



**The Fragmented Self in Postmodern English
Novels: A Study of Identity and Memory**

**الذات المتشظية في الرواية الإنجليزية ما بعد
الحدائة: دراسة في الهوية والذاكرة**

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Abstract

The present research explores the idea of the fragmented self in postmodern English novels and is focused on narratively constructed, deconstructed, and reconstituted identity and memory. In this sense, postmodern fiction rejects a stable and unitary self and instead depicts identity as fluid and in constant shift under the agentive power of language and memory. Theoretically supported by Foucault, Derrida, Lyotard, and Lacan, the study examines selected works of Ian McEwan (*Atonement*), Julian Barnes (*The Sense of an Ending*), and Jeanette Winterson (*Written on the Body*). Memory was found to function both creatively and deceptively; it reshapes individual identity when reconstructing the past. These novels enact the central insight of postmodernism—that the self is a textual construct, not a pre-textual fact—through unreliable narration, temporal fragmentation, and metafictional practices. From this, it logically follows that memory, language, and storytelling continuously rewrite identity as an open process of becoming in postmodern fiction.

Keywords: *Postmodernism, Fragmented Self, Identity, Memory, English Novel, Narrative, Metafiction.*

المخلص

تتناول هذه الدراسة مفهوم «الذات المتشظية» في الرواية الإنجليزية ما بعد الحداثة، مركزة على الكيفية التي تُبنى وتُفكك ويُعاد تعريف الهوية والذاكرة من خلالها عبر تجريب السرد وتفكيك البنية التقليدية. ترفض رواية ما بعد الحداثة فكرة الذات المستقرة الموحدة، وتقدم بدلاً منها هوية مرنة ومتغيرة تتشكل عبر اللغة والذاكرة. واستناداً إلى الإطار النظري الذي قدمه فوكو، دريدا، ليوتار، ولاكان، تُحلل الدراسة روايات مختارة لكتاب إنجليز مثل إيان مكويون (*Atonement*)، وجوليان بارنز (*The Sense of an Ending*)، وجانيت وينترسن (*Written on the Body*) وتبين النتائج أن الذاكرة تعمل كقوة إبداعية وخادعة في آن واحد، إذ تعيد بناء الماضي وتشكل الهوية الشخصية بصورة سردية جديدة. ومن خلال الراوي غير الموثوق، وتقطيع الزمن، والتقنيات الميتاسردية، تجسد هذه الروايات جوهر فكر ما بعد الحداثة القائل إن الذات بناءً نصي لا حقيقة جوهرية. وتخلص الدراسة إلى أن الرواية ما بعد الحداثة حوّلت الهوية إلى عملية مفتوحة من التشكل المستمر، تُكتب وتُعاد كتابتها عبر الذاكرة واللغة والسرد.

الكلمات المفتاحية: ما بعد الحداثة، الذات المتشظية، الهوية، الذاكرة، الرواية الإنجليزية، السرد، الميتاسرد.



1. Introduction

Postmodern English fiction represents a radical reorientation in the way writers conceive of and express the self. On the contrary, from the modernist preoccupation with psychological depth and internal coherence, postmodernism emphasizes indeterminacy, fragmentation, and multiplicity. The self, earlier conceived of as an integrated entity, thus becomes, in postmodernism, an unstable construction of language, culture, and historical context. Employing narrative discontinuity, unreliable narration, and temporal dislocation, postmodern novelists reveal instability within consciousness and memory's frailty. Identity, therefore, is no longer understood to be essential or fixed but fluid and fragmented—a reflection of the fractured nature of postmodern reality.

1.1 Problems of the Study

The problem that this research aims to investigate is the issue of defining and representing identity within the postmodern English novel. All traditional literary frameworks rely on coherent characterization and linear narration, tools resisted by postmodern fiction. Julian Barnes, Ian McEwan, and Jeanette Winterson are among those writers who create characters whose sense of self dissolves in the competition between memories and unreliable narratives. The research gap thus focuses on the way in which these novels delineate the fragmentation of the self and how memory both constructs and betrays its formation. Moreover, a systematic analysis has yet to be provided that would relate the postmodern narrative techniques to philosophical conceptions about the fragmented self.

