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### **Remembering identity after postmodernity**

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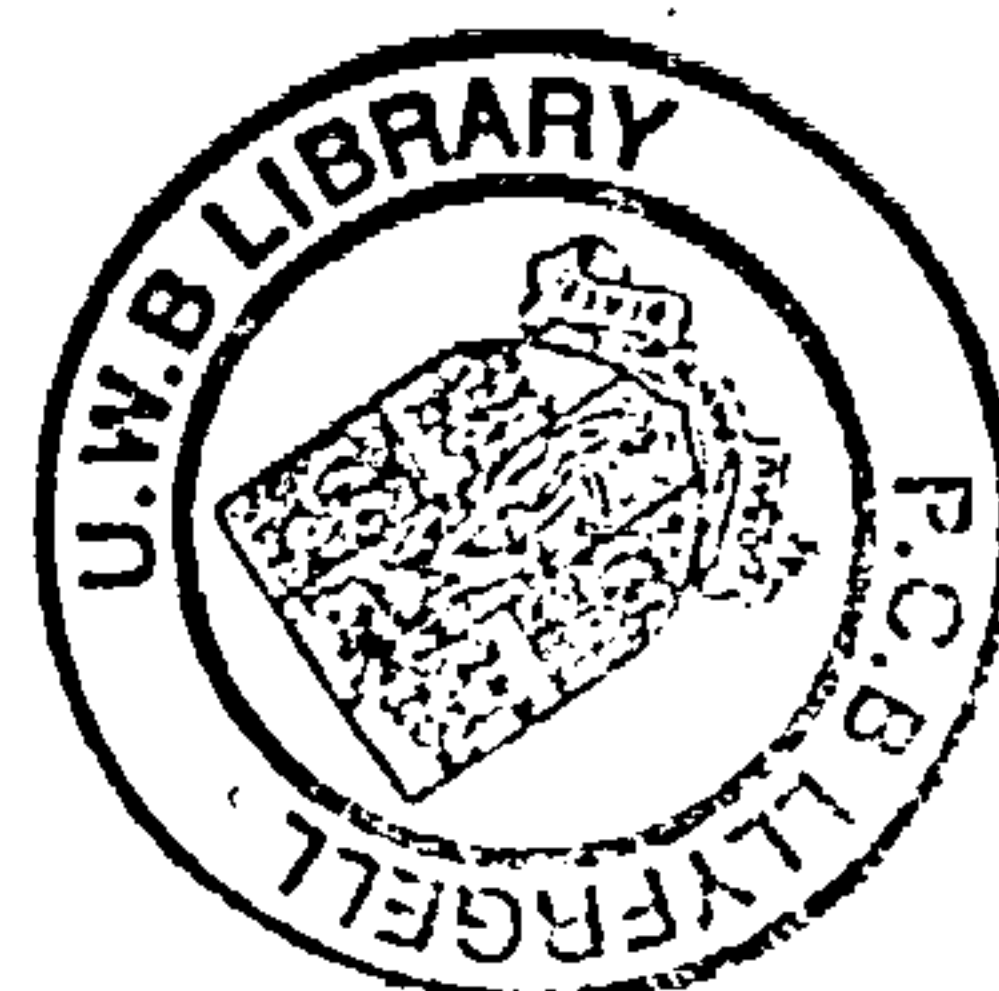
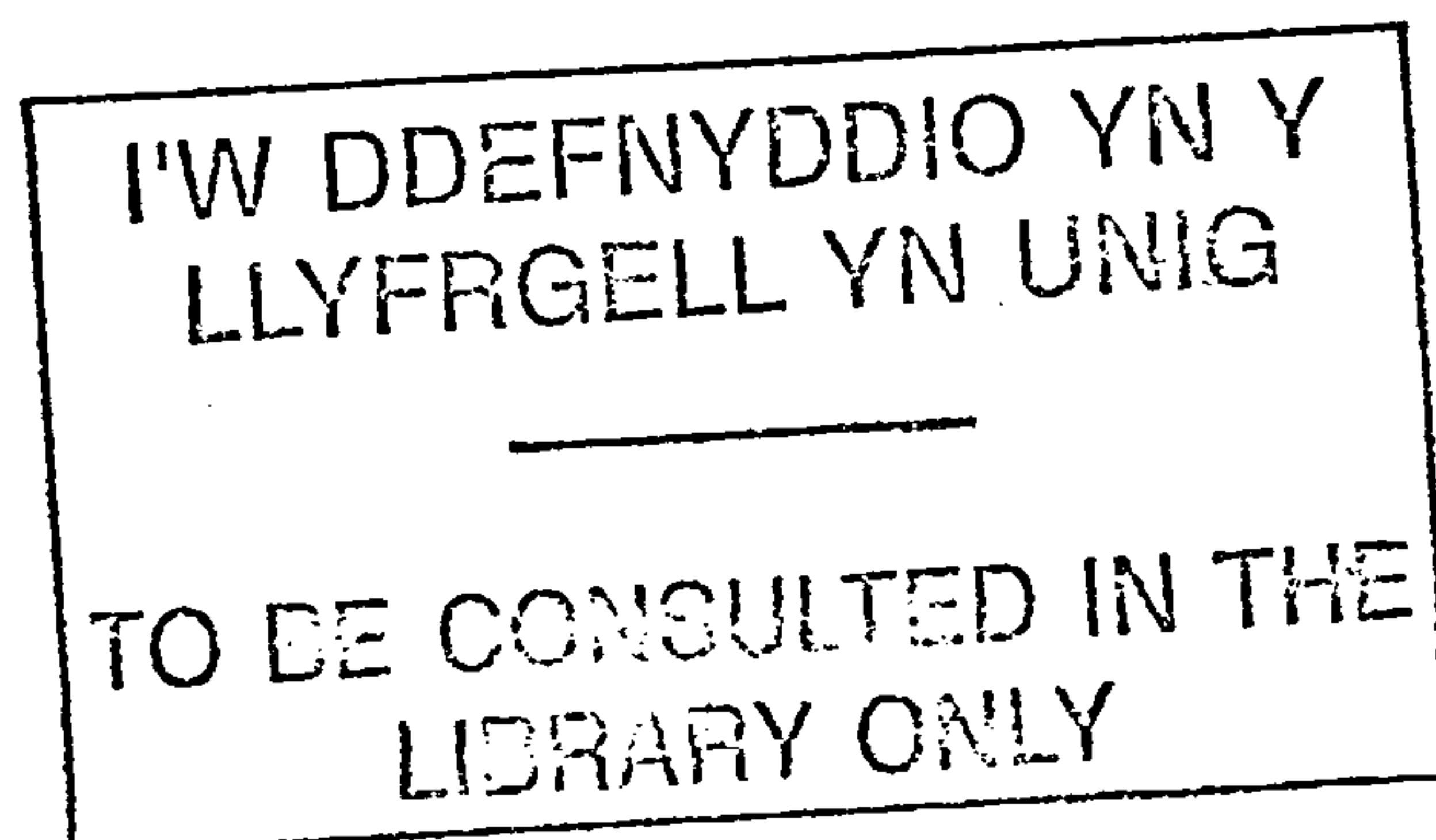
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# **Remembering Identity After Postmodernity.**

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## Abstract

This study focusses on the outcomes of postmodernity with particular emphasis on memory and the reconstruction of identity after postmodern theories of the fragmented self.

Chapter Two analyses Graham Swift's Waterland, Iain Banks's The Crow Road and Margaret Drabble's The Peppered Moth which show the reconnection of identity to cosmological, geological, genetic and familial history, and demonstrate the necessity of the subject's connection to the formerly denounced metanarrative of history. Drabble's text also highlights a gender issue concerning representations of women and motherhood in contemporary fiction.

In Chapter Three, Ian McEwan's The Child in Time and Margaret Atwood's Cat's Eye illustrate the way in which the new physics has influenced concepts of identity as being interconnected. The Child in Time shows how this model also risks creating an a-historical, de-politicised subject, particularly if existing problematic constructions of gender are not reformed. This reformative project is one of the main achievements of Cat's Eye in which Atwood revises archetypal female iconography.

Chapter Four discusses three texts from postcolonial India: Salman Rushdie's Midnight's Children, Anita Desai's Clear Light of Day and Arundhati Roy's The God of Small Things. These novels demonstrate the specific difficulties in constructing a coherent sense of self in a fractured political situation which mourns the broken connection to the motherland. Cultural imperialism and its psychological effects are brought to the fore here, showing the ways in which imperial ideals force the postcolonial subject to accept a hybrid identity. Women are doubly oppressed in these situations by both the machinations of an imposed Western patriarchal system and the indigenous caste hierarchy and also by association with the motherland ideal of a culturally authentic, pre-colonial India.

Chapter Five brings together the themes of gender, history, memory, colonisation and the reconstruction of the self in an analysis of Toni Morrison's Beloved and Anne Michaels's Fugitive Pieces. The effects of slavery and the Holocaust, respectively, are explored in these texts and both novels conclude with the necessity of finding ways to mourn loss and go on to represent modes of subjectivity as historically and socially connected. Communal memory is reclaimed as a necessary antidote to institutionalised violence and dispossession, thereby constructing a form of identity which progresses from postmodernity.



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## Chapter One: Introduction— Identity in Contemporary Fiction.

Inevitably the question will arise: what comes next?  
The logic of disillusionment will have to yield to some new affirmation.<sup>1</sup>

Andreas Huyssen's comment concerns the development of Western cultural consciousness, particularly in reference to what he terms a "radical modernism of negativity."<sup>2</sup> For Huyssen, recent decades have seen a "memory boom" in contemporary culture which is indicative of this desire to construct a "new affirmation."<sup>3</sup> The process of remembering is traced here through a collection of texts which demonstrate the attempt to 're-member' (in the sense of 'put back together') a shattered philosophical terrain in new ways which are appropriate for the present time. This remembering is undertaken on personal, social and national scales in these texts, all of which demonstrate the desire to create a contemporary ontology in which identity is anchored with reference to historical and temporal scales, familial and communal relationships, new developments in science and, in some cases, radically revised attitudes towards spirituality.

Jane Flax discusses a concept of identity which she terms the "social self", a paradigm which relates to this concept of remembering and the construction of identity in relation to other elements.<sup>4</sup> For Flax, as for many others within this study, a concept of interrelated

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<sup>1</sup> Andreas Huyssen, Twilight Memories: Marking Time in a Culture of Amnesia, (New York: Routledge, 1995) 95.

<sup>2</sup> Huyssen, Twilight 2

<sup>3</sup> Huyssen, Twilight 9.

<sup>4</sup> Jane Flax, Thinking Fragments: Psychoanalysis, Feminism, and Postmodernism in the Contemporary West, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990) 232.

identity is a positive move towards creating a new ontological pattern, one which overcomes the postmodern preoccupation with the fragmented self. Jean François Lyotard's statement in the introduction to his landmark work The Postmodern Condition has acquired totemic significance due to the fact that it acknowledges the most basic common denominators of the postmodern phenomenon: "I define postmodern as incredulity toward metanarratives."<sup>5</sup> These metanarratives are those philosophical precepts by which existence was formerly explained, such as Time, God and History, concepts which enforced a perception of reality which was most germane to the imperious selfhood of Enlightenment thought, a bourgeois, insular concept of identity. Postmodernity's resistance to overarching narratives extends into a critique of oppressive authoritarianism, a valuable aspect of the discourse, yet where postmodernity fails is in the need to reconstruct after such a process of deconstruction.

In the postmodern era, cultural consciousness was perceived to be involved in the dismantling and rearrangement of fragments, in the play with meaning. While this perspective undoubtedly had its place, postmodernity is currently felt to be waning due to its lack of constructive, progressive volition. Steven Connor identifies this stasis as a particularly postmodern feature: "It is as though postmodernity had borrowed from the modern its capacity for breaking with the past, its quality of self-possession, while losing all its forward impulsion. The past is abandoned, without the vocation towards the future."<sup>6</sup> This position has some very serious consequences when applied to the topic of identity, the

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<sup>5</sup> Jean-François Lyotard, The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge, trans. Geoff Bennington & Brian Massumi (1984; Manchester: Manchester UP, 1984) 27.

<sup>6</sup> Steven Connor, "The Impossibility of the Present: or, from the Contemporary to the Contemporaneous," Literature and the Contemporary: Fictions and Theories of the Present, eds. Roger Luckhurst and Peter Marks (New York: Longman, 1999) 21.



development of which is thrown into crisis as there can apparently be no evolution, given this barricade of thought.

Postmodernity is therefore a discourse inspired by loss; the loss of metanarratives and the concept of identity which those metanarratives supported. In her psychoanalytic reading of postmodernity, Wendy Wheeler identifies two possible responses to loss:

[w]hat we call postmodern seems to consist in the struggle between melancholia and mourning—between, on the one hand, nostalgic turns to the past and a masochistic sense of social fragmentations, and, on the other, the attempt to imagine differently reconstituted communities and selves . . .<sup>7</sup>

It is important to distinguish between nostalgic melancholia and a healthy remembering. The melancholic side of postmodernity is that which is most readily represented by psychosis: diffuse, manic, engaged in the play of meaning (which at root is really a crisis of meaning), incredulous towards the metanarratives, and ready to question any structure whilst simultaneously believing itself to be beyond question. However, the mourning aspect of postmodernity and, more importantly, its product, is the acknowledgement of the loss of former principles and the creation of new ones, a point which Wheeler goes on to make:

we might therefore say that the outcome of postmodernity, seen as the attempt to live with loss and uncertainty as a permanent condition, would be the discovery or invention of ways of being in the world which move beyond the harsh individualism of utilitarian modernity, and towards a different way of accounting for and valuing human needs.<sup>8</sup>

This creation of a new perspective forms part of Julia Kristeva's work in Black Sun on the relationship between melancholia and mourning in which she concludes with a study on the value of artistic formulation as a way of overcoming depression. In the culmination of

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<sup>7</sup> Wendy Wheeler, A New Modernity? Change in Science, Literature and Politics, (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1999) 74-75.

<sup>8</sup> Wheeler, Modernity 74-75, emphasis in original.

her argument, Kristeva advocates the use of “sublimatory solutions” as a way of healing psychic collapse in which the subject undergoes a cathartic process of representation, creating beauty out of the depressive state, thereby enabling them to heal. Relating to psychology, sublimation can be defined as the translation of primitive energies into socially acceptable activities.<sup>9</sup> As Kristeva explains, “Works of art thus lead us to establish relations with ourselves and others that are less destructive, more soothing.”<sup>10</sup> Kristeva’s and Wheeler’s work agrees insofar as both writers advocate a similar creative process for healing on both individual and cultural scales. Wheeler’s “differently reconstituted communities and selves” and the “social self” of which Flax writes are in alignment with Huyssen’s “new affirmation”, being the end product of postmodernity’s mourning face.

In Chapter Two this “new affirmation” arises in the attempt to position oneself with reference to different scales of history and different temporal rhythms. This chapter concentrates on Graham Swift’s Waterland (1984), Iain Banks’s The Crow Road, (1992) and Margaret Drabble’s The Peppered Moth (2000), works which represent contemporary British realism over the final years of the twentieth century and into the twenty-first.<sup>11</sup> As Dominic Head suggests, British fiction shows significant moves away from the postmodern at this stage, a point which this combination of texts illustrates from different perspectives.<sup>12</sup> The chapter begins with Waterland as a text which occupies one of the most transitional spaces in

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<sup>9</sup> Collins English Dictionary 1152.

<sup>10</sup> Julia Kristeva, Black Sun: Depression and Melancholia, trans. Leon S. Roudiez. (New York: Columbia UP, 1989) 187.

<sup>11</sup> Graham Swift, Waterland, (1984; London: Picador, 1992). Iain Banks, The Crow Road, (1992; London: Abacus, 1993). Margaret Drabble, The Peppered Moth, (2000; London: Penguin, 2001). All further references are to these editions.

<sup>12</sup> Dominic Head, The Cambridge Introduction to Modern British Fiction 1950-2000, (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2000) 229.



this thesis, with the empty landscape of its Fenland setting becoming a metaphor for cultural consciousness.

Swift's text is preoccupied with melancholia and the struggle to accept loss through the process of mourning. Waterland presents the point at which postmodernity can no longer sustain its process of deconstruction as we see characters trapped in a timeless present, unable to escape the pull of history. This state illustrates Kristeva's descriptions of the depressive's sense of time which

does not pass by, the before/after notion does not rule it, nor does it direct from the past towards a goal. . . . Rivetted to the past, regressing to the paradise or inferno of an unsurpassable experience, melancholy persons manifest a strange memory: everything has gone by, they seem to say, but I am faithful to those bygone days, I am nailed down to them, no revolution is possible, there is no future . . . An overinflated, hyperbolic past fills all the dimensions of psychic continuity.<sup>13</sup>

This evokes the ideas of Connor, mentioned above, when he writes that in the postmodern, "time can no longer move, but only, so to speak, dilate."<sup>14</sup> However, like The Crow Road, this entrapment in time is turned into a sense of connection to history in a move which reforms and reclaims one of the metanarrative principles. Swift's novel comes to rely on history as a narrative which can ground the subject, often catastrophically, within a complicated network of causality and chaos.

