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The Fragmented Self in Postmodern British Fiction: Narrative Disintegration and Identity in Kazuo Ishiguro's *The Unconsoled* and A. S. Byatt's *Possession*

الذات المتشظية في الأدب البريطاني ما بعد الحداثي: تفكك السرد والهوية في روايتي كازو إيشيغورو اللامُعزَى والامتلاك لـ أ. س. بايت

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Abstract:

The postmodern British novel has always questioned the unity of human identity, understanding the self not as a fundamental entity but rather as a construct which is continuously destabilized by language, memory, and narration. This paper discusses the image of the fragmented self in Kazuo Ishiguro's *The Unconsoled* (1995) and A. S. Byatt's *Possession* (1990). Although the novels employ different narrative techniques, both works deal with the destruction of subjectivity to a significant extent. With the help of theoretical approaches based on poststructuralism, psychoanalysis, and narratology, it becomes possible to show that Ishiguro's dreamlike narration creates a phenomenological fragmentation, as the identity of the protagonist collapses into the structure of his own unconscious. At the same time, in Byatt's historiographic metafiction the self is fragmented in time, as the identity is constructed through an intertextual process of rewriting the archive. In conclusion, both works demonstrate that in the postmodern era the self can exist only as an unstable construction of texts and is always absent from itself, as it is dispersed in texts which try to represent it.

Keywords: Fragmented Self, Postmodernism, British Fiction, Kazuo Ishiguro, A. S. Byatt, Narrative Identity, Historiographic Metafiction.

المخلص:

تُشكك الرواية البريطانية ما بعد الحداثية باستمرار في وحدة الهوية الإنسانية، إذ تنظر إلى الذات لا بوصفها كياناً جوهرياً ثابتاً، وإنما بوصفها بناءً يتعرض بصورة مستمرة لزعزعة الاستقرار بفعل اللغة والذاكرة والسرد. وتناقش هذه الدراسة صورة الذات المتشظية في روايتي كازو إيشيغورو «اللامعزى» (1995) (*The Unconsoled*)، وأ. س. بايت «الامتلاك» (*Possession*) (1990). وعلى الرغم من توظيف الروائيتين تقنيات سردية مختلفة، فإن كليهما يتناول، إلى حد كبير، تفكك الذاتية وانهيارها. ومن خلال الاستناد إلى مقاربات نظرية قائمة على ما بعد البنيوية والتحليل النفسي وعلم السرد، يتضح أن السرد الحلمى لدى إيشيغورو يُنتج تشظياً ظاهرياً، حيث تنهار هوية بطل الرواية داخل بنية لاوعيه الخاص. وفي الوقت نفسه، تنتشظى الذات زمنياً في رواية بايت التاريخية الميتاسردية، إذ تتشكل الهوية من خلال عملية تناصية لإعادة كتابة الأرشيف. وتخلص الدراسة إلى أن العملين يُظهران أن الذات في عصر ما بعد الحداثة لا يمكن أن توجد إلا بوصفها بناءً غير مستقر من النصوص، وأنها تظل غائبة عن ذاتها على الدوام، لأنها تتوزع وتنتشت داخل النصوص التي تحاول تمثيلها.

الكلمات المفتاحية: الذات المتشظية، ما بعد الحداثة، الأدب البريطاني، كازو إيشيغورو، أ. س. بايت، الهوية السردية، الميتاسردية التاريخية.

Introduction

One of the hallmarks of the postmodern turn in British fiction has been its extreme distrust of the Enlightenment subject, the autonomous, rational, self-knowing person who was the basis of Western humanism. The novel marked the end of grand narratives, as Lyotard (1984) declared, and along with it the novel of the self, which was a linguistic construction, a performance, or, most disturbingly, an empty space around which stories gather but never get fixed. It is not just a psychological state to be diagnosed; it is an epistemological state to be explored: a state of radical uncertainty regarding the limits of self and other, present and past, reality and representation in postmodern British literature.

Two of the most advanced responses to this fragmentation in the late 20th century is Kazuo Ishiguro's *The Unconsoled* and A. S. Byatt's *Possession*. The novels, published within five years of one another, engage the issue of dissolution of identity in very different formal ways. Ishiguro's novel embeds the reader in a dream logic in which the spatial, temporal, and causal consistency of the world breaks down,

and the characters and protagonist appear to leak out into the surrounding world. In contrast, Byatt's novel is attentive to archival realism, piling up one layer of Victorian pastiche on top of another layer of academic discourse to create characters whose identities are made up of what they find and read in the material that they interpret and write. But although they differ in form, both novels arrive at a similar postmodern understanding: the self is not the source of the narrative, but its product; a provisional entity that is put together from the bits of language, memory and history which cannot be fully acquired or integrated.

