



“DEMYSTIFYING FATE AND FACT OF THE SEA IN A. S. BYATT’S “SEA STORY”

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ABSTRACT

Water gives constant fuel to the fires of imagination of the writers. Water has been used by the writers in different ways, representing different things, to create various points of view in literature. The image of water has clearly no set rules and used to symbolize various ideals such as life and death, birth and rebirth, love and loss, etc. The writers across the globe are exercising the creativity and awareness in portraying the different facets of water. In this way, the Man Booker Prize winner A.S. Byatt in her short stories, “Sea Story”, has encounters the mysterious beauty of the sea in a poignant manner. This paper focuses on how Byatt demystifies the fate of the nearer generation by throwing light on the universal truth of environmental disaster.

A.S. Byatt’s “Sea Story” is a haunting tale of a bottle containing a love letter which is thrown into the sea. The story not only explores the romantic aspects but also instigates how an inevitable natural resource, the water, has been corrupted by the human beings. The sea which looks calm and elegant in outlook has so much of mysteries locked inside it. The sea once the habitat of many species is being replaced by the nurdles. Thus, Byatt beautifully portrayed how water, a symbol of purity, now became sign of pollutant.

Keywords: sea, pollution, love, environmental disaster

The Literary world has long been fascinated by the wet stuff and this aquatic theme has opened the floodgates of the imagination of many writers. Water gives constant fuel to the fires of imagination of the writers. The image of water has clearly no set rules and symbolizes various ideals such as life and death, birth and rebirth, love and loss, etc. The writers across the globe are exercising their creativity and awareness in portraying the different facets of water.

To observe World Water Day on 22 March 2013, *The Guardian* has published a series of water-themed short story each day, leading up to the date. Well-known writers across the world have participated and their works distilled the essence of ebb and flow of our cultural existence. A. S. Byatt, winner of the Man Booker Prize for his novel, *Possession: A Romance*, wrote the first story in the series titled “Sea Story”. In this story, Byatt has encountered the mysterious beauty of the sea in a poignant manner.

The “Sea Story” is a haunting tale of a bottle containing a love letter which is thrown into the sea. It not only explores the romantic aspects but also instigates how an inevitable natural resource, water, has been corrupted by human beings. The Sea plays a vital role in the development of the protagonist, Harold. Born in Filey, on the east Yorkshire coast, a fishing town, Harold has a deep-rooted fascination towards the sea. Water has been associated with him since birth: “He was born beside the sea – almost literally, for his mother’s birth pangs began when she was walking along the shoreline” (Byatt).

Harold’s father is an oceanographer, so sea is part of his being. The collection of the bottles picked up from the sea, in his house, projects the techniques used by the Marine engineers to map the movement of currents of the North Sea. These bottles have seemed to be survived for a long term by lying on the sea bed. Among them, a bottle contained a love letter which reads, “Dear Mary” followed by a phrase “I love you, I love you, I love you...” (Byatt), and it runs both sides of the paper. The letter is duly signed as Robert Fisher, with an address that is erased by bombs in 1944. The bottle and the uncorrupted letter show the eternity of love that survives the bomb blast.

Through Harold’s inner consciousness, Byatt projects the universal truth of the sea. Harold’s life at Oxford portrays his condition of being in a sealess city:

The space inside his skull was composed of an almost abstract form – the sweep of sand, the black protuberance of the Brigg with the waves licking it or crashing over it, and most of all the huge curve of the horizon. It was an empty line, and it signified inhuman. That is, it was the limit of human vision. (Byatt)

The horizon of the sea seems to be the end of the world but life prevails ahead of it. Human vision is limited and there are many unseen and unimaginable things beyond the horizon.

Like his birth, his love life is also initiated in the sea shore. While fishing in a boat, he met his love interest Laura. To his surprise the very sight of the girl created a spark in him. He compares her appearance to that of a sea creature: “a pale woman in a sleek black wetsuit, like a seal” (Byatt). To his consternation, before he confesses his love, she departed to the Caribbean for higher studies. But before she had left, he got her address. It too ended in vain as it had a Scottish address but she left for the Caribbean.

The drift bottle containing the love letter on his mantle piece created an impulse in him. The sea, till then his companion, turned into a messenger of love. He rolled a letter, and put it into a green coloured Perrier bottle with some threads of his hair and his grandfather’s ‘carnelian signet ring’. He didn’t know whether casting his love away into the sea was an attempt to drive his love from his life, or a hope for some improbable luck. He closed the bottle and dropped into the water. But the sea is not the same as before. Now, it is being corrupted by human beings.

Byatt elegantly presents the real fact of the corrupt sea water through the travel of the bottle. She showcases that the sea, once the habitat of aquatic creatures, is being replaced by nurdles, the tiny plastic spheres made by manufactured microbeads of polyethylene thermoplastics. The sea water is invaded by the contamination of plastics and ‘the decomposers and fragments from the sumps of the world’s washing machines’. The nurdles and the plastic beads are poetically termed as ‘mermaids’ tears’.

The bottle travelled far and it survived wet and cold. As days pass, the sea water started to react with the bottle and slowly it loses its brilliant green colour. It is bobbed and slopped by the sea bird. In the Caribbean Sea it is arrested at the fringe of a slowly swirling carpet of floating fragments. Slowly the bottle started to decompose. The cork got detached from the bottle and it is swallowed by the green turtle, as it is mistaken for glass eel. The sea has lost its inner beauty and is contaminated by the wastages. The decomposers and the plastic beads are being eaten by the species and it results in its annihilation.

The letter is eaten by the fat eel and got excreted. The bottle has totally lost its shape and separated into shreds of green-grey floaters and they joined the mass of other pale beads. Part of this mess reached the intended destination, Laura. She is shown as gathering the beads, microscopic living things for her study. She looked at them under the microscope. But the only message that she reads is “human occupation and corruption of the masterless ocean.” The identity of the letter has lost its colour and it conveys the factual message of environmental disaster. The uncorrupted sea once preserved the love letter for several years and symbolized as a saviour is corrupted by the inhuman human beings.

In the ending of the story, Harold is married and retires from service. He was collecting the plastic bags and debris from the sea shore till he died. Laura too died long ago when her boat capsized. The last lines of the story portray the fatal result of the human power over Nature: “Fires raged and floods drove through streets and houses as the planet became more and more inimical to human life. The sempiternal nurdles, indestructible, swayed on and under the surface of the sea” (Byatt).

Byatt, through this story, creates an awareness and voices the adverse consequences of polluting the water. She demystifies the gloried fate of the sea by throwing light on the universal truth of environmental disaster. The sea which looks calm and elegant on the surface has so many mysteries of devastation hidden inside it. By polluting and destroying it, human beings are digging their own graves. Thus, Byatt beautifully portrays how water, a symbol of purity, now became an agent of pollutant.

Reference

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