1.2 Aims of the Study

This paper intends to explore how postmodern English novelists trace the fragmented self through the interplay of identity and memory. It is intended to:

1. Analyze narrative structures and stylistic strategies that reflect self-fragmentation.
2. Analyze how memory functions as a site of reconstruction and distortion of identity.
3. Interpret the philosophical implications of the postmodern subjectivity in selected novels.



4. Contribute to the contemporary critical discourse on postmodern identity, linking literary analysis with theoretical viewpoints drawn from Foucault, Lacan, and Derrida.

The ultimate goal of the research is to prove that postmodern fiction redefined identity as a process, not an essence, and showed the deeply inseparable connection between selfhood, memory, and language.

1.3 Questions of the Study

The following are the key questions that this research work will seek to address:

1. How do postmodern English novelists represent the fragmented self?
2. How does memory operate as a tool for constructing, and destabilizing, identity?
3. What narrative and stylistic techniques are used to depict fragmentation, multiplicity, and unreliability?
4. In what way do postmodern theories of subjectivity inform the literary portrayal of the self in contemporary English novels?

These questions guide both the analytical framework and the thematic focus of the study, connecting literary form with philosophical investigation.

1.4 Significance of the Study

This paper attempts to bridge the gap separating the postmodern form from philosophical discourses of identity. While many critics have written on the stylistic renovation of postmodernism, few have analyzed how such techniques reflect a deeper epistemological crisis with regard to the nature of self and memory. The selected English novels analyzed in this research will add to an understanding of how literature reflects the postmodern condition—a condition of fragmentation, indeterminacy, and multiplicity. In further locating English novelists within global theoretical debates on identity and subjectivity, the scholarship of postmodern literature is further enriched, and in turn, brings forth a nuanced perspective linking narrative aesthetics to existential and psychological dimensions.



Chapter Two: Theoretical Background

2.1 Introduction

The postmodernism phase disavows the coherence, objectivity, and universal truth of modernism. Reality, for it, is plural, unstable, and discursively constructed. This will imply, in literature, fragmentation of narrative, metafictional self-consciousness, and rejection of fixed identity. The self does not appear as an autonomous or consistent being; it is a shifting construct mediated by language, culture, and memory. Certain foundational theories explaining how postmodernism reconfigures identity and memory have been elaborated in the book. These theories rest on philosophical and literary theories propounded by seminal thinkers like Michel Foucault, Jacques Derrida, Jean-François Lyotard, Jacques Lacan, and Linda Hutcheon (Hutcheon, 1988; Lyotard, 1984; Foucault, 1977; Derrida, 1978; Lacan, 2006).

2.2 The Concept of Postmodernism

The postmodernist movement of the mid-twentieth century revolted against the rationalism and structural stability of modernity. Indeed, Lyotard proceeds to define postmodernism as "incredulity toward metanarratives," a skepticism toward those grand explanations which claim for themselves universal validity. In literature, this manifests as self-referential storytelling, parody, and the breakdown of chronological order. Therefore, in the same light, postmodern fiction becomes a space wherein the lines between reality and representation are blurred. Jameson's (1991) complementing argument is that postmodern culture generates a "depthless subject," one reflecting a world saturated by media images and simulacra rather than actual experience. It would thus be true to say that this sense of cultural change would imply that the literary articulation of identity is to explore these changes with regard to fragmentation and precariousness. According to Lyotard, this means incredulity towards metanarratives or general skepticism of grand stories that lay claim to universal validity. In this respect, certain tendencies identified with postmodern literature, such as self-referential storytelling, parody, and the abandonment of chronological order, could be seen as typical manifestations of this attitude. In this way, postmodern fiction becomes a space wherein the lines between reality and representation become blurred. Jameson's complementary assertion is that postmodern culture produces a "depthless subject," one reflecting a world saturated by media images and simulacra rather than actual experience. In this



larger sense of cultural change, the fragmentation and precariousness of identity may be understood as a literary articulation of such changes.