This research will propose the idea that *The Unconsolled* and *Possession* portray the split self in complementary ways, using different narrative approaches—phenomenological dissolution and historiographic intertextuality—to bring into focus the many aspects of postmodern identity crisis. In Ishiguro's novel, the logic of the dream is used to fragment the self and the world, and in Byatt's novel the logic of the archive is used to fragment past and present selves. Together, they argue that the postmodern British novel is not just a novel of the fragmented self, but a novel of the breaking apart of the self in the structure of the novel itself.

1. Theoretical Framework: Postmodernism and the Fragmented Subject

In order to grasp the modalities of fragmentation in these novels, it is essential to set them in the context of the broader theoretical discussion of the postmodern subjectivity. The poststructuralist criticism of the subject, especially that of Jacques Derrida and Michel Foucault, demolished the idea of a self that is posited before language or power. Derrida (1978) has a different understanding of the subject, as it is always already involved in the play of difference, made up of traces that refer ad infinitum to other traces with no present origin. Foucault (1972) saw the self as an effect of discursive formations, a “subject” two-fold, both as the agent of knowledge and as that which is “subjected” to power. In this theoretical space identities are not something to be found but something to be observed in its processes of construction and/or failure, fracture and/or reconstruction, and the novel is a privileged space for such observation.

The diagnosis that Fredric Jameson (1991) termed “the cultural logic of late capitalism” is a helpful context for this specifically historical aspect of fragmentation. Jameson claims that postmodern culture is in a state of “waning of affect”—of a diminished sense of the past, which leaves a schizophrenic time where the past continually presents itself but does not relate in a linear, narrative fashion. This temporal dislocation appears in the postmodern novel through a disintegration of the traditional Bildungsroman pattern that juxtaposed innocence with experience as a series of steps forward. In their place, postmodern fiction provides the “schizophrenic” texts that Jameson defines as “texts that cannot be read continuously enough to allow the formation of a stable sense of self.”

The British postmodern novel, however, is not always as faithful to the American narrative as Jameson's work would lead one to believe, and is more histrionic and literary. The idea of “historiographic metafiction” coined by Linda Hutcheon (1988) is especially pertinent here, as it refers to novels that are highly self-conscious about how they have been constructed, but also are true to the historical period they are set in. *Possession* is the most representative example of this mode, and its Victorian pastiche is not only a parody of the past, but also reveals the ways in which the present is haunted by remnants of history that lie beyond retrieval and interpretation. Likewise, although not so clearly historical, Ishiguro's fiction is phenomenological metafiction, a literary genre that imparts the very cognitive and perceptual disruptions it portrays by means of the formal features of the literature.

The Lacanian revisions of Freud's psychoanalytical theory are needed to help understand the fragmented self in these novels. The mirror stage as outlined by Jacques Lacan (1977) is the process of the ego's formation through creating an imaginary identification with the image of a unified self, which is essentially a misrecognition of the subject's true fragmentation. The postmodern novel frequently poses the question of these fragmented repetitions again, revealing the casual coherence of the ego as a 'fiction of defense'. In *The Unconsoled*, this exposure is in the form of a radical destabilization of the protagonist's bodily, spatial boundaries, in *Possession*, it is in the form of possession, in the sense that alteration of the protagonists' desires and texts is in the form of the Other's desire and texts.

2.Kazuo Ishiguro's *The Unconsoled*: The Phenomenology of Fragmentation

Perhaps the most radical formal experiment in Ishiguro's oeuvre, *The Unconsoled* is a loose narrative that follows the associative, non-causal logic of a dream. When world-famous pianist Ryder shows up in an unnamed Central European city to perform, he finds himself trapped in a labyrinth of impossible spaces, forgotten appointments and conversations that are inextricably woven with entire histories he can't remember. From its very first pages the novel creates a world where the laws of physics, psychology and the flow of narrative causality are suspended, and where critics have found, with varying combinations of Kafkaesque, surreal, or oneiric, to describe the novel (O'Brien, 1996; Wong, 2000).

In *The Unconsoled*, the sense of fragmentation plays primarily in regard to space. The city in which Ryder travels is impossible: corridors return to their point of origin, hotel rooms have streets they cannot see onto, and buildings have areas that are bigger than their surface. In the realm of spatial incoherence, it is not just a foregrounding of Ryder's psychological disturbance but also a generative process of it. While Ryder tries to maneuver through these worlds, a sense of himself as a centered and independent subject starts to fall apart. For instance, when he goes to the hotel room of his childhood friend Gustav, he suddenly finds himself in his parents' apartment, as if there were no space or time between the two (Ishiguro, 1995, p. 87). In these moments, the self is shown to be not only temporally distributed, but also spatially distributed, not concentrated locally, but spread throughout the architecture of the city itself.