In The Crow Road, the melancholic sense of being trapped in the past is expressed through the novel's gothic influences. Whereas Waterland expresses the connection of the individual to familial history, The Crow Road follows the development of a character who comes to understand his connection to geological and cosmological history. Like Waterland, Banks's text also illustrates the difficulties of living within a Godless ideology, a point which

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<sup>13</sup> Kristeva, Black 60.

<sup>14</sup> Connor, 20, emphasis in original.



is evoked many times in both texts. The theological debate highlights a concern with meaning which is the problem at the base of the contemporary identity crisis for Wheeler who writes that human consciousness cannot function without a greater sense of one's place in the world, a sense which was formerly provided for by religion. Wheeler discusses the effect of the erosion of the Christian metanarrative in an increasingly secularised society:

in doing away with God, and in replacing Him with man as the source of all knowledge about the world, modernity opened within itself a sort of abyss of meaninglessness. . . . those human needs and feelings which had been more or less securely held and provided for by religious and traditional narratives of man's meaning and place in the cosmos no longer worked . . . <sup>15</sup>

Kristeva also writes that the increase in secularisation has both instigated and exacerbated the identity crisis, taking away one of the key metanarratives: "Changing in accordance with the religious climate, melancholia asserted itself, if I may say so, in religious doubt. There is nothing more dismal than a dead God . . ." <sup>16</sup> The struggle to accept the death of God links Waterland and The Crow Road, yet The Peppered Moth leaves a question mark over the issue of spirituality.

Like Swift and Banks, Drabble also constructs a narrative which seeks to demonstrate the individual's interconnection with communal, historical and temporal models, but The Peppered Moth also shows the inevitability of religious resurgence as God, like Time and History, cannot be simply abandoned but must also be rethought. As in the other two texts in Chapter Two, The Peppered Moth shows the reconnection of the self-consciously postmodern present to enormous perspectives of time and history but the atheism which is accepted in the work of Swift and Banks is not so readily accepted here, as Drabble includes an epiphanic

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<sup>15</sup> Wheeler, Modernity 72.

<sup>16</sup> Kristeva, Black 8.

moment towards the end of this novel which questions whether postmodern ideals are truly able to eradicate the desire for a religious context.

The Peppered Moth brings another element to this chapter in its reappraisal of feminist concerns. The concept of interrelated ontology presented by the two previous texts is complicated by the problematic representation of women in each novel, wherein female characters are associated with the maternal which becomes a site of differentiation for the male protagonists. Interrelated identity is taken into a different dimension in The Peppered Moth in the analysis of mother/daughter relationships. As a novel which looks closely at the position of women in the postmodern era, Drabble's text recognises the inharmonious state of mother/daughter relations with a culture which laments the dissolution of the insular subjectivity of the Enlightenment. Drabble's protagonists highlight the concern which runs through the work of writers such as Flax and Patricia Waugh, who warn of the difficulties inherent in women's relation to the postmodern. As Waugh writes:

Postmodernism expresses nostalgia for but loss of belief in the concept of the human subject as an agent effectively intervening in history, through its fragmentation of discourses, language games, and decentring of subjectivity. Feminism seeks a subjective identity, a sense of effective agency and history for women which has hitherto been denied them by the dominant culture.<sup>17</sup>

In light of this reasoning, a feminist perspective is irreconcilable with even the progressive, mourning aspect of postmodernity. Drabble's project in The Peppered Moth is akin to Waugh's as both writers "think of subjectivity in ways which neither simply repeat the Enlightenment concept of modernity nor repudiate it in an embrace of anarchic dispersal."<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Patricia Waugh, Feminine Fictions: Revisiting the Postmodern, (London: Routledge, 1989) 9.

<sup>18</sup> Patricia Waugh, "Stalemates?: Feminists, Postmodernists and Unfinished Issues in Modern Aesthetics," Modern Literary Theory: A Reader, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. eds. Philip Rice and Patricia Waugh (1989; London: Arnold, 1996): 333.



New formations of subjectivity, the maternal and the idea of an interrelated identity are all ideas which follow through into Chapter Three in which we begin to read them in relation to the new physics through Margaret Atwood's Cat's Eye (1988) and Ian McEwan's The Child in Time (1987).<sup>19</sup> The new physics is, in basic terms, the attempt to unite relativity theory, which deals with forces on a huge scales, with quantum physics, which accounts for the workings of sub-atomic particles. It is an incomplete theory which requires the identification of one hypothetical particle called the Higgs Boson if it is to cohere completely. Should the new physics ever operate as a complete theory it would explain how all the various forces, dimensions and particles of the universe are inextricably interrelated. Regardless of whether this theory proves to be true or not, the new physics can be read as another form of contemporary fiction which reveals our desire to see ourselves and the rest of time and matter as interrelated parts of one whole. In contrast to the postmodern forms of fragmentation discussed above, the new physics ideas seek to forge unity, questing for a single, elusive, possibly non-existent particle in order to create another web of meaning within which to re-conceptualise life, a contemporary metanarrative. Essentially, the new physics is concerned with 're-memembering' the cosmos of which we are an integral part, a theory which contests the dissolution of postmodernity, and which, with reference to Huyssen, can be interpreted as a "new affirmation."

Just as the discovery of the heliocentric planetary system inspired a massive cultural reevaluation during the Renaissance age, the new physics developments are starting to have greater philosophical implications for identity. The findings of contemporary physics extends

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<sup>19</sup> Ian McEwan, The Child in Time, (1987; London: Vintage, 1992). Margaret Atwood, Cat's Eye, (1988; London: Virago, 1990). All further references are to these editions.

way beyond the circles of scientific research and can be found to be influencing, as well as corresponding with, research and artistic creation in a variety of fields. As Susan Strehle writes, “The general conception of the change in reality implied by these terms extends beyond physics into psychology . . . philosophy . . . and literary theory . . . In short, like any significant change in reality, the latest one has rattled windows in every house on the block.”<sup>20</sup> These scientific advancements can also be thought of as indicative of a particular stage in the evolution of Western cultural consciousness as it begins to manifest a drive towards a holistic, integrated worldview.

In Cat's Eye Atwood explores the new physics in relation to identity and memory and, in doing so, shows how such ideas of integration can be channelled into the creation of ontological forms which seek to overcome melancholia, represented in this text by the clinical depression which the protagonist suffers. Alongside this developing ontological perspective, Atwood consciously reworks entrenched notions of female subjectivity by reinterpreting the iconography of the Virgin Mary. Thus, the debate surrounding feminist concepts of subjectivity which is opened in Chapter Two with reference to The Peppered Moth is carried through into Chapter Three, where it encounters a new stage of development with regard to scientific innovation. By engaging with the new physics paradigm, Cat's Eye and The Child in Time work in an expanding frontier between realism and speculative fiction, forcing a debate concerning our self-understanding and our relation to everything which surrounds us.

While Cat's Eye demonstrates the use of the new physics as a bridge between mourning and the creation of new ontological forms, The Child in Time can be read as a

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<sup>20</sup> Susan Strehle, Fiction in the Quantum Universe, (Chapel Hill: North Carolina UP, 1992) 13-14.



cautionary narrative in which mourning is unsuccessful, thereby risking a regressive, melancholic state. In McEwan's text, the new physics becomes an extension of the maternal paradigm in which the individual senses a connection with a power which is reminiscent of the intra-uterine state of wholeness. This paradigm becomes reminiscent of Wheeler's "nostalgic turns to the past" in its desire for wholeness.<sup>21</sup> Evidently, such an association has negative implications for female identity, women then becoming locked into the damaging role of the a-historical, de-politicised mother figure, an outcome which is demonstrated in McEwan's text. A comparative analysis of these two novels highlights both the dangers and benefits of such a holistic impulse in contemporary constructions of identity.

Chapter Four complicates these ideas further by looking at their application in non-Western, postcolonial fiction from India. As a country which has only been independent from British rule since 1947, India's struggle to regain autonomy over its political scene has been fraught with problems arising, among other things, from partitioning. This national situation filters into the constructions of subjectivity within the combination of texts selected here. Clear Light of Day (1980) by Anita Desai, Midnight's Children (1981) by Salman Rushdie and The God of Small Things (1997) by Arundhati Roy are set in India after independence from British rule and each text shows, to varying degrees, the difficulties of constructing a coherent sense of self in the wake of such vast political change.<sup>22</sup>

A truly interconnected concept of identity must include a global perspective, yet a study of postcolonial issues demonstrates that the forms which are being developed with

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<sup>21</sup> Wheeler, Modernity 74.

<sup>22</sup> Anita Desai, Clear Light of Day, (1980; London: Vintage, 2001). Salman Rushdie, Midnight's Children, (1981; London: Vintage, 1995). Arundhati Roy, The God of Small Things, (1997; London: Flamingo, 1998). All further references are to these editions.

reference to Western situations are inappropriate for postcolonial situations. By comparison, the new physics-inspired philosophy of the previous chapter also appears to be as effete and politically evasive as postmodernity. This grouping of texts provides a historical continuum of decline from the early 1980s onward, from the publication of Desai and Rushdie's novels, to Roy's tragic account of life in the India of the late 1990s. Thirty years after Independence, Clear Light of Day and Midnight's Children end with some sense of the possibility of a healing whereby the protagonists nurture hope for the future and begin to realign their sense of relation to the world around them. However, The God of Small Things, written fifty years after Independence, shows its protagonists completely overwhelmed by melancholic regression.

Chapter Four analyses the specific condition of postcolonial mourning in which the construction of identity is bound up with the motherland as a site of cultural origin. Within postcolonial mourning, it is not the bourgeois, insular self which is mourned, rather it is the sense of connection to cultural origins as represented by the nation, language, and traditions such as mythology and dance, part of a store of cultural memory which has been exploited through the history of Empire. The postcolonial subject is irreparably broken from this "source of self-image", to use Elaine Savory Fido's term, due to the processes of colonial intervention, followed by the relinquishing of colonial power and the subsequent lingering hold of cultural imperialism.<sup>23</sup>

For the female characters of Desai and Roy's texts the difficulty of creating a viable ontological paradigm is compounded by the inherently patriarchal structure of Indian society.

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<sup>23</sup> Elaine Savory Fido, "Mother/lands: Self and Separation in the Work of Buchi Emechita, Bessie Head and Jean Rhys," Motherlands: Black Women's Writing from Africa, the Caribbean and South Asia, ed. Sushelia Nasta (London: Women's Press, 1991) 89.



Women in these novels are shown to bear the burden of living in a culture which is haunted by a motherland ideal, which still offers the illusion of reconnection with a sense of cultural authenticity. The women in these texts are associated with this notion of an unattainable, idealised, pre-colonial past in a way which extricates them from the world of political change, thereby trapping women in a regressive state, as does the new physics paradigm in The Child in Time. As the effects of the caste system are shown, particularly through the course of The God of Small Things, we see that the feminist concerns which have been explored in the second and third chapters of this study are greatly compounded by the present political situation in India and that the possibility of ontological reformation is hindered in these cases.

Chapter Five then moves on to examine two texts which are situated at the confluence of the above ideas concerning identity in Western and postcolonial areas. Toni Morrison's Beloved (1987) and Anne Michaels's Fugitive Pieces (1996) are novels which cover the dispossession of national and cultural identity due to the effects of oppressive forces, while also showing how individuals struggle to recreate a new sense of belonging and coherent identity within a Western context.<sup>24</sup> Beloved is set in Ohio in 1873 and follows the trials of an Afro-American woman who has been freed from slavery. Fugitive Pieces comprises two related narratives: the first is that of a sixty-year-old Jewish man who escaped a World War Two pogrom in Poland while he was only seven; the next is by a younger student of his, also Jewish, whose parents survived a concentration camp. These texts explore the theme of communal memory, often expressed as cultural haunting, which provides a base for the reconstruction of the self that does not rely on an exterior source of identification, such as a motherland.

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<sup>24</sup> Toni Morrison, Beloved, (1987; London: Vintage, 1997). Anne Michaels, Fugitive Pieces, (1996; London: Bloomsbury, 1998). All further references are to these editions.



The problems of postmodernity are consciously worked through in these novels, both of which support a reading of postmodernity as an illness to be healed. Morrison in particular provides a historical reading of the context of modernism which encompasses the effects of the slave trade on cultural consciousness. For Morrison, it is the African slavery which took place three hundred years prior to World War One which “broke the world in half, it broke every way. It broke Europe. It made them into something else, it made them slave masters, it made them crazy.”<sup>25</sup> This interpretation points to the mourning and melancholia at the base of the cultural psychosis which postmodernity represents.

Writing about Hiroshima and the Holocaust, Kristeva suggests that the monstrosities humanity has witnessed have caused an ideological collapse, a point which is similar to Morrison’s interpretation of the effects of slavery. Events of such cataclysmic violence thus become points in history at which artistic creation seems meaningless. As Kristeva writes, “[w]hat those monstrous and painful sights do damage to are our systems of perception and representation.”<sup>26</sup> However, the texts in Chapter Five, and those in the study as a whole, insist on the possibility and importance of representation whilst simultaneously accepting that representation can never be enough to remember the violence experienced in its entirety.

The possibility of healing through the reformation of ontology, which these novels explore, is reminiscent of the progression made, or at least attempted, in every text in this study. Throughout, we see that the creation of new ontological forms through individual memory, communal memory and the relation to new or reinvented metanarratives can result in the kind of “sublimatory solutions” of which Kristeva writes, bringing about a healing of

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<sup>25</sup> Toni Morrison. Interview, “Living Memory,” with Paul Gilroy. City Limits 31 March (1988): 26.

<sup>26</sup> Kristeva Black 223.

the depressive state of the postmodern. These developments show the end product of postmodernity, in which certain voices begin to remember identity within a contemporary context, a process which we will now explore through three contemporary British texts.

## Chapter Two: Beyond Mourning—

### Waterland, The Crow Road and The Peppered Moth.

Graham Swift's Waterland (1984), Iain Banks's The Crow Road (1992), and Margaret Drabble's The Peppered Moth (2000) all deal with contemporary constructions of subjectivity in the face of the postmodern deconstruction of identity. The three texts in this first chapter show their protagonists reaching a point at which they come to a greater understanding of history and their place within it, resulting in valuable comment on the debate over identity within current British fiction. In each case, the narratives here demonstrate ambivalence verging on outright rejection of postmodernism in favour of the creation of the kind of regenerative outlook advocated by Wheeler.

Dominic Head comments on the fraught relationship that British fiction has had with postmodernity, classing it as “conspicuous” and entirely dependent on the way in which ‘postmodern’ is defined by the reader.<sup>27</sup> The features within some British fiction which Head identifies as postmodern are the “questioning of metanarrative, the decentring of cultural authority, [and] the ironic disruption of the self-contained fictional world”, all of which relate to the texts under consideration here to some degree.<sup>28</sup>

However, Head also notes some aspects of this body of literature which do not correlate with the typical perception of postmodernity, such as “a conviction about the moral and emotional function of narrative fiction, and its ability to make readers re-engage with the

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<sup>27</sup> Head 229.

<sup>28</sup> Head 229.



world they know.”<sup>29</sup> For example, Head writes that Waterland “asks searching questions about narrative authority” and “revivifies mimesis in the process.”<sup>30</sup> The strongly mimetic position from which Drabble’s narratives are written is also commented on by Head who notes her rejection of experimental writing in favour of maintaining a stoical realism which allows her characters to show how they are “embedded in the competing intellectual claims of their day.”<sup>31</sup> The basis of Head’s interpretation is that by maintaining a focus on realism, these British writers illustrate the areas in which postmodernity, as a dominant critical ideology, lacks efficacy.

Head distinguishes between what he terms British postmodernism and the international phenomenon of postmodernity, saying of the latter that it foregrounds artifice to such a degree that it is identifiable mainly by its capricious rupturing of realist codes:

This degree of playfulness is self-depreciating in the sense that it has the effect of devaluing the role and function of ‘literature’. No longer capable of seriousness, the literary object colludes in its own debunking, participating in the cultural logic that blurs the distinction between ‘high’ and ‘low’ literature. The consequence of this is a culture of pastiche, with no vantage point from which value can be assigned with authority.<sup>32</sup>

However, Head appears to equate the term ‘contemporary’ with the term ‘postmodern’ in a way which is unproductive. The texts which are under analysis in this chapter are the antithesis of everything noted in the above citation. As such, struggling to assign some degree of ‘postmodernity’ to these texts is futile and unnecessary. The truly interesting aspects of the novels under consideration here are their points of departure from the

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<sup>29</sup> Head 229.

<sup>30</sup> Head 229.

<sup>31</sup> Head 233.

<sup>32</sup> Head 229.

postmodern; the ways in which they seek to claim value, to affirmatively reconfigure the realist code with all its attendant implications for the discourse on identity and even suggest some value in the formerly debunked metanarratives, particularly that of history.

