wrote his novel *The End of the Road* following the techniques of postmodernism propounded by Fredric Jameson. Barth

was asked questions about his philosophy of postmodern novel and he answered thus: “It was a time that invited thinking. I wrote the essay in 1967 in Buffalo, in the middle of a very apocalyptic time in the history of our republic” (*An Interview*, 7). It is important to understand the transitional literary scene in which the postmodern novel was incubated by John Barth. The World War I destroyed faith of man and the rules of chivalry had been broken; people started distrusting Christian values and the very existence of God was questioned by Frederic Nietzsche in his book *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*. For the young generations, the old world had collapsed and with it the blind faith in absolute principles that existed in politics, art and literature. Joseph Wood Krutch observes thus:

Darwinism led to the formation of the idea of the machine-man the image of the mechanical self. Kepler’s laws and Freud’s explorations of the unconscious brought home the realization that man is but an infinitesimal fraction of the energy that flows through the universe. In the age of Freud and Einstein, God ceased, as it were to reveal Himself in man (Krutch 38).

Krutch further argues that “modernism and tragedy are incompatible, modern malaise, nausea, angst, alienation, loss of identity, entropy, nihilism were forces that had dehumanized and deflated the heroes” (Krutch 79). Indeed, “modern playwright lacks potential to acknowledge the awareness of the reality of death” (Fromm 245). John Barth introduces multiple images and icons borrowed from popular culture and the youth rebellion of the 1960s which failed in America. Barth has referred to Godzilla and his footprints in Japan and the popularity of mythology from television to pulp novels.

Fredric Jameson observes that after World War II massive cultural and political changes took place in America. People experienced a new force of nihilism and pessimism, anxiety and angst that brought about the awareness of futility of life. Jameson also discussed in detail in his book *Marxism and Form* the rise of technological developments that led to the growth of capitalism in America. Truth lost its relevance. Mind and consciousness lost their relevance in society and money

became the be all and end of all values. Jean-Paul Sartre, Albert Camus and Karl Jaspers argued that man's death and failures are inevitable. He is just a cipher in the cosmos. The post-modern writers such as Thomas Pynchon, John Updike and Kurt Vonnegut believed that religion, morality and values have failed to help man to cope up the existential problems. In the Greek and in the Victorian world man was in communion with God and Nature but this link was broken after the World War II. Man lost faith in religion and values and he lived in darkness and suffered despair. The existentialists such as Albert Camus, Sartre and Kafka depicted the terrifying picture of man in their works. Man was depicted as a lost intellectual suffering alone and fighting with the irrevocable forces of nature and destiny. There was no heroism but he was an anti-hero introspective, skeptic and a tormented self. Kafka, Feeder Dostoevsky, Marcel Proust and James Joyce created characters who were neurotics and derelicts. Sean O'Faolin observed thus: "most of the traditional certainties have become progressively less and less certain" (O' Faolin 16). O' Faolin observes thus: the protagonists are "anti-humanist and anti-heroic, highly skeptical about man's inherent dignity" (O' Faolin 81). "Thus, soulless robots, corrupt people, the expressionistic plays revealing the trend towards corrosion of self and dehumanization of the protagonists. Surrealism of Strindberg, psychic iceberg of Freud, philosophy of Bergson, enlightened them about the absurdity of human condition and the gradual corrosion of self" (O' Faolin 81).

Barth realized that there was no room for certainties of life. The writers of the Continent were in search of new values based on originality, individuality and postmodernity. The new ideas and philosophy ought to do better than the old values. In the post World War, many artistic movements changed the perception of the writers; Dadaism, Cubism and Surrealism and Futurism were prominent among them. Jacques Derrida who is called the philosopher of language gave his theory of deconstruction and Richard Rorty propounded his philosophy of pragmatism in America. The massive growth of science, computer and technology and mass media culture changed the flow of the cultural currents. In such a climate, John Barth's *The Floating Opera* and *The End of the Road* deal with the problems of writing on original issues confronting postmodern man. Francese observes thus:

Postmodernism is life and to argue about postmodernism then is to argue about life today: it is a way of feeling, a state of mind, an attitude towards cultural and political possibilities, because reality is something flexible and fluid (49).

In the postmodern fiction of Barth everything is questioned and no answer seems to emerge. Barth was found in a dilemma and struggle in quest of his identity in a disordered environment. In his novels he depicted the hero suffering from this identity crisis. His hero tried to establish relationship between self and the society. Alfred Kazin (1963) remarks thus: “Now we? Get novels in which society is merely a backdrop to the aloneness of the hero” (Kazan 18). Barth explored the chaotic multiplicity of meanings. In the center of this chaos was Barth himself and he struggled to analyze his relationship between self and society. Hebert Gold stated the plight of the writer thus: “He will not have a mediocre subject himself. He will have a subject with grandiose boundary and tangled interior himself” (Gold 44). John Barth in his novel *The End of the Road* sets his hero in a complete paralysis as he fails to make a choice in concrete form. There are multiple choices before him; he feels bewildered and confused like most of people. John Barth (1980) comments thus: “The ideal postmodernist novel will somehow rise above the quarrel between realism and irrealism, formalism and contentism, pure committed literature, coterie fiction and junk fiction” (70). The plot of the novel is focused on the conflict between Jacob Horner and Joseph Morgan. Jacob tells about him thus: “In a sense I am Jacob Horner” (1) in the first sentence of the novel. He is both a writer and the protagonist of the novel. The novel is easy as its structure represents a retrocess. The narrator also describes the sexual relationship between Jake and Rennie culminating with their sexual intercourse. Rennie becomes pregnant and in Epilogue Rennie dies due to abortion. Jake sees the act of shaping the world with words as something equal to an absolute: “Articulation! There, by Jove, was absolute” (119). Jacob expresses his dilemma thus:

To turn experience into speech-that is, to classify, to categorize, to conceptualize, to grammarize, to syntacify it- is always a betrayal of experience, a falsification of it; but only so betrayed can it be dealt

with at all, and only in so dealing with it did I ever a man, alive and kicking (Barth 119).

The events are described in a sequence by some dates which work as chronological devices. In the 5th chapter there is a flashback. Jake is a lecturer in Wicomico Teaching College. Barth follows the naturalistic novels of the 19th century as he gives details of his associations with animals and the impressionistic details of Rennie's death. John Barth applies the theories of postmodernism and is "parodying" the traditional novels. He introduces the issues of nihilism, absolute values, social chaos and philosophical chaos in the novel *The End of the Road*. The metaphor of the "end of the road" is symbolizing the downward run of the American civilization. Jacob Horner is compelled to narrate a story; his story needs characters and characters need names. He wears many masks and plays multiple roles in the novel and multiplicity is a unique characteristic of a postmodern novel. At last Jacob Horner chooses a name to begin his story. The name of the narrator is biblical; he was one of Isaac's twin sons. He used a trick to get the blessings of his father and then he ran away to get the blessings of his father. He is a Proteus character in the Bible. The other name is Horner; symbolically one who puts horns or engaged to seduce someone. Horner gets freedom from what is old and archaic and comes to the conclusion that originality can be sought with the help of erasing the past. He impresses upon the woman lost in riddles of life. The characters in the novel *The End of the Road* are allegorical indicating the transitional period after the World War II. Joseph Morgan represents the transitional age representing the old that are fast changing with the rise of computer, industry and technology. The heroine Rennie introduces herself to Jacob Horner "Rennie. Okay? My name's Rennie, but nobody calls me that." She introduces herself on the phone to Jacob Horner in an unconventional style. She calls him up and he is naked in the room symbolizing his pristine glory and being disarmed and giving some advantage to Rennie. He reacts thus: "I feel fine, Rennie Morgan, to whom I was introduced, was by no means my idea of a beautiful woman" (John Barth, *The End of the Road* 37) suggesting the opposite. Rennie is a French word from Latin origin which means "reborn." Barth has carefully chosen all the names and Rennie represents the birth of new literature.

The three major characters; Rennie, Joseph and Horner are symbolical characters. Rennie represents postmodern tendencies; Joseph represents the old and traditional forms of literature. Jacob tries to influence her but she reacts against the old principles. Rennie dies at the end of the novel and her death is a new birth symbolizing her freedom and individuality. She is dominated by Jacob who tries to seduce her; he uses the power of articulation to enjoy sexual pleasures with her. He tries his best to seduce her during their walks. Their sexual intercourse is a natural consequence of physical attraction. Rennie exposes herself; she weeps, she cries and expresses her anguish. Jacob has been touched by her fragility and he destroys all her illusions of love and sex. The writer is not sure of the new germ –like in the *Night Sea Journey*: that puzzles him. It is all mysterious and he doesn't understand the significance of the new germ taking birth. Barth has developed the relationship between Jacob and Rennie employing the language full of sarcasm, wit, irony and arid sadism. Their sexual intercourse is depicted as a farce with malice, sadism and guilt leading to the death of Rennie who becomes pregnant. Her death didn't affect Jacob but it was a disaster for Rennie. Jacob tries to transform that farce into good art. Certainly his sexual affair is mechanical, artificial and without love. Both are exhausted as they had spent the whole night for the hard sex. To forcing the enactment was stupidity like the modern writers who are using the old ideas and genres forcefully. Barth (1980) exemplifies this in his *The Literature of Exhaustion* where he states "that to compound a Beethoven's symphony would be ridiculous and the imitation of the author would be a farce" (Barth 31). Jacob becomes very sexually excited at a time when he was a teacher at the Wicomico Teaching College. He makes "great considerations about the human obsession for sex. It is what most people enjoy doing, spend most of time thinking about, but imposes restrictions: "Whenever, wherever and with whomever he wants" (13). So sex becomes a restricted pleasure for human beings. Jacob gets excited "inside the class room which is a place of the intellectual activity. It was a great success of Jacob in defeating an impertinent pupil inside the class room with his power of articulation that prepared his positive mood and made him successful in his adventure with Rennie" (112). Jacob Horner is challenged in one way or the other, for sex and also for mental activity. He could become a long time "weatherless if no demand was made on him

and would be as unarousable as a gelding unless a target worth the ammunition appeared” (Barth 28). The novel *The End of the Road* is a great allegory in which Barth transforms his novel to symbolize sex with writing. Like sex, writing becomes a mysterious act. Barth chooses to tell stories instead of making love. Jake is a writer and a lecturer; he finds the essence of experience when he writes but as he proceeds he betrays experience and shows only his bookish knowledge. Jake “uses real experiences as his raw material for fiction but as the story progresses he goes on changing the story line and this is the real process of narration. He can take a stand but his opinions are contradictory” (112). As a writer he is supposed to cope with various situations and narrate multiple experiences through his stories but here he fails as his knowledge is bookish and his stories are insipid and tasteless. But Jake lacks the will power to accommodate his situation according to the existential needs. Jake feels that the failures are due to the forces of destiny which always disrupt the happiness of human beings. He is helpless to explain his motives as he says:

One can go a long way into a situation thus without finding the word or gesture upon which initial responsibility can handily be fixed, such a long way that suddenly one realizes the change has already been made, is already history, and one rides along then on the sense of an inevitability, a too-lateness in which he does not really believe, which for one reason or another he does not see fit to question (100).

It is the choice of an intellectual person rather than physical pleasures. Jacob Horner has to face problems while making love but he is successful in dealing with language. A superficial reading of the plot of the novel *The End of the Road* would give the impression that the novel is a traditional love triangle ending in a tragedy. Jake believes that the activities of life do not flow like the waters of the stream; like the seeming principles of history and there is no chain of facts and there is no correlation between cause and effect. Just as the thoughts of man turn into speech, facts grow out of actions. He believes that the past is dead but the former action exists in memory alone. When Rennie becomes pregnant and he expresses his desire to abort the child. Jake finds the need to find a doctor in order to counteract the existential threat a child would represent to his life. Rennie dies and Jacob is released from the

existential reality. His black Doctor is a psychiatrist whose theories are an imitation of French existentialism. He puts faith in the myth making believing that it can take the role of history. He observes thus:

Mythotherapy is based on two assumptions: that human existence precedes human essence, if either of the two terms really signifies anything; and that a man is free not only to choose his own existence but to change it at will (88).

The Doctor further says that “fiction isn’t a lie at all, but a true representation of the distortion of that everyone make of life” (88). Morgan testing the human activities and the role of Rennie symbolizing all that is new and modern. She is tempted by Jacob who is a disguised Satan. Barth has used the theme of adultery employing the impressionistic scenes with the cathartic effects. Tony Tanner (1981) in his book *Adultery in the Novel: Contract and Transgression* observes that “Adultery as a phenomenon is tin evidence in literature from the earliest times, as in Homer. Barth gives new life and energy to the theme of adultery in the novel *The End of the Road* creating allegorical characters. The other way of interpreting the novel is the religious perspective. Joseph Morgan acts like God as his wife says: “He is God, he is just God” (155). Joe looks like God; strong, correct without any vices. He is superior with power of punishment and relief in Him; he represents uncommon intelligence. Rennie is “his creation; molded her from mud and before coming in contact with Joseph, she was nothing but a disformed mass, a disoriented young girl with no spiritual understanding at all” (141). The characters of Barth have conflicting attitude towards everything. The universe of *The End of the Road* is paradoxical and one becomes what he wishes to be in the universe as there is no certainty of life and values. Jacob Horner has strange feelings towards Rennie Morgan:

The thing is that even in my current mood I couldn’t see much of a paradox in Rennie’s feelings...it should, ideally, be a really arresting contradiction of concepts whose actual compatibility becomes perceptible only upon subtle reflection. The apparent ambivalence of Rennie’s feelings about me. I’m afraid like the simultaneous contradictory opinions that I often amused myself by maintaining

were only pseudo-ambivalence whose source was in the language, not in the concepts symbolized by the language (Barth 141).

The universe is ambivalent opposing controversies over any objective value. In the world of *The End of the Road* there is no sense in anything and everything is ambiguous. Barth depicts the eternal ambiguity in all the scenes of the novel and there is no layer of objective truth. Individuals are only responsible for their actions and choices. Ambivalence dominates the plot of *The End of the Road* and those characters like Todd and Horner struggle for survival in the harsh world. Jac Tharpe comments thus:

Barth's genius lies in his awareness of magnificent ironies and his ability to dramatize paradox. He is able even to suggest that since the universe operates consistently on paradox, the universe may to that extent nightmarish experiences of that and in that respect actually be rational instead of absurd (114).

The heroes of John Barth can never forget the nightmarish experiences of the World Wars and this nightmare has become a living reality with humanity. Barth believes that the religious and political institutions and ideologies which profess to usher an era of peace in the world have become the cause of carnage all over the world. The absurd is not limited to a country but it is enveloping the entire globe with the emergence of mass media, computers and television network. The absurd transcends all the boundaries and postmodernism represents the fragmentation of such a world. Richard Boyd Hauck (1971) points out that imagination is an important basis for a realistic response to the absurdity of existence:

What the man who is conscious of absurdity must do, if he is not to commit suicide is to convince himself that an acceptance of what he must accept it as an act of will. This decision is in itself absurd creation, for it has no rationale. The rational choices are suicide or unthinking resignation, since to be conscious is to risk being afflicted by the sense of meaninglessness and unconsciousness is an escape from that sense (Hauck 7).

John Barth “prefers fictions which represent, fictions whose events are metaphors for something else, not something in themselves. For Barth, fiction should forever be an imitation of an action, and not an action itself” (Klinkowitz 411). Alfred Kazin (1963) observes thus:

This is typical of postmodern writing. In the face of the absurd, postmodern novelists should logically abandon their writings and lapse into silence, but they do not and cannot stop writing. There is no scope of salvation for the heroes of John Barth as they continue to live and act even as they fully realize the absurdity of the universe (121).

In the postmodern world the theme of absurdity dominates the plots as the characters are depicted as anti-heroes. The reality in the contemporary society has collapsed. Science, literature psychology has created confusion. Jerome Klinkowitz comments thus:

Though their differences are more numerous than their similarities, all have taken part in the trend which, for a long time in the sixties and early seventies, introduced antirealism to mainstream American fiction (407).

Like God, Joe doesn't accept irrational love. Jacob Horner is Satan; clever, scheming persuasive. Jacob Horner performs the role of Satan perfectly as he emerges as the “Satan Hero” Richard Lehan (1963) observes thus: “His role becomes even explicit, when Rennie identifies him as the devil about whom she had dreamt. In the referred dream becomes friendly to the devil and had invited him to test her. Jacob himself had already suspected of his role and after Rennie tells him her dream he confirms it” (23). Jacob says: “Am I supposed to be a devil's advocate's then? I'd be a damned good one” (73). But they continue playing their role and the result is Rennie emerges as Eve who succumbs to Joe. The role of Rennie is superb as the Biblical Eve who is seduced by Satan. Barth observes thus: “She is the center of the plot but appears different from the original story given in the Bible. Rennie is trapped in a nihilistic and existential world, as there is no salvation and no hope as well. It is just one more cycle in the history of human failures” (112). Barth just narrates the

personal experiences of the characters. The plot is focused on private learning and on collective evolution in the basic values. The deeper analysis of the novel induces the readers to interpret it as an allegory. Barth is in favor of good talking, intellectual approach and constructive thinking. Tharpe argues thus:

In the postmodern chaotic world there is a mess of different theories as there are no fixed values. Joseph Morgan represents the classical literature and Jacob Horner represents the new literature and Rennie is the literature itself. She is disputed by two forces and Barth impregnates the novel with his fictional concepts and the current theories of his time (115)

The story is narrated in the first person and according to Gerard Genette (1982) the novel is called the “Autodiegetic narrator,” (6), the plot is narrated through Jacob Horner who uses the mask of John Barth. Barth is the creator of all characters and he is always looking for verisimilitude. He uses many masks being the creator of all the characters. The novel is an extension of Barth’s creeds. Barth’s characters wear multiple masks to explore the reality. Both the characters Joe and Jake oppose each other and there is personal and internal struggle between both the characters. Barth depicts his superego in the novel. There is conflict between American pragmatism and the principles of freedom. Doctor is another important character in the novel. No particular name is given to him but he represents wisdom, knowledge, study and research. He is either a wise man or a crank representing a very common figure of the postwar novels and a permanent one in Barth’s novels. The Doctor is conscious that he has formulated the therapy but he cannot love his patients: “They’re just more or less interesting problems in immortality, for which I find it satisfying to work out therapies” (79). The exercise remains one of the mind but Joe and Morgan are unable to master the strategies. They experience the collapse of the system and this becomes obvious in his relation with Peggy Rankin. Joe is not interested to explore the cause of Jake’s and Rennie’s adultery. The Doctor says to Jake: “It’s extremely important that you learn to assume these masks whole- heartedly” (90). Jake’s involvement with Peggy and Morgans remains futile and useless. His character is uncertain and undependable; he is living in the world of chaos as he fails to establish relationship

with anyone in the novel. He has no concrete self to which he can refer. Jake sees himself as the vessel of a number of different personalities and wears masks like Todd:

One of these days, Jacob Horner, except in a meaningless metabolic sense, ceased to exist, for I was without a personality. Like those microscopic specimens that biologists must dye in order to make them visible at all. I had to be colored with some mood or other if there was to be a recognizable self to me (36).

Joe Morgan and the Doctor are suffering from the disintegration of self and their intellectual hypertrophy doesn't help them to bring order out of chaos. They live in objective world, knowable and manipulative because everything is an object. Todd in *The Floating Opera* gets an awareness that man must re-confront and re-imagine existence. He reconciles with the life of many masks, roles and stances. Joe and the Doctor struggle to invent a mask to fit the world and endure. Joe insists on absolute consistency of character and Doctor demands strict following of meaningless therapies:

Jake's lack of self is what sets him apart from the other two. He can equate this lack of self as well as Joe's and the Doctor's omnipresent selves with a lack of imagination, because as author, Jake's imagination is what is needed to re-order the world and the events of his life. Joe's and the Doctor's refusal to alter their concepts of life is a refusal to re-confront it (Barth 123).