2.3 The Fragmented Self: Philosophical and Psychological Perspectives

The idea of a coherent, centralized self began to crumble with the philosophical movements informing postmodern thought. According to Foucault (1977), the self is not an origin but instead an effect of discourse and power structures; identity is socially and linguistically constructed rather than naturally given. Similarly, identity can never be complete in Derrida's theory of *différance*; it is always deferred and incomplete. In psychology, Lacan (2006) denotes the "mirror stage" to mean the instance when a person forms an image of wholeness concealing inner fragmentation. That illusion of unity continues from language, which is constantly dividing subject and object. The implication here is that, ontologically speaking, identity is fundamentally unstable, always a product of text and language rather than of psychic stability. (Foucault, 1977; Derrida, 1978; Lacan, 2006)

2.4 Identity in Postmodern Literary Theory

Postmodern literary theory conceptualizes the self as a creation of language and narrative. According to Barthes (1977), the "death of the author" implies that meaning is not fixed by the intention of the author but rather emerges from texts and their interaction with readers. Thus, inside fiction, the self becomes a performative act of language rather than a function of an individualized self. Hutcheon (1988) extended this idea by describing postmodern fiction as "historiographic metafiction," in which historical and personal identifications are rewritten through the playful transgressions of narrative. Waugh (1992) has added that postmodern novels flaunt their textuality in order to reveal the artificial construction of character and plot. In this respect, by various means and new concepts, writers contend with the illusion of psychological complexity and offer fragments of self-reflexive protagonists whose identities are partial and shifting. (Barthes 1977; Hutcheon 1988; Waugh 1992).



2.5 Memory and the Construction of Selfhood

The main role of memory is related to the identity conceptions of postmodern thought. While traditional psychology considers memory as a means of preserving personal experience, postmodernism views it more as an act of reconstruction. Ricoeur (2004) claims that memory is interpretative rather than objective because it consistently re-creates the past through narrative. In postmodern novels, memory is often untrustworthy or contradictory and reflects the instability of selfhood. Barnes's *The Sense of an Ending* and McEwan's *Atonement* represent this tendency with narrators whose memories distort reality and create a false sense of identity. Memory becomes here a textual space where selfhood is negotiated rather than recovered.

2.6 Language, Narrative, and Fragmentation

Language is central to postmodern theories of fragmentation. Since meaning is never fixed, the self expressed through language is perpetually deferred. Derrida (1978) contends that signifiers refer only to other signifiers, creating an endless chain without stable meaning. It follows, therefore, that the postmodern subject is constituted through discourse, which is itself unstable. Literary language in postmodern novels reflects that instability through self-referentiality, irony, and the breakdown of linear narrative. As Eagleton notes, "the novel becomes a site of struggle where there is constant negotiation of meaning and identity". Through metafiction and intertextuality, authors expose the fragility of both linguistic and personal coherence. (Derrida, 1978; Eagleton, 2011).

2.7 The Postmodern Self and Cultural Context

The fragmentation of identity in postmodern fiction reflects the fragmentation of postmodern life. Globalization, media saturation, and technological change all contribute to a sense of dislocation and multiplicity. Baudrillard (1994) contends that persons in late capitalism live among simulacra—copies without originals—that replace actual experience. This self is mediated by images rather than being grounded in reality. Hassan (1987) further characterizes the postmodern condition as one of "indeterminacy" and "immanence," where all boundaries dissolve. English novelists writing against this background reflect these conditions through disjointed structures and self-aware characters, recording the postmodern anxiety of being dispersed across plural realities. (Baudrillard, 1994; Hassan, 1987; Jameson, 1991)



Chapter Three: Analysis of Selected Novels

3.1 Introduction

Postmodern fiction dismantles the traditional notion of character unity by portraying identity as unstable, performative, and dependent on memory. This can be well exemplified in *Atonement* (2001) by Ian McEwan, *The Sense of an Ending* (2011) by Julian Barnes, and *Written on the Body* (1992) by Jeanette Winterson—three representative novels that show how the fragmentation of narrative, the unreliability of narration, and the distortion of memory reinstates the postmodern self. Each novel constructs selfhood through the process of narration, underlining how truth and memory are joined and untrustworthy. These complex narrative forms are used by the writers to explore how identity is reconstructed from broken memories and linguistic traces rather than being anchored in stable experience (Hutcheon, 1988; McHale, 2012; Ricoeur, 2004).