Moreover, the way in which Head describes postmodernity as a global movement correlates with that melancholic outlook of which Wheeler and Kristeva write. British postmodernism, as Head describes it, relates to the progressive mourning side of postmodernism, that side which has the ability to exceed the postmodern as it mutates into another stage of development, engaging in the creation of those new communities and selves which Wheeler writes are “the outcome of postmodernity.”<sup>33</sup>

As with all three of the novels under discussion here, The Peppered Moth traces the development of one’s relationship to history using the connected themes of maternal lineage and genetic inheritance. Being the most recent novel taken into consideration in this thesis, Drabble’s text is an excellent example of the currently emerging need to develop coherent ideologies concerning the self, the family, the community and history. Drabble’s narrative traces the development of the mother/daughter bond over three generations of women, a feature which raises many interesting ideas concerning feminist ideology. Faro Gaulden is a young woman who returns to her grandmother’s hometown in Yorkshire in order to attend a community meeting concerning the local discovery of an ancient skeleton which is the basis of a scientific project being undertaken in that area in order to ascertain how many, if any, of the locals carry the same DNA as the skeleton. The specific kind of DNA being used to trace lines of inheritance is mitochondrial DNA, the genetic information which is handed down through the maternal line alone, an aspect which brings the feminist perspective of this text

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<sup>33</sup> Wheeler, Modernity 74.



into the foreground once again. Drabble's text is primarily concerned with reconnecting the dehistoricised postmodern present with a historical continuum, a development which is expressed through the development of Faro's character. In doing so, Drabble communicates grave reservations over the possibility of dispensing with metanarrative principles entirely, suggesting instead that new philosophical precepts must evolve in order to give conceptual grounding to contemporary constructions of the self.

Similarly, The Crow Road is primarily concerned with the realignment of the self with history. Like Drabble, Banks looks at familial and cultural history, referring back to the history of the ancient Scotts, and the development of the human species. However, the protagonist of this text, Prentice McHoan, also comes to a recognition of the vast scales of cosmological time. This has a profound influence on Prentice, a student of history, who develops a sense of his interrelation to the cosmos. Superficially, this text's main narrative concern is Prentice's discovery of his Uncle Fergus's guilty secrets, as Prentice learns that Fergus is responsible for having murdered both his own wife and brother-in-law, Prentice's Aunt Fiona and Uncle Rory. This aspect of Banks's narrative provides a Gothic theme which becomes a metaphor for the haunting of one culture's ideology by another's; this is a text in which the past haunts the present moment.

The collision of past and present is certainly a prevalent theme in Waterland, in which Swift presents the story of Tom Crick, a man in his fifties who is having to give up teaching History due to his wife's scandalous abduction of a baby from a supermarket. In his final lessons, Tom narrates to his pupils the story of events which leads to his wife's actions, demonstrating to his pupils that the individual is always implicated in chaotic history, making it difficult to ever fully blame his wife for her actions. His narrative tracks back over forty years to the summer of 1943, when he and Mary were both teenagers. Tom recounts the main

events of this time: Mary's pregnancy and subsequent abortion and the murder of their friend Freddie Parr by Tom's half-brother, Dick. Traumatic as they are, these events are shown to be only part of the complex web of incidents which eventually lead to Mary's crime. Tom interweaves several hundred years of his and Mary's family history into the narrative, showing its inescapable pull and its perpetual effect on the present moment.

### **Waterland and Remaking Nothingness**

In this text, the primary impetus of life is shown to be narrative, an idea which is reflected in the intimate first-person narrative style. Storytelling is shown to be the practice by which we structure reality and join our individual selves to the world around us and to history. The Fenland setting of Waterland is described by Tom as "a landscape which, of all landscapes, most approximates to Nothing" (13). The vast, empty flatness of the Fens is used by Swift as a metaphor for the individual psyche as well as that of a wider cultural consciousness which is viewed as barren and formless after the metanarratives have been dismantled. Swift demonstrates different ways of filling this "Nothing" with narrative. In particular, this is achieved by the main storytellers of the text: Tom, and his parents Helen and Henry Crick.

In terms of Kristeva's analysis, storytelling is precisely that process of sublimation which "weaves a hypersign around and with the depressive void" and allows one to "remake nothingness better than it was and within an unchanging harmony, here now and forever, for the sake of someone else."<sup>34</sup> The dynamics of sublimation allows the depressive access to a healing process, creating anew in order that the subject can avoid being overpowered by the depressive death drive. This psychological example can be applied to the individual or to

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<sup>34</sup> Kristeva Black 99.



society, as discussed above with reference to Wheeler's argument. This is precisely the dynamic at work in Swift's text in which narrative grounds itself firmly within the past, suggesting that its story is part of a chain of events that will continue into the future, thereby becoming a potentially reformative outcome of postmodernity which, as Connor notes, has no 'forward impulsion.' Waterland maintains its position as a forward-looking text; as Tom tells his pupils, "there must always be—don't deny it—a future" (93).

For Tom, storytelling and history are closely linked and he remembers his introduction to both via his mother's tales. After studying global, political history and the history of his family, Tom reaches the conclusion that "history is a yarn," nothing more than a story (62). This conclusion does not occasion disillusionment but a deep satisfaction for Tom who admits that he did not necessarily want to learn something factual or revelatory from history, but instead simply wanted to enjoy its narrative: "And can I deny that what I wanted all along was not some golden nugget that history would at last yield up. But History itself: the Grand Narrative, the filler of vacuums, the dispeller of fears of the dark?" (62). The "vacuum" referred to here is both the Fenland environment and Tom's perception of cultural consciousness. Tom is aware of the essentially man-made quality of history, that it is merely a story constructed and perpetuated by people. However, it is this artificiality which Tom craves, evidence of humankind's need to make sense of the past and inform the present. Tom defines humankind as a storytelling species which craves meaning whilst being aware that meaning is not fixed:

Children, only animals live entirely in the Here and Now. Only nature knows neither memory nor history. But man—let me offer you a definition—is the story-telling animal. Wherever he goes he wants to leave behind not a chaotic wake, not an empty space, but the comforting marker-buoys and trail-signs of stories. (62)

The “chaotic wake” referred to here is reminiscent of the bombed cities Tom sees in 1946 and of the damage civilisation can do to itself. Against both the empty backdrop of the Fens and the traumatic state of post-war Europe, Tom’s belief in the creation of meaning is very firm, positing it as a basic human need: “Events elude meaning, but we look for meanings. Another definition of Man: the animal who craves meaning—but knows—” (140), the omitted words here are arguably ‘there is none,’ inviting the reader to come to an admission that the universe is meaningless.

Swift constructs tension between the progress of dredging and reclaiming land, and the threat of the ever-encroaching sea which surrounds the Fens, “a liquid form of Nothing” (13), a contrasting emblem of humankind’s primal origins and the regressive deep past. Psychosis is associated with the obliterating water, while storytelling is linked to the creation of inhabitable land and a healthy mind. The story-telling Cricks form part of this link in their association with land-reclamation projects in which they dredged the various canals and rivers allowing the land to drain and be sculpted. Like the ‘Grand Narrative’ of history and the art of storytelling itself, land-reclamation is acknowledged as a kind of artifice: “Strictly speaking, [the Fens] are never reclaimed, only being reclaimed . . .” (10), as any decline in the work of dredging would allow the drainage systems to silt up once again, flooding the land.

The reader is told that the Fens is a “fairy-tale land” (3), whose bare emptiness “yield[s] so readily to the imaginary—and the supernatural” (18). The landscape itself demands that the Cricks conjure up stories in order to lessen the maddening effects of the stark reality presented by so much open, flat land. Tom notes the danger inherent in living within such a landscape: “To live in the Fens is to receive strong doses of reality. The flat monotony of reality; the wide empty space of reality. Melancholia and self-murder are not unknown in the Fens. Heavy drinking, madness and sudden acts of violence are not



uncommon” (17). The “reality” which Tom notes, so featureless and stark, is this text’s metaphorical representation of a culture without metanarratives; potentially formless and unable to protect the subject from psychological collapse. Thus it is the subject’s duty to create her/his own narratives in order to prevent the “melancholia and self-murder”, or psychic collapse, of which Tom forewarns: “What do you do when reality is an empty space? You can make things happen—and conjure up, with all the risks, a little token urgency; . . . like the Cricks who out of their watery toils could always dredge up a tale or two, you can tell stories” (61).

Again, this tension between progress and storytelling on one hand, and the regression inherent in the sea’s threat to the land can be read in psychoanalytic terms. As Kristeva writes, “Artifice, as sublime meaning for and on behalf of the underlying, implicit nonbeing, replaces the ephemeral.”<sup>35</sup> This “implicit nonbeing” is the death drive, a concept symbolised in Waterland by both the waters surrounding the Fens, and the essential meaninglessness of an existence devoid of metanarratives (or “the ephemeral”). At a symbolic level, this regression relates to the death-drive, the nostalgia to return to a blank, primal state. Kristeva explains this aspect of psychology with reference to Freud: “Having observed that living beings appeared later than the non-living, Freud thought that a specific drive must reside in them, which tended toward ‘a return to an earlier state’. . . . [Freud] considers the death drive as an intrapsychic manifestation of phylogenetic inheritance going back to inorganic matter.”<sup>36</sup> For both Swift and Kristeva, the healthy mind is one which creates narrative in order to control the “implicit nonbeing”.

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<sup>35</sup> Kristeva Black 99.

<sup>36</sup> Kristeva Black 16-17.

In his discussion of the logic of post-structuralism, Huyssen makes a similar point when he writes of a “new affirmation,” saying: “Nietzsche rings true when he says: ‘[t]hat the destruction of an illusion does not produce truth but only one more piece of ignorance, an extension of our ‘empty space,’ an increase of our ‘desert.’”<sup>37</sup> Huyssen’s quotation from Nietzsche is particularly appropriate for this discussion in the use of landscape as a metaphor for consciousness, both cultural and individual. The Cricks’ stories are constructions which parallel that ‘new affirmation’ of which Huyssen writes, filling the empty ‘desert’ or Fenland with meaning.

Paul Smethurst describes this aspect as an attempt “to create those defences against chaos and non-differentiation, to find something to crawl inside and call home.”<sup>38</sup> Smethurst’s reference to ‘chaos and non-differentiation’ corresponds to the empty desert of which Huyssen and Nietzsche write and is essentially the psychological collapse risked by those living in a world without metanarratives. Storytelling, based in personal, familial and national histories forms the basis for the creation of a context which constitutes such a ‘defence’ or ‘new affirmation.’

As a nurse, Tom’s mother encourages her patients, soldiers sent back from the war, to try to remember their experiences and put them into stories which they can tell to others, thereby defending themselves against the maddening effects of their experiences of war. Helen sees the danger inherent in attempting to forget traumatic parts of one’s life, and Tom paraphrases his mother’s point of view in his narrative: “No, don’t forget. Don’t erase it. You can’t erase it. But make it into a story. Just a story. Yes, everything’s crazy. What’s

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<sup>37</sup> Huyssen, *Twilight* 95.

<sup>38</sup> Paul Smethurst, *The Postmodern Chronotope: Reading Space and Time in Contemporary Fiction*, (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2000) 271.

real? All a story. Only a story . . .” (225). Like Tom and the Crick family in general, the artifice of human-made meaning is accepted but it is nevertheless valued as a helpful way of making life bearable. Such creations are certainly revered by Kristeva as a viable antidote to depression on both personal and cultural scales.

Making meaning is one of the driving forces of Waterland, indeed, the impetus behind Tom’s narrative is to explain to his pupils why he is being made redundant. Tom’s explanation sets off a ceaseless chain of tales, each explaining the content of the one before it, in order to reach an ever-receding initial reason for his early retirement, to the extent that the reader is aware of that complete comprehension could only arise if one could understand history in its entirety. The idea behind this is that the human subject is always an inextricable part of history, an aspect which Swift himself notes in interview: “I think the older we get, the more we know that we belong to history. We’re not just the individual person that we recognise as us, but we are formed, we’re made, we belong to this bigger collective thing. We call it history, for want of a better word, we call it history. But we’re all part of it.”<sup>39</sup>

The search for meaningful expression is encompassed in the structure of Waterland as many chapters link into each other in an attempt to achieve an explanation of why Mary abducts a baby, for example, the end of chapter two and the beginning of chapter three:

. . . let me tell you

About the Fens

Which are a low-lying region of Eastern England. (8)

Just as the subject can never be taken out of history, history and story cannot be taken apart as this would eradicate its full potential meaning. On the other hand, the attainment of

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<sup>39</sup> Graham Swift, “Graham Swift in Interview on Last Orders,” With B. Grossman et al. Anglistik:Mitteilungen des Verbandes Deutscher Anglisten 8. 2 (1997):159.



comprehensive meaning is impossible as it would require a full knowledge of history in its entirety.

### **“De la Révolution”<sup>40</sup>**

The tension created between regression and progress forms a cyclical model of time. Instead of the metanarrative of linear time, we are presented with Tom’s concept of time, which is linked to the water cycle: “It goes in two directions at once. It goes backwards as it goes forwards. It loops. It takes detours. Do not fall into the illusion that history is a well-disciplined and unflagging column marching unswervingly into the future” (135). This cyclical model is echoed in the structure of the text which carries several main storylines simultaneously; the events surrounding Freddie Parr’s death in 1943, the histories of the Atkinson and Crick lineages as they extend back through the centuries, the events surrounding Mary Crick’s abduction of a child from a supermarket in 1980 and the history of the French revolution, part of the syllabus which Tom is supposed to be teaching to his pupils. This last storyline is presented as a miniature of the themes of progress and regression which run throughout the novel and the word “revolution” is played upon a great deal as a way of explaining Tom’s concept of history, time and culture:

that word, revolution? A turning round, a completing of a cycle. . . . though the popular notion of revolution is that of categorical change, transformation—a leap into the future—yet almost every revolution contains within it an opposite if less obvious tendency: the idea of return. A redemption; a restoration. A reaffirmation of what is pure and fundamental against what is decadent and false. A return to a new beginning. (137)

The impetus behind the French revolution was the idea of a return to an egalitarian society, to some idealised past which may never have existed. Similarly, Mary’s abduction of a child

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<sup>40</sup> Swift, Waterland title of Chapter 14, 135.

from a supermarket is motivated by the desire to return to the summer of 1943, before she induced her own miscarriage and had a botched abortion.

Mary undergoes two stages at which she desires to return to a former state; one during the abortion and one when she abducts a child. The abortion is portrayed as having the effect of suspending the linear flow of time, as the destruction of the foetus metaphorically destroys their future yet they cannot return to their former state. Mary induces her own miscarriage, after which she and Tom are described as waiting “[f]or Nothing to happen. For something to unhappen” (295), language which evokes the barren environment of the Fens. In this reading, Mary’s womb is a similar empty space in which creation must take place in order to avoid madness; the effects of this not happening are shown in the fact that Mary eventually runs mad. The period of melancholic religious devotion in which she lives like a hermit for three years, until Tom comes back from the war, reflects the static nature of her psychology. Biologically, this stasis extends into her adult life as she is left infertile after contracting septicaemia of the womb for which she is hospitalised.

This annihilation of creation is also linked to Dick Crick’s character, whose incestuous lineage marks the point at which time and progress begin to run backwards. The Second World War also forms a backdrop to the narrative of this abortion, bringing together themes of personal and national destruction. As Tom describes the bomber planes leaving Norfolk airbases that night for Germany, the destruction of the developing egg in Mary corresponds with the bombs inside the planes which are described as “inflammatory eggs” (299). Once again, the future is being prevented from happening as meaning (life, civilisation) is being destroyed and the forward-flow of linear time is disrupted.

The summer of 1943 becomes an unsurpassable event which negates both the sequential flow of narration and the psychic continuity of which Kristeva writes. Tom comes



to recognise the annihilation of progress which the abortion represents in the culmination of the grotesque scene at the cottage of Martha Clay, the woman who completes Mary's miscarriage. Her cottage is a site of bodily excesses and the overturning of natural order. Martha Clay inhabits a space which Tom describes as the 'once upon a time' realm of the fairytale, detached from knowable linear time. In another example of the narrative hanging over a chapter division, Tom tells his pupils of the abortion scene;

So, children, since these fairy-tales aren't all sweet and cosy (just dip into your Brothers Grimm), since no fairy-tale is complete without one, let me tell you  
About the Witch  
 Who was called Martha Clay. (298)

Martha's cottage is a peculiar mix of the ancient and the modern, having walls and ceiling hung with dead birds, dried herbs and roots and "misshapen things blackened with smoke that you don't like to ask what they are. . ." (304). However, her cottage also contains "incongruous items" such as newspaper clippings and a photograph of Winston Churchill, objects which Tom describes as "[i]mpossible intruders, stray objects from some exhibition of the far-away future . . ." (304). For Tom and Mary, Martha's cottage is a "different world. The one where things come to a stop; the one where the past will go on happening . . ." (304). This fear of being trapped in the past resembles Kristeva's analysis of the depressive's entrapment in the past, having none of the "forward impulsion" which Connor identifies as lacking in the postmodern.