Jake is a writer as writing gives him psychological relief and he tells he is still with the doctor. Jake's main struggle is to order his experiences and he thinks writing is the best possible way to come out of the psychological trauma. He puts faith in the Doctor and through writing he wants to make sense of and order the events of his life, to re-create them. It is therefore that, when I had cause to think about it at all. I responded to this precise falsification, this adroit, careful myth making with all the upsetting exhilaration of any artist at his work (119).

Jake's self is fractured and what sets him apart from the other characters is his lack of will. Doctor is certainly better placed; he enjoys confidence and has stability of mind but Jack needs an imagination to re-order the world and the events of his life. Doctor surprises Jake by his refusal to alter their concepts of life. On the contrary, Jake never displays such a complete grasp of this paradox. His consciousness works against imaginative awareness. Barth has depicted the gap between reality and imagination and both Jake and Rennie struggle to bridge the gap. Todd in *The Floating Opera* succeeds at the end but Jake chooses the terminal at the end and reveals the failure of his consciousness. Joe's relation with Rennie and Peggy reveal his lack of self and "lack of existence" as he states. His perceptive apparatus fails and with Rennie's death everything is lost for him. The therapy of Doctor also doesn't work at all and he is forced to choose the terminal at the end in acute frustration. In his final telephone call he finds that the destruction of his life is inevitable: "Jake throws up his hands at what to do next and Joe, disgusted that anyone should be unable to know what to do, hangs up in contempt" (197). The Doctor's first therapy is "Knowledge of the world" (82) is failing. He is in the mess as he doesn't find any relevant and workable solution to deal with the situation in which he is embroiled. He comes to the conclusion that writing as therapy is as meaningless as mythotherapy.

Barth for the first time in this novel realizes that realism in this universe is inadequate and realistic view of the world is threatening and terrifying. Ihab Hassan remarks thus: "Man is too weak to confront the reality of the universe. He loves to live in the world of illusions to escape the terror of life" (56). Barth uses the word "exhausted" to describe the dilemma of postmodern man. Jake's statements on the question of realism seem to admit to his awareness of the need to edit life into fiction as he writes:

Enough now to say that we are all casting directors a great deal of the time, if not always, and he is wise who realizes that his role-assigning is at best an arbitrary distortion of the actor's personalities, but he is even wiser who sees in addition that his arbitrariness is probably inevitable, and at any rate is apparently necessary if one would reach the ends he desires (28).

This speech reminds the readers of the remarks of Todd about Capt. Osborn's self-deception. Jake is involved in the worst situation which demands more courage and acute wisdom and the guts to decide. He is confronted with a situation the complexities of which defy any committed decision. Jake finds that life is not exhausted by mythotherapy. Jake is devoted to solve the riddles of life as he states:

The trouble is that the more one learns about a given person, the more difficult it becomes to assign a character to him that allow one to deal with him effectively in an emotional situation. Mythotherapy, in short becomes increasingly harder to apply, because one is compelled to recognize the inadequacy of any role one assigns. Existence not only precedes essence: in the case of human beings, it rather defies essence (128).

Jake accepts the absurdity of the universe and decides to go to the terminal at the end of the novel in his search of making the "real" sense of the world. The last word of the novel is the signal of this articulated word: "Terminal" (198). Jake believes that language is a tool to "have at reality" (119). For Jake writing is a therapy and he finds peace living with the doctor. He struggles to create a new world through writing and it allows him to deal with experience:

To turn experience into speech...is always a betrayal of experience, a falsification of it; but only so betrayed can it be dealt with at all...It is therefore that, when I had cause to think about it at all. I responded to this precise falsification work, this adroit, careful myth-making, with all the upsetting exhilaration of any artist at his work (119).

Jake is engaged in therapeutic exercises, working towards a goal or end of sorts. He is struggling to get a new awareness of the universe in which he lives. He is governed by flux, decay and death and absurdity of life. His account of events brings him no relief and whatever has happened to him seems no good. He fails to get even limited awareness that Todd receives. Jake suffers from the paralysis of consciousness and when he meets Peggy Rankin Barth comments: "Her mistake in the long run, was articulating her protest" (27). Peggy destroyed the constructed

games of Jake. He pursues therapies with grim seriousness and he assumes that the therapies are arbitrary. Barth has depicted the meaningless cosmos of Jake and the Doctor try mythotherapy to relieve the distress of Jake and mythotherapy serves as a metaphor for him to write his fiction. Barth comments thus: "Mythotherapy is based on two assumptions: that human existence precedes human essence and that a man is free not only to choose his own existence but to change it at will" (88). Through this technique Barth is able to assign the different roles to his characters as the Doctor says: "Most people are always reconceiving just the sort of hero we are and he attributes this to the exercise of imagination" (89). In mythotherapy, as a fiction, the imaginative faculty is for the benefit of the patient. The artist like patient must devote to the process of mythotherapy. He must devote all his energies to achieve his task. Barth observes thus:

If any man displays almost the same character day in and day out, all day along, it is either because he has no imagination...or because he has an imagination so comprehensive that he sees particular situation of his life as an episode in some grand over-all plot, and can so distort the situations that the same type of hero can deal with them all. But this is most unusual (89).

Rennie is the third angle of the triangle as she represents a different mask. She accepts all the doctrines of Joseph and Rennie expresses her individuality. She is married to Joseph Morgan. Jacob uses all the strategies to seduce Rennie. Jacob Horner takes with him to Wicomico a record player, some Mozart records and a plaster bust of Laocoon. Gerard Genette (1982) observes thus: "The image of Laocoon works as a kind of Jacob's alter ego. Jacob transfers to him his own characteristics and the face of the bust changes according to Jacob's suspicious side. Jacob did not listen to him and the result was his death. Jacob abandons the bust in the same way the Trojans abandoned their priest and got him killed by the twin serpents" (23). This episode has symbolical significance as Joseph Morgan represents the new cycle of literature. In *The End of the Road*, Joe Morgan tries to embrace reason and live by it. He accepts reason as an absolute value and fails. For him

distrust of reason is a unifying force in the postmodern world as Gerald Graff comments:

A number of social developments immensely deepened this skepticism toward reason. Industrialism intensified the separation of fact, and values by institutionalizing objective thought in the form of technology and commerce (41).

The critics observe that Barth imitated Joseph Campbell's famous book *The Hero with the Thousand Faces* (1964) while creating the characters in the novel *The End of the Road*. Jake, Joe and Doctor and Rennie are performers wearing several masks. Jacob Horner has to perform several roles. He is given the "assignment to carry on super human jobs" that required an uncommon physical agility and unique intellect and wisdom. Barth gives him the power of articulation to bring order in his chaotic world and he is depicted as a burlesque character lacking the grandeur and the dignity of the great Greek heroes. Horner confesses that he is a sum of many different selves. His behavior indicates his paradoxical personality ruled by weathered arid and unweathered" days. He has his "own personal concept of right and wrong, good and bad and often he appears as a rebel in the society; he wears multiple masks to survive in the postmodern society. He reveals his feelings and opinions to the readers as a vehicle of the author himself, because he is a product of the author's mind" (46). Rennie confirms the fictional experience in the following words: "I think, you don't exist at all. You're not real like Joe is" (47). Gerard Genette (1982) observes thus:

Though Jacob Horner doesn't give the reader a biography, but there is one constant information about him; he is going to get master's degree in English Literature. He intended to teach literature at the Wicomico Teaching College but the Doctor forbade it because of its potential dangers for his cosmopsis since the students of literature have so many choices (123).

The idea of Jacob's cosmopsis refers to paralysis of the writer who has to deal with so many styles and genres and subjects. In the words of Jacob: "There is an art, that my diffuse education had schooled me in preface: the art of composing a telling letter of application we can see an allegation to the technical competence of the writer" (123).

Jacob is quite expert in language and has the ability to articulate well. He uses proper nouns and effective adjectives and this is evident when he examines the furniture of his new room. He is expert in using the metaphors to express his ideas and thoughts. He is a writer in the form of a hero showing his new literary creeds. John Barth comments thus: "In life, there are no essentially major or minor characters. To that extent, all fiction and biography, and most historiography, are a lie. Everyone is necessarily the hero of his own life story" (Barth 8). John Barth believes that "ontology recapitulates cosmology and he believes that the knowledge of the world is the basis for knowing one's self and for gaining wisdom" (2). Jacob is a cynic but in reality he is ignorant since his knowledge is theoretical based on the books he read. In the novel *The Floating Opera*, the hero is easily identified since a narrator is there who tells that it is extremely difficult to write a novel. In *The End of the Road* Barth has depicted the struggle of the hero and his evolution. The main focus is on the meeting of Jacob Horner and Doctor. He is lost in a pit of paradoxes which paralyze him. He expresses his commitment to the absurd attitudes like doing everything. He is confused in finding the difference between "good" and "bad." He doesn't emerge as the "rational and sensible person; highly individualistic as his main concern is "to be at ease." Barth gives reference to this attitude in the very beginning of the novel. The novels depict the personal evolution or ontology. He is described as "woofer without a tweeter as he can sit for hours in his room since he believes that nothing has intrinsic value" (112). Jacob Horner reacts when he is challenged by the whole staff of the college where he is teaching. Joseph Morgan, the secretary of the school also challenges his absurd ideas. Barth presents him as a man who has no practical knowledge. In *The Literature of Exhaustion* John Barth observes that Jacob may represent the fresh vision of life. Barth says: "Jacob Horner may represent the flesh that knows a lot about literature but practically wrote nothing in his life" (Barth12). His meeting with the Doctor is crucial; the Doctor gives him "Informational Therapy" or the knowledge of the world. Doctor advises him that instead of crude and dry logic he should pursue practical things. He should make efforts to explore the reality of life. The Doctor guides him thus: "Take long walks, but always to a previously determined destination" (76). Doctor argues that "Mythotherapy is, then a means but not an end." Jacob recognizes this but he knows that it lack value. The Doctor believes that it is essential for Jacob to shake his feelings and to transform him from ignorance into knowledge. Jacob says: "At the moment Rennie was lowered into the earth, I believe I

was explaining semicolons to my students” Jacob is touched for the first time in his life as he feels a change in his mind as he confirms it: “We’ve come too far and learned too much....Of those of us who have survived to this age, who can live any longer after the World War II” Jacob Horner in *The End of the Road* emerges as an individualist, existentialist and nihilist. He is a “protean character” anxious about gathering new experiences. He observes thus: “Human culture is the sum of the acquired and stored knowledge that should never be disdained and there is no need to reinvent the wheel” (34). Peggy Rankin has no impact on Jacob. But Rennie Morgan has different experience than Peggy. “At such times she assumed a strong kind of beauty. But she could not handle her body in situations where there were no rule” (21). Barth gives the metaphor of horses symbolizing free imagination and controlled discipline as he says: “Stop digging her in the barrel, she’d blurt out as we trotted along. You’re telling her to go with your heels, and holding her back with your hands” (22). The Doctor says: “This is intended discipline, and you’ll have to pursue in diligently, perhaps for a number of years” (113).

To conclude, the last word of the novel is “Terminal” and Barth has frequently asserted in his interviews that he himself might have been on the end of the road. The vision depicted in the novel is typically postmodern, nihilistic and pessimistic. He has parodied the old and the traditional novels following his observations made in his essay *The Literature of Exhaustion*. He refers to Kant and his theory of “disinterested pleasure. Man often cannot decide whether life ought to be lived by the principles of logic or principles of ethics” (Barth23). This is exemplified in the life of Jacob Horner. Barth refers to the malaise of the postmodern society; Doctor talks of the absolute indecision in *The End of the Road*. Doctor used the word “cosmopsis” giving the cosmic view of life. Doctor argues that the will to action always springs from a will to overcome one’s weaknesses. Often a cosmic perspective leads to paralysis and the postmodern man must be ready to face these truths.

Chapter - 3

Metaphysical Despair of Ebenezer Cooke in *The Sot-Weed* *Factor* of John Barth

John Barth is a postmodern novelist as he wrote novels following the postmodern trends propagated by Kurt Vonnegut, Thomas Pynchon and John Updike. The novels of John Barth are the manifestoes of postmodern culture and the real mirror of the American cultural transformation. Theorists such as Jürgen Habermas, Linda Hutcheon, Ihab Hassan, Fredric Jameson and Jean-François Lyotard and Jean Baudrillard have given their own ideas of postmodernism. The postmodern writers took keen interest in the old tales and mythologies expressing their fascination for fantasies and uncanny tales. They expressed their renewed love for pastiche, parody, inter-textuality and magic realism as their novels are dominated by the fictional landscape of the past. Barth is known for stylistic innovations. Barth has expressed his awareness of absurdity and nihilism in his novel *The Sot-Weed Factor* (1960). The plot of the novel *The Sot-Weed Factor* of Barth reflects a distinct phase of developing conception of the artist and his relationship to the world. Barth called the novel as “a seventeenth century-mock epic” Barth stated thus: “I had thought I was writing about and it turned out I was writing about innocence” (Interview 11). The plot of the novel *The Sot-weed Factor* is dubbed as “an extended parody of the historic Ebenezer Cooke’s poem of the same title” (12) and his role as a poet laureate of Maryland. The interesting part in the novel is the dual nature of parody as defined “between the opposite poles of imitation and play, or necessity and freedom” (12). The central metaphor in the novel is twinhood which deals with the question of identity. Barth lays stress on the tension between fiction and reality. Barth believes that parody is a tool to resolve the tensions. The strategy is simple. Barth dissolves the tension into separate segments which is used by Barth as useful material for the active imagination. The heroes of *The Floating Opera* and *The End of the Road* struggled to confront the questions of “ultimate” sense and “absolute value” and this ambivalent attitude reflects the futility of life. Barth transcends this opposition by

transforming complexes of experience into stories. Barth is not interested in the single event in the novel, real or fictional, but an interest in the process of transformation. Characters are not important in the novel and do not constitute the center of an event, even plot is not very important but the issues are important which function as symbols in the novel. Barth has used the weapon of parody to dissolve the experiences into infinite number of segments which ultimately become the raw material for various tales. Barth wrote in his *Literature of Exhaustion* (1967) thus: “As in Lucretius’s universe, the number of elements, and so of combinations is finite and the number of instances of each element and combinations of elements is infinite” (Barth 34).

The hero Ebenezer Cooke is seriously concerned with the overwhelming enormity of existence. Barth uses his imagination as an exercise to exhaust the vastness of life, to give it shape and meaning. Barth is not much concerned with verisimilitude as the novel is full of stock fictional devices, stereotype characters, unlike events and the layers of parody are very effective. Barth decided to abandon realism as he says: “I didn’t think after *The End of the Road* that I was interested in writing any more realistic fiction-fiction that deals with characters From Our Time, who speak real dialogue....Reality is a drag” (An Interview with Barth 11). The novel *The Sot Weed Factor* is cosmic in vision and is not confined to any particular society. Barth is concerned with the existential anguish of the postmodern people who are trapped in the abyss of futility and nihilism. Ebenezer is not an ordinary hero, Barth presents him thus in the opening of the novel:

As poet, this Ebenezer was not better nor worse than his fellows, none of whom left behind him anything nobler than his own posterity; but four things marked him off from them. The first was his appearance; pale-haired and pale-eyed; raw-boned and gaunt-cheeked, he stood nay, angled-nineteen hands high. His clothes were good stuff well tailored, but they hung on his frame like luffed sails on long spars. Heron of a man, lean –limbed and long-billed, he walked and sat with loose jointed poise; his every stance was angular surprise, his each gesture half flail (John Barth, *The Sot-Weed factor* 5).

In *The Sot-Weed Factor*, Ebenezer is placed in a universe that defies his understanding. Barth deals with various ways to confront the absurdity and futility of the universe and the infinite ways of ordering the chaotic events of life. The novel focuses on the adventures of Ebenezer who was a minor poet. Ebenezer wrote *The Sot-Weed Factor* as a diatribe against the prevalent barbarism of the late eighteenth-century Maryland life. In the poem he talks about the theft of his tobacco estate and other cowardly deeds. But Barth wrote the novel narrating the journey from innocence to experience. Barth takes the opportunity to talk about his interest in the picaresque of hero myths:

My general interest...dates from my thirtieth year, when reviewers of my novel *The Sot-Weed Factor* (1960) remarked that the vicissitudes of its dventure as described by Lord Raglam, Joseph Campbehero...follow in some detail the pattern of mythical heroic all and other comparative mythologies....I was struck enough by the coincidence ...to examine those works by which I'd allegedly been influenced, andmy next novel, *Gies-Goat Boy* (1966) was for better or worse the conscious and ironic orchestration of the Ur-Myth which its predecessor had been represented as being (Interview, 207).

The hero Ebenezer Cooke is a postmodern man struggling to find the answers and solutions in the random universe. He is engaged to confront with “fundamental and ultimate” values. In a letter to his sister Anna, Ebenezer writes:

All Roads are fine Roads, beloved Sister, none more than another...to choose one, impossible...I cannot choose, sweet Anna twixt Stools my Breech falleth to the Ground (Barth 20).

The narrator reacts thus: “The man thanks both to Burlingame and to his natural proclivities, was dizzy with the beauty of the impossible, dazzled, he threw up his hands at choice, and like ungainly floatsam rode half-content the tide of chance” (21). Briefly stated, Eben’s predicament is clearly depicted since he suffers from the “cosmopsis” Ebenezer attempts to describe the immortal aspect of humanity against the background of destructive world. He suffers from immobility and lack of

decision determining his love life. Soren Kierkegaard in his *The Sickness Unto Death* opines that human beings often suffer the metaphysical despair when they lack possibility. Ebenezer has observed that many characters created by the contemporary writers that suffer existential despair since they have to confront with so many possibilities. Ebenezer is confronted with the dilemma to synthesize that which is and that which he imagines should be. He fails to distinguish what is real and what is illusory and this exacerbates his dilemma. Barth has presented the juxtaposition of artificial and imaginative dramatizing the multiplicity of choices and possibilities in the context of postmodern culture of America. Ebenezer is engaged to order the world but as he proceeds in his quest he finds life futile and all the projects of man frivolous. Life defiles arbitrary organization, and demands that human beings make sense of it anyway. The author is omnipresent in the novel *The Sot-Weed Factor*. Barth follows the style of the 18th century novel indicating the existence of the author who addresses the readers directly at the end of the novel. The hero of the novel lives in chaotic worlds. On the surface of the novel the plot chronicles historical episodes and this is done in a number of ways. The style of the novel follows historicity as Barth has introduced many erudition of that age. The novel takes the readers to view the adventurous journey of Ebenezer who is a historical figure. Ebenezer did write the poem "Sot-Weed Factor" in the 18th century and its version is shown by Barth in his novel. The plot abounds with characters both real and fictional. The blending of the fact and fiction, of events of history and story form the core of the novel which is the main feature of postmodernism. Barth has depicted the dilemma of Cooke who fails to resolve the problems with his genius. Barth avers that life and art are mimetic. Barth has depicted the postmodern of historicity, he recalls that historical events give a new direction to people and one's past is crucial to ontological enlightenment. Ebenezer learns this awareness after many of his misadventures and the novel emerges as a model of this awareness. The debates between Ebenezer and Henry Burlingame III are very crucial in the novel and many important issues emerge in this debate. It is observed that the awareness of this novel is artificial and contrived and there is no historical authenticity. The title of the novel is taken from the title of the poem of the classical age written by Ebenezer Cooke. Barth wrote the novel *The Sot-Weed Factor* around the poem of Ebenezer following the conventions and style of

The Floating opera which was inspired by the show boat Barth had seen in his childhood. Indeed, the novel is a remarkable exercise of imagination depicting the plight of the postmodern man. In addition, the novel is an account of the life on Ebenezer but as the plot progresses there are layers of multiplicity of experiences.

