



Post-Truth and Historical Revisionism in A.S. Byatt's *Possession: A Romance*

Dr. Rashmi Verma

Professor, Dept. of English, Kurukshetra University, Kurukshetra, India

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Abstract— *In an era dominated by post-truth politics and the manipulation of historical narratives, the pursuit of truth and the reclamation of lost histories have become pivotal themes. A.S. Byatt's Possession: A Romance (1990) intricately explores these concerns through dual narratives of contemporary scholars and 19th-century poets. The novel interrogates the construction of history, its revision, and the dynamics of power that influence knowledge production, with a focus on gender, class and sexuality. This study examines Possession as a critical commentary on post-truth and historical revisionism, emphasizing Byatt's portrayal of history as a mutable narrative shaped by power and ideology.*

Keywords— *Post-truth, Historical revisionism, mutable narratives and power dynamics.*

In the age of post-truth politics and the increasing manipulation of historical narratives, the quest for truth and the recovery of lost histories have become central concerns. A.S. Byatt's *Possession: A Romance* (1990) engages with these themes in a profound and multifaceted way. Through the intertwined narratives of modern-day scholars and 19th-century poets, *Possession* explores how history is constructed, who gets to define it, and how it is subject to revision. The novel probes into the complexities of historical revisionism and the power dynamics surrounding knowledge, particularly through the lens of gender, class and sexuality. This research article will examine how *Possession* can be read as a commentary on contemporary concerns with post-truth and historical revisionism, highlighting Byatt's engagement with the idea that history is not an immutable set of facts, but rather a constructed narrative that is often shaped by power and the politics of knowledge.

The term post-truth refers to a cultural and political moment in which emotional appeal, personal belief and manipulation of facts often supersede objective facts and truth. This phenomenon is particularly noticeable in the realm of politics, where alternative facts have been used to shape public opinion and obscure established truths. Post-truth politics thrives in an environment where facts become

malleable and history can be rewritten to serve the agendas of the powerful. "Post-truth is not simply the claim that truth doesn't exist, but that facts are subordinate to emotions and personal beliefs" (McIntyre 13).

In *Possession: A Romance* Byatt engages with similar questions regarding the manipulation and rewriting of history. The novel's central plot revolves around the search for a lost literary connection between two 19th-century poets, Randolph Ash and Christabel LaMotte. Roland Michell, a modern-day scholar, uncovers evidence of an illicit love affair between these poets, which had been obscured by the dominant narratives of history. This hidden history, much like the alternative truths of the post-truth era, challenges the accepted historical record and highlights the ways in which history is often written by those in positions of power.

Byatt's novel demonstrates that history is not a fixed entity but is subject to constant revision, particularly when it is unearthed by marginalized voices. The story of Ash and LaMotte's affair can be seen as a metaphor for the ways in which historical truths are obscured, distorted, or suppressed, often due to the prevailing power structures of the time.

The modern-day scholars Roland Michell and Maud Bailey undertake a literary excavation, trying to piece together the

past by finding lost letters and forgotten documents. Roland's investigation into the lives of Ash and LaMotte echoes the contemporary quest for lost historical truths, and the tension between fact and fiction that emerges in the narrative reflects the ambiguities of history itself. "Post-truthfulness exists in an ethical twilight zone: it allows us to dissemble without considering ourselves dishonest" (Keyes 14).

In the novel, Byatt emphasizes the role of archives and documents in constructing historical narratives. Roland's discovery of Ash's letters to LaMotte leads him to question both the nature of the poets' relationship and the way in which their love story was erased from literary history.

Roland Michell's serendipitous discovery of Randolph Ash's letters to Christabel LaMotte catalyses the central narrative and highlights the constructed nature of historical understanding. Byatt uses Roland's discovery to explore how fragments of the past can disrupt established histories and open up new avenues of inquiry. The letters, hidden in a book in the London Library, represent both the fragility and the endurance of history, as they have survived but remain forgotten until Roland's intervention. This moment underscores the tension between what is preserved and what is lost in the archival process. As Roland reflects, "The past is not past. It is present in us, and is insistent" (115).

The letters not only shed light on Ash and LaMotte's personal lives but also challenge the broader assumptions of literary history. Roland initially approaches Ash as a symbol of Victorian propriety, an image perpetuated by generations of literary critics. However, as the letters reveal an intense and clandestine romantic relationship between Ash and LaMotte, Roland begins to question the dominant narrative. This is particularly evident when he considers how their love story was "written out" of history, concealed by Victorian moral codes and subsequent scholarly biases. Byatt writes, "A whole hidden history could be glimpsed, a story which had been suppressed or forgotten because it did not fit" (187). Through this, Byatt critiques the power structures inherent in historical and literary scholarship that determine which voices and stories are to be preserved.

The novel also illustrates how the physicality of archival documents—their material presence—affects the construction of history. Roland's tactile engagement with the letters emphasizes the immediacy and intimacy of the past. Byatt describes the experience: "He felt a guilty, sensual delight in the physical act of handling the faded paper, of deciphering the old-fashioned handwriting" (72). This sensual connection with the material artifact contrasts sharply with the detached, objective stance traditionally associated with scholarly research. Byatt uses this

juxtaposition to argue that history is not merely an abstract intellectual pursuit but an emotional and human endeavour.

The erasure of Ash and LaMotte's relationship speaks to the broader theme of how power dynamics—especially those related to gender—shape historical narratives. LaMotte, as a woman and a poet, occupies a marginalized position in both her personal and professional life, and her relationship with Ash is similarly suppressed. This suppression reflects what Byatt sees as the broader silencing of women's voices in history and literature. As Maud Bailey observes, "Women's lives were supposed to be hidden, private, and their voices were so often lost" (223). Through the archival discoveries in *Possession*, Byatt not only reconstructs the love story of Ash and LaMotte but also critiques the systems of power that have historically erased such narratives.