Tom eventually goes into the cottage to see Mary lying unconscious on Martha's bed and Martha sucking the contents of Mary's womb through a thin pipe and blowing them into a bucket which, as Tom says, contains "what the future's made of" (308). Martha then tells Tom to take the bucket and throw its contents into the River Ouse. Although warned by Martha not to look, Tom watches the contents float downstream:

But then I looked. I howled. A farewell glance. A red spittle, floating, frothing, slowly sinking. Borne on the slow Ouse currents. Borne down-stream. Borne all the way (but for the Ouse eels . . .) Down to the Wash. Where it all comes out. (317)

The repetition of the word “borne” contrasts with ‘born,’ reminding the reader of the way that the foetus should have exited from Mary’s body and highlighting the tragedy of the event.

Again, the ellipsis invites the reader to acknowledge the fact that the foetus will probably be eaten by eels.

The darkly grotesque nature of this scene is completed by the ironic reference to the saying ‘it all comes out in the wash’, an expression which implies that small problems will easily be resolved in due course. Adrian Poole interprets the inclusion of this saying as a “[d]aring jest” which preludes “the first stirrings of relief. The event begins to recede, smiled gingerly into a long perspective, from which it will become—in time—one of those things.”<sup>41</sup> Poole’s reading is extraordinary, given that Tom is aware that he has just thrown away “what the future’s made of”, an act which makes him howl in grief. This event proves to be cataclysmic in terms of Tom and Mary’s lives and although in actuality their problem comes out in the coastal region known as the Wash, the aftereffects of this day are never resolved. Perspective is just what this scene lacks, as it warps Tom’s sense of time’s continuum; he has stepped into a world “where the past will go on happening” (304), allowing him none of Poole’s “long perspective”. Moreover, this scene witnesses the end of both the Crick and Atkinson lineages as Tom’s only possible progeny exits via the Ouse, as does Dick, ending the lines of both families.

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<sup>41</sup> Adrian Poole, “Graham Swift and the Mourning After,” An Introduction to Contemporary Fiction: International Writing in English Since 1970, ed. Rod Mengham. (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1999) 151.



This event's role as the unsurpassable experience which marks out the depressive's entrapment in the past is confirmed in its narrative juxtaposition with the scene, four decades later, in which Tom and Mary take the abducted child back to its mother. Both scenes demonstrate a restorative attempt; the restoration of Mary to her previous state without a child in her womb, and the return of the abducted baby to its mother (310). Once again, Mary is hospitalised after this event, confirming her position as one locked into the depressive's ever-expanding sense of the present moment, cut off from linear time. Tom, however, can see the way in which Mary is intricately linked to linear norms as he attempts to explain his wife's actions to the police who question him about the abduction:

“Look, sir, shall we go back to the beginning?” The beginning? But where's that? How far back is that? Very well, I confess that my wife, with intention to do so, took a baby from an unminded pram. Very well (this far back?): I confess my responsibility jointly with my wife for the death of three people (that is—it's not so simple—one of them was never born, and one of them—who knows if it was really a death . . .) (314)

In referring back to the deaths of Freddie Parr and Dick, and the destruction of Mary's foetus, Tom takes the explanation of his wife's actions back to events which occurred several decades ago, but, as the reader we have the understanding of how several centuries impacted upon the events of 1943. Swift reiterates the idea that the subject is forever bound up in history and that the attempt to regress ends in the disastrous consequence of feeling trapped in a melancholic, static present. This ultimately supports Tom's ideas on history which have taught him that humankind ought not to be concerned with the resurrection or restoration of an earlier state but with guarding against destruction or, as Tom tells one of his pupils, a boy called Price, to stop things from getting any worse (240).

Tom's tracing back through the Atkinson lineage uncovers revolutionary paradigms in another guise, in the form of the incest which took place between his mother and his



grandfather, Ernest Atkinson. Ernest's incestuous urges are motivated by his desire to make an Edenic paradise on Earth by creating what he believes will be the 'saviour of the world' with his daughter. This is essentially a melancholic, regressive yearning for a fabled lost origin which is inspired by the mass destruction of the First World War in which Tom's father and uncle go off to fight: "while George and Henry Crick join the forward march of history and end up in muddy madness—Ernest Atkinson beats a headlong retreat, backwards, inwards, to Paradise, and starts to believe that only from out of this beauty will come a Saviour of the World" (220). The offspring of this union is Dick, Tom's mentally handicapped (half) brother/ (half) uncle, a figure who embodies Tom's definition of 'revolution.'

Dick's character is an emblem for nostalgia, a sentiment which Tom describes as a "bastard but pampered child . . ." (136), a phrase which emphasises both Dick's parentage and his regressive nature. Dick represents the point at which the Atkinson lineage turns in on itself: "Because when fathers love daughters and daughters love fathers it's like tying up into a knot the thread that runs into the future, it's like a stream wanting to flow backwards" (228). Both this backwards-flowing stream and Ernest's "headlong retreat" relate to melancholic nostalgia in which the subject's psyche appears to be "[r]ivetted to the past", as Kristeva says, and unable to conceptualise a future: "no revolution is possible, there is no future . . . An overinflated, hyperbolic past fills all the dimensions of psychic continuity" (60).

Moreover, Dick is often associated with the element of water, with the silt which he dredges, and with eels—another metaphor for his phallic masculinity. Like Dick, the main role of the eel is to return to the sea, in this text that feminine space of non-differentiation, via the river, a link which prefigures Dick's suicidal dive into the River Ouse. Tom describes

the smell of water in the lock as being a “cool, slimy, but strangely poignant and nostalgic smell. A smell which is half man and half fish”(4), the same smell which can never quite be eradicated from Dick’s person (255), and the “smell of something hauled from primitive depths. The smell that haunts Dick’s bedroom” (355). Due to the link that is made here between fish and human life forms, the ‘nostalgia’ which is mentioned does not only relate to the individual but also to the biological, evolutionary history of humans; the nostalgia mentioned here is for that primeval state of the species. The association which Dick has with fish, mud and water relates to that phylogenetic inheritance which Kristeva mentions with reference to Freud: “an intrapsychic manifestation of phylogenetic inheritance going back to inorganic matter.”<sup>42</sup> The regression which Dick undertakes is not characterised by mental collapse, but by the desire to return to his evolutionary origins.

Dick’s character is persistently associated with the eel, a creature whose phallic appearance is noted, and this detail is in turn linked back to Dick whose name and over-sized penis confirm him as a character who embodies an excess of masculine potency.<sup>43</sup> However, he is forbidden to use this virility due to his incestuous genealogy. It is apparent that such an excess of masculine virility cannot be accommodated within the world in which Dick lives, an idea which is borne out in the scene in which Mary attempts to educate Dick about sex and love by having sex with him. Sexual intercourse is abandoned because Dick is ““Too big””

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<sup>42</sup> Kristeva, Black 16-17.

<sup>43</sup> Swift, Waterland 196, the eel is described as a “phallically suggestive creature.”

for Mary (58). The suggestion is that as Dick's genes cannot be passed on, and as he is prevented from forming normal family relations with both his own family and any potential partner, total regression becomes his only option thereby representing a complete frustration of the Atkinson genetic inheritance.

The culmination of Dick's regression is reached as he dives into the Ouse to commit suicide, which Tom narrates by saying "He's on his way. Obeying instinct. Returning. The Ouse flows to the sea . . ." (357). Dick's amphibious instinct is mingled with the phylogenetic impulse to return to the sea, the symbol for the obliterating 'Nothing' which persistently threatens the reclaimed Fens. During his dive into the water, Dick's body forms a "taut and seemingly limbless continuum, so that an expert on diving might have judged that here indeed was a natural, here was a fish of a man" (357). Tom's description confirms, once again, the eel or fish-like, and thus primeval, nature of Dick's body. The allegorical quality of Dick's character warns that existence must be given meaning, that life must be joined into a narrative of sorts in order that psychosis is avoided. The 'Nothing-ness' of existence may be acknowledged but then must be filled with meaning, a philosophy which is represented by the stories which the Crick family create. This incident mirrors the scene in which the foetus is flushed downstream towards the obliterating sea, taking the future with it. Regression and 'nothing-ness' are linked through the equilibrium of water which threatens to eradicate all difference.

This impeding of normal family relationships begins many generations before with the mother-fixation surrounding Sarah Atkinson, (Dick's great, great, great, great-grandmother), a point which suggests that it is, initially at least, the desire for the mother which engendered such regression. This is certainly the received opinion in psychoanalytic theory, where the subject's inability to accept separation from the mother is often at the root of psychosis.



Sarah Atkinson sustains brain damage after being hit by her husband, Thomas Atkinson, which renders her unable to communicate with anyone for the rest of her long life. Her husband fully confesses to his act of violence and Sarah becomes a martyr-figure for Gildsey, where she is revered, even after her death aged 92, as a “Guardian Angel, Holy Mother, Saint Gunhilda-come-again . . . an intrepid Britannia” (94). Her sons, George and Alfred, born before the accident, grow up under the pressure of having a mother who is regarded as a saint by their fellow citizens, which complicates their relationship to her: “In short, the brothers were inhibited by that woman up there in that upper room. In short, the townsfolk might have diagnosed, had they been acquainted with a form of magic not then invented, the classic symptoms of the Mother Fixation, not to say the Oedipal Syndrome” (88). This sets up a precedent for a pattern of mother-fixation which is never fully eradicated from the Atkinson line, and becomes translated down through the generations into Ernest’s incestuous feelings for his daughter.

Tom’s cyclical model of time contradicts the Enlightenment ideal of progress by which Ernest Atkinson lives. Tom examines the myth of linear progress which governed Ernest’s generation and those before him, and finds that this naive simplicity can only ever be detrimental: “a few generations ago—the world went through its revolutionary, progressive phase; and the world believed it would never end, it would go on getting better. But then the end of the world came back again, not as an idea or a belief but as something the world had fashioned for itself all the time it was growing up” (336). The pretence upon which such an ideology is based is that culture ‘began’ somewhere, in a state which was primitive and unsatisfactory, and that the development of humanity must always be ‘pushed forward’ from this point in a straight, linear plan of development. The ultimate logic of this ideology, however, is that development must also ‘end’ somewhere, that there must come a

point at which development can be sustained no longer, after which culture will spiral into a perceived decline, represented by Dick's character with his regressive, primordial associations. By contrast, the Cricks are aware, because of the nature of their work, that progress is a superficial concept which is only a part of a revolving cycle. However, the entrepreneur Ernest Atkinson reaches a stage of disillusionment in the narrative of linear progress, and his nostalgic, melancholic impulse causes him to commit suicide, an extreme manifestation of psychic collapse.

### **Driving Out Fear**

Waterland is partly a mourning for the death of the progress narrative itself, another side of which is seen in Tom's pupil, Price, who argues that the only thing about history which is worthy of note is the fact that it is about to end (7). By the novel's end, Price learns to rethink this statement, a point which is represented by his protests against his history teacher's early retirement. It is whilst Tom shares a drink with Price at The Duke's Head pub that Tom explains both his reasons for teaching and his love of history:

It was when I was in Germany in 1946. All that rubble. Tons of it. You see, it didn't take much. Just a few flattened cities. No special lessons. No tours of the death-camps. Let's just say I made the discovery that this thing called civilisation, this thing we've been working at for three thousand years, so that now and then we get bored with it and even poke fun at it, like children in school (sometimes it takes the form of a pompous schoolmaster), is precious. An artifice—so easily knocked down—but precious. (239-240)

This scene takes on great emblematic significance in terms of the plot's development of the themes of postmodern mourning and melancholia. Price is the leader of the school's 'Holocaust Club', a group who are convinced of an all-pervasive nihilism and engrossed by their own fears, which Tom calls "contemporary nightmares" or "collective nightmares" (296). Tom cites some examples of these as being "the Afghan crisis, the Tehran hostages,



the perilous and apparently unhaltable build-up of nuclear arms” (7). Conversely, Tom is a man who wants to pass on a sense of the need to preserve the world and learn from history. The bombed-out cities of Europe in World War Two represent the destruction of artifice, which can be related to the melancholic depressive state in which the subject is unable to create a meaningful context in which to heal themselves. The creation of meaning through the narrative of history (or story) becomes the only way of constructing a viable philosophical principle within which to live. As Tom goes on to say:

It helps to drive out fear. I don't care what you call it—explaining, evading the facts, making up meanings, taking a larger view, putting things into perspective, dodging the here and now, education, history, fairy-tales—it helps to eliminate fear. (241)

This is the humanist element of the novel; Tom's need to perpetuate an understanding of the world through history as a way of counteracting the fear which both he and Price experience. Postmodernity is a discourse which has arisen, at least in part, from the kind of fear and destruction which the world wars engendered. In the quotation above, Tom makes clear links between stories, history, philosophy and education and notes the ways in which these creations can help to overcome this fear and destruction. Ultimately, Tom's conclusion is that “[i]t's progress if you can stop the world from slipping away” (336), evoking the dredging of constructed rivers and canals that his ancestors carried out in order to prevent the obliterating sea from encroaching on the Fens once more.

It is clear that the import of Tom's ideas have passed on to his pupil, a fact which becomes particularly apparent during the assembly in which the school's headmaster, Mr Lewis, delivers a farewell speech to Tom. During this speech, several members of Price's 'Holocaust Club' begin to chant “‘Fear is here! Fear is here!’” (333). For Price and his club, Tom's departure signals the passing of their last hope of learning about their wider historical context, their last opportunity to receive encouragement in the creation of their own



worldview and raises in this group some of the “revolutionary fire” which Tom thinks they formerly lacked (239): “From the centre point of the recent eruption, in the midst of the silence, comes a sudden solitary cry, strangely urgent and imperative, devoid of schoolboy insolence: ‘No cuts! Keep Crick!’” (335). Price’s insolence has been replaced by a mature political awareness and the desire to protest for the protection of that which is precious to him; thus, Tom has successfully handed his world view on and has enlightened his pupils in the belief that it is possible to abate nihilistic fear by creating stories, learning from history and educating others. David Leon Higdon notes this point in Swift’s text, saying:

Crick has won a major victory for himself. He has wrung from his own painful story a burst of enlightenment for Price and can retire knowing that he has passed his sense of history’s value and the necessity of defending civilisation on to another generation. . . . Tom may have kept alive the idea of a saviour of the world. This, in a postmodernist work, is no small victory.<sup>44</sup>

However, Higdon’s comment is somewhat awry toward the end of this excerpt in interpreting Tom’s philosophy as dependent on a ‘saviour of the world.’ Tom does not advocate the need for a hero, a single champion, but rather he wants Price and his classmates to understand the need to preserve the world. One must also bear in mind that Waterland has a supposed ‘saviour of the world’ in Dick’s character, a role which is shown to be only the pivotal point of a revolution in which progress suddenly regresses toward a fabled beginning. The protest in the assembly is significant due to its suggestion that if there is no one around to construct narratives about the importance of the past then there may be an ideological holocaust of sorts, a problem which is at the root of the ‘Holocaust Club’s’ fears.

This point aside, Higdon acknowledges the huge achievement which Swift has made in Waterland concerning the preservation of this wider human context, of our relation to the

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<sup>44</sup> David Leon Higdon, “Double Closures in Postmodern British Fiction: the Example of Graham Swift,” Critical Survey 3.1 (1991): 92.

past and our need to preserve humanity for the future. Waterland is not about the 'end' of history but the continuation of history, its survival. Yet this is precisely the point which makes Higdon's classification of Waterland as "postmodernist" uncomfortable. Tom's character, like several others in this work, is representative of postmodern mourning insofar as he accepts the loss of metanarrative precepts. However, Tom's character also charts a development beyond this stage, thereby taking this novel's ideological structure into an area which moves beyond the postmodern bind. Swift's achievement is not simply down to the challenge of working with postmodernity but in defending the value of civilisation and history, or, in other words, in defending the value in the artifice of the metanarrative, within a postmodern era.

## God

Along with the reassessment of the metanarratives of time and history, the idea of religion is also reevaluated in this text. Waterland presents an example of society under the process of secularisation and focusses on the changing position of the father figure and Christianity within this context. God and the Father, former patriarchal pillars, are changed in this text to sources of narrative inspiration. The figure of God is relied upon as another way of filling the blank Fens with some of the occult mystery that Henry Crick favours, just as Tom fills his life with the tales of history.<sup>45</sup> Both father and son are aware of the artificial, fabular nature of the metanarratives to which they refer, thus simultaneously deconstructing their status whilst also recreating them as artifice. Swift fills the gap left by the death of God and the reduced role of

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<sup>45</sup> Swift, Waterland 1, see Henry Crick going out to set his eel traps by night, not for any practical purpose "but because the mystery of the darkness appealed to him." Henry Crick "liked to do things in such a way as would make them seem magical and occult."



the patriarch with the figure of the nurturing, storytelling father in a way which parallels the type of process that both Wheeler and Kristeva discuss. What the father passes on is no longer the Word of God but words of wisdom; philosophy entwined in stories which are based on their own experiences.

Both Tom and Henry's stories become the means of transmitting basic humanitarian (and humanist) principles from one generation to the next: principles such as the belief that everyone is basically good, and that civilisation and society are good things which are worth preserving. The importance of Henry's stories is demonstrated in the opening lines of Waterland where Tom recalls one of his father's tales: "'And don't forget,' my father would say . . . 'whatever you learn about people, however bad they turn out, each one of them has a heart, and each one of them was once a tiny baby sucking his mother's milk . . .'" (1). Henry Crick does not preach to his children, rather he uses the idea of God as another form of inspiration for the tales he tells them: for example, he explains that the reason why the Fens are flat is so that God can oversee them more easily. He also explains that the stars are little bits of the "silver dust of God's blessing. They are little broken-off bits of heaven" which God threw down upon the world but, on seeing how "wicked" people were (2), he then decided to suspend them, mid-air.