There are sixty-five chapters in *The Sot-Weed Factor* and twenty eight chapters are devoted to narrate the tale pertaining to the craft of fiction. Barth chronicles the rivalry between Isaac Newton and Henry Hare. The tale of the “Great Tom Leech” is highly symbolical and its functional value is to depict the absurdity of human life. Barth refers to the rape of the Cyprian and the tale of Maryland Palatinate and the tale of Father Joseph Fitzmaurice. The plot of the novel is sprinkled with the written accounts of Henry Burlingame I, Capt John Smith and of Ebenezer. In fact, the novel is recognized as the collection of stories of the ways the people interpret and narrate stories. The quest of Ebenezer is the main thread of the novel running into all important events. His strength depends on the ability to make sense of what Joan Toast’s pimp calls “the entire great real world” (74). The adventurous journey of Ebenezer is to explore the real great world. John Barth has given very unconventional titles to the chapters of the novel; they are based on the postmodern concept of multiplicity. The very title of each chapter of the novel serves to acquaint the readers of the dilemma of Ebenezer to confront the hostile universe and the chapters are intended to be a compendium of the facts and fiction. The omnipresence of the author is a reality in the novel. Consider for instance the following passages:

The Laureate is Exposed to Two Assassinations of Character, a Piracy, a Near-Deflowering, a Near Mutiny, a Murder, and an Appalling Colloquy, Between Captains of the Sea. All Within the Space of Few Pages (Barth 255).

John Barth has evolved new style alluding to the artificial allusions as artifice and these headings of the chapters reveal some of the philosophical problems confronted by Ebenezer. Barth is indebted to James Joyce while writing the titles of the chapters as the similar effect is rendered by Joyce in the “Aeolus” chapter of

Ulysses. Barth employs the newspaper headlines as capsule burlesques of the matter. The headings of Barth's novel *The Sot-Weed Factor* depict the deflation of Ebenezer who looks ridiculous. Ebenezer states thus:

If the Laureate is Adam. Then Burlingame is the Serpent... The tale of Billy Rumbly Is Concluded by a Eye-witness to His Englishing. Nary Hungummory Poses the Question. Dos Essential Savagery Lurk Beneath, the skin of Civilization, of Does Essential Civilization Lurk Beneath the Skin of Savagery? But Does Not Answer it (8).

Ebenezer struggles to explore a way to adjust with the way of the "great real world" but his quest leads him to inevitable failure. He is shocked to know the insensitive attitude of the people to the spiritual problems and finds most of the characters lost in the abyss of spiritual paralysis. Burlingame is the real messiah of the novel who explains the necessity of coming out of the pit of spiritual paralysis. He is a Protean character of existence. He performs the role of a tutor to Ebenezer and gives him an awareness that man lives in the world and is bound to suffer in the harsh and the hostile universe. His life is futile and the world is devoid of any purpose and life is directionless. Man can use his genius to fashion the values necessary for his survival. Burlingame articulates his fatalism urging Ebenezer to act boldly:

My dear fellow, we sit here on a blind rock careening through space, we are all of us rushing headlong to the grave.... We are dying men, Ebenezer: in faith there is time for naught but bold resolves (Barth 36).

Burlingame takes the view of the postmodernism in defining existence to Ebenezer. His inexhaustible energy is the outcome of his struggle to forge an identity in the harsh and hostile world. But unfortunately, even he has no link to the rest of the world and leads an isolated life cut off from the society. His views of life are based on his multiple experiences.

Our true and constant Burlingame lives only in your fancy, as doth the pointed order of the world. In fact you see a Heraclitean flux: whether

‘tis we who shift and alter and dissolve; or you whose lens changes color, field, and focus; or both together. The upshot is the same, and you may take it or reject it (349).

Burlingame urges Ebenezer that God has destined man to struggle for the meanings of life. He says: “Tis our fate to search, Eben, and do we seek our soul, what we find is a piece of that same black Cosmos whence we sprang and through which we fall: the infinite wind space”(364). Search for meaning is the food of the soul as search brings realization that the search sustains man in the face of a hostile universe empowering him with the inner strength to fight with the odds of life. Search for meaning is the “truth that drives men mad.” Ebenezer is in a fix as he tries to find out a solution through his genius. He puts faith in the maxim that “what the cosmos lacks ourselves supply” (660). This maxim he borrowed from Shelley’s *Defence of Poetry* but he creates his own essence of meaning. Burlingame tries to solve his riddle as he observes thus:

The truth that drives men mad must be sought for ere it’s found, and it eludes the doltish is myopic hunter. But once ‘tis caught and looked on, whether by insight, or instruction, the captor’s sole expedient is to force his will upon it ere it work his ruin...One must needs make and seize his soul, and then cleave fast to it, or go babbling in the corner. One must choose his gods and devils on the run, quill his own name in the universe, and declare Tis I and the world stands such-a way” One must assert, assert, or go screaming mad (Barth 365).

The advice of Burlingame is desperate for Ebenezer but this is the only option open to man. Burlingame uses many arguments to defend his assertion and we see it as a clear recognition of flux, impermanence and mortality. He feels that there is a divine urge in man that helps him to cope up with the onslaught of change. There is something stubborn in man and in spite of his awareness of the futility of life he believes in the possibility of transcending his mortality. Ebenezer recoils at the advice given to him by Henry and he performs his role of poet and virgin. His relationship with Joan Toast is very interesting. He offers her his ideal love but she

feels offended and storms out of the room. Ebenezer comes under the inspiration of her love and under these circumstances he writes his first poem: "Hymn to Innocence" expressing his dual identity of a poet and virgin. In the last stanza of the poem he expresses his view of innocence"

From Life, from Time, from Death, from History; Without it I must
breathe Man's mortal Breath Comment a life...and thus commence
my Death (71).

Ebenezer defines his self in opposition of life and feels that he is in the process of disintegration being a divided soul. His ideas about innocence and mortality, and death are typically postmodern. He asserts that he will not die but the decay in his personality disturbs him. He wishes to withdraw himself from the active life as he experiences the loss of self in love and fails to make a choice. Barth has depicted his sense of purpose and of value. Barth has depicted the love experiences of Ebenezer thus:

Faith, 'tis a rare wise man knows who is: had I not stood firm with
Joan Toast, I might well never have discovered that knowledge ! Did,
I then, make a choice? Nay, for there was no I to make it! "Twas the
choice made me: a noble choice, to prize my love over my lust, and a
noble choice bespeaks a noble chooser. What am I? Virgin, Sir! I am a
virgin and a poet (71).

Ebenezer is a celebrated poet Laureate of Maryland. It is his foremost responsibility to explore the patterns of meaningful life and in this struggle his old fantasies generate new fantasies. He believes in pure love and for this he needs a woman worthy of it. Ebenezer turns into mythopoesis and uses his imagination to create imaginary words around himself. He is engaged to investigate the operation of mythical world and to analyze his self-concepts. Ebenezer blindly gropes in the darkness to find out the solutions but his tutor Burlingame has reasoned out in advance and gets the answer what should be done, thought and followed in life. He interacts with his sister Anna and investigates the psychological working of children and their natural talent. He teaches them the art of understanding the historical

process and tells them to assume different identities and perform different roles through reenacting the past. His attitude towards history and old traditions is similar to that of the great Romantics. Ebenezer is confronted with the problem of his identity and he expresses his concern thus:

What am I? What am I? Virgin, sir! Poet, Sir! O ma a virgin and a poet: less than mortal and more: not a man, but Mankind! I shall regard my innocence as badge of my strength and proof of my calling (72).

Burlingame believes that the main problem confronted man in the postmodern world is the quest for identity. It arises because “The world’s index indeed a flux, as Heraclitus declared: the very universe is naught but change and motion” (137). Man is free in this universe to forge his identity and the process of identity formation is full of challenges: “This the house of Identity, the Soul’s dwelling place! Thy memory, my memory, the memory of the race: ‘tis the constant from which we measure change: the sun. Without it, all were Chaos right enough” (137). Burlingame also warns Ebenezer that the memory of man is not a reliable foundation and often it proves faulty and deceptive. Barth has portrayed the character of Burlingame like Heraclitus of Greek world performing the role of a phenomenologist and of a postmodern existentialist philosopher. He warns that nothing in this world is reliable except his ability to change the world and his self-concepts. Ebenezer has to lead his life as a quester and an artist and all these observations of Burlingame baffle Ebenezer: Mary, your discourse hath robbed me of similes: I know of naught immutable and sure!” (140). Burlingame tries to sooth the disturbed Ebenezer thus: “Tis the first step on the road to Heaven” (140). Burlingame continues arguing that “if you want to know who you are, search for the historical modes” (23). The right approach in life is the historicity that can help in identity formation. Burlingame motivates Ebenezer to continue his search for identity and if historical model doesn’t help him he will have to create his own model. In his long discussion on the topic of identity Burlingame lays down the philosophical principles motivating Ebenezer to continue his search for identity and in this war Burlingame

creates the intellectual landscape in the novel. Barth has described the role and philosophy of Burlingame thus:

Aside from its obvious efficiency, this system was in keeping with the second of Master Burlingame's three principles of pedagogy; to wit, that one learns a thing best by teaching it. The first was that of the three usual motives for learning things-necessity, ambition and curiosity-simple curiosity was the worthies of development, it being the purest (Barth 7).

His philosophical and practical approach heightens the theme of the novel as Barth uses him to demonstrate the real struggles of life. Burlingame's commentary on the future of mankind and his role as a second coming of Proteus is highly significant giving the novel a new dimension. Burlingame is a foundling who emerges as Moses coming out of the water as Barth writes: "he sprung de novo like a maggot out of meat, or dropped from the sky" (142). Burlingame has no fixed place. He can change his roles when he likes since he is not bound by the laws of the universe and is above time and space being a Protean character. Burlingame can create his own identity from any material he likes: "ex-nihilo and without travail" (503). He firmly believes that all existence is "a Heraclitean flux" (345). Burlingame discusses his own ambitions thus: "I love no part of the world, as you might have guessed but the entire parti-colored whole, which her poles and contradictions" (508). He is considered as a model for modern people: "When I reflect on the weight and power of such fictions beside my own poor shade of a self, that hath much disguised and counterfeited, methinks they have tenfold my substance!" (744). Barth has created a lot of suspense around the character of Burlingame as he admits: "I have no parentage to give me place and aim in Nature's order: very well-I am outside Her, and shall be Her lord and spouse" (516). Burlingame is seen in many roles in the novel. He is Baltimore, John Coode, Peter Sayer, Timothy Mitchell, Nicholas Lowe and Ebenezer. Travesty is the backbone of his philosophy. Barth uses the metaphor of a snail describing the functional value of Burlingame. He is free in this universe to act and create and freedom nullifies him as an individual as the plot of the novel progresses. He eventually embraces nothing and reaches into nowhere as his freedom

negates all his explorations. Ebenezer finds in the world both liberty and lawlessness as he says:

This is more political and religious liberty-they come and go year to the next. Tis philosophical liberty I speak of from want of history. It throws one on his own resources, freedom-,makes every man, an orphan like myself well an demoralize as elevate (178).

Ebenezer and his sister didn't accept the verdict of Burlingame of his true identity and again slipped into disguises of Nicholas Lowe. As Burlingame loses touch of reality he transcends the real boundaries of experience. He writes poem to get freedom from the absurdity of life and in his poems he distorts reality. His poems reveal his process of transformation. His personal life is also slowly converted into art. The objects of his poetry collide with the objects of his life. The tables are turned on Ebenezer as his fantasies of himself as the Poet Laureate boomerang. His love for Joan Toast also collapses and the idea of perfect love is shattered. In the end of the novel, Ebenezer throws away the false images he had created. He revokes all the mythical assumptions. Lord Baltimore makes him the Poet Laureate after he has discarded his fantasies. He becomes the husband of his love Joan Toast but soon he becomes a dying wreck. History plays a significant role in the novel *The Sot-Weed Factor* as Barth uses history in manifold ways. The critics have dubbed the novel as a "historical hoax." Barth uses huge historical apparatus "grounded on meager of fact and solid fancy" (82). In his early days he suffered from cosmopsis; Jake Horener also suffered from the same disease and Ebenezer is unable to reconcile to the fact:

Gerard Genette (1982) observes thus: "His great imagination and enthusiasm for the world were not unalloyed virtues when combined with his gay irresolution, for though they led him to a great sense of the arbitrariness of the particular real world, they did not endow him with corresponding realization of its finality" (76). He very well knew, for instance that "France is shaped like a teapot, but he could scarcely accept that...despite the virtual infinitude of imaginable shapes, this France would have to go on resembling a teapot forever" (19) Ebenezer's life is the case study of a man who lives in the world of illusions and when he confronts death he comments thus:

In his heart the fact of death and all these sensuous anticipations were to Ebenezer like the facts of life and the facts of history and geography which owing to his education and natural proclivities, he looked at always from the storyteller's point of view: notionally he admitted its finality; vicariously he sported with its horror, but never, never could he really embrace either. That lives are stories, he assumed: that stories end, he allowed-how else could one begin another? But that the storyteller himself must live a particular tale and die-Unthinkable! Unthinkable! (Barth 288).

Ebenezer lives to see the light of the day but he is surprised to note that the lives of other people is fictional and during his journey of life he fails to understand this mystery of life. He has his own view of metaphysical reality being inspired by Plato and his view of the world. He is engaged in a task to order the chaotic universe but he experiences futility of life. Joan's fate is to suffer rape at sea and subsequently to be ravaged by the pox. In Maryland Joan suffers disgrace and ignominy for the sake of her husband Ebenezer. She is innocent and this allows Ebenezer to will away his estate and this brings ruin for his sister Anna. In his bitterness he turns his Maryland into a "Sot-Weed Factor" and realizes at the end of the novel that his innocence is a vain construction of his imagination. But he insists on his innocence despite the loss he has suffered. He expresses his anguish to his childhood nurse Mrs. Russecks thus:

My brave assault on Maryland-this knight-errantry of innocence and Art-sure, I see now it has an edifice raised not even on sand but on the black sand vasty Zephyrs of the Pit. Wherefore a voice in me cries Down with it then! While another stands in awe before the enterprise; sees in the vain construction all nobleness allowed to fallen man (670).

Ebenezer at the end of the novel is convinced that all illusions are deceptive and all imaginative constructions lead to anguish and despair. The world is real and the imaginative adventures are misleading. Ebenezer calls his experience as "a right

significance” (671). He offers himself to the diseased and dying Joan Toast so that he may repay her selfless love. He makes effort to make Henry sexually potent; he regains the estate for himself and Anna. He wants to atone for the ruin it has left. The message of Barth is simple; man cannot create his own imaginary worlds. Man cannot escape the entropy of the cosmos and it is the responsibility of the human beings to confront the chaos prevailing in the universe man has to articulate to survive in this planet.

The interesting part of the novel is the historical context which is linked with form and content and the plot doesn't serve the problem to solve the identity crisis of the hero Ebenezer and the loss of identity becomes the main theme of the novel *The Sot-Weed Factor*. John Barth has preserved the “picaresque” and “parodistic structure and according to Richard W. Noland (1966) Barth is employing the conventions of fiction of the eighteenth century to depict the malaise of the postmodern society of America. John C. Stubbs (1965) opines that the novel *The Sot-Weed Factor* “is a parody of history as well as a parody of the picaresque novel” (101). Barth has borrowed from Cervantes and Samuel Butler's *Hudibras* to intensify the comic quest of Ebenezer. He published his poem *The Sot-Weed Factor* in 1708 and called it a “satyr” depicting all the comical elements. Ebenezer doesn't tell the purpose and direction of the satire. The critics have discussed the intended audience of the poem of Cooke. The problem with Cooke is that he never resolved the problem and the poem remains ambiguous and just a comic satire. The interesting aspect of the novel of Barth is mutability of history. When Barth was writing *The Sot Weed-Factor* in the 1950s “the primary objective in American studies was to reconstruct our past to help explain our present identity as a nation” (Micklus 1). Barth also admitted this fact in his Gado Interview: “Though I was not a patriotic writer, I had feelings about America in the late 1950s...I had a feeling comparable to the one Virgil must have had about Rome” (118). But in his 1971 interview Barth expressed the significance of his work of researching the colonial period in Maryland thus:

I love that phase of our history, and I remember it with pleasure because of the apocalyptic feeling that we have about America at the moment (Barth 118).

Barth expresses his postmodern view of history and novel in this novel as he says: “I was deep into the idea of the mythical America by that time in the 1950s” (118) and in the novel *The Sot-Weed Factor* he made experiments introducing the elements of fiction, history and myth. Gordon S. Wood opines that in the 1970s and 1980’s the historians “seemed to have lost a unified sense of purpose; without a clear sense any longer of America’s role in history, the discipline of (history) seemed to be coming apart” (Wood 3). Barth has dramatized the process of fragmentation of Ebenezer questioning the “purpose of the past.” Wood further opines that:

We Americans unlike Europeans, have tended to see our history as the product of conscious intentions and purposeful leadership. We have not usually thought of ourselves as caught up in large impersonal forces sweeping us along to destinies we have not chosen (30).

The universe is random and chaotic and the modern writers have agreed that the past is unstable and there is no critique national identity. This trend poses problems for people in their understanding of history. Wood argues that Americans resist to “this kind of historical consciousness. We do not want to hear about the unusability and pastness of the past or about the limitations within which people in the past were obliged to act” (Wood 14). The first paragraph reveals Barth’s theory of fiction:

Ebenezer Cooke, more ambitious than talented, and yet more talented than prudent, who, like his friends-in- folly, all of whom were supposed to be educating at Oxford or Cambridge, had found the sound of Mother English more fun to game with than her sense to labor over, and so rather than applying himself to the pains of scholarship, had learned the knack of versifying, and ground out quires of couplets after the fashion of the day, afroth with Joves and Jupitars, aclang with jarring rhymes, and string-taut with similes stretched to the snapping-point (3).

Ebenezer is presented in this paragraph as a comic figure. Barth says: “He stood - nay, angled-nineteen hands high. His clothes were good stuff well tailored,

but they hung in his frame like luffed sails....His every stance was angular surprise, his each gesture half flail. Moreover there was a discomposure about his face, as though his features got on ill together” (Barth 3). He is one of “fools and fops “of the 18th century and is “not better than his fellows” (3). He is dubbed as a “gangling flitch with more ambition than actual talent and one who has learned the knack of versifying and his poetry is ground and in quires and afroth” (3). All these images reveal the grotesque personality of Ebenezer in the novel.

John Barth wrote his postmodern novels depicting the absurdity of Americans. In his *Introduction*, he comments thus: “the third...turned out to be much more different than (Barth) originally thought. It turned into an extravagant novel, an extravaganza from history” (117). Morrell traces the development of the novel in detail and he investigated the various issues of postmodern America. For instance: “Barth would...be implicitly contrasting the world view of the seventeenth century with that of the twentieth century and getting much thematic mileage out of the contrast” (32). Morrell observes that Barth used the title of Cooke for provoking laughter in the novel as he took advantage of the puns. The name Cooke refers to a merchant, it also means “a maker, and author, and that is what the historic and the imaginary Eben Cooke fancy themselves. That is what Barth is: the factor of *The Sot-Weed Factor*” (32). Morrell further argues that Barth delighted in creating the sketchiness of biography of Cooke. It gave Barth a chance “to play loose with history and imagine as fantastic a version of Cooke’s life as he wished. Besides Barth was free to make up his own history of early Maryland” (36). Morrell contends that there are many instances in the novel of the departures from historical record and his sense of historicity is typically postmodern. Barth’s novel *The Sot-Weed Factor* is written in the 20th century with the material and the events of the eighteenth century. Barth follows the comical and epical style of Fielding and preserves humorous and the ludicrous and even satirical borrowed from Butler’s *Hudibras*. There are numerous episodes which are fictionalized created only to intensify the comic effect. Barth has borrowed even the conventions of the 18th century. Barth changes Cooke’s history of the origin of his country. Cooke seems to have been born in England but Barth relocates his place of birth to America. This refers “to a journey which comes full circle” (37).

In the opening chapters Barth tries to establish Eben in England. Eben's adult age is described in the opening scenes and then his childhood is described. He is involved in the prostitute Joan Toast and then his exile to the colonies by his father is described. "Barth postulates that their arguments were kept alive in part because they were both rivals for the love of a young man, and that their enmity resolved itself when they put away the boy and took to loving one another" (Morrell, 40). This is just the beginning of the subversion of Barth of historical facts.