Byatt's use of archival material, from poems to letters, suggests that history is often fragmented and must be actively reconstructed from the scraps left behind by previous generations. This is evident in the following passage, where Roland reflects on the importance of these recovered letters: "Letters are where one hears the real voice. We are all of us, not what we seem. We are all, somewhere, some part of us, like the poets we study: we pretend, we try to be ourselves, and in the end, we speak in echoes of others" (156). Roland's statement highlights the theme of historical revisionism in *Possession*. The poets, Ash and LaMotte, have been silenced by the male-dominated literary canon, but their rediscovered voices, through the letters, complicate the historical record. As the characters piece together the fragments of the past, Byatt draws attention to how history is a narrative that is always in the process of being revised, with some voices left out or obscured. The characters in *Possession* revisit the past events by discovering and reading its texts. In fact, they resurrect the past as Coyne Kelly views that, "in the process of reading and writing, the characters, readers and writers—make meaning" (107).

Possession also interrogates the exclusionary practices of the literary canon, particularly the ways in which it has historically marginalized women writers and non-conforming sexualities. The novel juxtaposes the lives of the Victorian poets Randolph Ash and Christabel LaMotte with the contemporary scholars investigating their work, underscoring how women's contributions to literature have often been undervalued or erased. Christabel LaMotte's struggle as a woman poet in a male-dominated literary culture highlights this marginalization. Despite her undeniable talent, LaMotte is confined by the patriarchal structures of her era. As Maud Bailey, a modern scholar and feminist, observes, "Her work was always read as derivative, as though a woman could not have an original

voice" (156). This critique aligns with broader feminist concerns about the systematic exclusion of women from the literary canon.

The novel also explores how societal norms around sexuality have shaped the reception and preservation of literary works. LaMotte's relationship with Blanche Glover, a woman she deeply loved before her connection with Ash, reflects the silencing of non-conforming sexualities in Victorian society. Byatt portrays this relationship with sensitivity, emphasizing its emotional depth and complexity. However, the tragedy of Blanche's suicide—linked to her despair over losing LaMotte to Ash—underscores the lack of societal acceptance for their bond. As Roland reflects, "The hidden relationships, the ones that did not conform to the expected patterns of life, were erased or made into footnotes" (213). This erasure mirrors the broader marginalization of LGBTQ+ identities in historical and literary narratives.

Byatt also critiques the ways in which the literary canon has prioritized the voices of men while relegating women's experiences to the periphery. LaMotte's poetry, rich in symbolism and subversive in its feminist themes, is dismissed by her contemporaries as minor in comparison to Ash's work. This reflects a recurring theme in literary history, where women writers have often been categorized as secondary or derivative. The discovery of Ash and LaMotte's letters forces the contemporary scholars to re-evaluate their assumptions, not only about the poets' personal lives but also about their literary legacies. Maud's realization that LaMotte was "a poet of power, whose work had been overshadowed by male voices" (196) underscores the need for a more inclusive understanding of literary history.

Furthermore, *Possession* critiques the romanticized narratives often imposed on women writers, which reduce their lives and works to reflections of their relationships with men. LaMotte's identity as a poet is frequently overshadowed by her connection to Ash, a dynamic that mirrors the broader historical tendency to subordinate women's achievements to those of their male counterparts. However, through the novel's dual narratives, Byatt challenges this narrative, showing LaMotte as a fiercely independent and creative force whose work deserves recognition on its own terms. As Maud remarks, "She was not simply a muse or a shadow—she was a creator, with a voice that demanded to be heard" (229).

A key element of *Possession* is the ethical tension surrounding the recovery of history. The characters in the novel—Roland, Maud, and the posthumous figures of Ash and LaMotte—are all engaged in the act of historical recovery. However, Byatt raises questions about the ethics

of this search. "In the post-truth era, ethics is displaced by expedience, and moral responsibility is blurred as truth becomes a matter of persuasion rather than principle" (Bauman 6). As Roland and Maud uncover the romantic relationship between Ash and LaMotte, they wrestle with the implications of revealing private details from the past. Is it right to expose the personal lives of historical figures, especially when those lives were intentionally concealed?

The tension between scholarly inquiry and respect for privacy is underscored in the following passage, where Roland grapples with his own role in uncovering these hidden histories: "We think of the past as a dead thing, but it is a thing we can remake. It is a living thing, mutable, subject to the slant of the light, the angle of the viewer" (305). This idea that the past is remakeable suggests that history, like the past itself, is subject to interpretation. The act of historical recovery is not an objective exercise but one fraught with personal bias and selective memory. In the post-truth world, where the truth is often manipulated for political gain, Byatt's novel reveals how the historical record can be rewritten and how those in power can shape the narrative to suit their purposes.

A.S. Byatt explores the fluidity of history, emphasizing the ways in which historical truths are not fixed but are constantly being rewritten and revised. Through the parallel narratives of modern-day scholars and 19th-century poets, Byatt highlights the ethical and intellectual complexities of historical recovery and revisionism. The novel critiques the ways in which history is manipulated by power structures, especially in the context of gender and sexuality. In an era of post-truth politics, *Possession: A romance* serves as a timely exploration of the politics of knowledge and the construction of historical narratives, reminding us that history is never a static, unchanging truth, but a contested and malleable discourse shaped by those who control it.

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