This transference is not without its problems, however, as the metanarrative of religion becomes conflated with the capitalist consumer narrative through the scene in which Mary abducts a baby from a supermarket. Mary tells Tom that God encouraged her to snatch the child: "'God told me. God . . .'" (268). Tom explains that God no longer communicates



with people, therefore the “miracle” needed in order for Mary to give Tom a child cannot have taken place.<sup>46</sup>

But God doesn't talk anymore. Didn't you know that, Mary? He stopped talking long ago. He doesn't even watch anymore, up there in the sky. We've grown up now, and we don't need him anymore, our Father in Heaven. We can fend for ourselves. He's left us alone to make what we will of the world. In Greenwich, in the midst of a vast city, where once they built an observatory precisely to stare back at God, you can't even see at night, above the aurora of the street-lamps, God's suspended stars. (268)

The real sadness in the use of this Biblical reference is that not only has the metanarrative of religion been swept away, but the minor narratives with which Henry Crick embroidered existence have been demolished too, as God no longer oversees society and his suspended stars cannot be seen either. The relationship between the sacred and the secular has been irreparably severed, leaving not only a disillusioned culture, but a defunct God who no longer has the ability to bestow a child on this modern Mary. In Tom's narrative, God takes on the persona of an abandoned parent who has been forced to extricate himself from the lives of his children, a portrayal which evokes Tom's position as a dismissed school teacher. God is seen to be in mourning just as sections of society mourn for him, indicating an underlying desire to be implicated in the Christian metanarrative once more. This metanarrative, however, has not been deconstructed, merely abandoned; God is not dead, as such, just dismissed.

The resolution to this scene unveils another key theme. Ultimately, Mary abandons the idea that God told her to take the child and admits to Tom that the child, in fact, came from the local supermarket, as she says, “All right, all right. I got him from Safeways. I got him from Safeways in Lewisham” (269). In these terms, the baby becomes a product, the

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<sup>46</sup> Swift, *Waterland* 122, as they decide to get married, Mary tells Tom “You know, don't you, that short of a miracle we can't have a child?”

“‘miracle’” of (be)getting a child is being reduced to an act of consumerism, and religion is reduced to commercialism. Tom comments on this in his narrative, saying “The truth is a miracle. God came down to Safeways and left her a gift, a free product. A babe in the bulrushes. He said, Go on, I command you. Take. It’s yours” (311). The proposal here is that the void left by the destruction of the metanarratives is in danger of being filled with consumer culture. If divine voices can tell a woman to take a child from a supermarket, then life can be explained with reference to the culture of consumerism which then becomes the new metanarrative.

Not only does consumerism replace religion it also becomes a substitute for the normal family unit. Just as Mary believes she can become a mother by ‘buying’ a baby, Dick is rumoured to have an amorous relationship with his motorcycle. As Tom says, “he talks, for solace, to his motor-bike, more than he talks to any living thing. And . . . it has even been said (and Freddie Parr was one of the chief rumour-mongers) that Dick is so fond of his motor-bike that he sometimes rides it to secluded spots, gets down with it on the grass and . . .” (38). Once again, the ellipsis marks the absence of something shocking, in this case it is Freddie Parr’s remark that Dick has a sexual relationship with his motorbike. While this statement is obviously not true it supports the idea that Dick is unable to form normal human relationships. Product of abnormal family relations himself, Dick’s apparent obsession with his bike is evidence of his need to compensate for this hindrance with material objects. Pamela Cooper notes a similar point, saying, “[s]exualized and feminized but inorganic, the bike replaces the cycles of human generativity with the utilitarian repetitiveness of mass-production.”<sup>47</sup> The natural ‘cycles’ of life have reached a standstill for Dick and are instead

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<sup>47</sup> Pamela Cooper, “Imperial Topographies: The Spaces of History in Waterland,” Modern Fiction Studies 42.2 (1996): 388.



replaced by a commodity which, it is supposed, fills the role of the female partner that Mary could not fill, a motorised, mechanical cycle.

The motorbike is all that is left of Dick after his suicidal dive into the Ouse and the final resting place for Tom's narrative is with a view of Dick's bike: "On the bank in the thickening dusk, in the will-o'-the-wisp dusk, abandoned but vigilant, a motor-cycle" (358). Dick's bike takes on a macabre aura in this last line as it is personified by its 'vigilance' in 'looking out for' Dick, its companion, which insinuates that the rumoured relationship was somehow reciprocated by the bike. Consumerism is posited as a narrative which purports to fulfil the "human needs and feelings" formerly accommodated by the master narratives.<sup>48</sup>

Waterland concludes with the idea that consumerism is in danger of becoming a contemporary metanarrative, even from the perspective of the teenage Tom in 1943. Between Mary's abduction of a baby from a supermarket and Dick's emotional attachment to his motorcycle, we see the commodification of the sacred and the sanctification of commodities.

### The Crow Road

Whereas Waterland concerns itself with the process of accepting loss and then filling the empty present with one's own creation (basically a humanistic project), The Crow Road shows the tension between a more or less outmoded sacred philosophy and a contemporary move towards a science-based perspective of the cosmos. This struggle is essentially between the ancient and the modern. The Crow Road is a text in which the past haunts the present, with old ideas being evoked or with the suggestion that they have not been entirely

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<sup>48</sup> Wheeler, Modernity 72.



eradicated by modern scientific enlightenment. This 'haunting' of one age by another is figured in the text's Gothic aspects.

The Crow Road is set in Argyll in the early 1990s at the height of the Gulf War, news of which is largely peripheral to the plot. The narrative revolves around the small town of Gallanach which is this text's Gothic centre, and home to the McHoans, the Urvills and the Watts, the families involved in the mysterious murders which take place. At the centre of Gallanach is the Urvill's ancestral home, the newly renovated Gaineamh Castle. This castle is not only the setting for the adultery that instigates the chain of murders, it also becomes a symbol of the entrenched ideologies of the past which threaten to encroach upon the present: orthodox religion, upper-class domination, and patriarchal rule. As Gaineamh castle is revived and restored, so are the value systems which dominated during the days when it was first built. Appropriately, the head of the castle is Fergus Urvill who fits into the role of the Gothic arch-villain as the murderous uncle of Prentice McHoan, the text's protagonist and Gothic interloper.

Alongside the castle, this text's other main Gothic motif is the ghost. However, in Banks's version of the modern Gothic novel, the ghost does not take its usual supernatural manifestation but rather appears in the form of fragments of writing by Prentice's uncle, Rory McHoan, which are discovered and pieced together again by Prentice. These notes, parts of text which were going to be used for Rory's novel, frame Fergus Urvill as the murderer of his wife, Prentice's Aunt Fiona, and Rory himself. In this capacity, the ghostly writings fulfill the same function as the ghost which haunts the site of its own death in order to draw the Gothic hero into the mystery who then exposes the killer, thereby avenging the dead.

Banks's novel plays out similar psychological dynamics to Waterland, in that both texts show the struggle against melancholic regression and the creation or adoption of a

philosophy which allows the subject to move beyond the stasis of the present. For Prentice, this is done with reference to the huge scales of geological and cosmological time and his attempts to position personal, familial and cultural history within these time frames. As we see in Waterland, the positioning of oneself in relation to various historical or philosophical perspectives is primarily done via stories which are passed, once again, from father to son. As a teacher who goes on to become a children's fiction writer, Prentice's father, Ken, is the perfect storyteller, imparting his views of the world to his sons and their friends through his tales. By telling his children magical stories about the world, Ken teaches them of "distant times and long-ago places, of who they were and what they weren't and of what had and what had never been" (25). In line with this pedagogic role, Ken's name can be read as a play on words as 'Ken,' the name which most characters use for him, is the Scots dialect version of the verb 'to know.'<sup>49</sup> Similarly, Prentice's name carries with it connotations of the word 'apprentice', one who is learning, a point which also fits in with his position as a university student. These characters' names suggest a pupil-teacher relationship and the text delineates the process by which Prentice comes to understand the sense of wonder in the natural world that his father tries to pass on to him, and his belief in the subject's integration with a fascinating, rich natural history rather than a religious perspective.

### Connection to the World

The most profound stories that Ken tells to Prentice and his brothers concern the development of geology, a theme which becomes a recurrent motif throughout the text. Prentice recalls his father's explanations of the development of Earth: "On walks, on day trips and holidays, he

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<sup>49</sup> Banks, The Crow Road 148, as Lachlan says: "' naebudy kens a thing.'" and Lachlan again on 149 "'Ah ken that.'"



found and pointed out the signs that told of the past, deciphering the symbols written into the fabric of the land” (307). The landscape is a text from which Ken reads to his children, telling them the story of the earth itself and the development of the “well-travelled country” on which they live (306). Like Waterland, land, history and story are linked in a way which allows the subject the ability to construct their identity in relation to the world around them. Just as Tom and Henry fill the overpowering ‘nothingness’ of the Fens with their tales, Prentice manages to conceive of how he is related to the “swirling empty space of the present,” to use Huyssen’s phrase, by historical and narrative means.<sup>50</sup>

This viewpoint is illustrated during the scene in which Prentice’s friend, Ashley Watt, takes him to an old ballast mound by the harbour near her home. Ashley recalls her grandfather telling her “‘There’s aw ra wurd unner yon tarp a grass’” as the rocks used for ballast have come from all around the world and been dumped at that site (75). Ashley explains to Prentice that she has always appreciated the significance of the global collectivity represented by the mound she calls her “‘world hill’”: “‘ . . . I’d come out here by myself when I was a kid, just to sit here and think I was sitting on rocks that had once been part of China, or Brazil, or Australia or America . . . ’”(75). These thoughts inspire Prentice a great deal, to the extent that he experiences a revelatory moment in which he thinks of his relation to the rest of the world:

. . . for one long, swim-headed instant my veins seemed to run with ocean blood, dark and carrying as the black water sucking at the edges of the tumbledown wharf beneath us. I thought, God, how we are connected to the world!, and suddenly found myself thinking about Uncle Rory again; our family connection to the rest of the globe, our wanderer on the planet. I stared up at the broken face of the moon, dizzy with wonder and hunger to know. (75, emphasis in original)

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<sup>50</sup> Huyssen, Twilight 27.



The connection Prentice senses here is not only to the rest of the world but to history, as the language at the start of this extract evokes that primordial state discussed above with reference to Dick Crick. The “ocean blood, dark and carrying” relates to the early aquatic life forms from which humans are descended; the “carrying” nature of this water alludes to its ability to contain life. In Waterland, the presentation of Dick’s character as related to this primeval existence prefigures his final suicidal dive into the Ouse, when he returns to the sea to which he belongs and, on one level, it would seem that Prentice’s “ocean blood” could indicate a similar melancholic, regressive state. However, his next thought demonstrates his sense of involvement in a forward progression, rather than in a regressive spiral, as he feels he is connected to the world, a sense which is confirmed in Prentice’s belief that a member of his family is travelling the globe.

Such a development has its parallel in Kristeva’s writing on the recovery of the depressed subject, as she states, “It can thus be understood that the triumph over melancholia resides as much in founding a symbolic family (ancestor, mythical figure, esoteric community) as in constructing an independent symbolic object . . .”<sup>51</sup> Ultimately, this is the stage that Prentice reaches, but it is not an easy journey because the losses that he experiences leave him wanting to believe in the ideologies which belong to that haunting past.

### **Gothic Melancholia and Religion**

The problem with reading Prentice’s development as one in which he overcomes depression is that it is difficult to think of Prentice as a ‘depressed’ person, in the sense used above. However, it is the Gothic structures of this text which represent melancholia, particularly in

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<sup>51</sup> Kristeva Black 162.

the sense of being locked into the past, and the resolution of this text's Gothic excesses is the same point at which Prentice reaches his reaffirmed worldview. Once the melancholic pull of previous ideologies is overcome, the Gothic darkness is also enlightened. As his grandmother Margot suggests, Prentice proves to be the pivotal point in his family, as he balances on the cusp of either reverting to a sacred philosophy of metanarrative proportions, or the attempt to continue a new line of thought presented to him by his father and uncle; a secular, politically left-wing view of the world which reveres the histories of biology, geology and cosmology—the metanarrative of science (323). Prentice's struggle reveals the difficulty of breaking irrevocably from the metanarratives, particularly that of religion.

In their introduction to Modern Gothic: A Reader, Victor Sage and Allan Lloyd Smith write that "the Gothic . . . is a language, often an anti-historicising language, which provides writers with the critical means of transferring an idea of the otherness of the past into the present."<sup>52</sup> In this reading, then, the Gothic is related to melancholia via the device of the recurring past which comes back to haunt both the mind of the depressed subject and to form the basis of the Gothic narrative. As Kristeva notes above, one of the problems with the melancholic subject is the inability to conceive of a future due to an engrossing past: "[a]n overinflated, hyperbolic past fills all the dimensions of psychic continuity."<sup>53</sup> This sense of being trapped by past events is certainly at the core of the Gothic aspects of The Crow Road, a narrative in which the present is always paralleled by the past, with episodes from disparate times being narrated one after another, a similar frustration of linear time to that which we see in the structure of Waterland, albeit for a different purpose.

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<sup>52</sup> Victor Sage and Allan Lloyd Smith, Modern Gothic: A Reader, (Manchester: Manchester UP, 1996) 1.

<sup>53</sup> Kristeva Black 60.



The typical Gothic concern with death is certainly the focus of The Crow Road, the title itself being a euphemism meaning ‘to die’ in the Scottish dialect.<sup>54</sup> Gallanach’s role as the centre of Gothic magnetism is confirmed on the first page of the novel, as Prentice reflects “it was always death that drew me back to Gallanach” (3). It is the sequential deaths of people very close to him that lead Prentice to question the world-view set down for him by his father, to the extent that Prentice begins to think of Ken’s teachings as “megalomania” (324). Ken’s explanations of the universe in purely scientific terms are insufficient for Prentice as he goes through this difficult time. Although Prentice has been raised as a “‘good little atheist’” according to his grandmother Margot (11), he pursues his “need for meaning, for faith” (217):

But didn’t there have to be something out there, just to witness, just to know? Hell, it didn’t even have to do anything; it didn’t have to act on prayers or have us singled out as a special species, or play any part in our history and development; it didn’t even necessarily have to have created us, or created anything, all it had to do was exist and have existed and go on existing, to record, to encompass. (217, emphasis in original)

Prentice’s sense of connection to the world is not enough and he feels he lacks an understanding of how consciousness fits into this equation, yearning for an exterior consciousness which can register the existence of the vast cosmos, something which a purely scientific view cannot provide.

Several attitudes towards religion are demonstrated through the characters in this text. Prentice narrates Hamish McHoan’s obsession with his own “fascinating heresy” which he calls “Newton’s Religion”(175), inspired by Newton’s Law, a belief-system in which each person receives in the afterlife exactly what they did to others in life (11). At the other end of the spectrum, Prentice’s father is a committed atheist who teaches his children that God is

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<sup>54</sup> Banks, The Crow Road 126. As Janice explains to Prentice “It meant dying; being dead. ‘Aye, he’s away the crow road,’ meant ‘He’s dead.’”



only an idea and believes that a reliance on religion merely shows a weakness, a refusal to admit the enormity of the cosmos. When Prentice is considering the possibility of a divine being, Ken says: ““You’re too frightened to admit how big everything else is, what the scales of the universe are, compared to ours; distance and time”” (337). These two attitudes are brought into direct conflict during the scene in which Ken dies, in the most ironic way for an atheist; by being struck by lightning whilst climbing up a church in order to demonstrate to his fanatically religious brother that the building is merely a symbol ““a testament to the skill of humans, not the glory of God . . .”” (314).

Prentice’s questioning of the philosophy laid down by his father leads to an argument, after which they never speak again. Reading this split in structural terms, Prentice’s dilemma would appear to be over the choice of his own father’s ideas or those of God the Father, presenting a similar substitution to that which is found in Swift’s Waterland in which the story of Christianity is substituted by the stories of Tom and Henry Crick. Caught between these two extremes, Prentice and Rory represent, for the greater part, agnostic, open minded viewpoints. Rory tells Prentice that he has been greatly influenced by the spirituality he experienced in India but finds that the environment in Britain has a different effect on him, and Prentice’s narrative is concerned throughout with the possibility of a spiritual dimension to existence (189). The manner of Ken’s death temporarily casts an eerie question mark over the narrative as it would appear to be divine punishment for blasphemy. However, Ken’s final word, ““See?””, can be read as his confirmation that there is no afterlife as he is aware that his life is terminating with no possibility of continuation (317). Banks brings the secular and sacred world views into direct collision in this scene, crediting the secular view with as much proof as is possible; the word of a man who is almost dead and sees no evidence of an afterlife.

## The Need for Meaning

In a development which will become increasingly important in the following chapter,

Prentice muses on the possibility of a scientific basis for his “need for meaning” (217).