In the tenth chapter of the novel Burlingame narrates the story of *Marylandiad* to Eben. The tale of Burlingame is focused on the conflict between the government and the colony of Maryland and the plotter John Cooke. Barth spent one year to understand the politics of Maryland and devoted his time to study *The Archive of Maryland*. In his readings Barth "learned that the compilers of the Archives were a one in believing Lord Baltimore an extreme good man and John Coode an extreme villain" (Morrell 40). Barth also found in the Archives that "Baltimore had been very oppressive governor and that Coode may have plotted against him for just reasons" (Morrell 40). Barth has used the device of disguise in the novel; Lord Baltimore is disguised as Burlingame to demonstrate "how little we can be certain of what actually happened in history" (40). Barth is expressing his patriotism as he says "he was deep into the idea of the mythical America at that time" (118). Barth has captured the fears of the people "that cabals of the French and Indians or of the Catholics and somebody else, were simply going to exterminate the province at any moment" (118). All "these historical facts are the source of much of humor in the novel *The Sot-Weed Factor*. Barth found colonial history so fantastic that it had to be toned down for his farcical novel" (Safer, *The Contemporary American Comic Epic* 34). "The novel is a satire upon the "traditional celebration of country and on America's past, present and future" (43). Fielding explored the concept of virtue in his novel *Joseph Andrews* and defined it as an expression of personal identity. Eben expresses his ideas about the virginity of Burlingame thus:

Yet it pointeth not to Eden or to Bethlehem, but to my soul. I prize it not as a virtue, but as the very emblem of myself, and when I call me virgin and poet, this is not more boast than who should say I'm male and English (Barth 157).

Like Fielding Barth has ridiculed the concept of double standard of morality. Eben is thirty year old virgin and this is ridiculed in the novel. When Barth wrote this novel many Hollywood films were released dealing with the theme of male virginity. The issue of male virginity is humorous and Barth is using “the dialects of the late seventeenth century as a wide canvas onto which he paints characters beset with ailments that are primarily modern thus creating a comic suspension between two historical periods that provides a breezily detached perspective upon the agonies of both” (Joseph 24). Ironically Eben who is a virgin expresses his interest for a prostitute Joan Toast. This exposes the hypocritical morality of Eben like Lady Booby of *Joseph Andrews*. Joseph comments thus:

From such actual historical as the several Lord Baltimores, Henry More, Isaac Newton, William Claiborne, and John Coode down to the lowliest besotted tobacco planter, all is bleared in the novel with comic sludge.... For every imposing historical reputation there is secret history” This enthusiastic mock realism appears on the page to share the lexical qualities of an eighteenth century novel, as well as the heft (Joseph 26).

Barth has created many scenes to depict the mock-heroic elements in the novel. Burlingame performs various roles and his masquerading provokes laughter. Morrell further argues that “By trivializing mythological patterning, he uses the traditional vehicle of parody at time, to create a purposeful violation of decorum” (Morrell 60). Max Schultz identifies “*The Sot -Weed Factor* as a parody. Ebenzer Cooke is an imaginative child growing into to become the idealistic adult poet who realizes the virtuous art is a misconception. He realizes that the real world is not a virtuous place” (Schultz xvi). Schulz talks of the postmodernist techniques used by Barth such as multiplicity and intertextuality. Schulz cites an interview of John Barth where “he makes a distinction between a pastiche and a parody” He claims that there are various elements of a pastiche in the novel. The term parody denotes a work that is imitative but that can also be a “take off” or “spoof” In the novel *The Sot-Weed Factor*, Barth has used the language of the 18th century and he has used the elements of the picaresque novel. The structure of the plot is built around the rambling and

episodic elements of the storyline. Tobin avers that “Satire, in any case, is not often great art. In dealing with the ridiculous, satire reduces itself somehow. Likewise parody tends to be merely grotesque about what it ridicules and becomes an oddity because of exaggeration” (Tobin 113). Tobin argues that the novel *The Sot-Weed Factor* has the elements of both parody and satire as he argues: “Is the *Sot-Weed Factor*: parody, travesty, or farce? Is it an imitation or a debunking of history? This question is serious because Barth uses both the elements in his novel” (Tobin 58).

To conclude, Barth’s novel *The Sot-Weed Factor* is a typical postmodern novel containing all the features and elements of postmodernity. Barth has created a new type of fiction discarding all the old conventions. Barth turned to the fiction of the 18th century and sought inspiration from Henry Fielding and Samuel Butler. The 700 page novel is a good study of pastiche, parody and intertextuality focused on the themes of futility and nihilism of life. Barth exposes and ridicules the working of the educational systems that contributed to Eben’s foolishness. The hero Ebenezer is an ambivalent character trapped in the abyss of darkness and uncertainty of life. Barth has depicted all the stages of his growth from childhood to the adulthood and particularly exposing his virginity. He is taught classics, natural philosophy, by his tutor Burlingame but he fails to grow up and remains like the common human beings unable to resolve the contradictions of life.

Chapter – 4

Subversion of Mythology in John Barth's *Chimera*

John Barth established his name as a postmodernist American novelist known for his existential vision. He borrowed the techniques of postmodernism from Jameson and employed the literary techniques such as inter-textuality, black humor, magic realism and pastiche in his novels. Harris observed that “Barth creates his unique theoretical and technical strategies in his fiction. His novels depict his passion for traditional story telling techniques like framing and embedding” (Harris 6). His fascination for the ancient tale of the *Thousand and One Nights* is predominant both in his fictional and non-fictional writings. His novel *Chimera* is full of the elements of meta-fiction; it is a fine juxtaposition of old and the new styles of writing as Barth argues thus:

Of course, when you consciously use an old myth, a received myth, like the myth of Perseus or the myth of Helen, Paris, and Menelaus, then whatever there is of the originally mythpoetic in your own imagination is either going to come in somewhere else in that text – with new characters, or language, or new twists to the old myth – or else will simply flow in to fill in those mythic receptacles which go by the names of Paris, Menelaus, Helen. I believe firmly, in other words, that some of the serious affect that we experience in the face of genuine myth can be experienced in the face of contemporary 'comic' fiction using mythical materials (qtd in Walkiewicz 19).

No wonder why Polizzotti Clavier (2007) compares “Barth with Kurt Vonnegut, Monty Python's *Flying Circus*, and the films of David Lynch and the Cohen brothers. Indeed, each of his works rolls in front of the reader's eyes like some kind of avant-garde movie which never fails to surprise, or even shock” (Clavier 23). John Barth brought revolution in the art of fiction and he started his career in early 1960s, he wrote *The Sot Weed Factor* (1960), *Giles-Goat Boy* (1966) and *Chimera* (1972) demonstrating his passion to revive the eighteenth century trends of fiction

imitating the cultural value of art of writing shown by novelists like Fielding, Smollett and Stern. Barth depicts the malaise of contemporary America. Patricia Waugh observes that “he attempted to transcend his ancestors by recreating his own world with the help of mythical proportions and frame tale convention” (Waugh 12). He is famous for his postmodern techniques and his postmodernism is according to Rice and Waugh (2001) is essentially “a continuation but modification of cultural modernism, a way of telling stories” (Waugh3). Barth employs the technique metafiction to depict the existential problems of the contemporary Americans. Brian McHale in his book *Constructing Postmodernism* (1992) observes that “once upon a time modernist literature reached the point of exhaustion; then the postmodernist breakthrough, and literature replenished itself” (McHale 32). Patricia Waugh comments thus:

Meta-fiction is a term given to fictional writing which self-consciously and systematically draws attention to its status as an artefact in order to pose questions about the relationship between fiction and reality. In providing a critique of their own methods of construction, such writings not only examine the fundamental structures of narrative fiction, they also explore the possible fictionality of the world outside the literary fictional text (Waugh 2).

Barth’s *Lost in the Funhouse* (1968) and *Chimera* (1972) depict an exceptional art of storytelling of the novelist. Schultz observes that in his novels Barth “creates his own fictional world rather than imitating the real one. He maintains to fulfill his desire through his frame tales for they refer to series of interconnected tales rather than direct experience of life. Barth exploits convention which is as old as Homer’s epic, to generate his self-conscious, self-reflexive collection of short stories” (Schultz 23). Charles B. Harris observes that the writings of John Barth are the “emanation of passion of virtuosity algebra and fire where algebra is the form of technique, it is successfully combined with fire the unique and original expression” (Harris 6). Max

F. Schultz observes thus:

Barth's method as an aesthete one in which he explores traditional literature specifically realism; his fiction is the outgrowth of this impulse to go back to the beginning of things; to see to what contemporary uses they might be put and that the literary preoccupation of his lifetime has been the metafictional concerns of self-reflexivity and intertextuality (Schultz xii).

In this chapter the features of popular culture and the use of popular mythology of John Barth is explored. The topic of the chapter requires a succinct definition of both "Popular Mythology and Popular Culture." Popular Culture is evident with the growth of mass media and T.V. channels. *The New Shorter Oxford English Dictionary* defines it as "a medium of communication (such as radio, television, newspapers) that reaches a large number of people; such media collectively" (1708). Schultz observes thus:

Popular culture similarly exists within these means of communication (or media) - predominantly film and television and to a lesser extent radio, novels, newspapers and magazines - and popular culture also appeals to the broadest possible audience. Popular culture is, therefore, the "forms of art, music, or other culture which appeal to or are favored by many people; intended primarily to please, amuse, or entertain (Schultz 229).

In contrast serious "music, literature is not intended simply to amuse, please, or entertain." (229). Dominic Strinati in *An Introduction to Theories of Popular Culture* observes that "it seems difficult to define popular culture independently of the theory which is designed to explain it and for this reason I have provided only a basic, dictionary definition of this term and shall avoid any irrelevant theory" (xviii). "Popular Mythology entails "a falsification of reality, according to popular misconceptions, which occurs in various forms of the media and conforms largely to the Mythotherapy" endorsed by the Doctor in *The End of the Road*" (8). The Doctor in *The End of the Road* represents Mythotherapy since he avoids reality and promotes

traditional ideas about correct behavior. Indeed, John Barth is one of the most inventive American novelist and the critics and the reviewers have praised for his creative art and unconventional approach. He boldly developed his complex trilogy of tales, *Chimera*. His plot is conspicuous for its multi-layers. The very title of the novel is confusing and fantastic full of mythical layers and intricate themes. His meanings are hidden beneath his brilliant surfaces. Barth employs convoluted phantasies and metafiction in the plot of *Chimera* giving a new model of mythical style. Barth explores the ancient myths of Middle East reviving old mythology. His passion for the old leads him in discovering the roles of men and women in the context of the contemporary American culture. In *Chimera*, Barth plays off a Faustian Scheherazade against her sister Dunyazade who remains her own woman. This tale frames the one-role Shahryar with the more complex Shah Zaman. Dunyazadiad offers the passionate Genie to contrast as author to the mutable and self effacing Polyeidus and the imitative Jerome B. Bray of Bellerophoniad. The mythical characters developed in Perseid are Greek and the myth of the hero is well developed on the mythical lines. According to Morrell "Perseus's problem sounds the obvious theme of the three part novel: how are men and women ever to transcend the myth of heroic maleness that, Bellerophoniad" reminds us, has dominated Western culture since the overthrow of the matriarchy some 3500 years ago (*Chimera* 111). The real mythical power comes from Scheherazade. She has Faust-like dimensions. Barth uses the sources from various disciplines such as politics, psychology, mythology, and folklore. She makes efforts "to stop Shahryar from killing a virgin every night and wrecking the country" (5-7). Bakhtin observed that black humor and witty speeches are the creation of popular festive forms.

Girard Genette observes that a "narrative situation, like any other complex whole needs to be analyzed in details" (2 Genette 15). Narrative "levels are recognized to be associated with narrative farming and embedding" (2). Prince regarded "embedding as one of the methods in which narrative sequences can be linked within a narrative instance and in this respect it is a device associated with story" (Pier 3). It is significant to refer to the "Theory of Heteroglossia" propounded by M.M. Bakhtin. Barth followed the concept of the dialogic in his novel *Chimera to*

achieve the magical and fantastical effects. Bakhtin comments thus: “all language is a dialogue in which a speaker and a listener form a relationship” (Bressler 45). Bakhtin further observes thus:

Language is not a neutral medium that passes freely and easily into the private property of the speaker's intentions; it is populated-overpopulated-with the intentions of others. Expropriating it, forcing it to submit to one's own intentions and accents, is a difficult and complicated process...it exists in other people's mouths, in other people's contexts, serving other people's intentions : it is from there that one must take the word, and make it one's own (Bakhtin 295).

Barth was passionate to bring radical changes in the tradition of fiction so he turned to Bakhtin. He explores the notion of heteroglossia. Bakhtin defines the novel as “a diversity of social types sometimes even diversity of languages and a diversity of individual voices artistically organized” (Bakhtin 262). Bakhtin emphasized that “this stratification of the language and social heteroglossia is indispensable for an authentic prose” (264). For Bakhtin “novel orchestrates all the themes, the totality of the world of objects and ideas and expressed in it, by means of the social diversity of speech types and by the differing individual voices that flourish under such conditions” (Bakhtin 3-5). Bakhtin considers that the “novel parodies the other genres and squeezes them into its own structure and finally reformulates and reaccentuates them” (5). Indeed, the “novel came to contact the present significantly, however it constantly pushes the limits and plunges into the past by the use of parody. On the other hand it crosses the boundaries by pulling the future into the text” (27). He observes that:

The entire novel breaks down into images of languages that are connected to one another and with the author via their own characteristic dialogical relationships. [...] The author participates in the novel [...] with almost no direct language of his own. The language of the novel is a system of languages that mutually and ideologically interanimate each other (Bakhtin 47).

Bakhtin indicates that “the dialogical languages in the novel are not just languages but images of languages which flow through the author into the text. The existence of multiple stories embedded to each other is there for can be regarded as images or textual representation of these languages” (Bakhtin 2). Roland Barthes (1967) states that “the whole of literature, from Flaubert to the present day became the problematic of language” (Barthes 34). It is pertinent to note that in his novel *Chimera* is the most significant example of such type of language. The plot of the novel is a blending of the elements of metafiction and the use of modernization nature of a myth; the use of “metaphor for literature in need of being replenished by recycling the old. Barth argues that the postmodernist fiction must always keep one foot in the narrative past and one foot in, one might say, the Parisian structuralist present” (Barth 34).

Barth’s Use of Embedded

According to *Oxford Dictionary* the verb “embed technically means to place (a phrase or clause) within another clause or sentence” (234). Thus the embedding technique is a new form of innovation of John Barth who employed this technique in *Chimera*. Bakhtin’s shared system of languages is similar to the technique employed by John Barth. Barth has used the technique of embedding stories introducing new images and symbols to intensify his themes. *One Thousand and One Nights* is packed with such images and symbols revealing the oppression of King Shahryar. Schultz explains the plight of Scheherazade thus:

The only way she could escape is to amuse the king with marvelous stories every night. So she tells a story within which a new story is embedded and this will continue for a thousand and one nights. Scheherazade tells story A in which a character tells story B where another person tells story C (Schultz 123).

Meik Bal in his *Narratology: Introduction to the Theory of Narrative* discusses the characteristics of embedded text is “that the primary narrative is gradually forgotten after some times by the reader or listener” (53). Bal described “*the Nights* as a good representative of this situation. He pointed that this forgetting is

quite necessary in Scheherazade's survival" (53). He talks of forgetting as the primary function of a narrative;

This forgetting is a sign that Scheherazade's goal has been accomplished. As long as we forget that her life is at stake, the king will too, and that was her purpose. In that case, the apparently loose relationship between primary and embedded text is relevant to the development of the primary fibula (53).

Bal has clarified "the relationship between the primary story and the embedded ones. There are two possibilities, either the embedded story explains the primary story or resemble it" (Bal 53). It is interesting to note that "the embedded stories shared system and their role in plot and narration; they can function independently as a particular story. The embedded narration promotes multiple reading from the text and gives the chance to various interrelationships" Bal 54). David Herman observes that "the coding system in embedded stories permits them to be combined with the real life contexts and situations familiar to the reader. The attraction toward this mechanism of inserting one story into another is primarily cognitive and functions as vehicles of shared thinking, or socially distributed cognition"(Herman 3) Narrative embedding is based on a strict functional system. Bal observes thus:

The embedded stories are usually established within frames which are normally understood as a kind of enclosing. In framed narratives, which are the simulation of oral storytelling; stories get embedded within other stories to where the narrator of each frame, narrate another story within which its character/characters, tell another story (32).

John Barth employed the oriental legacy of frame tale narrative in his novel *Chimera*. He came under the influence of Richard Burton who translated *The Thousand and One Nights*:

My love affair with Scheherazade is an old and continuing one. As an illiterate undergraduate, I worked off part of my tuition filing books in

the Classics Library at Johns Hopkins, which included the stacks of the Oriental Seminary. One was tacitly permitted to get lost for hours in that splendor's labyrinth and to intoxicate, engorge oneself with story. Especially I became enamored of the great tale-cycles and collections: Somadeva's *Ocean of Story* in ten huge volumes, Burton's *Thousand Nights and a Night* in seventeen, the *Panchatantra*, the *Gesta Romanorum*, the *Novellini*, and the *Pent-Hept-and Decameron*. If anything ever makes a writer out of me, it will be the digestion of that enormous, slightly surreptitious feast of narrative (51).

Barth expressed his love for frame tale narratives as he “praises Scheherazade for her art of storytelling as he indicates Most of those spellbinding liars I have forgotten, but never Scheherazade. Though the tales she tells aren't my favorites, she remains my favorite teller” (51). John Barth's *Chimera* cannot be understood without understanding the depth of the frame tales techniques. Barth's admiration is expressed thus: “Tales within Tales within Tales” Barth investigated the techniques used by Chaucer in his *Canterbury Tales* and also explored the techniques used in Dante's *The Divine Comedy* and the majestic *The 1001 Nights*, “to discover something about that ancient narrative convention which might inspire a story of my own: a story which, whatever else it was about, would also be about stories within stories within stories.”(160). Barth confessed that “it was never Scheherazade's stories that seduced and beguiled me, but their teller and the extraordinary circumstances of their telling: in other words, the character and situation of Scheherazade, and the narrative convention of the framing story” (157). Barth “categorized the framed narratives into two major groups. In the first group there are those with incidental or casual frames and in the second one stand the more or less systematic frames” (23). These “stories that programmatically frame other stories” are sometimes embedded in one primary frame as in Dante's *The Divine Comedy*, Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*” (19). Barth highly appreciated the technique of the frame tale and the oriental way of narrating stories. He discusses the thematic significance “of the tales where the second degree of narrative becomes a serial frame within a single frame where the characters on the third level of narrative involvement more than once tell further stories” (Barth 161-162). Barth explored the

relevance of the frame tales. First and the most frequent ones are those that make “little or no connection between the contents of the framed and the framing stories like most part of *The Divine Comedy or Canterbury Tales* or even *The 1001 Nights*” (166). The formula for starting the unrelated story is like this in the *Nights*: “And yet, O King! this is not more wondrous than the story of ” (Burton 25). “And you,[...] have ye no story or rare adventure to amuse us withal?” (Burton 29). The second group in “which most of the literary frame tales are placed, is referred to those stories where there is an associative, thematic, or exemplary (or cautionary or prophetic) relationship between the framed and the framing story” (166). These stories are included in the *Nights* too. For “Scheherazade’s stories about faithfulness of the wife that resemble her own situation are among them. The final and most significant group are those with dramaturgical relation” (167) Barth elaborates the case for the *Nights* with this quotation:

Aha, Shahryar might be said to say to himself here and there in the *Nights*: “I see now that my own cuckolding is as nothing compared to X’s; moreover, the story of Y suggests that my misogyny may have been an overreaction, particularly given such a brave, wise, and beautiful storyteller. Perhaps I should consider not executing my bed partners every morning (Barth 167).