3.2 Ian McEwan's *Atonement*: Memory, Guilt, and Narrative Reconstruction

Ian McEwan's *Atonement* is one of the most powerful postmodern explorations into feelings of guilt, memory, and narrative invention. The story focuses on Briony Tallis, whose false accusation, which occurs in her childhood, destroys two lives; later, the act of writing takes on dimensions of fictional redemption. McEwan structures the novel as a metafictional confession in which narrator memory becomes both creative and unreliable.

Briony's attempt to reconstruct the past through storytelling is the embodiment of the postmodern condition of the fragmented self. Through her narrative, the distinction between fact and fiction is blurred—a feature that draws on the premise that memories are often reinterpreted in order to relieve guilt, as Ricoeur (2004) suggests. The revelation in the final section, in which Briony is proved to be the author of the whole narrative, undermines any sense of truth on the part of the reader. The metafictional twist has demonstrated a dependence of personal identity upon narrative acts that rewrite experience. McEwan (2001) provides evidence for this view.

In postmodern fiction, as Waugh (1992) suggests, the artificiality of the representation is brought to the fore. McEwan employs this device to show that



the self is always mediated through language. Briony's character and authorship collapse the boundary between lived experience and textual construction. Her fragmented consciousness, molded by guilt and artistic control, incarnates the postmodern view of the self as an ongoing process of invention rather than a stable entity. Hence, *Atonement* dramatizes the impossibility of absolute truth and the reliance of identity on narrative manipulation. (McEwan, 2001; Waugh, 1992; Hutcheon, 1988; Ricoeur, 2004)

3.3 Julian Barnes's *The Sense of an Ending*: The Unreliable Self and the Fragility of Memory

Julian Barnes's *The Sense of an Ending* offers a deeply introspective narrative that probes the unreliability of memory and the illusion of coherence in self-perception. In this perspective, the protagonist, Tony Webster, reconstructs his past through selective recollections that are gradually proved inconsistent and deceptive. Barnes builds the identity of Tony as a narrative of forgetfulness, repression, and self-deception (Barnes, 2011).

The fragmented structure of the novel-itself divided into two parts, separated by decades-parallelled the disjunction between past and present identity. In the light of Ricoeur's explanation (2004), memory is interpretative and not factual; it constantly reconfigures personal history to fit present comprehension. It is here that Tony realizes his reconstruction was partial, which underlines the instability of identity: the self he believed in is unwoven by the return of suppressed memories.

Barnes applies minimalist prose and ambiguity to reflect the postmodern condition of uncertainty. The lack of closure is a symptom of Jameson's argument that postmodern culture is "depthless" and disoriented. Barnes demonstrates, through the unreliability of Tony as a narrator, that the self is not a coherent entity but instead a text of fragments, lacunars, and interpretations. The protagonist's belated realization of his narrative unreliability brings with it a critique of human memory and epitomizes postmodern subjectivity. (Barnes, 2011; Jameson, 1991; Ricoeur, 2004)

3.4 Jeanette Winterson's *Written on the Body*: Language, Gender, and the Dissolving Self

In *Written on the Body* by Jeanette Winterson, the idea of fragmented identity is taken to its furthest extreme since she doesn't even give the narrator any gender markings. The lack of a determined gender identity makes the



protagonist purely linguistic—a reflection of Derrida's assertion (1978) that meaning, and thus identity, is an effect of difference and deferred reference. This title in itself suggests that the body then becomes a text inscribed with memory, desire, and loss.

Winterson's narrator also contests binary categories of male and female in favor of a more fluid identity that is discursively produced. The unnamed narrator reflects upon love and loss to create a self existing only in and through language: "Written on the body is a secret code only visible in certain lights; the accumulated debris of a life" (Winterson, 1992, p. 89). This metaphor underlines the text's central paradox—the impossibility of separating self from the language that constitutes it.