Whilst trying to explain his ideas to Ashley, Prentice states that his spiritual notions are not dependent on a God in the typical sense, but rather on

a sort of interconnectedness; a field effect. I keep getting this feeling it’s already there, like in quantum physics, where matter is mostly space, and space, even the vacuum, seethes with creation and annihilation all the time, and nothing is absolute, and two particles at opposite ends of the universe react together as soon as one’s interfered with; all that stuff. It’s like it’s there and it’s staring us in the face but I just can’t . . . can’t access it. (168)

Contrasting sharply with the fragmentation which typifies postmodernity, Prentice’s ideas of a scientific basis for the integration of the universe present what Wheeler refers to as “the discovery or invention of ways of being in the world which move beyond the harsh individualism of utilitarian modernity . . .”<sup>55</sup> The view that all of matter is encompassed within an infinite and inextricably connected network informs the two primary texts under analysis in the following chapter, Margaret Atwood’s Cat’s Eye and Ian McEwan’s The Child in Time. Both texts have quantum physics as a recurrent theme throughout, which, as I shall discuss in greater detail below, becomes a means of describing reality and our place within it.

In spite of Prentice’s thoughts about the purely science-based ideas of quantum physics he still feels a need for faith, for a divine presence. Not only is this idea of divinity brought into the text with Prentice and Hamish’s thoughts on the subject, it is also dispersed throughout in reference to the monuments which are scattered over the landscape around Gallanach. Compatible with the Gothic structures of this text, these stones represent the continuing presence of the past, but their appearance is incongruous as in many cases their

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<sup>55</sup> Wheeler, Modernity 74-75.



purpose has been lost over time. Now empty of meaning, they haunt the present with the supposed weight of their former significance. Prentice describes how Lewis, Verity, Helen and himself spend a day looking at the local sites:

The land around Gallanach is thick with ancient monuments; burial sites, standing stones, henges and strangely carved rocks; you can hardly put a foot down without stepping on something that had religious significance to somebody sometime. (397)

The foursome go to visit funeral barrows, moss-covered standing stones, stone circles and chambered cairns, and stand staring at “the great flat faces of cup-and-ring marked rocks, their grainy surfaces covered in the concentric circular symbols that looked like ripples from something fallen in a pond, frozen in stone” (397). The attraction which these stones have for Prentice is that they represent a period which, as it appears from a twentieth-century viewpoint, had a coherent philosophical or religious basis, something which Prentice feels he lacks in his life. Sage discusses this aspect of The Crow Road, interpreting these petrified remains of older cultures as symbols of the persistence of faith, and argues that they are a meeting point at which the relationship between humanism and religion is debated.<sup>56</sup> For Sage the stones in Banks’s fiction constitute a “stock-taking of the value and the failures of Science-based Humanism in post 1960s popular culture . . . a fictional meditation on the continuing, dialectical relationship between humanism and religion.”<sup>57</sup> While Prentice’s scientific view of the world can account for reality to a certain point, the deaths in his immediate circle of family and friends leave him wanting further explanation and some sense of a spiritual dimension in his life.

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<sup>56</sup> Victor Sage, “The Politics of Petrification: Culture, Religion, History in the Fiction of Iain Banks and John Banville,” Modern Gothic: A Reader, eds. V. Sage and A. Lloyd Smith (Manchester: Manchester UP, 1996) 20.

<sup>57</sup> Sage, “Petrification,” 23.



Huyssen warns of the conservatism inherent in such a return to an outmoded ideology, and goes on to pose the question “how can the search for alternative traditions, whether emergent or residual, be made culturally productive without yielding to the pressures of conservatism which, with a vise-like grip, lays claim to the very concept of tradition?”<sup>58</sup> A great deal of ambiguity surrounds Prentice’s attachment to the ancient stones of Argyll, but essentially Prentice manages to blend the residual traditions of Scottish heritage with the present day through the illustration of a temporal continuum. Prentice remembers how his father told him and his brothers about the history of Scottish inhabitants, from “the hunter-gatherers of eight or nine thousand years ago” and on through the various invasions by tribes who “left on the place their own marks; the treeless slopes themselves, the roads and walls, cairns and forts, tombs, standing stones, souterrains, crannogs and farms and houses and churches; the oil refineries, nuclear power stations and missile ranges too” (321-322). Prentice senses a direct connection with the ancient Scottish cultures, but this chain is shown to have evolved and he is prepared to see himself as related to much more than that mysterious era of ancient Scotland. The stones are not necessarily representative of a greater, higher truth, they are simply representative of a viewpoint held at the time of their construction, a viewpoint which may be incongruent with contemporary ideology, but which is held within it at a historical level. This idea of expanding, encompassing circles of development evokes the concentric circular carvings on the rocks that Prentice views.

It is not only ancient cultures which are represented in the landmarks around Gallanach. Whilst on a visit to see his family after his father’s death, Prentice goes to sit on a sculpture created by his friend Darren Watt, who has been recently killed in a traffic accident.

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<sup>58</sup> Andreas Huyssen, After the Great Divide: Modernism, Mass Culture, Postmodernism (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1986) 185.

Darren's sculpture, entitled "Block One," is described as an enormous concrete cube, four metres high, which is situated on a remote beach near Gallanach with one edge of it submerged in the sea. Darren's block serves as a housing for a complex internal system of pipes and heavy doors into which the sea gushes with each wave, producing spouts of water and "noises like a ghost trapped in badly tuned organ-pipes, sonorous slammings as waves opened and shut heavy doors like hinged manhole covers within the set tonnes of the block's hollow insides . . ." (301). Darren's work, although looking like "some stranded cubist whale" or an "old war-time ruin," interacts with the environment in a way which the ancient monuments that Prentice sees do not.

This aspect of the sculpture relates it to Prentice's view of human existence which is always bound up with its context, the environment and the natural world. However, it is clear that Darren's work is not purely devoid of a potential spiritual dimension as the 'ghostly' noises which it produces infer a Gothic dimension to the work which contravenes the ideology of the supposedly secularised present. Prentice describes the four-year-old block as "post-post-modernist" (324), a phrase which, although seemingly sardonic, indicates his awareness of a movement beyond the postmodern and into a new phase of cultural evolution. His inability to express this new phase in terminology which does not rely on already existing labels, is similar to his inability to explain the extra dimension to existence for which he feels a need. Block One does not negate the possibility of a spiritual dimension, rather it forces Prentice to question the mysteries of the world around him. As he leaves the modern monument and walks back to Gallanach, Prentice looks at the darkness before him, "cluttered" with ancient monuments, and thinks about the words his father said to Hamish just before he died: "All the gods are false, I thought. Faith itself is idolatry" (324). Like the ghostly noises trapped within Block One, contemporary culture has not entirely eradicated the



desire to conceive of life in sacred terms even if it ultimately realises, as Prentice does, that this cannot be achieved.

## Utopianism

Prentice comes to accept that the ancient monuments can only mark a sense of connection to the past rather than any kind of identification with its ideology, a point which is also illustrated by the persistent undercutting of the particular brand of 1960s-inspired holism in which Prentice's Aunt Charlotte indulges. For example, Prentice demonstrates a great deal of skepticism concerning her insistence that she consummate her marriage beneath a two-thousand-year-old yew tree in a graveyard, saying that his aunt was crazy to believe in "some sort of weird cosmic energy beaming out of a geriatric shrub . . ." and dismisses his aunt's ideas as a product of "the dear old daft old hippy days" (60). Further on in the narrative, it becomes apparent that such ideas of magical conception are a more persistent theme as Fergus reveals to Rory that he and Fiona conceived their twins at McCaig's Folly, another supposedly magical place suggested to them by Charlotte (206).

Huyssen writes that such a trend towards uncovering "traditions, and the growing fascination with pre-modern and primitive cultures" is due to a "genuine and legitimate dissatisfaction with modernity."<sup>59</sup> For Huyssen, this marks an "attempt to break out of the swirling empty space of the everyday present and to claim a sense of time and memory."<sup>60</sup> However, the desire to escape the present can be indicative of, or indeed engender, the depressive state. The distinction between a productive revisiting of the historical and a

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<sup>59</sup> Huyssen, *Divide* 185.

<sup>60</sup> Huyssen, *Twilight* 27.



dangerous regression can be very fine, as Waterland shows us; while Tom's relation to history proves to be beneficial, Dick falls into the regression inherent in the attempt to escape the present and return to the past.

By contrast, Darren's 'Block One' shows the evolution of the utopian imagination and its articulation from new a perspective. The stock-taking of Science-based Humanism of which Sage writes is linked to Huyssen's assertion that "the utopian imagination has been transformed in recent decades, reemerging in formerly unpredictable places . . . and [is] being articulated from new and different subject positions."<sup>61</sup> Huyssen goes on to cite several different factors which he believes have contributed to the decline of the "dear old daft old hippy" ideology which Prentice notes:

the crisis of liberalism and the welfare state, . . . the long agony and final collapse of socialist alternatives (Soviet Union, China, Cuba, Third World), . . . the heating up of the armament race in the late 1970s and early 1980s, . . . the rise of structural unemployment in the West and the systemic impoverishment in major parts of the Third World, . . . the damage to the environment and the generally waning confidence in technological solutions to social problems.<sup>62</sup>

The Crow Road is set against the events of the Gulf War and both Prentice and Ken's narratives carry many references to the elements Huyssen notes above. For example, Kenneth's reticence to recourse to utopian ideals is due to his opinion that the human race is "One wee daft species, on one wee daft planet circling one wee daft star in one wee daft galaxy; us? Barely capable of crawling into space yet; capable of feeding everybody but . . . nyaa, can't be bothered?" (145). Ultimately, Banks's text is in agreement with Huyssen's ideas, showing that one can no longer rely on a return to ancient traditions as a way of healing a sense of contemporary unease. However, this political awareness is situated within

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<sup>61</sup> Huyssen, Twilight 86

<sup>62</sup> Huyssen, Twilight 87.

enormous temporal scales which include not only family history and local ancient history, but also geological and cosmological history. The subject position for that new utopian imagination is one which is mindful of the different patterns of time and history whilst also showing concern for social and political issues on a global scale. This is the antithesis of the postmodern melancholic imagination and yet the outcome of postmodern mourning: to reconceptualise one's relationship to one's context and gain a sense of being linked to an evolving and diverse totality, rather than being cast adrift by the abolition of metanarratives, which leaves the subject fragmented and aloof.

### Geological and Cosmological Perspectives

Although the historical viewpoint of Waterland extends back over several thousand years, to a time when the first inhabitants settled by the Ouse, history in The Crow Road has a much greater scale, encompassing the development of the cosmos and the formation of Earth's land masses. This enormous historical perspective is impressed upon Prentice as a child by the stories his father tells him:

- Within the oceanic depths of time that lay beneath the surface of the present, there had been an age when, appropriately, an entire ocean had separated the rocks that would one day be called Scotland from the rocks that would one day be called England and Wales. That first union came half a billion years ago. . . . Compressed and folded the rocks that would be Scotland—by then part of the continent of Euramerica—held within their crumpled, tortuously layered cores the future shape of the land. (306)

Again, the development of the earth is thought of as happening in concentric stages, one era overlapping the other, like the circles carved into the ancient monuments. In this example the continuum is reversed as, instead of the stone holding an imprint of the past, the tectonic plate holds the shape of the future. Also, the history of this development demonstrates the transient, arbitrary nature of nationality.



This idea is illustrated as Prentice, Lewis and Verity stand on the ramparts of Gaineamh castle to look out for Fergus Urvill flying solo overhead. Whilst up there Verity spots Dunadd Rock, one of the ancient stones they had been to visit earlier that year:

Dunadd Rock had been the capital of Dalriada, one of the early and formative kingdoms in Scotland. The footprint—looks more like a bootprint, actually, just a smooth hollow in the stone—was where the new king had to place his foot when he made his vows, symbolically—I suppose—to join him to the land. (396)

Thus the kind of connections with the land hinted at in the description of the coronation ceremony and the idea of land-ownership embodied by the Urvill family are shown to be superficial ideas with no practical significance. The basis of any such land-claim is brought under scrutiny, as the narrative suggests that everybody is a coloniser as land cannot belong to anyone. Nationality as a principle is set within a geological timescale which calls into question the notion of attaching particular values and a name to a piece of land. Prentice narrates the development of tectonic plates, as explained to him by his father:

. . . the waters rose and cut what would eventually be called the British Isles off from mainland Europe, while the scoured, abraded hills to the north, set free at last from the compressing weight of ice, rose slowly back out of the earth, to be colonised again by plants and animals, and people. (307)

Land ownership, colonisation and nationality are all undercut by the relative enormousness of geological time scales. Ecological and animal-rights issues are evoked here in the suggestion that the land is shared by plants and animals as well as people, all of whom seek to claim their rightful space upon it. Once again, this has the effect of lessening the importance of the human race in reference to such a broad perception of life.

The idea that there is no meaning as such inherent in land, that meaning only exists in the significance humans attach to it is brought into the narrative in many ways. The tectonic plates which move around the planet are echoed in the ‘world hill’, the ballast mound which includes rocks from all over the globe, evoking exactly this idea of the homogeneity of land.

To reinforce this idea of unstable national boundaries, at the end of their conversation by the ballast mound, Ashley presents Prentice with a piece of the Berlin wall, a “[b]it of the world that used to be between Germanies” (80). This fragment of concrete carries with it the same significance as the world hill, showing a collapsing of national boundaries and the unification of countries in one communal land-mass.

References to the development of the cosmos are less frequent than the references to geological progress but just as indicative of Prentice’s holistic outlook. When looking at the stars from the observatory in the Urvills’ house, Prentice describes them as “mysterious galactic harmonies, constellations like the symphonies of ancient, trembling light . . .” (71). The “ancient” light once again evokes that enormous time scale to which Prentice feels he belongs and the use of the word ‘harmony’ confirms the perspective of the interconnected nature of existence. Prentice’s interest in cosmology is so overpowering that he inspires his cousin Diana to study it, a point which she reveals to him towards the novel’s closing pages, where she says,

‘Oh, you were just so fascinated with it all. Especially with stellar evolution. That had obviously really blown your mind. “We are made of bits of stars!” you shouted.’ Diana laughed a little. ‘You’d been reading about all that stuff and it just tickled you pink. You told us about how the sun and the solar system were made out of the elements of older stars that had blown up; how the elements that made up the world had been made in those ancient stars, and that meant our bodies, too, every atom. Jeez, I thought you were going to explode.’ (497, emphasis in original)

Diana’s account of Prentice’s enthusiasm continues with further details of his explanations that evening: “‘you kept yelling and went through it all: super novae scattering heavy atoms; the debris swirling through space, other novae and supers sending shock-waves through the debris, compressing it; stars forming, planets; geology, chemistry; life’” (498). However, it is Diana’s closing comment on Prentice’s speech that evening which puts this scene into context: “‘You were pretty scathing about religion, too; tawdry and pathetic in comparison,



you said’” (498). Banks situates this conversation at the end of this novel in order to conclude the ideological struggles which Prentice has undergone. This conversation with his cousin reaffirms his worldview, as well as confirming the key philosophical issues of the text for the reader. As such, Prentice’s journey demonstrates the creation of a utopian ideal for the present time. Rather than attempting to reconnect with the outmoded idealism of the 1960s, the mysterious and unknown spirituality of ancient Scotland, or the Christian doctrine, Prentice forms an optimistic outlook from the position of one who is mindful of both enormous cosmological viewpoints and precise social and historical issues.

### **Trans-generational Haunting**

Parallel to this search for universal truths, Prentice is also engaged in the search for the specific truths of his family history. Prentice is led further into this Gothic mystery via the notes for Uncle Rory’s literary work which was also to be entitled “The Crow Road.” These notes are found in various forms, both written in code in Rory’s diaries and notebooks and saved onto computer disks which have become obsolete by the time Prentice finds them. Some of the notes are found in Ken’s study, while others have been kept by Janice Rae, Rory’s girlfriend. Prentice loses the notes given to him by Janice whilst he is on a train but manages to get the computer disks converted into a readable format with the help of Ashley and her professional contacts.

The notes which Prentice uncovers reveal what Lucie Armitt terms a “ghost-writing parallel narrative.”<sup>63</sup> Armitt goes on to discuss this strategy with reference to the work of psychologists Nicholas Abraham and Maria Torok who developed the concepts of the secret,

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<sup>63</sup> Lucie Armitt, “The Magical Realism of the Contemporary Gothic,” A Companion to the Contemporary Gothic, ed. David Punter (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000) 310.

the crypt, cryptonomy and the phantom as ways of formulating new approaches to the problem of repression within the mind of the traumatised subject.<sup>64</sup> Cryptonomy is the disturbance of language which inhibits the emergence of meaning in the subject's speech in order that they can repress the secret at the heart of a traumatic event. Abraham and Torok name the place in which this secret is stored as 'the crypt', which Rand describes as "an isolated region within the psyche in which an experience that is shameful, and therefore unspeakable, has been 'buried alive.'"<sup>65</sup> Thus, in this line of analysis, the phantom becomes something distinctly internal to the subject, who senses that they are haunted by the secret in the unacknowledged 'crypt' of meaning within themselves: "what haunt[s] are not the dead, but the gaps or 'silences' left within the living by the secrets of others. The 'phantom' . . . is understood to mean a delusion of the living provoked by the tormenting unconscious suspicion that something had been left unsaid during the life of the deceased."<sup>66</sup>

Abraham and Torok's work provides some very useful apparatus for analysing the ghost-narrative within The Crow Road. Approaching such a reading at a superficial level, the bulk of Rory's notes are written in code leaving Prentice in a difficult situation when he comes to interpret the system Rory used, as he illustrates in his narrative when he relates one of the "more comprehensible bits": "*H crshd twn carige & tr? Erlier proph. by Sr: 'kld by t. livng & t. ded((?)) H Chrst-lk figr (chng nm to start with T!!???); fml Chrst fr new times? Scot mrtyr? Or Birnam wd idea—disgsd army??? (2 silly?)*" (172, italicised in original). This code is the first obstacle which Prentice must overcome in order to access the mystery.