Barth explained that in case of “high-level dramaturgical relation where the characters of the frame tale are the same as the characters within the framed stories the inside story can reverse the climax or the action of the outside story” (167). It is Scheherazade’s frame tale that expresses “his love for Black Humor. He invokes her as a muse and says I beseech the Muse to keep me from ever becoming a Black Humorist” (50) he further more delineate his “fondness to Scheherazade as the aptest, sweetest, hauntingest, hope fullest I know for the storyteller” (54). Barth observes thus:

The whole frame of those thousand nights and a night speaks to my heart, directly and intimately -- and in many ways at once, personal and technical. The sultan Shahryar, you remember, is so disenchanted with life in general and love in particular that he marries a virgin

every night and has her killed in the morning. Scheherazade, who has perused the books, annals, and legends of preceding kings, and the stories, examples, and instances of bygone men.. . antique races and departed rulers, volunteers herself. The King abates her virginity whereafter, with the prearranged assistance of her younger sister, Dunyazade -- about whose role much might be said -- Scheherazade beguiles her deflowerer with a tale, artfully continued, involuted, compounded, and complicated through a thousand and one nocturnal installments, during the invention of which she also bears three sons by her imperious audience (51).

In his novel *Chimera*, Barth's fascination with Scheherazade and her frame tale is quite obvious. Barth was called as "existentialist by Ihab Hassan, and absurdist by Charles B. Harris, a black humorist by Max F. Schulz, and a fabulist by Alan Trachtenberg and Robert Scholes" (Clavier 1). Barth highly eulogizes Chaucer for his experimentation of frame tales as he states that "Chaucer's frame, for example, the pilgrimage to Canterbury is an excellent if venerable ground-metaphor -- life as a redemptive journey -- but, having established it, he does nothing with it." (52). Barth also considers the "contribution of Boccaccio for developing the frame tales in his *Decameron* where the wealthy ladies and gentlemen amuse themselves with stories while the plague of 1348 ravaged the countryside more arresting for its apocalyptic nature, for the pretty rules with which the company replaces those of their literally dying society[...] and for the occasional relevance of the tales to the tellers and to the general situation" (52). However he believed that "the story of Scheherazade excels all since it is more magical and dreamish" (52). It is Scheherazade "who must impress her in a publish-or-perish" situation" (5). Barth expresses his postmodern view of history thus: "history a night mare from which he's trying to wake or found it more as a "wet-dream,since he believes the past is a dream in which he laughs" (52) For Barth using "historical or legendary material, especially in a farcical, even a comic, spirit, has a number of virtues, among which are esthetic distance and the opportunity for counterrealism" (52).

When I think of my condition and my hope, muse wise, in the time between now and when I shall run out of ink or otherwise expire, it is

Scheherazade who comes to mind, for many reasons -- not least of which is a technical interest in the ancient device of the framing-story, used more beautifully in the Nights than anywhere else I know (Barth 51-52).

Barth praises the “convoluted style of Scheherazade’s stories and the way she shape her narrative in that apocalyptic situation” (53). As “a professional storyteller and an amateur of frame-tale literature he contemplates in Scheherazade’s complex tales within tales” (54). He concludes thus:

Scheherazade tells by my count 169 primary tales; she moves to the second degree of narrative involvement on no fewer than nineteen occasions, to tell 87 tales within the primary tales, and to the third degree on four occasions, to tell eleven tales-within-tales within- tales -- 267 complete stories in all, which by the way include about 10,000 lines of verse, by Burton's estimate (191).

Barth was charmed by the art of weaving of frame tales of Scheherazade when he wrote the novel *Chimera*. It is a question of life and death for her and she displays exemplary courage and conviction when she enters the King’s chamber. She is aware of her duty to save her life and the lives of so many girls of her town. She throws the trap and exploits the weakness of the cruel king. She has no weapon but she uses the weapon of storytelling shrewdly to entrap the King. She is artful planner and designs her tale brilliantly. Suddenly, Scheherazade “falls silent by the dawn leaving not one but two plots suspended as a kind of narrative insurance” (189). Scheherazade says:

What is this compared to what I could tell thee on the coming night, were I to live and the King would spare me? which is a hopeful self-deprecation to which the King would answer By Allah, I will not slay her, until I shall have heard the rest of her story (189).

Borges indicates that the “structure of the plot of *Chimera* is intoxicating and they disturb us metaphysically and remind us of the external frame” (Borges 113).

Barth declares, “the fiction of our own lives, of which we are both the authors and the protagonists, and in which our reading of *The 1001 Nights*” (Barth 169). It is a story within our story. Barth gave example of an embedded sentence thus “Whoever the man who the pos which on the bridge which on the road which to Worms goes, lies, knocked over, identities, gets a reward” (Barth 169). Todorov explained the issue in his essay “Narrative-men” in *The Poetics of Prose*:

The appearance of a noun immediately provokes a subordinate clause which, so to speak, tells its story; but since this second clause also contains a noun, it requires in its turn a subordinate clause, and so on, until an arbitrary interruption, at which point each of the interrupted clauses is completed one after the other. The narrative of embedding has precisely the same structure, the role of the noun being played by the character: Each new character involves a new story (Todorov qtd. in Barth 169).

Referring to the stories of *the 1001 Nights*, Todorov also “suggested that Scheherazde’s story is a reminder for what will happen if one stops telling stories, it is the inevitable death since figuratively each one of us tell stories and listen to them because we live stories and live in them” (Barth 169). He observes thus:

Frame tales fascinate us perhaps because their narrative structure reflects, simply or complexly, at least two formal properties not only of syntax but of much ordinary experience and activity: namely, regression (or digression) and return, and theme and variation (169).

M.M. Bakhtin observes that in the postmodern fiction, the parody has got new meaning in the fiction of John Barth. Barth follows Bakhtin in his use of modern form of tendency as Bakhtin (1981) states:

In modern times the functions of parody are narrow and unproductive. Parody has grown sickly, its place in modern literature is insignificant. We live, write and speak today in a world of free and democratized language: the complex and multi-leveled hierarchy of discourses, forms, images, styles that used to permeate the entire system of

official language and linguistic consciousness was swept away by the linguistic revolution of the Renaissance (Bakhtin 71).

Barth's novella revolves around the main protagonist Scheherezade who is the main story teller also. Her younger sister Dunyazade "is just like John Fowles who played a major role in *The French Lieutenant's Woman*. Barth is making a part of the story assuming the significant role of the Genie who helps the woman to fight with the evil forces" (15). Her way of telling the story is old and traditional as she says: "The real magic is to understand which words work, and when, and for what; the trick is to learn the trick" (15). John Barth had "claimed that literature was a language having body and hidden depths, existing both as dream and menace" (15). Poor Scheherezade has to narrate stories to save lives threatened by the cruel and ruthless king. She invented magical style of telling stories to excite the anxiety and curiosity of the oppressive King and at the same time to create an atmosphere of fantasy and romance. At the outset "Barth's tale is about her finding a way to change King's mind about women and turning him into a gentle, loving husband" (16) and suggests that "the key to the treasure is the treasure" (19). The Genie informs "Scheherezade that they are both storytellers and that he can help her think of the stories by retelling her book, which has never been off his worktable since he started writing" (21). She artfully narrates the romantic and adventurous stories such as *Sinbad the Sailor*, *Aladdin's Lamp*, *Ali Baba and the Forty Thieves*. She has successfully created a world of wonder and romance to enthrall the King. Shahryar's brother Shah Zaman is cruel and oppressive like his brother. He is sexual and womanish and treats women like sexual toys. He enjoys raping and killing virgins of the town and Scheherezade is fully aware of this. She concocts new stories every night to entrap the King and to save the virgins of the town. She had "watched her sister enjoying sex with the King which she described as not conjured illustrations from those texts, but things truly taking place" (29, 30). She expresses her psychological anguish thus: "Don't desert us, friend; give Sherry the story you're working on now, and you may do anything you like with me. I'll raise your children if you have any; I'll wash your Melissa's feet" (37). Barth invents new storyline to replenish literature and makes several experiments in this novel to articulate his postmodern vision of absurdity and death:

By exhaustion I don't mean anything so tired as the subject of physical, moral, or intellectual decadence, only the used-upness of certain forms or the fest exhaustion of certain possibilities – by no means necessarily a cause of despair (Barth 37).

According to Barth, “Shahryar represents the male chauvinist extreme of the American academic publish or perish principle which makes him not ideal audience, but Sherry is, on the other hand, an ideal storyteller” (Ziegler 87), Ziegler (1987) argues that “Dunyazade is the one representing the ideal listener” (87). Barth employs the technique of metafiction presenting Doony’s monologue:

Turning then to me, to my great surprise he announced that the title of the story was *Dunyazadiad*; that its central character was not my sister but myself, the image of whose circumstances, on my 'wedding-night-to-come', he found as arresting for tale-tellers of his particular place and time as was my sister's for the estate of narrative artists in general (40)

Barth has added the tragic elements also in the plot of the novel because he argues that life is not all comedy but is full of tragic events as well. The main character suffers tragic destiny when she is handed over to Shah Zaman. Scheherezade “still has trouble believing the Genie (Barth) and says that he is either a liar or a fool when he says that any man and woman can treasure each other until death – unless their lifetimes are as brief as our murdered sisters” (45). She struggles to survive as the instinct of survival in her is very strong. She is passionate to kill Shah Zaman but she hides her intentions. She has concocted new stories to save herself and to achieve her mission of life: Barth writes thus:

However, she is prevented by Shah Zaman telling her the story that hides behind his cruelty a whole new society consisting only of women. “All I craved was someone with whom to get on with the story of my life, which was to say, of our life together: a loving friend; a loving wife; a treasureable wife; a wife, a wife,” says he (60).

He later on tells that “he learned through life and impotence something that the responsive reader may already have suspected: the true magic words are as if words which, to a person satisfied with seeming, are more potent than all the genii in the tales” (Barth 57). (Walkiewicz 1986) argues that Shah Zaman “wants them to end the dark night and take the truly tragic view of love maybe it *is* a fiction, but it’s the profoundest and best of all” (61). This is an excellent example “of life replacing fiction and fiction replacing life what is *true* does not matter anymore, so this novella does not have any definite *resolution*. Treasure me, Dunyazade!” (63). Walkiewicz expresses the vision of Barth thus:

Since the story shall live, Doony shall live too – if we can accept the as if he offers, then this denouement may indeed become a moment of untying in which the tangled loops of story are opened up, a joyous climax that occurs concurrently in all the frames of the tale (Walkiewicz 86).

Barth informs that “this has not been the story of Scheherazade, but the story of the story of her stories” (63). Finally, Barth tells the readers that in order “to be joyous in the full acceptance of this denouement is surely to possess a treasure, the key to which is the understanding that Key and Treasure are the same” (64). In his controversial essay *Literature of Exhaustion* Barth “retains some of the apocalyptic tone of that ‘somewhat apocalyptic place and time’ (19). McHale (1992) observes that “this essay has been inevitably brought in connection with Barthes’s *Death of the Author*. To give a text an Author is to impose a limit on that text” (88). On the other hand, Lindsay claims that “Barth’s reading of his own fiction suggests that he believes the death of the author may be something else the real may consciously employ against itself in order to assert the author’s control of his material” (24). This is what Barth says in *Chimera*:

I think I’m dead. I think I’m spooked. I’m full of voices, all mine, none me; I can’t keep straight who’s speaking, as I used to. It’s not my wish to be obscure or difficult; I’d hoped at least to entertain, if not inspire (154).

Lindsay argues that

For me John Barth's fiction has the enormous power it does partly because it is always positing nothingness, because it is so 'created' that it also insists on that which is vacant. To me this is frightening. I think of Barth's work as an enormous poetic celebration (Lindsay 95).

Indeed, Dunyazade's relationship “with Shah Zaman can be compared with the author's relationship with the reader, which can, on the other hand, be brought in connection with a sexual relationship: The teller's role, he felt, regardless of his actual gender, was essentially masculine, the listener's or reader's feminine, and the tale was the medium of their intercourse” (34). He says: “Treasure me ... as I'll treasure you,” says Shah Zaman to his lover” (61). Barth says: “What is gropingly now called postmodernist fiction; what I hope may also be thought of one day as a literature of replenishment” (23). Walkiewicz (1986) comments thus: “the writer's reward is not immortality but the pleasure of writing, the reader's reward not truth but the pleasure of reading” (23). Walkiewicz further argues thus:

Barth's imagination has no limits while his games of metafiction are endless. So, no matter how hard it is for us to *decipher* his novels, we should always remember that postmodernism is deprived of limitations and approach the literature freely, without prejudice. In art as in lovemaking, heartfelt ineptitude has its appeal and so does heartless skill, but what you want is passionate virtuosity (23).

To conclude, his novels demonstrate his love for the literary techniques employed by Fielding, Smollett and Sterne. He revived the old tradition of frame tales as he experimented in his novels *The Sot-Weed Factor* (1960), *Giles Goat-Boy* (1966). All these novels are the best examples of postmodern meta-fiction. Cervantes and Boccaccio were the models of Barth who provided him frame tale conventions. Barth had a passion for the frame tale conventions which helped him to create a world of wonder and romance and to give novelty to his plots. Barth turned to Homer's epic and created collection of stories depicting the malaise of the

contemporary America. Barth articulated his interest in oral storytelling tradition deviating from the art of storytelling of the traditional novelists. His novel *Chimera* (1972) was greatly praised by the critics and the reviewers. In *Chimera* Barth illustrates his passion for novelty as he makes many experiments in storytelling and frame tales narratives. Ziegler observes that “*Chimera* is considered to be the author’s life story framed in the frame narrative of the *Thousand and One Nights*” (Ziegler 62). The frame tale convention helped him to articulate the complexity of postmodern society. Charles B. Harris described “John Barth’s writing as the emanation of passionate virtuosity: algebra and fire where algebra, the form and technique, is successfully combined with fire the unique and original expression.” (Harris 6) Max F. Schulz explains Barth’s method thus:

His fiction is the outgrowth of this impulse to go back to the beginning of things, to see to what contemporary uses they might be put and that the literary preoccupation of his lifetime has been the metafictional concerns of self-reflexivity and inter-textuality (Schulz xii).

Tales make “little or no connection between the contents of the framed and the framing stories like most part of *The Divine Comedy* or *Canterbury Tales* or even *The 1001 Nights*” (166). Each tale begins thus: “And yet, O King! this is not more wondrous than the story of” (Burton 25) or “And you,[...] have ye no story or rare adventure to amuse us withal?” (Burton 29). The second group in “which most of the literary frame tales are placed, is referred to those stories where there is an associative, thematic, or exemplary (or cautionary or prophetic) relationship” (166). These stories are included in the *Nights* too. For Scheherazade’s stories “about faithfulness of the wife that resemble her own situation are among them. The final and most significant group are those with dramaturgical relation” (167) Barth comments thus:

Aha, Shahryar might be said to say to himself here and there in the *Nights*: I see now that my own cuckolding is as nothing compared to X’s; moreover, the story of Y suggests that my misogyny may have

been an overreaction, particularly given such a brave, wise, and beautiful storyteller. Perhaps I should consider not executing my bed partners every morning (Barth 167).

Barth explained that in a meta-fiction the story can reverse the climax as the plot is a blending of many story lines. The main tale of Scheherazade moves like a shuttlecock; it goes forward and backward repeatedly. The tale creates many complications and often reverses the climax to create black humor. Barth invokes her as a muse and says: "I beseech the Muse to keep me ever becoming a Black Humorist" (Barth 50). He describes his liking for the narrative strength of Scheherazade as "the aptest, sweetest, hauntingest, hopefulest I know for the storyteller" (Barth 50). Her frame story is the main strength as it carries away all the listeners. He argues thus:

The whole frame of those thousand nights and a night speaks to my heart, directly and intimately -- and in many ways at once, personal and technical. The sultan Shahryar, you remember, is so disenchanted with life in general and love in particular that he marries a virgin every night and has her killed in the morning. Scheherazade, who has perused the books, annals, and legends of preceding kings, and the stories, examples, and instances of bygone men... antique races and departed rulers volunteers herself. The King abates her virginity" (as if it were an intense condition), whereafter, with the prearranged assistance of her younger sister, Dunyazade -- about whose role much might be said -- Scheherazade beguiles her deflowerer with a tale, artfully continued, involuted, compounded, and complicated through a thousand and one nocturnal installments, during the invention of which she also bears three sons by her imperious audience (Barth 51).

Barth's fascination for her frame tale is unique and he used all the possible literary devices in this novel to give the traditional color to the modern novel. His multiple techniques brought about a new genre in American fiction. He was considered as "existentialist by Ihab Hassan, and absurdist by Charles B. Harris, a

black humorist by Max F. Schulz, and a fabulist by Alan Trachtenberg and Robert Scholes” (Clavier 1). Barth highly appreciates the frame tale of Chaucer depicted in *The Canterbury Tales*. He observes thus: “Chaucer's frame, for example, the pilgrimage to Canterbury is an excellent if venerable ground-metaphor -- life as a redemptive journey -- but, having established it, he does nothing with it”(52). In Boccaccio’s *Decameron* there is an interesting situation of black humor. When the plague ravaged the town the wealthy ladies amused themselves with stories” “more arresting for its apocalyptic nature, for the pretty rules with which the company replaces those of their literally dying society and for the occasional relevance of the tales to the tellers and to the general situation ” (52) However he believed that “the story of Scheherazade excels all since it is more magical and dreamish” (52).

Chapter - 5

Postmodern Meta-fiction of John Barth's *Giles-Goat Boy*

John Barth firmly believed that the contemporary society needed a novel which could articulate the complexity of the society; the tensions and anxieties of Americans trapped in the bog of illusion and darkness. To achieve replenishment, Barth made many innovations in the stylistic techniques. Barth's novel *Giles Goat-Boy* (1966) or *The Revised New Syllabus* comprises a distinct phase in Barth's developing conception of the novelist and his relationship in the world. Barth depicts the ambivalence of the universe in this novel.

Within the context of Barth's works, this ambivalence to conflicting attitudes is a trait typical of all human beings, who are basically inconsistent, despite their attempts at consistent self-identity (Fogel and Slethaug 59).

The plot of the novel is concerned with the enormity of the existence and the task of coming to terms with it in fiction. The novel *Giles Goat-Boy* is an exercise of the imagination as it faces and tries to exhaust the vastness of life, to give it shapes and meaning. The plot of the novel is not concerned with verisimilitude. The plot abounds in stock fictional device, stereotype characters, unnatural events highly periodic in tone. Barth has consciously fashioned alternatives to the real world depicting its range of cosmological concern. In the words of Robert Scholes *Giles Goat-Boy* is a “tract for our times, an epic to end all epics, and a sacred book to end all sacred books” (Scholes 123). The novel is an attempt at all-inclusiveness and the critics of Barth have termed it as “total it is multidimensional, at almost every point; every situation, episode, character include everything: tragedy, comedy, parody, allegory, myth, history, irony, philosophy and artistic self-commentary, verbal exuberance and playfulness” (Scholes 123). Eliot Fermont Smith in his article “The Surfacing of Mr. Barth” published in *The New York Times* observes thus:

Doubts, doubts, doubts! What is one to do about John Barth? Is he, as so many people interested in original, funny, creative and brilliant writing agree he is -- the most original, funny, creative and brilliant writer working in the English language today? Or merely, as these same people hasten to add, the most impertinent and long-winded? Is *Giles Goat-Boy* or, *The Revised New Syllabus* (a decipherment of this peculiar title follows anon) the great American novel, come at last into being, or just a long, though expert, shaggy-goat story? (Smith 1).

For Barth, life cannot be examined with the instrument of reason. The characters of Barth do that by rejecting suicide out of their paralysis. The universe is paradoxical to them. Jac Tharpe comments thus:

Barth's genius lies in his awareness of magnificent ironies and his ability to dramatize paradox. He is able even to suggest that, since the universe operates consistently on paradox, the universe may to that extent and in that respect actually be rational instead of absurd (Tharpe 114).