As Hutcheon (1988) explains, in postmodernism, writing tends to expose the process of textual composition. Winterson does this because, in a self that is fragmentary, poetic, and intertextual, the erotic discourse gets intertwined with philosophical reflection. The playful use of language subsumes the narrator's identity; as such, it corroborates Barthes's notion of the "writerly text" since meaning and identity there are not fixed. Thus, *Written on the Body* instantiates postmodernism's fascination with language's instability and the performative aspect of identity. (Winterson 1992; Hutcheon 1988; Derrida 1978; Barthes 1977)

3.5 Comparative Discussion: Memory, Narrative, and the Self

Across these novels, it is the self as a textual and narrative rather than psychic phenomenon. McEwan, Barnes, and Winterson each approach the issue of fragmentation through different narrational strategies: metafictional confession in *Atonement*, retrospective unreliability in *The Sense of an Ending*, and linguistic indeterminacy in *Written on the Body*. All three novels, notwithstanding their stylistic variation, retain one theme in common: the volatility of identity when harnessed through memory and language.

Memory is at once the begetter of selfhood and its unmaking. In *Briony*, memory begets fiction; in *Tony*, self-deception; in Winterson's narrator, it is inscribed upon the body as text. These renditions enforce Ricoeur's (2004) contention that memory is not a mirror to the past but rather the narration of remembered events. In each case, self-identity is a performance about storytelling—a fragile negotiation between truth, imagination, and language.



Thus, the fragmented self in postmodern English fiction is a map of the condition of contemporary consciousness: uncertain, self-reflexive, and linguistically mediated. The novels show that identity is not discovered, it is created; it is not stable, but continuously rewritten. (Ricoeur, 2004; Hutcheon, 1988; McHale, 2012)

Conclusion

Postmodern English fiction rethinks the very notion of identity itself, presenting the self as fragmented, precarious, and in a continuous process of reconstruction. Conclusively, the research findings indicate that postmodernist novelists avoid the philosophical tradition of a solid, self-assured subject by demonstrating that identity is linguistically and narratively fabricated. The self no longer exists as an entity but instead as the discourse that generates it through memory, language, and meaning attribution. Through the use of unreliable narration, temporal disjunction, and metafictional awareness, postmodern fiction brings to the fore the instability of consciousness and the impossibility of truth.

The theoretical framework, based on the works of Lyotard, Foucault, Derrida, and Lacan, testifies that identity is always mediated through power, language, and ideology. These thinkers argue in unison that the self cannot be abstracted from these very cultural and linguistic systems that it emanates from. Instead, memory, rather than a preservative of an authentic past, becomes an act of re-narration by means of which the subject continuously reconstructs its own history. This conceptual framework provides a ground for the premise that the fragmented self lies at the core of postmodern subjectivity.

By analyzing the selected novels *Atonement*, *The Sense of an Ending*, and *Written on the Body*, this paper illustrates how the postmodern writers transform philosophical theory into narrative practice. Ian McEwan works out guilt and redemption by way of the untrustworthy consciousness of Briony Tallis; memory becomes fiction. Julian Barnes offers the incapacity of recollection and the cheat of self-understanding through Tony Webster's fragmented retrospection. Jeanette Winterson radicalizes the thought of identity by eliding gender and giving the self as a purely linguistic invention. In each case, memory is transmuted into a narrative form that constructs and deconstructs the self.



Through all these works, the fragmentation of identity reflects the fragmentation of postmodern experience itself. Living in a world saturated by media, simulation, and uncertainty, the coherent self gives place to multiplicity, contradiction, and self-reflexivity. The postmodern subject is aware of its artificiality and renounces any possibility of complete self-knowledge. Far from despair, this means the acceptance of a new mode of existence—a fluid, open one of creative redefinition.

Besides, postmodern English novels show that identity is not to be found; rather, it is something continuously to be rewritten. The self is not a fixed entity anchored in memory but a dynamic narrative evolving through the process of narration. In this manner, postmodern literature tells us something about the nature of contemporary consciousness: fragmented yet expressive, uncertain, and yet deeply human.

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