This spatial disintegration cannot be divorced from a temporal disintegration, which threatens continuity of story that, in turn, is essential for the identity to be stable. Memory in the form of Ryder's past creeps into his current without warning or transition: it is not memory in the usual sense, but a kind of re-occupying space. He sees his parents in the present tense, but they treat him as a kid. He meets his wife Sophie, and his son Boris in situations that imply they are his present-day family, but are also described as though they were from his long ago childhood. The result of these temporal collapses is what Jameson (1991) calls the postmodern "schizophrenic" experience of time, which is one in which the subject is unable to situate itself within a unified history of past and future. Ryder's own life is not continuous but a series of discontinuous moments that do not form a biography.

The theme of fragmentation is the most unsettling theme in the novel, in the sense of intersubjectivity. In the dream logic of *The Unconsoled*, there's a radical permeability between Ryder and the other characters. He keeps saying things he doesn't remember choosing to say, giving advice on opinions he didn't feel the urge to share, doing things he doesn't think he planned on doing, and doing things other characters want him to do. After Gustav the hotel porter admits his fears about his daughter, Ryder presents his own personal history with his parents, which appears to have been Gustav's story all along"

(Ishiguro, 1995, p. 156). It is not empathy or identification but a real dissolution of the self/other split and a return to the pre-ego stage of psychoanalysis, referred to as primary narcissism.

Many critics have interpreted *The Unconsoled* as a metaphor for the process of artistic creation, Ryder's inability to perform his concert as a symbol of the anxiety of influence or the impossibility of authentic expression (Shaffer, 1998). This reading is useful, but it may have the effect of reinterpreting the more radical implications of the novel into a coherent symbolic order that is domestic. I would say, on the contrary, that the novel is not about to be recuperated allegorically, demanding the literal reality of its dream world. Fragmentation isn't a sign of something else in Ryder's novel, it's just what the novel is. The reader is also in the same impossible places and in the same temporal loops as Ryder, and suffers from the same kind of fragmentation as Ryder — one that is impossible to tell apart from reliable narration and hallucination, from Ryder's consciousness and the world it sees.

The *Unconsoled* thus takes on a double meaning. On another level, it is a reference to the characters' inability to find solace in the losses and anxieties of various kinds—consolations they might find in religion, art, or human connection that might help put suffering into some kind of coherent perspective. On a deeper level, it designates the unassailability of the impossibility of "consoled" unity, of the fragments ever being gathered into a whole. Ryder's final scene, where he seems to be getting on a tram which would take him out of the city but at the same time hold him inside the city's labyrinth, implies that there is no outside to this fragmentation, no position from which the self can be reassembled (Ishiguro, 1995, p. 535). The novel itself does not have a resolution, but rather the endless postponement of any final action, the self-broken up in the process of narration.

3. A. S. Byatt's *Possession*: The Intertextual Self and the Archive

Whereas *The Unconsoled* from Ishiguro breaks apart the self by eroding the phenomenological boundaries, *Possession* from Byatt breaks apart the self by multiplying the text. The novel tells the story of two contemporary academics, Roland Michell and Maud Bailey, who discover a previously unknown correspondence between two Victorian poets, Randolph Henry Ash and Christabel LaMotte. As they explore this literary enigma, they fall more and more under the spell of the writers and their writings, becoming more and more like them. Byatt's novel is built like a palimpsest, the Victorian poetry, letters, fairy tales and scholarly apparatus layered over a contemporary story, to give the reader a romance, a detective story and a meditation on the nature of literary inheritance.

Possession is first and foremost a fragmented self in an intertextual construction. The characters have no selves other than those created by the texts to which they read, write, and belong. Roland Michell, the novel's first protagonist, is introduced as a kind of non-entity, a "scholar without a thesis" who has spent his life studying Ash, but never formed any original ideas of his own (Byatt, 1990, p. 13). His identity is purely derivative; it is made up of the relationship that he has with the archive. What he finds in the draft of Ash's first letter is not just a clue to a literary mystery, it is a possibility of a self that is not just a reflection of his scholarly subject. The novel is thus a simulation of the post-structuralist recognition that the subject is constructed by language, but it introduces an historical layer: not only is the subject constructed by language, but by certain traditions of language that are charged by the history.