Barth believes that the religious ideologies have become outdated today. Absurdity of life is enveloping the entire earth. Jerome Klinkowitz observes thus:

Though their differences are more numerous than their similarities, all have taken part in the trend which, for a time in the late sixties and early seventies, introduced antirealism to mainstream American fiction (Klinkowitz 407).

The structure of the novel is non-linear; it is extremely exhaustive. There are multi-layers and the plot is a unique blend of many stories, genres and experiences depicting the randomness of the universe. Like Thomas Pynchon, Barth believes in the pervasive vogue of entropy and absurdity gripping the psyche of the Americans. Alan Trachtenberg (1979) observes that "in the midst of an entropic universe, man represents an enclave of opposite tendency, a tendency for „organization to increase“ (Trachtenberg 43). He explains the role of entropy in the novels of John Barth's *Giles Goat-Boy* thus:

Entropy is the tendency described in Newton's Second Law of thermodynamics, of any closed system to lose energy, to run down. Another way of describing it ... is through probability theory: the probable answers to a given set of questions in a given world increase as the world grows older (Trachtenberg 43).

The plot begins with Billy Bocksfuss who lives peacefully in the goat barns of New Tammany College. Billy imagines that he is a goat and the child of Maximilian Max Spielman who was his keeper and tutor. Billy learns that he is human. He assumes a new name George, after George Herrold. The symbolical name is West Campus Automatic Computer. Allegorically, George's father is WESCAC, as it collected samples of human sperm to produce the GILES. Max teaches him love making and George calls the Lady Creamhair. She feeds him peanut butter sandwiches and tells him the romantic stories. George in the course of time finds that she is Virginia Hector, his mother but his concern for her is sexual leading him to shame and dehumanization. George sets out to achieve his destination at the age of twenty-two and he wishes to complete his project: "Pass All Fail All" He wishes to be a grand tutor since he had come from WESCAC's belly. His ambition is to destroy its AIM. Schultz sums up the growth of George thus:

On night he leaves the goat barns walking toward the central campus of New Tammany College. When George reaches a fork in the road and Max tries to get him to return to the barns, he plunges through the woods, determined to continue. George Herrold and Max accompany George. They reach a river with a washed-out bridge. There, George Herrold drowns trying to cross to Anastasia Stoker, who stands on the other side displaying her nude body and shouting, "Croaker," attempting to lure Croaker, a gigantic, primitive exchange student who has run amok. Anastasia was brought up as Virginia's daughter. Anastasia, however, is not Virginia's biological child (123).

After George Herrold drowns, Croaker comes, takes George on his back, crosses the river, and rapes Anastasia. The ambiguous structure of the novel is confusing and baffling. Barth comments thus:

This *Revised New Syllabus* is nothing new, but as old as sickness of the spirit; not a revision of anything, but a repudiation of all that's wholesome and redeeming. It is for us to repudiate *it*. Publishing remains despite all a moral enterprise, and is recognized as such in its heart of hearts even by the public that clamors for gratification of its appetites (Barth 6).

The novel *Giles Goat-Boy* is a work of modern parody or an allegory of parody of John Barth. The novelist employs the ironical pattern of structure. Barth has used the myths and the historical events following the model of Thomas Pynchon. The plot considers “cybernetic condition and endless processing of information to the point of entropy. Thus, parody is linked with what Barth call the tragic view of life and the universe. Barth reads technology as another myth; he is relating this to explore the new meaning that history lacks. Barth reinterprets the Oedipus story in his own way exploring the fate of the tragic hero” (Barth 35). Barth handles this problem creating the Author that is author-within the text. The main focus of Barth is to present the Tragic View and present himself as an admirer of the hero. As the plot of the novel *Giles Goat-Boy* progresses the historical consciousness is revealed. George is presented as a modern day Jesus Christ as well as an Oedipus. The University in the novel is symbolized as the Universe; chaotic and disorderly. He says “there are other universities, you know” (xxxiv). The novel is typically postmodern as Hassan says:

Postmodernism is life and to argue about postmodernism then is to argue about life today: it is a way of feeling, a state of mind, an attitude towards cultural and political possibilities, because reality is something flexible and fluid (Hassan 111).

The editor of the Life magazine labeled *Giles Goat-Boy* “a black comedy to offend everyone” (1). Harris called it as “a scientific fiction or Cold War satire” (Harris 21). Eliot Fermont Smith observed in *The New York Times* that “Barth had delivered an elaborate shaggy-goat story but also wondered whether it might not be the great American novel” (2). Gore Vidal attacked it as a “very bad prose work and

dismissed it as a failed experiment of Barth” (Vidal 23). While Punday remarks that “*Giles Goat-Boy* is widely considered one of Barth’s weakest novels, he argues that the novel reveals some things about the shift in the discursive field surrounding postmodernism” (38). Barth has used epistolary form following Richardson’s *Pamela* (1942). Letters are written and Barth receives communication through letters. Jac Tharpe, argues thus giving the religious tone of the novel thus:

If Giles is the author, it was the hero himself who wrote. Even J.B. has tampered with the text, however, and that is the case with holy words. J.B. is converted by a missionary with a book, and he then becomes the editor of the RNS. He could not pose as author. The paraphernalia enclosing the text furnishes a complete record or an edited text. Like other holy words, this is an ocean of story (Barth 89).

Barth conveys the complex philosophy of absurdity and entropy in the novel. Tharpe points out “to the tension between thinking of the author as a godlike figure and thinking of the author as an interpreter transcribing knowledge, information and narrative” (23). Indeed, “in the cover letter, J.B., who signs off as This regenerate Seeker after Answers, ¶ claims, I submit it to you neither as its author nor as agent for another in the usual sense, but as a disinterested servant of Our Culture” (Barth xxxvi, xxii). Charles B. Harris argues that

The artifice in *Giles Goat-Boy* suggests that the entire novel is but a way of speaking an approximation of a Truth that cannot be formulated. At the same time, the novel affirms ways of speaking as, quite simply, the only way *to* speak (102).

Mark McGurl argues “that the heroism of the goat-boy could be understood as a figure of democratized Authorship itself, of the spiritual authority of even the lowliest man or woman to play God in the domain of his or her own imagination, if nowhere else” (41). McGurl argues that Barth’s novel “*Giles Goat-Boy* reflects the autopoetic process” (18). For McGurl, “the autopoetic process functions as a self-observatory practice and is tied up with the rise of creative writing departments in the university” (123). Berndt Clavier argues that “is often at odds with himself,

particularly the claims he makes in his nonfiction and the work he performs in his fiction. This disjunction can cause an —interpretive problem” (140). Patricia Tobin calls “*Giles Goat-Boy* a glorious achievement of massive authorial repression, arguing that the book whose plot is closest to Barth’s definition of the heroic life as an obstacle course and scavenger hunt, whose heroic quest is closest to Barth’s ideal of the literary career, and whose extravagant hero is closest to Barth’s identification of himself as a poet” (70). Tobin observes that “Barth’s anxieties about authorship bubble up in a glorious showing of the return of the repressed in *Giles Goat-Boy*. In *The Friday Book*, Barth talks of authorial self-consciousness” (70). He has explored and investigated the history and literature and is “often manifested as narrative self-reflexiveness and usually condemned as the last-ditch decadence of modern self-consciousness in general” (Barth 207). He comments in *The Friday Book* thus: “These authorial selves and surrogates as characters are usually —just as fictitious as their fellow characters” (Barth 210). Underscoring “the poststructuralist understanding of ourselves as constructions, it seems, is part of the main agenda of Barth highlights the fact that these fictive selves are indeed just that fiction” (Barth 23). He puts it in *The Friday Book*, “the universe is a novel; God is a novelist!” (22-23); and “the novelist is not finally a spectator, an imitator, or a purger of the public psyche, but a maker of universes: a demiurge” (29). He refers to these novels as “novels which imitate the form of the Novel, by an author who imitates the role of Author” (72). Barth adds the elements of meta-fiction addressing the theories of consciousness of Daniel Dennett and Gerald Edelman. In *The Friday Book* Barth comments thus discussing consciousness:

The concept of the self as an *as if*—as a heuristic fiction is central to Dennett’s theory of consciousness, and right up this storyteller’s alley. Consciousness as multiply drafted scenario-spinning; language as not [simply] something we constructed, but something in which we created and recreated ourselves; storytelling (that is, our concocting and controlling the ongoing story that we tell others and ourselves about who we are) as our fundamental tactic of self-protection, self-control, and self-definition; the recognition that our tales are spun, but for the most part we don’t spin them; they spin us (Barth 195).

Barth records the stories narrated by Giles's mother called Lady Creamhair. His first story, "Billy Goat's Gruff" excites him to think of himself as the character of the gruff Billy goat. He remembers that "the character was to my mind, the real hero" (55). He decides to keep to himself what he discovers in the grove with his mother, "this miracle called *story*" (56). Indeed, Giles maps himself onto villains and trolls. His life is "a painful season, for no matter what he sees himself to be; he longs to be something else. The introduction of narrative, then, allows him to search for his identity, something he has never had to do as a goat" (57). More stories baffle him as he is not able to define his identity. Giles records his learning experience thus: "*The Encyclopedia Tammanica* I read from Aardvaark to Zymurgy in quite the same spirit as I read the *Old School Tales*, my fancy prefacing each entry Once upon a time..." (117). He confesses that "he was disposed to approach the events of history as critically as those of fiction" (116). Giles plays out his life as story, with himself as the hero. Giles sees himself as a character in quest of meaning of life in the random universe where everything even the life itself is meaningless. He says:

I had seen generations of kids grow to goathood, reproduce themselves, and die, like successive casts of characters, while I seemed scarcely to age at all. I had lived in goatdom as Billy Bocksfuss the Kid, now I meant to live in studentdom as George the Undergraduate; surely there would be other roles in other realms, an endless succession of names and natures. Little wonder I looked upon my life and the lives of others as a kind of theatrical impromptu, self-knowledge as a matter of improvisation, and moral injunctions, such as those of the *Fables*, whether high-minded or wicked, as so many stage-directions (Barth 117).

In the plot of the novel Barth has highlighted the power of narrative as Giles can perform multiple roles assigned to him by the multiple stories. Max says to Giles, "You haven't read much but the old epics yet, Georgie, or you'd know how it was between old men and young women" (141). No wonder, Giles admits that he uses stories to map his life:

I still preferred literature to any other subject, and the old stories of adventure to any other literature; but my response to them was by no means intellectual. I couldn't have cared less what light they shed upon student cultures in ancient terms, or what their place was in the history of Western Campus art; though my eyes and ears were keen enough, I took no interest in stylistics, allegorical values, or questions of form: all that mattered was the hero's performance (115-16).

Giles follows the gestures of the goats. As Giles "feeds on story, he thinks of his transformation from goat to human". He says: "Then I had known nothing; now my eyes were open to fenceless meadows of information; I felt engorged to bursting with human lore" (122-23). Giles transforms from Billy Bocksfuss the goat-boy to George Giles, the soon-to-be Grand Tutor as the plot of the novel progresses. Giles remarks: "I was not born George; I was not born anything; I had invented myself as I'd elected my name, and it was to myself I'd present my card (already properly signed) when I had passed by the Finals" (693). Giles ascends to the status of Grand Tutor in the course of the plot. David Morrell argues that "The tragic heroes have tragic flaws, and his is a trait of character we have seen before in Barth's fiction: the passionate urge to know" (79). Barth has depicted universe as university. The ultimate goal for Giles, is "studentdom." Barth says "To graduate, then, is to reach a point where knowledge has coalesced to such a degree that the student may pass from studentdom to something other" (53). Giles realizes and says: that "studentdom it was that limped: hobbled by false distinction, crippled by categories [. . .] my infirmity was that I *had* thought myself first goat, then wholly human boy, when in fact I was a goat-boy, both and neither: a walking refutation of such false conceits" (653).

Giles's epistemological journey began, under the tutelage of his mother and Max Spielman, "who feeds him stories both true and fictional" (653). In order to "become Grand Tutor, Giles has to fulfill a series of cryptic assignments as he muses. Things had to be lost before they could be found, broken before they could be fixed, infirm before they could be well, opaque before they could be clear—in short, failed before they could be passed" (682). Giles expresses his dilemma as he fails to defeat his rival the false Grand Tutor Harold Bray. Giles argues,

The Library's difficulties in filing the scroll stemmed from insufficiently clear distinctions—as did (I added pointedly) many other problems in the University, whose resolution must inevitably be attended with some upheaval. The fact was, I asserted, that the Founder's Scroll, like the Old and New Syllabi, was unique; *sui generis*, of necessity, else it would be false. The CACAFILE needed then simply to be instructed to create unique categories for unique items, and the filing should proceed without difficulty (553).

Giles comes to the conclusion that all knowledge is fragmentary. He anticipated the theory of fragmentation of Fredric Jameson and employed this technique in the plot of the novel. The main purpose of Barth is to provide something new and the technique of meta-fiction helps him to achieve this goal. Barth has created a galaxy of characters who lack in will and behave like neurotics. Giles observes thus:

Her Anastasia great nagging faith has alone sustained me, for better or worse, through the monstrous work this Revised New Syllabus, as she calls it, which she is convinced will supersede the Founder's Scroll. Supposing even that the Scroll *were* replaced by these endless tapes, one day to feed Him who will come after me, as I fed once on that old sheepskin what then? Cycles on cycles, ever unwinding: like my watch; like the reels of this machine she got past her spouse; like the University itself. Unwind, rewind, replay (755).

Barth explores the value of print media and information technologies in this novel. Jameson observes that the postmodern culture is new and innovative and this is called New Left. The growing tendencies of capitalism brought a revolution in the life style of the people. Barth's *Giles Goat-Boy* is epical tracing the history of creation. Barth observes thus:

Reading itself is augmented by, if not replaced with, the reels of recorded audio that do much of the teaching in the world of *Giles Goat-Boy*. These reels come across as a sort of audio-only internet, the

text glossed with what we would now call hyperlinks. When Giles finally enrolls and begins his classes, he is introduced to the teaching machines, which are wired directly into WESCAC's "Central Instructional Facility (443).

Barth lashes at the inertia of postmodern society and observes that absolute solutions of life are not available. There are no certainties of life and Truth, Consciousness are figments of imagination. No Christ will come today to save people and man is bound to suffer anguish and pain. He gives the message of the novel thus:

The message of the syllabus is ambiguous -- except perhaps that absolutes are non-cognizable, that thinking is a passion and most passionately expressed in humor, and that, except for these, the world is going to hell. Fortunately, it won't get there because Mr. Barth proves once more -- old jokes never die, they just lie in wait for resurrection. The jokes here -- sexual, scatological, gastronomical, existential, political, linguistic, literary conventions and parodies can be traced to Rabelais, *Tristram Shandy*, Lewis Carroll, Joyce, Nabokov, the Beatles and Bennett Cerf, among others, which should give an idea of the truly astonishing flavor of this lemon meringue pie of a book (123).

Mark McGurl argues that this "suggestion allows us to see how narrative forms in this case the genre of autobiography and its associated conventions can themselves be understood as recording technologies of a kind" (239). The quest of Giles ends with a loss of identity as he doesn't gain any awareness. George begins his journey on a positive note preaching and advising giving a clear distinction between good and evil. His quest is to explore the negative aspects and the absurdity of human existence. He discovers that in the random universe good is evil and evil is good. Evil is very powerful. He is left to "tell people because everything he has tried so far he has made things far off. By the end of the novel George has experienced so much trauma and psychological damage that he is left alone to suffer" (Barth 23). He feels that he merely exists and life has no meaning for him. He has been a false

prophet and everyone thinks of him so except Stacey and Peter Green. Like the characters of Beckett Pozzo and Lucky George think of committing suicide. Life is futile for him. Barth has taken 700 pages to explain the dilemma and baffling situation of George. The plot is disjointed as the identity of George is fractured. The writing style of Barth depicted in *Giles Goat-Boy* is ambiguous as the plot is non-linear. The novel has no message for the readers but it simply highlights the anti-heroic and destructive tendencies prevalent in the postmodern universe. The main interesting issue is to the description of hero's quests and psychoanalyzing the protagonist. Harris points out that "since *Giles Goat-Boy* is a 700-page bildungsroman novel, it much easier to trace the hero's quest throughout it stage by stage" (Harris 23). However, George is not psychologically broken till the end of the novel. Schultz observes thus:

Homer's *The Odyssey* traces the spiritual journey of the hero but the journey of George is a parody of the quest theme of the Greek heroes. John Barth's *Giles-Goat Boy* internalizes the paranoia, anxiety, and disillusionment present in their contemporary society. The authors use hyperbole to shed light on the contemporary issues they saw around them (123).

George experiences anxiety and psychological trauma as his quests brings about destruction rather than enlightenment. Barth has used the images and symbols used by Joseph Campbell in his book *The Hero With a Thousand Faces* and employing the archetypal psychology of Carl Jung. In addition, Barth has also used the terms of Freud's psychoanalysis depicting the quest of George. Mark McGurl argues thus:

The resurgence of the anti-heroic quest is a psychological and literary motif in contemporary postmodern fiction used as a tool applied to refract the contemporary issues of the 1960s. John Barth's postmodern novel, *Giles Goat-Boy*, dramatizes the contemporary malaise of American society (112).

Barth achieves this goal depicting the quest of anti-hero manifesting the futility of environment. George advances through all the stages of a hero mentioned by Joseph Campbell but ironically the outcome of his quest is destruction and tragic sufferings. Barth believes that the days of heroism are gone. Two World Wars, the Great Depression and the pervasive vogue of the skepticism and nihilism propagated by Schopenhauer and Fredrick Nietzsche's *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* (1833) inspired Beckett and Ionesco to evolve new ant-theatrical techniques to depict the existential realities of life. Kierkegaard's *The Sickness unto Death* (1946) brought revolution in the domain of art and literature. The conspicuous feature of the American fiction is the loss of self. R. D. Laing and Sypher Wylie have discussed in detail the deflation of self. It is averred that the Greeks were in harmony with Nature and God; they enjoyed harmony and integrity of life as their life was free from the anxieties and tensions of life. The Greeks and the Elizabethans believed that man is the creation of God as there are divine elements in his soul and mind. The modern philosophers contended such as Jean Paul Sartre, Albert Camus and Karl Jaspers believe that mind and consciousness are illusive. Failure is inevitable and life is meaningless. Each man is a victim of absurdity and suffer metaphysical despair. But in all the Albert Camus wrote *The Myth of Sisyphus* highlighting the absurdity of human existence. The present thesis is an explication of the forces that bulldoze modern man's personality and dehumanize him.

Victor Brombart traced "the various stages of the evolution of the mythical hero but the traditional and the conceptual hero vanished and the absurd hero emerged. In all the works of the modern writers there is a constant corrosion of self" (Brombart 2). The novelists like Barth, Kurt Vonnegut and Thomas Pynchon portrayed him as a sorry product of socio-economic forces. Barth's novel *Giles Goat-Boy* "internalizes the contemporary feelings of anxiety, paranoia, and disillusionment. The plot manifests them in a narrative symptomatic of confusion and chaos. The basic plot follows the protagonist, George Giles, on his quest to save studentdom from impending destruction" Schultz 23). George is a mysterious boy who was abandoned on a goat-farm. He was raised by the goat tender Max and when he reached his teenage years, Lady Creamhair teaches him to be human and soon

George found that he is a Grand Tutor. He starts his anti-heroic odyssey. George intends to demonstrate the power of literature. Harris points out thus:

One way of reading *Giles Great-Boy* is as an allegory for the Cold War with the set up of East campus versus West campus. West campus represents the United States and the East campus represents the Soviet Union. The tension between the two campuses is the premise for why George believes that he is a Grand Tutor born to save the universe (Harris 56).