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<sup>64</sup> Nicholas Rand, "Psychoanalysis with Literature: An Abstract of Nicholas Abraham and Maria Torok's The Shell and the Kernel," Oxford Literary Review 12.1-2 (1990): 58.

<sup>65</sup> Rand 59.

<sup>66</sup> Rand 60.



Initially, it is only Rory's disappearance which Prentice wants to solve, but Prentice later learns that Rory wanted to use some family secrets in his creative opus, secrets which involve Fiona and Lachlan Watt and which Rory decides to use, regardless of any reservations. Whilst reading these notes involving Fiona and Lachlan, Prentice comments: "The one thing that stayed with me as a result was not a solution to anything but another mystery. . . . a page headlined by the mysterious message: JUST USE IT!" (382). The mystery within Rory's texts comes to be of greater importance than the mystery of Rory's disappearance.

Eventually, Prentice narrates his feelings concerning these notes as if they are possessing him like a ghostly spirit. On the topic of the notes lost on a train, Prentice says, "it haunted me. Even now, months later, I had dreams about reading a book that ended half-way through, or watching a film which ended abruptly, screen whiting-out . . . Usually I woke breathless, imagining there was a scarf—shining white silk looped in a half-twist—tightening around my neck." (262, ellipsis in original). This is precisely Abraham and Torok's description of the phantom; the unexpressed thoughts which have been left behind by the dead and which torment the living. Prentice's own guilt at losing the notebooks is also a factor which disturbs him in this section, showing how he wants to take up the task of saying the things his uncle repressed in code and hid from view.

Prentice's gradual uncovering of Rory's coded text is, for him, akin to a necromantic exploration of Rory's body which becomes reanimated with the process of investigation. Prentice dreams that Rory's work is being disturbed, rearranged by his reading of it: "As though each scribbled sign had become a mote of dust and—by my reading—been disturbed; lifted from the page and blown around me in a vortex of microscopic info-debris, chaotic witnesses of a past that I could not comprehend" (383). The encoded, fragmented text is

stirred into life as Prentice's memory of Rory begins to occupy an uncertain territory between life and death, giving rise to the assumption that Prentice's grandmother Margot was correct in divining that her youngest son had died. The "tomb" of secret meaning within Prentice holds both the as yet unacknowledged death of his uncle and the secrets which he held at the time of his death.

There are further aspects in the narrative which link Rory's text to the kind of ideas analysed by Abraham and Torok: for example, the information on the obsolete computer disks, already corrupted by bad storage, go through a process where the computer expert encrypts and decrypts the corrupted information; Janice Rae gives Rory's files to Prentice and puts a note on them which reads "[Rory] said there was something secret buried in it. (Gallanach)?"; Prentice's mother tells him that there could be some more of Rory's notes "buried in the filing" of his father's office, and when Prentice finally finds these 'buried' files he describes them as "discovered treasure."<sup>67</sup> The language of burial and exhumation pervades these passages, while the secrets of Rory's manuscripts are withheld from Prentice, all the time fuelling his desire to find out what was in them. The gaps left in Prentice by the secrets which Rory knew form the phantom which torments Prentice. Similarly, the secrets which Rory knew about Fiona and Lachlan's affair form his suspicions about Fergus's guilt, yet Rory was unable to express these suspicions and obviously agonised over them a great deal, working through them in a coded state before being able to bring them to full language. This encrypted language forms that "tomb" of repressed secrets, which is inherited by Prentice, as Abraham explains, "What comes back are the tombs of others. The phantoms of

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<sup>67</sup> Banks The Crow Road 373, 174, 224 & 347 respectively.



folklore merely objectify a metaphor active within the unconscious: the burial of an unspeakable fact within the loved one.”<sup>68</sup>

Once again, the narrative plots backwards over past events, regressing into family history in order to explain a problem, which demonstrates the pull of history and one’s connection to the lives of others. Kristeva’s ideas about overcoming melancholic stages can be read in a different light, as we see that it is not just the psychological health of an individual which is at stake here but that of the whole family. Prentice is part of a generational structure which involves each family member, yet there is the sense that the generation before his has already expired. As Prentice looks at his Uncle Hamish, who is bedridden with a mental breakdown after seeing Ken die, Prentice says, “[t]his prattling wreck, this bed-bound, hide-bound bag of gibbering nonsense was all that remained of that generation’s one-time promise” (303). In unearthing the “crypt” of secrets which haunts him, Prentice fulfills his prophesied pivotal role within the family, bringing to an end the haunting concerning Fergus’s killings. Complicit with this theme of familial regeneration, the final scene shows a new era of the McHoan family, invigorated by the promise of the next generation with the birth of another Ken McHoan.

However, this is not the only aspect which this “trans-generational haunting” carries with it.<sup>69</sup> The class struggle between the upper-class Urvills and the working-class Watts is posited as the basis for Fergus’s insatiable revenge over his wife’s affair with Lachlan, suggesting that it is Lachlan’s possession of his ‘property’ that offends Fergus so much. The

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<sup>68</sup> Nicholas Abraham, “Notes on the Phantom: A Complement to Freud’s Metapsychology,” trans., Nicholas Rand. Critical Inquiry 13.2 (1987): 287-288. Emphasis in original

<sup>69</sup> Armitt 307.

root of this power-struggle between the two men is seemingly their childhood squabble, in which Fergus accidentally damages Lachlan's eye to the extent that it has to be removed. As a child, whilst playing hide-and-seek with Fergus and Lachlan in the ruins of Gaineamh Castle, Ken witnesses one example of the taunting that goes on between the two boys. Lachlan is aware that the hole in which Fergus has been hiding would have been part of the drain for the castle's toilet and enjoys teasing Fergus about his hiding place, revelling in the perceived overturning of order which this presents. Initially, Fergus is angry with Lachlan but Ken witnesses this change into a "blank, emotionless expression" which gives Ken the fleeting impression "of seeing something buried alive" and causes Ken to shiver (89). It is Fergus's pride and resentment which is suppressed here, and which later erupts when Lachlan teases Fergus about his hiding place once again and Fergus reacts by smashing Lachlan's face into the display cabinet (151).

Read through Abraham and Torok's analytical process, this sense of seeing something buried alive refers to the power struggle through the long history of domination over the Watt family, among others, by the land-owning Urvill family. This struggle is stored in that crypt of meaning in the psyche in which the unspeakable has been "buried alive," and constitutes the kind of trans-generational haunting which Abraham and Torok develop in their psychoanalytic research.<sup>70</sup> As Rand explains, "[t]hough manifest in one individual's psyche, the phantom eventually leads to the psychoanalysis of several generations (child, parents, grandparents) through the symptoms of a descendent."<sup>71</sup> Rand goes on to acknowledge the potential that this can entail for an understanding of culture and history: "The combined

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<sup>70</sup> Rand, 59.

<sup>71</sup> Rand 61.



theories of individual psychic concealment and secret transmissions over the generations have the wider potential of enriching our ideas of political history, social movements, and ideological currents.”<sup>72</sup> Thus, the antagonism between Fergus and Lachlan, leading to the loss of Lachlan’s eye, brings a broadly socialist dimension to the narrative. In the childhood incident, witnessed by Ken, Fergus berates Lachlan’s family for not owning their own house and Lachlan threatens to damage Fergus’s expensive ornaments, demonstrating upper-class notions of ownership and working-class contempt for ostentation (151).

This exposes the long-running conflict between upper- and working-class, Laird and labourer, coloniser and colonised. The exploitative position held by the Urvills is depicted in the stained-glass window, specially commissioned for the renovation of Gaineamh castle, on which Prentice comments during his grandmother’s wake. The window shows the movements of the Urvill family over the past thousand years as they moved from France to England to Scotland where they settled in “the very epicentre of the ancient Scots kingdom of Dalraida” where they stayed to “mingle their blood with that of the Picts, the Scots, the Angles, the Britons and the Vikings who have all variously settled, colonised, raided and exploited this part of Argyll . . .” (57, ellipsis in original). Once again, land ownership is portrayed as a ridiculous idea and nationality is shown to be merely a set of precarious circumstances. However, the issues at stake here can be identified as having contributed to the friction between the Urvills and Watts for many years, perpetually haunting down through the generational structures.

As Kristeva writes of the melancholic’s sense of living in the past, the trans-generational haunting which is illustrated in this text complies with that Gothic obsession

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<sup>72</sup> Rand 61.

with the past. It is not until Prentice has uncovered the mysteries which surround the various deaths in his family and had the time to grieve for them that he can escape the past's hold over him. This also allows Prentice to reach a stage where he can reaffirm his world view, accepting that it is basically the same, secular, rational one which his father impressed upon him as a child. Prentice throws the paperweight, the weapon which Fergus used to kill Rory, into the sea, Fergus's final resting place, and wonders if Fergus's personality is continuing after death:

I found that I couldn't believe that it was. Neither was dad's, neither was Rory's, nor Aunt Fiona's, nor Darren Watt's. There was no such continuation; it just didn't work that way, and there should even be a sort of relief in the comprehension that it didn't. We continue in our children, and in our works and in the memories of others; we continue in our dust and ash. To want more was not just childish, but cowardly, and somehow constipatory, too. Death was change; it led to new chances, new vacancies, new niches and opportunities; it was not all loss. (484)

Prentice's exploration of the mysteries underlying his family's history ultimately overthrow the final vestiges of this power structure and the text's end shows the new generation of the McHoan family, father, son and uncle, once again, on the ramparts of the Urvill's castle. As prophesied by Grandma Margot, Prentice's "pivotal" role in his family's history has been fulfilled and the affirmative ending reinforces this, as Prentice says in the final word of the text, "'Ha!'" (501). His sense of accomplishment is clear as he has finally neutralised the 'ghosts' which have travelled through the generations and manifested themselves in the Gothic aspects of this text. Generational structures and gaining a sense of connection to history is also the main theme of the final text in this chapter.



## The Peppered Moth

The Peppered Moth traces the lives of three women, one from each generation of the same family; Bessie Bawtry of Breaseborough in South Yorkshire, her daughter Chrissie Barron and her granddaughter Faro Gaulden. Drabble's text uses several themes as ways of exploring the lives of these three women, most notable are the themes of mitochondrial DNA, genetic mutation and evolution, all of which coalesce in the symbol of the Peppered Moth of the title. This is one of the common names for a moth which is native to South Yorkshire and which grew darker during the nineteenth-century due to the soot-filled air. By mutating and taking on a speckled appearance, the moth managed to maintain a better camouflage, thus ensuring its survival. The progress of the Peppered Moth is used as a metaphor for the development of the three generations of women at the centre of this novel.

The narrative begins with the collection of genetic information from the people of Breaseborough in order to discover if any of them are the direct descendent of an eight thousand-year-old skeleton known as Cotterhall Man which has been discovered in a cave in the surrounding hills. The people of Breaseborough are sampled for traces of mitochondrial DNA, the genetic information which is handed down only through the maternal lineage, thereby foregrounding the mother-daughter bond as the primary focus of the text. Towards the end of the narrative we learn that Faro Gaulden is a descendent of the ancient skeleton, sharing the same mitochondrial DNA. However, unusually for a book which highlights the mother-daughter bond, the skeleton is that of a man.

As in Waterland and The Crow Road, The Peppered Moth sets up a dialectic between the old and the new, the ancient and the modern. As it is in the previous two texts, the environment is the locus of this polemic, showing the sense of connection to place and the value of reconnecting with one's origins. However, unlike Tom Crick who manages to

escape the pull of the Fenland environment and moves to Greenwich, which suggests some line of development over the generations, Faro returns from her comfortable life in the south of England to Breaseborough, the land on which her genes have lived for millennia. This return culminates with a scene in which Faro experiences a spiritual awakening which, like The Crow Road, raises questions about the role of religion in the present day.

Through the ideas of a reconnection to one's origins, genetic tracing and a rewriting of matrilineal heritage, Drabble constructs a vision of contemporary subjectivity which works towards a similar interconnection of subject and context to that which is found in Waterland and The Crow Road. Once again, the constructions of the subject in Drabble's text contradict postmodern ideology in its demonstration of ways of building a sense of one's history and interconnection with the world around them. Faro's private search becomes a metaphor for a cultural concern with formulating an integrated approach. As Irmgard Maasen comments on Drabble's fiction, "The search for meaning in the midst of a crumbling national consensus takes on the form of an inquiry into the dark recesses of one's own, or other people's, past, and the retrieval and acceptance of one's rejected private roots become symbolic for the desired healing of society as a whole."<sup>73</sup>

### **Feminism and Identity**

Moreover, in comparing The Peppered Moth with Waterland and The Crow Road, an interesting development is uncovered concerning feminism and constructions of identity. Drabble's text is as focussed on the mother/daughter relationship as Banks's and Swifts's are focussed on the father/son relationship, and these bonds contribute to different formations of

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<sup>73</sup> Irmgard Massen, "Liberal Limitations—Margaret Drabble's Re-Inscriptions of Realism," Anglistik & Englishunterricht 60 (1997): 34.



the subject. Waterland and The Crow Road track a path which develops out of postmodernity while The Peppered Moth follows a synchronous yet subtly different approach, grounded in a specifically feminist perspective. Postmodernity and feminism are often thought of as synchronous and in agreement as each discourse is concerned with the questioning and dismantling of totalitarian, patriarchal ideologies and power structures, but feminism has undergone fundamental points of departure which complicates its relationship to postmodernity.

Flax notes the inherent incompatibility of the postmodern with a feminist politics saying, "It is questionable whether any of the spaces opened up by postmodernism would be comfortable to or inhabitable by those concerned with issues of gender and justice."<sup>74</sup> For Flax, postmodern interpretations of identity divest women of the opportunity to create a positive ontological form which is appropriate to them, based as it is on the concept of the bourgeois, insular self: "Our choice is not limited to either a 'masculine,' overly differentiated, and unitary self or no self at all. We should be suspicious of those who would revise history (and hence our collective memory) to construct such flawed alternatives."<sup>75</sup> Patricia Waugh also discusses the points at which postmodernism and feminism do not comply and writes of the similarities that the bourgeois subject, successor of Enlightenment thought, and the postmodern subject have, stating that the latter is a fragmented, disturbed version of the former. For Waugh, then, as for Drabble, women's relationship to the postmodern is always difficult because they cannot play with the deconstruction of an identity with which they were never associated and, as will be discussed in greater detail below with

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<sup>74</sup> Flax 210.

<sup>75</sup> Flax 220.

reference to postcolonial literature, the construction of a stable, progressive identity politics is something which those on the margins of power are striving to achieve. Waugh goes on to discuss the postmodern fragmented identity as a perverted form of nostalgia for the bourgeois subject, an interpretation which uncovers that melancholic face of postmodernity once more, cultural evidence of an inability to accept the loss of this outmoded form of subjectivity.

Meanwhile, feminism “seeks a subjective identity, a sense of effective agency and history for women which has hitherto been denied them by the dominant culture. . . . Feminist writers, in the meantime, appear to be pursuing the sort of definition of identity and relationship to history which postmodernists have rejected.”<sup>76</sup> Waugh goes on to elaborate on the specific position of women writers, mentioning a point which is particularly relevant to Faro’s journey towards a realisation of her full identity:

Much women’s writing can, in fact, be seen not as an attempt to define an isolated individual ego but to discover a collective concept of subjectivity which foregrounds the construction of identity in relationship.<sup>77</sup>

This is the aim of all three texts under consideration in this chapter, but the feminist aspect of The Peppered Moth introduces another dimension which Banks’s and Swift’s texts lack as it successfully redefines that most influential relationship between the mother and child.

### **Rewriting the Maternal**

A glance at the constructions of gender in the three texts under discussion here, and representations of the mother in particular, reveals a glaring impasse in formulations of identity. In Waterland and The Crow Road women are shown to be either hysterics or doting mothers, often a combination of both in the case of Swift’s text, indicating an inability to

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<sup>76</sup> Waugh, Feminine 9-10, emphasis in original.