Ash and LaMotte are not just historical characters in the novel, but textural constructs, with their "selves" only available through their fragments. Byatt provides copious excerpts of their purported poetry, and correspondence: they form a remarkable ventriloquistic effect that obscures the distinction between the historical novel's historical reconstruction and postmodernism's distrust of historical

reconstruction. Ash's epic poems and LaMotte's fairy tales and lyric verse are not just ornamental embellishments woven into the story of identity but integral parts of the story. The Victorian story's characters, Ash's wife Ellen and LaMotte's companion Blanche Glover, are also fashioned out of the letters, diaries, and poems they have left behind. In the novel, the self is the thing that remains in the archive—the thing that is composed of many fragments, and which requires other people's interpretation and assembly.

The fragmentation is different from the phenomenological in Ishiguro's novel, since this is an “archival” construction of identity. Possession is a game of “possession” in which the self is divided in time by being divided between the Victorian era and the present. Both Roland and Maud become “possessed,” but not in the supernatural sense, but in the sense that their desires, thoughts, and even their physical experiences are now shaped by what they study in the books. Reading the poets' love letters, they feel some kind of vicarious passion which erodes their emotional boundaries. Byatt's career as a feminist LaMotte interpreter is complicated by the fact that LaMotte was not the lonely lesbian separatist Maud had made him into, but a woman who had had a passionate sexual affair (Byatt, 1990, p. 291). The self that Maud has constructed based on her research, the carefully cultivated, emotionless feminist intelligence, starts to come undone in the face of history that stands against her theories.

Historiographic metafiction is most clearly evident in Byatt's treatment of the romance plot in the novel. On the surface, Possession is thoroughly engrossed in the game of Victorian romance: secret love affair, stolen letters, a tragically split relationship, and the final exposure. At another level, the novel is very self-aware about the conventions, and presents them from a critical point of view that's appropriate to the modern academic world. Byatt's novel thus presents a postmodern self, between longing for the romantic epic tale and the recognition that it is an invented story, a product of history. This is the tension with which Roland and Maud charts their own emerging romance: they are attracted to one another because they are discovering it together, but they are also hyper conscious of how the romance between them reflects the Victorian romance they are studying, which prevents any sort of raw, unmediated emotional bond from forming.

The novel's iconic ending, in which the truth of Ash and the relationship of LaMotte is only learned through a late-in-hand letter, which further fragments knowledge and self in postmodern fashion, among the contemporary characters. It is the letter that Ash's great, great, great granddaughter reads incomprehensibly, a letter that contains the truth but is unable to communicate it, a fragment that survives without its context, a message that reaches its destination only to remain unread (Byatt, 1990, p. 511). Both the Victorian and the contemporary selves are then shown to be made up of such gaps, such unreadable texts, such unending histories.

4. Comparative Analysis: Phenomenology and History as Modes of Fragmentation

An analysis of *The Unconsolated* and *Possession* together suggests two parallel approaches to the process of the self's fragmentation in the postmodern British novel. On phenomenological grounds, Ishiguro's approach is to manipulate the formal elements of a narrative (i.e., his treatment of space, time and perspective) to create in the reader a sense of cognitive dissonance that mirrors the protagonist's fractured consciousness. As with all of Byatt's work, this method is historical: it demonstrates the construction of the self as a problem of the material properties of text—archives, letters, poems, scholarly apparatus—that survive into the present. These strategies together imply a postmodern fragmentation, both in the here and now, and in the inheritance of history.

The two novels have a deep distrust of the possibility of self-knowledge. Both Ryder and Roland discover that his own identity as a scholar is a derivative construct, a discovery that is paralleled by his inability to understand his own motivations, and his constant surprise at his own words and actions. In both, the characters are trying to understand themselves, to comfort themselves with the narrative coherence, the formal structures of the novels themselves systematically spoiling the understanding. But the attitude of this doubts is vastly different in the two texts. Ishiguro's novel evokes an existential terror, a feeling that one has vanished into an empty space, and it will never return. However, despite the postmodern ironies of Byatt's novel, there is a certain elegiac beauty in the fragmentation, which, ultimately, is like the dispersion of the self over textual boundaries, living on in the words and stories that last beyond the body.

There is also a comparison of the role of the reader in each novel. *The Unconsold* invites the reader into Ryder's disintegration, for it does not offer any foundation for evaluating the trustworthiness of the story. The novel accepts no reality in existence beyond Ryder's consciousness, so we can't know what is "really" happening as described by the events of the story. *Possession*, on the other hand, calls for the reader to be part of the archival process of reconstructing identity, providing several texts to compare, analyze and interpret. Byatt's reader is like a kind of detective or scholar, piecing together the elements of the past to make a sense of it. But this coherence is always precarious, always unsettled by the knowledge that the archive is incomplete, that important documents are lost or burned, that the whole story cannot be conveyed.