Barth has employed the Cold War allegory to depict the destructive nuclear power threatening the universe. Barth uses allusions and baffling terms such as M.A.D which means *Mutually Assured Destruction* that threatens the other to destroy by bombing. The simple idea is that if one country used the Nuclear bomb the other would retaliate with more powerful nuclear bomb and thus the civilization would be decimated. Max explains “how the people were permanently damaged, as well as the generations after them: How many generations it will go on, nobody knows... That’s what it means to be EATEN, Billy! The goats, now: they’ll eat almost anything you feed them; but only us humans is smart enough to EAT one another!” (Barth 54). He talks of radiation and chemicals which damaged the bodies of the survivors. Schultz describes the journey of Georg and Max thus:

Generations existed as living examples of the horrors of war. With this analogy, Max demonstrates the human ability of committing evil. These feelings are internalized by Barth’s novel and permeate throughout both the story line and the various characters. George believes he has been created by WESCAC to save the University from their present state of suspended fear and paranoia. WESCAC created George, so he would essentially be destroying his father. Barth uses various allusions of old mythologies (Schultz 67)

Oedipus killed his own father and this allusion is very powerful in the novel. George wants the war mongers to understand that war is very dangerous and war doesn’t solve any problem. He talks of existential problems gripping the psyche of

the people. Barth depicts the mass paranoia and the psychological trauma of the people who became the victims of two World Wars. Freud described “this type of paranoia as a psychological split: Two psychological attitudes have been formed instead of a single one, the normal one, which takes account of reality, and another which under the influence of the instincts detaches the ego from reality” (*An Outline of Psychoanalysis* 90). People had lost touch with reality’ chaos and disorder prevailed and the law of the jungle started. Lack of control and deep-seated paranoia brought the wave of skepticism and nihilism. Max alludes to this existentialism and says, “The result was confusion, anxiety, frustration, despair, and a fitful search for something to fill the moral vacuum in their quads” (Barth 55).

Barth has created a typical postmodern anti-hero George who lives in the world of absurdity contemplating suicide. Campbell explained “that the quest could be broken up into three distinct phases: departure, initiation, and return. The departure phase includes the call to adventure, meeting the mentor, and leaving the known world for the unknown one” (Campbell 41). The “initiation phase contains various trials the hero (or anti-hero) must overcome” (Campbell 81). Finally, the return of the hero is meaningful bringing enlightenment in his life. But in the case of George there is no enlightenment and awareness; he is lost in the bog of futility. At the end of the novel, George is confused, conflicted and deeply flawed. He introduces himself parodying the old classical heroes thus: “George is my name... Who misbegot me, and on whom, who knew, or in what corner of the University I drew first breath? It was my fate to call no man Daddy, no woman Mom” (Barth 5).

George is proud of his mysterious parentage and thinks that he is born to set the universe right the way Hamlet had done. He thinks that divinity has created him with special purpose: “A deed became Grand-Tutorial from its having been done by the Grand-Tutor and in no other way... I would choose infallibly the Grand-Tutorial thing” (Barth 207). Barth has allegorically depicted George as Enos Enoch representing Jesus Christ who was also the creation of divinity. George is presented as a Christ-like figure born to save the humanity. Interestingly, Barth has used the inverted hero’s quest to parody the quest of the classical heroes. Barth argues that the real quest of the classical heroes is not possible in the contemporary times as man has

lost his faith in the goodness of life and spirituality of life. For George, “he is a modern-day Jesus Christ as well as an Oedipus” (40). Barth comments thus:

One consisted of people who in pursuit of their normal business find themselves thrust into a situation calling for the risk of their welfare to insure that of others, and respond courageously... The other class consisted of those men and women the fruit of whose endeavors is some hard-won victory over the sufferings of studentdom in general... These latter, in Max’s view, were not more or less admirable than the former sort (Barth 89)

Max explains in detail the problems to George by responding thus:

But there always *are* plenty of dragons, aren’t there, Max? If a man knows he’s a hero can’t he always find himself a dragon? Max agreed that he could indeed, and ruthlessly would—even if the dragon were minding its own business (Barth 90).

He expresses his experience thus: “I had, he confirmed, met nearly all the prerequisites of hero-hood: the mystery of parentage... the irregularity of my birth... the circumstances of my rescue, and my being raised by a foster parent in a foster-home, disguised as an animal and bearing a name not my own” (Barth 108-109). But George disregards what Max tries to tell him and says: “Not every dumb head with a scar is a bonafide hero” (Barth 109).

Barth’s novel dramatizes the psychoanalytic aspects of man’s life. The psychological problems of George are universal in nature as each American was suffering from the psychological trauma during the Wars. Barth observes thus: “His first sexual experiences are with goats and the janitor who saved him from the belly of WESCAC, nothing about George’s life is a typical upbringing. He is left disconnected from reality and becomes a neurotic figure. George’s neurosis is due to his inability to deal with the trauma of his childhood, which causes him to repress his past and have subsequent symptoms” (Barth123).

George is presented as a neurotic personality as he fails to keep hold on

reality. He is mentally sick but he has an exceptional urge to probe into the events of life. Barth has dramatized through his character the psychological issues of the contemporary America that gripped the psyche of the Americans. The second phase of anti-heroic quest of George begins in his initiation phase. He is an anti-hero who faces trials and tribulations of life and feels trapped in the abyss of doubt and despair. He meets additional helpers to help him on his journey. Croaker and Stacy are the first helpers who struggle to save him on his journey. Max observes thus:

Speaking bitterly of those fair dread singers Laertides met, who, had he not stopped his colleagues' ears and lashed himself to the mast, had lured his research vessel onto the rocks... her temptation was quite as dangerous as the Sirens (Barth 117).

Stacey and Croaker are allegorical characters and are very complex personalities. Barth uses mythical pattern following the epic tradition to depict the malaise of the contemporary America. Stacey represents the sexual mania of the American youth and Croaker represents the racist society of black men. Both these characters are hyperbolic and grotesque to satirize racism and sexism. Both the characters are the product of fantasy and cannot exist in reality. Stacey is represented in her extremes; she is depicted as a sexualized woman with her sexy hips and tantalizing body. The 1960s was a period when America got sexual liberty. This period was different from the pre war era when women were faithful and served their husbands in the traditional manner. Betty Friedan noted this cultural change and discussed this issue in her book *The Feminine Mystique* (1963). Betty observes thus: "The problem that has no name burst like a boil through the image of the happy American housewife" (17). In the 1960s women got full liberty and they started moving out side from home. They joined the work force and started competing with men. They were now office workers and often experienced sexual molestation in the work place. Girls were taught that "truly feminine women do not want careers, higher education, political rights- the independence and the opportunities that old-fashioned feminists fought for... All they had to do was devote their lives from earliest girlhood to finding a husband and bearing children" (Betty 15). Stacey is depicted a New Woman of America. She is a typical flapper exulting in sexual liberty. She has to

play multiple roles; she performs the role of a nurse, and a married wife. Barth presents Stacey as:

A more or less uneducated student from one of the newly established colleges in dark Frumentius, visiting New Tammany under an official exchange program: as such he was immune to arrest, however contrary to West Campus law the customs of his native college or his personal behavior; the most his embarrassed hosts could do (not wanting diplomatic reasons to offend the Frumentians by asking for his recall) was try to channel and appease his appetites. If one is mounted on his shoulders Croaker was almost entirely governable (Barth 121).

She seduces Croaker allowing him to rape her. She had been moving around the campus alluring policemen to enjoy sex with her and eating raw animals. Croaker is free to make choices based on his needs of food, sex and violence. Croaker was acting from his unconscious and Freud says that in these circumstances the ego of an individual is damaged. Croaker is a strange person; he needs the help of Dr. Eirkopf to control him. He goes to their place and here Barth brings into limelight the underworld depicted by Homer in *The Odyssey*. George is drunk and enjoys sex with Stacey. Barth alludes to the scene narrated by Lord Tennyson in his famous poem *The Lotus Eater*. George is bewildered as he loses touch with reality. George says, “It had blown from my head all liquor and delusion and left me stricken by my folly” (Barth 200).

There are manifold allusions to *The Odyssey* to affirm George as an anti-hero. Stacey is likened to a siren. Other characters George meets along the way also have similarities to mythological creatures in *The Odyssey*. Peter Greene is like the one-eyed Cyclops, Croaker is likened to the minotaur, Stoker resembles Hades, and Dr. Eirkopf and Dr. Sear are both monstrous in their descriptions. Many of the locations are also referencing *The Odyssey* (Schultz 23).

Stoker lives in an underworld or in the land of lotus eaters and is described

moving from location to location like Odysseus. He continues his quest as an anti-hero and leads an absurd and directionless life. He can save the students of New Tammany College from WESCAC. George has to struggle to graduate. Robert Scholes in his book *The Fabulators* labels this “George’s first Grand-Tutorial posture... his Thesis and describes it as a posture of fundamentalist righteousness” (163). Scholes argues thus:

George’s second Grand Tutorial posture is the Antithesis of the first... This new answer with its beguiling paradoxes, proves finally to be as rhetorical as the first, though the rhetoric this time is not that of fundamentalist preaching but of semantic philosophizing (164-165).

He explains his change of mind saying, “My first proposal, I told him, was to cease being reasonable—as if there were a floodlit Boundary between Reason and Unreason!...Embrace nonsense! Be immoderate when you feel like it!” (Barth 594-595). Scholes says:

Passage and failure are distinct but interdependent... We are left finally without a moral. We are given only the story of a life to imitate, with the qualification that to imitate it we must diverge from it, since George’s life is his; ours is ours (167).

It is only at the end of the novel that “George transcends the disparate nature of things and arrives at an awareness of the unity of an apparently various universe” (172). Scholes observes thus:

Barth is demonstrating the necessity of finding a middle ground and not portraying the world in extremes as was happening with war, and race and gender binaries. During this initiation phase where George is attempting to save studentdom while completing his task-list, he meets The Shadow (Scholes 123).

The “Shadow in the novel symbolizes the hero’s quest is the hero’s enemy and antagonist to the novel. According to both Campbell and Jung the negative aspects of the shadow are often a projection of the hero’s unconscious and darkest

desires” (Jung 22). Harold Bray observes that “George’s Shadow is fantastic. He claims to also be a Grand-Tutor and uses deception and performs tricks to convince studentdom to follow him instead of George” (Bray 24). In his essay, “A Service to the University,” Dabney Stuart explains that Bray “embodies the idea of deceptive nature of appearances not least in the fact that his value to the goat-boy’s increasing insight belies one’s ability to relegate him to hell as an out and out fiend” (Stuart 151). Stuart says:

The final phase of George’s anti-hero’s quest as outlined by Joseph Campbell is the return. The return phase is divided into two parts: the resurrection and the return. The resurrection is when the hero must be cleansed from their journey in order to return to the ordinary world. The resurrection is typically marked with a symbolic change in behavior of the hero (Stuart 151).

Christopher Vogler gives the following conclusion:

Once the hero's transformation is complete, he or she returns to the ordinary world with the elixir, a great treasure or a new understanding to share. This can be love, wisdom, freedom, or knowledge (Peterson). George’s resurrection is marked when he returns to the belly of WESCAC for the final time to attempt to pass. Before he leaves to go, he bathes himself (1).

George says: “I will be cleansed myself in that potent bath, immersing even my head, until no trace of my term on Great Mall remained” (Barth 686). Once he is able to pass through WESCAC he believes he will be “passed” and prove his Grand-Tutorhood” (Barth21). George is an anti-hero as his narrative ends quite suddenly. George’s resurrection is symbolical of the moral awareness at a student rally. Bray is his tutor who employs magic to transform himself. Barth describes the climax thus:

George laments his failures and those of his followers and discusses his banal existence following the narrative in which all but Peter Greene and Stacey abandon him. He has become a professor at the

University, however, he fears that he will soon fail at this as well. He ends his postscript by discussing his religiously influenced and dramatic plan to end his life. He says he will first climb to the top of Founder's Hill and find a tree in the middle of the rock that is crowned with vine (Barth 708).

To conclude, Barth employs the techniques of fantasy, magic realism and fragmentation to depict the character of George following the tradition of postmodernism of Fredric Jameson. He imitates Joseph Campbell's theory of the mythical journey of anti-hero. George says at the end of the novel that "My parts will be hung with mistletoe," meaning he will castrate himself. The religious imagery is very effective as George is portrayed as Jesus. George says, "It will be finished. The claps will turn me off. Passed, but not forgotten, I shall rest" (Barth 708). Freud comments thus on death wish:

The aim of the first of these basic instincts is to establish even greater unities and to preserve them thus- in short to bind together; the aim of the second is, on the contract, to undo connections and so to destroy things (*An Outline of Psychoanalysis* 18).

Barth has depicted George's psychological longing of George to kill himself in desperation since he is too vulnerable to carry the weight of absurdity. The novel *Giles-Goat Boy* demonstrates the resurgence of the anti-heroic quest as a postmodern fiction. Barth "sheds light on a variety of issues present in the 1960s: sexism, prejudice, racism, women's changing roles, war, scientific advancement, morality, just to name a few. He does this to bring attention to these contemporary issues by implementing pastiche" (Schulz xvi). Barth said that a novel "works like a camera obscura. The arbitrary facts that make the world — devoid of ultimate meaning and so familiar to us that we can't really see them any longer, like the furniture of our living room, these facts are passed through the dark chamber of the novelist's imagination, and we see them, perhaps for the first time" (Schulz 202). Barth's novel dramatizes the psychoanalytic aspects of man's life. The psychological problems of George are universal in nature as each American was suffering from the

psychological trauma during the Wars. Schultz has commented thus tracing the growth of Georg thus:

His first sexual experiences are with goats and the janitor who saved him from the belly of WESCAC, nothing about George's life is a typical upbringing. He is left disconnected from reality and becomes a neurotic figure. George's neurosis is due to his inability to deal with the trauma of his childhood, which causes him to repress his past and have subsequent symptoms (220).

Barth has dramatized the hollowness of the American society and the traumatic experiences of the characters employing the techniques of pastiche and fragmentation. The novel is a typical postmodern creation of John Barth celebrating the theme of absurdity; psychological alienation and loss of self of the characters. They suffer from neurosis, angst and trauma. The novel depicts the mythical journey of the postmodern anti-hero whose quests end in despair as he fails to solve the riddles of life and live in darkness bound in the wheel of fire of absurdity and nihilism.

Conclusion

The thesis entitled: *The Postmodern Novel: A Study of the Writings of John Barth* explores the postmodern tendencies of contemporary American fiction. John Barth came into the limelight with the publication of two essays *The Literature of Exhaustion* and *The Literature of Replenishment Postmodernist Fiction* propounding his own theories of fiction. In 1979, Barth argued that the conventions of art can be subverted, transcended and transformed and he advocated in his essays that the fiction must belong to the “literature of replenishment” and not to “literature of exhaustion”. Like postmodern writers Barth also believes that there is no absolute truth so facts and falsehood are interchangeable. Modernism puts faith in the ideas, beliefs and cultural norms of the west but the postmodern writers like John Barth and Nabokov reject all traditional values as they view life meaningless and all struggles of life futile ending in despair. The postmodern fiction of John Barth depicts the horrifying alienation of man. David Riesman argues that “man has no identity, no existence; he is a lonely wanderer in the crowd of people. He is alone in the universe. He is bound to the wheel of destiny and he cannot escape the terror of the absurdity of life. Death is inevitable to him and all his struggles and achievements lead him to despair. His birth is superfluous on earth. He is a waste product of nature and is thrown in the cosmic dustbin after death. His real worth is the ashes preserved in an urn” (Reisman12). Ihab Hassan observes thus:

The protagonists of John Barth long for death as they attempt suicide to escape from the terror of the universe. He is horrified with the mystical anarchy and organized nothingness prevalent in the universe. He is baffled with truth that is abstract and uncertain (Hassan 34).

The novels of John Barth such as *The Floating Opera* (1956), and *The End of the Road* (1958) deal with the themes of suicide and abortion. Barth’s novels *The Sot-Weed Factor* (1960), *Giles-Goat Boy* (1966), depict the cries of man, the mood of nihilism and pessimism. The very titles of the novels of John Barth are based on absurdity and meaninglessness of life and the futility of all struggles of man.

Kierkegaard published *The Sickness Unto Death* (1946) and brought a revolution in the domain of art and literature. The existentialists believe that failure and death are the only goals of man. He is bound to suffer the metaphysical despair as he grope in darkness. Religion, Mind and Consciousness are illusions and are irrelevant in the random universe. Man is bound to live in chaos and he has no potential like the Greek heroes to bring order out of chaos. It is “this type of despair, this sickness unto death which disintegrates man’s self and the consequences are neurosis and schizophrenia of self” (Sartre 21). Giraud depicted the absurd situation of man thus: “Man is a skeletal individual, a personality split by considering the problems of sincerity and hypocrisy, conformity and dissent, commitment and indecision, loneliness and complicity” (229).

The present study has four main objectives and all the objectives have been achieved in all the chapters written in this study. The second objective of the study is “to interpret and reinterpret the malaise of the contemporary civilization and the impact of the theories of nihilism on John Barth.” In the *Introduction* the socio-economic forces and theories of nihilism are discussed in detail. Barth was greatly impacted by the writings of Fredric Jameson and Leotard who explored the main issues confronting the modern Americans. The evolution of the anti-hero was a new feature of American fiction. Feeder Dostoevsky, Marcel Proust and James Joyce revolted against the realistic tradition of Shaw and Galsworthy. John Simmons Barth realized very early in life that the contemporary world is stripped of its meaning. The Holocaust and genocide shattered man’s faith in God and the waves of nihilism and skepticism engulfed the intellectuals and the writers such as T. S. Eliot, Nabokov and Bashevis Singer. The religion and culture lost their appeal as man lost his faith in the old values. The fiction of postmodernist writers of 1920's, depict man as a funny creature. The postmodern novelists such as James Joyce, Kurt Vonnegut, Bashevis Singer, Vladimir Nabokov and John Barth portrayed him as a sorry product of socio-economic forces. They were influenced by the ideas of Surrealism and by new theories of Unconscious, Sexuality and Neurosis. The very titles of the novels of John Barth are based on absurdity and meaninglessness of life and the futility of all struggles of man. Kierkegaard published *The Sickness Unto Death* (1946) and

“revolutionized art and philosophy by giving his philosophy of nihilism” He highlighted the growing anxiety neurosis of people. It is this type of despair, “this sickness unto death which disintegrates man’s self and the consequences are neurosis and schizophrenia of self” (23). The characters of Barth depicted in the novels such as *The Floating Opera* (1956), *The End of the Road* (1958), *The Sot-Weed Factor* (1960), *Giles-Goat Boy* (1966) and *Chimera* are the victims of the mood of nihilism and pessimism. Sartre presented the concept “broken and fragmented self” in his *Being and Nothingness* (1943). He observes that “self of man is free to act but all his actions lead him to death and despair. Man is in fact trapped in a solitude from which there is no escape” (Sartre 3). Slethaug Fogel in his book *Understanding John Barth* (1990) observes that the central conflict of Todd’s life can be formulated as “the tension between the urge to live and the desire to die, between what human beings want to be and what they are, between subconscious sexual drives and conscious rational processes, between human violence and elaborate systems of justice, and between events and attribution of causes” (Fogel 25).

The third objective of the study is “to relate the theories of postmodernism of Fredric Jameson on the characters of John Barth.” In the first chapter of the thesis entitled: “**Postmodern Themes of Alienation and Nihilism in John Barth’s *The Floating Opera***”, the themes of alienation and randomness of the universe is explored relying on the postmodern theories of Fredric Jameson and Linda Hutcheon. Linda Hutcheon (1988) observes “that post-structuralism and deconstruction are the main the obvious theories that contributed to the growth of post-modernism” (188). Hutcheon talks about the novels of John Barth that fictionalize the actual historical events and characters. Jameson’s book *Postmodernism* discusses in detail the characteristics of postmodernism such as intertextuality, magic realism, pastiche, fragmentation, dissonance, meta-fiction. Barth created a galaxy of characters mostly belonging to the middle class America confronting the uncertainties involved in a world of despair. His protagonists are rootless struggling in a world of science and technology and trapped in a godless universe. The post-modern writers such as John Barth, William Gaddis, Kurt Vonnegut and Bruce Jay Friedman extensively use irony, playfulness and black humor. John Barth portrays the modern world as a

bleak, barren abyss where human civilization faces its decline. Barth uses black humor to diminish the disgust of the nihilistic modern life. The fiction of John Barth is considered as meta-fiction and his *The Sot-Weed Factor* is epic in dimension. All the four novels of John Barth deal with the problems of four generations of people. His novels evince mythopoeia realism. John Barth's famous novels *The Sot-Weed Factor* and *The Floating Opera* are epitome of "essentialist" work filled with the gruesome and terrifying episodes. These novels touch upon all the important issue of the 21th century. The theme of death and the futility of life are typical existential themes structuring the plot of *The End of the Road*. There is a free discussion of the themes of existentialism, nihilism, absolute values and absolute chaos. John Barth was twenty six years old when he published his first novel *The Floating Opera* (1956) dealing with the theme of the fragmentary nature of life and art and fluid human existence. He believes that identity and reality are products of man's imagination. Barth used his first novel to explore the fundamental questions of life and universe. Barth focuses on the theme of death and decay in the novel *The End of the Road*. Jacob remains confused till the end of the novel; he confesses at the end to Joe Morgan thus: "God, Joe I don't know where to start or what to do! His voice remained clear, bright and close to my ear, Tears ran in a cold flood down my face and neck, onto my chest, and I shook all over with violent chill" (197). The plot of the novel is packed with the crowd of ironies about Jacob who confesses to Morgan on the telephone: "God, Joe I don't know where to start or what to do!" (197). Jacob behaves like the confused and bewildered characters of Beckett in *Waiting for Godot*; he represents modern man who remains confused and directionless and fragile to confront the absurdity of life. John Barth wrote his third novel *The Sot-Weed Factor* (1960) as an expanded parody of the historical poet Ebenezer Cooke whose innocence is in tatters as he spurns the sexual liberties of Mrs. Russecks and Ms. Toast. Mr. Ebenezer Cooke has been the first poet laureate of Maryland. The central metaphor of the novel is twin hood which unfolds the issue of identity and role creating ambiguity in the plot. Ebenezer wishes to become a poet and remain virgin in his life. No wonder, he resists the sexual advances of a whore Joan Toast. He goes to America to sing his new epic poem *Marylandiad*. He composes a satirical poem "*Sot-Weed Factor*" there; marries Joan Toast who falls in love with him and is

afflicted with physical illness and psychic humiliations. Like Horner, Ebenezer suffers from immobility and is characterized as “consistently no special sort of person” (21). Barth uses the metaphors of “pits” and “castle” to depict the antithetical possibilities of existence. The “pit” is a recurring image in *The Sot-Weed Factor* symbolizing uncertainty and irrational energy. Ebenezer knows that his innocence will soon vanish as absolute values are an illusion in the contemporary society. He realizes the truth that the “chaste and consecrated life may be lunacy. Ebenezer realizes that he is living in an uncertain and ambiguous world. His quest is modern man’s quest for certitude. He is confused by multiplicity of choices as he writes to his sister Ann: “All Trades, all Crafts, all Professions are wondrous, but none is finer than the rest together” (21). Barth uses the metaphor of university as the universe lacking in certainties and values. George is the main mythical hero of the novel who believes that “everything only gets worse, gets worse; our victories are never more than moral, and always pyrrhic; in fact we know only more or less ruinous defeats” In the novel *The Sot-Weed Factor*, the main focus of Barth is on humanism but *Giles-Goat Boy* is a novel of heroic adventures turning into misadventures. George says: “There is no birth date, birth place, or ancestry to define me. I had seen generations of kids grow to goat-hood, reproduce themselves, and die” (117). John Barth’s novel *Chimera* depicts characters fighting for survival in a harsh, universe confronting the challenges leading to death. *Chimera* is composed of three interweaving novellas. Barth gives the subversion of mythology in a postmodernist framework. Three important myths of Scheherzade, Perseus and Bellerophon dominate the plots of the novel. Jerry H. Bryant is of the view that *Chimera* is “a lecture on the nature of fiction, disguised as a kind of retelling of some very old stories” He further observes that “*Chimera* is supposed to be ...an exploration into the possibilities of a new kind of fiction” (213). In each novella the hero sets out on a journey to escape the world of existential absurdity, boredom and stagnation.

The third objective of the study is “to appraise the evolution of new postmodern themes of John Barth.” In the novels such as *The Floating Opera* (1956), *The End of the Road* (1958) and *The Sot-Weed Factor* (1960) Barth uses the metaphor of nihilism to depict the alienation of the characters. Barth realizes in his

life that people strive for things and treat them as valuable which are vain and fruitless. All the material things of the world are inconsequential and money is merely paper. In the novels of John Barth nihilism is a central metaphor controlling the activities of the characters. Barth has developed the nihilism theory with great acuity; he has a fine sense for perceiving and drawing out the implications of philosophical views. The central character Todd Andrews of *The Floating Opera* defends nihilism, and no answer to his argument is presented in the novel.

In the second chapter of the novel: “**Existential Dilemmas of Jacob Horner in John Barth’s *The End of the Road***”, it is examined how John Barth is devoted to explore the malaise of postmodern man. His novels *The Floating Opera* and *The End of the Road* deal with philosophical and metaphysical issues despite the comic layers. Both Todd and Jake suffer from the spiritual crisis that brings them near falling into the Pit. Todd thinks of suicide and Jake removes himself from life to live in the Doctor’s hospital. Barth published an article “The Literature of Replenishment” describing his vision and ideas of a postmodern novel. Barth presents a historical background giving details of the characteristics of Cervantes’s famous novel *Don Quixote*. Barth believes that Cervantes should be considered as a model for the real creation of a postmodern novel. Barth discussed his perception of a postmodern novel and wrote his novel *The End of the Road* following the techniques of postmodernism propounded by Fredric Jameson. Barth realized that there was no room for ideologies like Positivism, Determinism or an “exhausted art, since they represented imposed values from a decadent social structure. The writers of the Continent were in search of new values based on originality, individuality and postmodernity. The new ideas and philosophy ought to do better than the old values. In the post World War, many artistic movements changed the perception of the writers; Dadaism, Cubism and Surrealism and Futurism were prominent among them. Jacques Derrida who is called the philosopher of language gave his theory of deconstruction and Richard Rorty propounded his philosophy of pragmatism in America. The massive growth of science, computer and technology and mass media culture changed the flow of the cultural currents. In such a climate, John Barth begins his literary career; he had been writing since 1950 but he wrote his first novel *The*

Floating Opera in 1956. His second novel *The End of the Road* shows the germs of Barth's basic philosophical literary concepts. John Barth in his novel *The End of the Road* sets his hero in a complete paralysis as he fails to make a choice in concrete form. There are multiple choices before him; he feels bewildered and confused like most of people. John Barth (1980) comments thus: "The ideal postmodernist novel will somehow rise above the quarrel between realism and irrationalism, formalism and contentism, pure committed literature, coterie fiction and junk fiction" (70). The plot of the novel is focused on the conflict between Jacob Horner and Joseph Morgan. Jacob tells about him thus: "In a sense I am Jacob Horner' (1) in the first sentence of the novel. He is both a writer and the protagonist of the novel. Barth's characters wear multiple masks to explore the reality. Both the characters Joe and Jake oppose each other and there is personal and internal struggle between both the characters. Barth depicts his superego in the novel. There is conflict between American pragmatism and the principles of freedom. Doctor talks of the absolute indecision in *The End of the Road*. Doctor used the word "cosmopsis" giving the cosmic view of life. Doctor argues that the will to action always springs from a will to overcome one's weaknesses. Often a cosmic perspective leads to paralysis and the postmodern man must be ready to face these truths.

In the third chapter of the study entitled: "**Metaphysical Despair of Ebenezer Cooke in *The Sot-Weed Factor* of John Barth**", Barth's renewed love for pastiche, parody, inter-textuality and magic realism is explored. Barth is prominently known for inventiveness and wit, glibness and stylistic innovations. Barth has expressed his awareness of absurdity and nihilism in his novel *The Sot-Weed Factor* (1960). The plot of the novel *The Sot-weed Factor* is dubbed as "an extended parody" of the historic Ebenezer Cooke's poem of the same title and his role as a poet laureate of Maryland. The central metaphor in the novel is twinhood which deals with the question of identity. Barth lays stress on the tension between fiction and reality. Barth believes that parody is a tool to resolves the tensions. The strategy is simple. Barth dissolves the tension into separate segments which is used by Barth as useful material for the active imagination. The heroes of *The Floating Opera* and *The End of the Road* struggled to confront the questions of "ultimate" sense and

“absolute value” and this ambivalent attitude reflects the futility of life. Barth has used the weapon of parody to dissolve the experiences into infinite number of segments which ultimately become the raw material for various tales. Barth wrote in his *Literature of Exhaustion* (1967) thus: “As in Lucretius’s universe, the number of elements, and so of combinations is finite and the number of instances of each element and combinations of elements is infinite” (Barth 34). The novel *The Sot-Weed Factor* is cosmic in vision and is not confined to any particular society. Barth is concerned with the existential anguish of the postmodern people who are trapped in the abyss of futility and nihilism. Ebenezer is not an ordinary hero, In *The Sot-Weed Factor*, Ebenezer is placed in a universe that defies his understanding. Barth deals with various ways to confront the absurdity and futility of the universe and the infinite ways of ordering the chaotic events of life. The novel *The Sot-Weed Factor* is basically a farce written in the eighteenth-century style focusing on the adventures of Ebenezer who was a minor poet. Ebenezer wrote “Sot- Weed Factor” as a diatribe against the prevalent barbarism of the late eighteenth-century Maryland life. In the poem, he talks about the theft of his tobacco estate and other cowardly deeds. The hero Ebenezer Cooke is central character of the novel and is preoccupied with the problems of postmodern man struggling to find the answers and solutions in the random universe. He doesn’t find clear cut answers so he chooses to create the absolutes. He is engaged to confront with “fundamental and ultimate” values. The hero of the novel lives in chaotic worlds and the artificial elements dominate the plot of the novel. On the surface of the novel the plot chronicles historical episodes and this is done in a number of ways. The style of the novel follows historicity as Barth has introduced many eruditions of that age. The novel takes the readers to view the adventurous journey of Ebenezer who is a historical figure. Barth has depicted the dilemmas of Cooke who fails to resolve the problems with his genius. Barth avers that life and art are mimetic. Barth has depicted the postmodern of historicity, he recalls that historical events give a new direction to people and one’s past is crucial to ontological enlightenment. The adventurous journey of Ebenezer is to explore the real great world. John Barth has given very unconventional titles to the chapters of the novel; they are based on the postmodern concept of multiplicity. The very title of each chapter of the novel serves to acquaint the readers of the dilemma of Ebenezer

to confront the hostile universe and the chapters are intended to be a compendium of the facts and fiction.

The fifth objective of the study is “to formulate the cause of alienation and loss of identity of the characters of John Barth” and in the chapter entitled: “Subversion of Mythology in John Barth’s *Chimera*”, the themes of alienation and loss of identity are explored. John Barth is a postmodernist American novelist who is called as an existentialist and an absurdist. His novels depict his passion for traditional story telling techniques like framing and embedding. He follows his own techniques that he discussed in his essay *The Literature of Replenishment* (1981). His novel *Chimera* is full of the elements of meta-fiction; it is a fine juxtaposition of old and the new styles of writing. He wrote *The Sot-Weed Factor* (1960), *Giles-Goat Boy* (1966) and *Chimera* (1972) demonstrating his passion to revive the eighteenth century trends of fiction imitating the cultural value of art of writing shown by novelists like Fielding, Smollett and Stern. Barth heavily borrowed from writers like Boccaccio and Cervantes to depict the malaise of contemporary America. Barth developed his unique style and technique in *Chimera* as he managed to integrate three loosely connected novellas *Dunyazadiad*, *Perseid* and *Bellerophoniad*. The very title of the novel is confusing and fantastic full of mythical layers and intricate themes. His meanings are hidden beneath his brilliant surfaces. Barth employs convoluted phantasies and metafiction in the plot of *Chimera* giving a new model of mythical style. Barth explores the ancient myths of Middle East reviving old mythology. His passion for the old leads him in discovering the roles of men and women in the context of the contemporary American culture.

In the fifth chapter entitled: “Postmodern Meta-fiction of John Barth’s *Giles-Goat Boy*” Barth explores the complexity of the society; the tensions and anxieties of Americans trapped in the bog of illusion and darkness. To achieve replenishment, Barth made many innovations in the stylistic techniques. The novel *Giles Goat-Boy* (1966) or *The Revised New Syllabus* comprises a distinct phase in Barth’s developing conception of the novelist and his relationship in the world. Barth depicts the ambivalence of the universe in this novel. Schultz aptly remarks thus:

For Barth, life cannot be examined with the instrument of reason, and man has to make a compromise to continue living and acting in a world that has apparently lost its meaning and purpose. The ambivalence, caused by distrust of reason must help the modern man to come out of the absurd instead of succumbing to it. The characters of Barth do that by rejecting suicide out of their paralysis (Schultz 36).

Barth's characters hold conflicting attitudes towards everything. Like Thomas Pynchon, Barth believes in the pervasive vogue of entropy and absurdity gripping the psyche of the Americans. The novel *Giles Goat-Boy* is a work of modern parody or an allegory of parody of John Barth. The novelist dramatizes the scenes of a world of complex modern technology and cold war hostilities employing ironical pattern of structure. Barth has used the myths and the historical events following the model of Thomas Pynchon. The plot considers cybernetic condition and endless processing of information to the point of entropy. As the plot of the novel *Giles Goat-Boy* progresses the historical consciousness is revealed. George is the hero of the novel, he is a legendary figure who ascends from the animal to the human. He is presented as a modern day Jesus Christ as well as an Oedipus. The story line is very derailed and easy to follow along; the plots are disjointed as the identity of George is fractured. The writing style of Barth depicted in *Giles Goat-Boy* is ambiguous as the plot is non-linear. The authors use hyperbole to shed light on the contemporary issues they saw around them. George experiences anxiety and psychological trauma as his quests bring about destruction rather than enlightenment. Barth has used the images and symbols used by Joseph Campbell in his book *The Hero With a Thousand Faces* and employing the archetypal psychology of Carl Jung. In addition, Barth has also used the terms of Freud's psychoanalysis depicting the quest of George. John Barth's postmodern novel, *Giles Goat-Boy*, dramatizes the contemporary malaise of American society. Barth achieves this goal depicting the quest of anti-hero manifesting the futility of environment. George advances through all the stages of a hero mentioned by Joseph Campbell but ironically the outcome of his quest is destruction and tragic sufferings. Barth has depicted George's existential feelings of futility which urges him to kill himself at the end of the novel. The novel *Giles-*

Goat Boy demonstrates the resurgence of the anti-heroic quest as a postmodern fiction. He does “this to bring attention to these contemporary issues by in his own words implementing pastiche” (Schulz xvi). Barth accomplishes this pastiche and refraction through his characters and his existential narrative. Barth’s novel dramatizes the psychoanalytic aspects of man’s life representing the bigger picture of contemporary 1960s society. The psychological problems of George are universal in nature as each American was suffering from the psychological trauma during the Wars. Barth is of the view that American culture is dominated by the electronic media and technology resulting in the loss of identities of the individuals. In this study the fluid nature of man’s identity is explored relying on the theories of Erik Erikson and Norman Holland. John Barth has depicted the anomalous nature of the fragmented postmodern personalities. Anomaly of identity is the resultant of the fragile relations and names of the individuals. Each character plays manifold roles creating tensions in the life of people. Barth has portrayed the jellied perception of self. The image of man is presented as jelly, amoeba, lot, blob, suggesting the formlessness. Characters assume many shapes; embody shifting personalities in Barth’s *The Floating Opera* and *The End of the Road* and *The Sot-Weed Factor*.

Following observations are made after having investigated the novels of John Barth:

- 1) John Barth is a postmodern novelist who discarded the theories and themes of the traditional novelists. He wrote two famous essays such as *The Literature of Replenishment* (1981). *The Literature Exhaustion* (1967) in which he described the condition of literature. John Barth was inspired by the postmodern theories of Fredric Jameson and Linda Hutcheon who innovated new theories of postmodernism. Barth employed the techniques of pastiche, fragmentation, dissonance, magic realism, inter-textuality and meta-fiction in his novels.
- 2) John Barth made experiments in the postmodern novel rejecting the themes and stylistic techniques of Ernest Hemingway and William Faulkner. The titles of the novels such as *The End of the Road* (1958), *The Sot-Weed Factor* (1960), *Giles-Goat Boy* (1966) and *Chimera* (1972) are ambiguous and absurd metaphors depicting the alienation and absurdity of postmodern man.

- 3) Barth created typically postmodern characters who lead a hollow and directionless life in the imitation of T.S. Eliot, James Joyce and Kafka. His fiction is an expression of metaphysical absurdity and despair which give eternal psychological anguish to the characters. They live in a void and are trapped in the abyss of darkness and despair. They are anti-heroes and their quest is futile and meaningless.
- 4) John Barth employed new language and typical postmodern techniques such as pastiche, fragmentation and inter-textuality intensifying the heavy burden of absurdity and despair of the characters. He turned to the old writers of 14th and 18th century such as Chaucer, Cervantes and Boccaccio borrowing the techniques of frame tales and mythical patterns.
- 5) The novels of John Barth chronicle the psychological anguish and futility of life of the postmodern man. His novels are historical and cultural documents revealing the imminent collapse of civilization and moral structure of contemporary American society. Each novel is a warning to postmodern man who is leading a directionless life. The decadence of spiritual faith and decline of moral values have created a void in his life. Barth realizes that love, religion, morality which were the pillars of old civilization and society have disappeared in the contemporary American society.

Social Relevance of the Study

This study has cultural value as the theories of fiction of John Barth are reinterpreted in the context of the contemporary society. Like Thomas Pynchon, John Updike and Kurt Vonnegut, John Barth discarded the traditional techniques employed by Earnest Hemingway, Norman Mailer and William Faulkner. Barth realized during his early career that the postmodern world has grown very complex and hence the available stylistic techniques cannot articulate the contemporary malaise of life. He turned to the writings of Fredric Jameson and Linda Hutcheon. The reviewers and the critics of Barth eulogized him for his concern for the American society. Like Thomas Pynchon, John Barth's novels are a study of fluidity of identity. A close study of the novels of John Barth reveals the concept of dissolution of identity. Barth intensively

explores the American culture and the place of man in the American society. Barth believes that man deviates into a feelingless robot, corrupt and mad moving in the dark alley. They were influenced by the ideas of Surrealism and by new theories of Unconscious, Sexuality and Neurosis. Bergson too depicted the absurdity of human condition. John Barth wrote *Letters*, *Chimera* and *Vineland* in which he deconstructed the Classical myths as those of Oedipus, Orpheus and Narcissus in relation to Slothop, Todd, George and Oedipa. Barth's *Giles Goat-Boy* traces the mythical history of man's evolution and his place in the random universe. He is obsessed with the mystical anarchy and planned nothingness prevalent in the universe. He is horrified with truth that is abstract and uncertain. The novels of John Barth such as *The Floating Opera* (1956), and *The End of the Road* (1958) deal with the themes of suicide and abortion. Barth's novels *The Sot-Weed Factor* (1960), *Giles-Goat Boy* (1966), depict the cries of man, the mood of nihilism and pessimism. The very titles of the novels of John Barth are based on absurdity and meaninglessness of life and the futility of all struggles of man.

To conclude, Barth's novels open the eyes of modern man who is trapped in the abyss of darkness and despair. The real happiness can be achieved through the realization of the purpose of life. Pessimism, nihilism and negative thoughts are not the solutions of life. Man has to build up a connection with God and has to understand his place in the universe. Each novel of Barth is a thought provoking study of sufferings, loneliness and despair. Man has to find out the real meaning of life within himself brushing aside the negative thoughts and putting faith in the creation of God and Nature.

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