The question of gender also comes up in both novels in distinctly different ways in relation to fragmented identity. Critics have pointed out that *The Unconsold* is a purely male-voiced work; that it offers a universal subjectivity, which is a specifically male experience of artistic genius and domestic failure (Krishnan, 2011). Ryder's fragmentation is tied to his failure as a father and husband and the women in the novel—the hotel manager's daughter, Sophie, Boris's mother—are more about his fears than of their own. By contrast, *Possession* is a work that explicitly investigates the gendering of the self in its parallel stories of male and female poets. LaMotte's resistance to being made into a man's man is similar to that of Maud, who is in resistance to being made into a man's academic voice. LaMotte's fight for her artistic voice in a male-dominated society is akin to Maud's fight for her feminist voice in a male-dominated academia. Byatt proposes that the split of the self is not a gender-neutral one, but distinct for male and female subjects, for women in particular the split is more severe as they are additionally burdened with the split of their selves by the same cultural forces that are constructing a coherent and authoritative male identity.

The styles of fragmentation are also influenced by the various national contexts of the two novels. As a Japanese-British writer, Ishiguro has often dealt with the theme of having to be someone who doesn't really belong anywhere. *The Unconsold*'s anonymous Central European city is reminiscent of a non-place, a space of universal exile in which the borders of national identity have been stripped away. Byatt, on the other hand, is firmly fixed in the literary history of England, and *Possession* is very much preoccupied with the very English legacy of Romanticism and Victorian poetry. Her characters' fragmentation is a fragmentation of tradition, a splitting of the self between the texts of English literary history. These two novels together present the idea of fragmentation in postmodern British fiction from the point of view of exile, and the point of view of the native, overwhelmed by the weight of inherited tradition.

Conclusion: The Self as Narrative Assemblage

The postmodern British novel is not simply a representation of the fractured self, but an enactment of a fractured form, the very structure of narrative being a sign of the instability of identity. *The Unconsoled* by Kazuo Ishiguro and *Possession* by A. S. Byatt are two of the most successful instances of that enactment, offering a similar epiphany: the self is not a source but a residue, not a presence but a trace, not a unity but a patchwork of fragments that are not all captured.

Ishiguro's phenomenological experiment is one in which the self-breaks down into the spaces and temporal loops of a dream-world, and the cohesiveness of the ego is a defensive fiction that can hold only with the help of suppressing the radical permeability of the body to its environment. Ryder cannot console himself; cannot bring his fragments together into a whole that can stand in a world of confidence; cannot even believe in the grand narratives, the artistic genius, fulfillment at home, or the historical progress, of which the postmodern subjectivity is bereft. The novel's refusal to offer any firm foundation on which to base any interpretation, its insistence on the literal reality of its impossible world, make it an unparalleled disturbing examination of what is it like for the self where "boundaries are completely penetrated"?

Byatt's historiographic metafiction is self that is fragmented across past texts, not coming before them, but in the archive. The postmodern subject is an intertextual construct, a palimpsest of quotations and references which can never be reduced to a single origin: this is what Roland and Maud realize when they discover they are possessed by the poets they study. But, in Byatt's novel, the fragmentation is not only a loss but also a connection: a way of life beyond living, a means of entering into relationships across the boundaries of time and space that would otherwise utterly separate us from the dead. The elegiac quality of *Possession*, its beauty, but also its irony, comes from this ambivalent awareness that the split self is the only self we have, that the only form of identity we can have in a culture that has been inundated with texts from the past.

When read together, these novels indicate that the postmodern British novel has a refined double vision on the subject of self. It shares with the poststructuralists the idea that identity is a construct, a fiction, created by a narrative and set of ideas that comes before and outlasts the individual. But it agrees with the humanists that this fiction is needed; it is not possible to live without the consolation of narrative coherence even though we are aware of its nature as a consolation. The postmodern fragmented self in fiction is therefore less a marker of cultural decay, and more a complex portrayal of the circumstances that contemporary subjects are forced to navigate in order to create their own sense of self: they know their sense of self is provisional, but they must create a sense of self anyway.

Finally, both *The Unconsoled* and *Possession* propose that the self-lives on after its fracturing only in and through the narrative. Ryder never gets to know himself, Roland and Maud may never fully know Ash and LaMotte, but their story lives on in the textual tradition. The postmodern self is not the death of the self but the reconfiguration of the self as a narrative assemblage, provisional, incomplete, intertextual, alive yet always, even desperately, alive.

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