<sup>77</sup> Waugh, Feminine 10, emphasis in original.



depart from the idea of the all-powerful maternal archetype against which the (male) child must distinguish himself in order to overcome the power which he perceives she holds over his identity, a power which threatens his creation of an autonomous self. The mother figure is at once peripheral and central to Waterland and The Crow Road, being what Flax terms “the last refuge not only from the ‘heartless’ world, but from an increasingly mechanized and fabricated one as well.”<sup>78</sup>

In The Crow Road, even the sexually liberated and independent Ashley Watt fulfills a mothering role for Prentice whom she thinks of as “‘just a bairn’” (CR, 277), frequently exhibiting maternal sentiments towards him such as stroking his head, holding him and shushing him (CR, 305). Ashley’s attractive yet strong, masculine features and voice portray her as a powerful partner whom Prentice cannot quite equal, yet depends upon, much like a child’s relationship to a parent. Similarly, in Waterland Mary is Tom’s “mother-wife who pack[s] her husband off to school” (W, 131). Instead, these texts firmly situate their search for understanding as related to the wisdom of the good father (Tom Crick heeds Henry’s stories as Prentice McHoan heeds Ken’s), and the position of the women in these texts remains ambivalent. This premise is damaging for the development of the debate on subjectivity insofar as it indicates women’s exclusion from a truly interconnected concept of identity as they necessarily hold an iconic position.

Waugh questions the traditional construction of the bourgeois self as it is presented in both enlightenment thought and postmodernity. Neither of these positions are credible for Waugh, who perseveres with the argument that there must be other ways of thinking of identity, in particular, that there must be successful ways of constructing a viable relational

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<sup>78</sup> Flax 25.

identity. Waugh discusses the bond between mother and child and carries out the same revision of Freudian theories of identity formation as Drabble achieves in The Peppered Moth, as she asks

Can we imagine alternative modes of subjectivity? . . . in the development of selfhood, the ability to conceive of oneself as separate from and mutually independent with the parent develops with the ability to accept one's dependancy and to feel secure enough to relax the boundaries between self and other without feeling one's identity to be threatened. Why, then, is autonomy always emphasised as the goal of maturity? Why not emphasise equally the importance of maintaining a connection and intersubjectivity? . . . Parts of other people, the parts we have had relationships with, are parts of us, so the self is both constant and fluid, ever in exchange, ever redescribing itself through its encounters with others.<sup>79</sup>

Flax writes from a very similar perspective in thinking on the importance of reconceiving the maternal for the development of identity politics, saying:

In most cultures the first person we are in an intimate, social relationship with is a woman—a mother or her substitutes or relations. Hence many feminists, including myself, are suspicious of theories that require denying the centrality of human relatedness or obviate the ways these relations become part of a complex inner world or distinctive subjectivity. Feminist theorists have argued that the repression, especially by men, of these primary relations and the relational aspects of our subjectivity is necessary for the replication of male-dominant cultures.<sup>80</sup>

Thus, a true move beyond the mourning of postmodernity can only be achieved through a reclaiming of such a maternal link, along with the implications for identity which this entails. Drabble does not return to a simplistic ideal of the 'good mother', in fact she consciously works against such a premise in this novel, yet the example of interrelation which the maternal bond denotes is used as a template for a concept of identity which is complicit with feminist ethics.

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<sup>79</sup> Waugh, "Stalemates?" 337.

<sup>80</sup> Flax 232.



In accepting her connection to people around her, the natural world, history on ancient and familial scales, and , most importantly, her mother Chrissie, Faro comes out of the timeless postmodern present and into an organic, connected perspective of life. Waugh notes this as a feature of many female characters in Drabble's fiction, saying that they "may move from a position of over-defensive separateness and repression of the need for human connection to a recognition that their identity is at least partly bound up with others."<sup>81</sup> This is the journey which Faro makes. It is also the journey which Prentice McHoan and Tom Crick attempt but, particularly in the case of Tom Crick, fail to achieve as the women in these novels occupy a marginal position.

The deconstruction of the 'good mother' ideal is carried out through the characters of Ellen Bawtry and her daughter Bessie Barron. Ellen is the first mother we meet in this text, a woman who does not like children and has no understanding of how to interact with them (11). Even when Bessie visits Ellen on her deathbed, Bessie and her sister Dora conclude that "she had not been very gentle with them, that old woman upstairs. She had not been a motherly mother" (202). As a teenager, Bessie harbours a disdain for her mother over what she sees as Ellen's failure to keep the house free from the coal-dust that hangs permanently in the air: "Therefore she was to despise her mother. That is the way it is with mothers and daughters" (12). A similar animosity continues into the relationship between Bessie and her daughter, Chrissie. As Chrissie embarks on a life with her first husband and Faro's father, Nick Gaulden, she feels a sense of victory at having escaped life with her mother: "Chrissie felt, during this wild heyday, that she had truly escaped Bessie at last. She had burned her boats. Goodbye Mother" (255).

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<sup>81</sup> Waugh, Feminine 128.

This is contradictory to what one would normally expect in a text which looks back through the mother/daughter line, as the dead, long-gone mother is usually romanticised in literature as the ideal maternal figure, just as Sarah Atkinson becomes idealised by the people of Gildsey in Waterland. Drabble deconstructs this literary convention, replacing it with an account of human relationships which complies with her literary realism. In addition to the systematic destruction of the maternal archetype, Drabble also works against the kind of martyrdom which affects several of the “gorgeous, doomed matriarchs” in Waterland, particularly Mary whom Cooper describes as “less a character than a placeholder or conduit for desire: a dioramic sequence of paradises lost.”<sup>82</sup> This myth of lost origins, often represented by the subject’s sense of traumatic separation from the mother, is consciously undone in The Peppered Moth as Drabble deconstructs the links between women’s position in society and martyrdom. Near the novel’s beginning, the narrator makes a sardonic comment to this effect as we are told that Bessie’s friend, Ada Marr, envies Bessie’s sickly nature which keeps her bedridden for weeks at a time, as the narrative says “martyrdom of one sort or another was one of the few attractive prospects open to an imaginative girl child in those days” (29). The limitations placed on female identity are explicit in this comment.

Drabble’s constructions of identity are also partly dependent on the breakdown of nuclear family structures. Faro’s father openly has affairs with several other women, many of which result in children being born, and Faro is brought up in a house which she and Chrissie share with the other women and children from time to time. Because of the situation in which these two characters find themselves, the established pattern of relations between mother and daughter has to be revised greatly, a factor which portrays the broken family unit

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<sup>82</sup> Cooper 385.



as a productive situation. Unlike the daughters of generations before her, Faro is very close to her mother and the two women “speak nearly every day, sometimes several times a day” (158), yet as an adult Faro is never dependent on her. In exposing the innate mother/daughter bond and the maternal ideal as myths, Drabble destroys the strange power dialectic which we see in Waterland and, to a certain extent, in The Crow Road. The mother is not seen to be an estranged locus of infinite power; instead she is a person with whom one can have a healthy closeness. Faro’s eventual sense of interconnection to time, history, the environment and her cultural heritage extends to the link with her mother, opening up another way of figuring the maternal bond which works against archaic perceptions of the mother and, by implication, all women.

These ideas are supported by the narrative’s concern with feminism, an aspect which is expressed in Faro’s secret delight in the fact that it is the mitochondrial DNA, the genetic information handed down the maternal line, which is helping to uncover the past in Dr Hawthorne’s search:

Yes, she is pleased, but only on a frivolous, point-scoring level. Faro is a feminist, as women of her class and her education are these days. She is not a sentimental feminist and does not hold with the opinion that all women are good, all men bad, all mothers good, all fathers bad—though in her particular domestic circumstances she might well have been expected to adopt that ideological fallacy. . . . But yes, Faro is a feminist, and she is pleased by the irony of the power of the new magic of mitochondrial DNA. (160)

Drabble’s refusal to rely on a romanticised maternal ideal problematises a dualistic approach to feminism and forces the reader to think about the specifics of human interaction. Thus the tracing back through the maternal line in both the scientific research and the narrative eschews the simplicities of binary oppositions in favour of an evaluation of cultural norms, historical models, and traditional family structures. Such a position is hinted at elsewhere by the narrator, as Chrissie’s husband Don, an archeologist, goes away to lecture at a conference

on cave artefacts, a conference which has a feminist perspective. The narrator goes on to say that “although there will no doubt be some fierce separatist hard-line women there, with some extreme views on the essential placidity of the early palaeolithic matriarchies, there will also be some interesting discussion”(351), stating that the idea of essential maternal goodness is a mythology which is as outlandish as it is dull.

### **Reconnecting with the Past**

The narrative search through the maternal line does not seek a reunion with a retrogressive concept of the maternal ideal but instead moves towards a new way of evaluating contemporary representations of relationships with the mother. In a similar way, the search led by Dr Hawthorne is also motivated by the need to understand the present and the future rather than as a way of supporting readings of the past. Dr Hawthorne impresses the relevance of his study on the people gathered at the church hall, saying

one of the most interesting riddles facing humanity lies not in the future but in the past. ‘How did we get here from there?’ . . . The very future of our species may lie, repeats Dr Hawthorn, in our correct interpretation, with all the new tools now available, of the data of the past. Where we come from is the most interesting thing that we can know about ourselves. (67)

Dr Hawthorn’s ideas concerning genetic inheritance seek to give a sense of continuity between the past and the present, a point which becomes especially important with reference to the ideas concerning postmodern temporality. Also, this trope of reconnecting with the past in order to better understand our present outlines the feminist project of rethinking the relation to the maternal. The individual’s implication in the metanarratives of time and history is revised alongside the relation to the maternal paradigm. Drabble uses Faro’s character as a device to illustrate the necessity of reconnection with time and history; not



completely abandoning metanarrative concepts, but reworking them into more appropriate forms.

At the start of the text, and much of the way through it, Faro epitomises the postmodern dismissal of the metanarratives and the search for a wider meaning to existence. The narrator mentions the timeless, placeless, meaningless nature of the postmodern with reference to the hotel at which Faro chooses to stay instead of staying at her great aunt Dora's house. The hotel is described as

[a]n ordinary, modern, two-storey, moderately priced 1980s business motel, built in red brick, in a postmodern style that belonged to all periods and to none, in a jumbled compromise between chateau and chalet and dungeon and supermarket. Just the place in which to recover from the too-pressing, high-smelling past. . . . so anonymous, so utterly ahistorical. (136)

The description here relates the hotel to buildings both ancient and modern, implying the composite nature of the postmodern which borrows from many time periods yet never fixes itself within one. This is a symptom of the postmodern inability to see itself as related to the linear flow of time, to the organic development of history, a point which evokes Connor's assertion that the postmodern has borrowed from modernism the idea of breaking from the past but cannot conceive of a "forward impulsion."

Similarly, Faro's decision to dine in the hotel's restaurant is motivated by her desire to watch the other guests, described as "real-unreal unknown transit people, people whom one need never see again. Motorway people, without history, without provenance!" (136). Like the building which they inhabit, the people are also composite yet detached from context and Faro is happy to watch them without having to become involved their personal lives. Like the perfunctory mass-produced artefacts of the technological age, people are disposable (one need never see them again) and divorced from historical and geographical contexts.

The timeless, placeless hotel and the real-unreal people within it are an antidote to what Faro experiences as the “disquieting” immersion in the past that her visit to Breaseborough has entailed. As the narrator says, “Breaseborough jerked one from the banal to the surreal, from the ancient to the postmodern without any warning” (135). Reaching into the past is equated with gaining understanding: just as Tom Crick works his way back through several generations of his family in order to explain the events of the present, and just as Prentice McHoan seeks to understand the meaning within Rory’s texts and his position within a cosmological perspective. Faro is aware, although resentful, of the potential understanding she could gain from looking into her historical context, not just through Dr Hawthorn’s project, but also by becoming better acquainted with her great aunt and Breaseborough, but she chooses instead to retreat to the decontextualised hotel room which is described as “Very nice, very meaningless. Faro had had enough of meaning” (137).

However, Faro’s reconnection with her past is accompanied by a revision of the most abandoned and deconstructed metanarrative of all: religion. Like The Crow Road, The Peppered Moth begins in a church, allowing both Banks and Drabble a means of introducing the uncertain status of religion in contemporary culture. In the first scene, the population of Breaseborough gathers at the church hall to hear microbiologist Dr Robert Hawthorn talk about his genetic tracing program in which he is attempting to link the DNA of the locals to that of the recently discovered skeleton. This scene illustrates many breaks between the past and the present, showing differing ways in which society has changed over recent decades. We are made aware that the majority of people in the church would not go there in order to worship yet the locals cannot turn it into a useful building because of prevailing economic circumstances: “In other parts of England, churches and chapels have been deconsecrated and turned into private houses, public houses, restaurants. But there isn’t the money for that kind



of thing around here. There isn't the call" (1). In this sense, 'the call' refers to consumer demand, not divine vocation. Like Swift in Waterland, Drabble highlights the position that consumer culture holds as the dangerous contender for the place religion formerly held in people's lives.

Several aspects concerning the presentation of Dr Hawthorne's project also highlight a similar substitution with reference to the equipment used, showing the move away from the craftsmanship of former times in favour of the mass-production of the technological age. For example, the banner used by Dr Hawthorne has been made on a computer, a fact which incites a comment loaded with nostalgia from the narrator: "It is a computer-designed and computer-printed banner. Nobody has time for cross stitch and herringbone and tapestry now" (2). Similarly, there is a reference to the old church hall clock which has marked time for a century and now stands redundant, replaced by the various electronic digital devices of the modern age: "You could probably get it to go again. But why bother, when everyone has a watch or a mobile telephone? When you can tell the time from the microwave on the draining board in the kitchenette? When Dr Hawthorn's computer screen tells you in large glowing green digits that it is 15:27 hours precisely?" (3). This nostalgia for a past time in which heterogeneity was valued above the homogeneity of mass-production is at a variance with the postmodern which attempts to break from the past. The use of the twenty-four hour clock as opposed to the traditional British twelve-hour clock, and the reduction of the kitchen, the traditional centre of the family home, to a kitchenette also indicates a similar reserve towards the processes of modernisation. The homogeneity of the present, as it is represented in mass-produced technology, forces the reader to consider the values held by the secular congregation within what was formerly a place of worship.

Science is presented as a new metanarrative which explains existence and gives meaning to the world, a substitute for religion. This idea is highlighted by Dr Hawthorn as he takes on the role of a vicar making a sermon, “the mood of this meeting has nothing to do with prayer. It is a scientific meeting, and microbiologist Dr Robert Hawthorn is about to address his flock upon the subject of mitochondrial DNA and matrilineal descent” (2). Yet the search for the mitochondrial line is also a search for meaning, not just for an understanding of the past in isolation, but for a sense of its relation to the present and, by implication, to the future as well. Dr Hawthorne speaks to the Breasborough community on this topic; “we are about to make history. We are history, every man, woman and child of us, every grandmother, every niece, every auntie, every babe in arms! We’re all part of one big happy family! . . . this business has given a whole new fascinating, fascinating, fascinating meaning to the family!” (61-62, emphasis in original). Dr Hawthorne’s project, like Tom Crick’s and Prentice McHoan’s, is to look to the past in order to gain an understanding of our context, familial, cultural and national, in relation to different scales of time and history.

Drabble goes on to explore the ways in which science competes with religious norms in its claims to fulfill every desire that has previously been catered for by spiritual precepts, particularly the idea of the afterlife. As a scientific historian, Faro is well informed of the latest developments in sustaining human life, an idea which is presented as a scientific parallel to the concept of an afterlife. Whilst visiting Breaseborough and staying in her chic postmodern hotel, Faro awakes to muse over the substitution of the religious metanarrative by scientific techniques: “Was death at last to die? Yes, so they claimed. Immortal life was within reach. Cloning, genetic engineering, spare-part surgery, xenografts, then immortality. Nobody shall die needlessly. All shall be saved, and all manner of people shall be saved”



(156). However, Faro takes no comfort in this as it offers no solution for the spirits of the dead:

What of the already dead? Shall there be a resurrection for them? Shall there be a Harrowing of Hell? Shall they be redeemed, all of them? What of the virtuous Heathen? What of those born before the genome? What of those who never had a moment's happiness? What about the forgotten bits of prehistory? All the hominid mandibles, all the forelimbs and hindlimbs, all the fossils and partial face and cranial fragments of the past? They had suffered pain. Shall Cotterhall Man be redeemed of his pain? (156)

Faro's thoughts highlight her worries surrounding the inadequacies of science to completely explain the nature of existence and the mysteries of the afterlife, a concept which she finds increasingly attractive due to her growing sense of connection to her ancestors. The conflation of scientific, biblical and archeological language here represents the ultimate intertwining of three of the central themes in this text which give historical relevance to existence and this is Faro's gradual comprehension as she comes to familiarise herself with her ancestors' homeland. Through this illustration, Drabble shows a great reserve towards the abandonment of the metanarratives, particularly those of history and religion, whilst not being completely seduced by the idea of their reinstatement.

Irmgard Maasen discusses this point with reference to Drabble's work: "Like other British writers who only partially subscribe to postmodernism . . . she can neither wholly accept the loss of the grand récit nor can she rejoice in playful heterogeneity as American postmodernists do."<sup>83</sup> Maasen marks British postmodernism out as a distinct movement in a similar way to Head's argument, discussed above. In both cases, these critics identify a certain resistance to postmodern ideology. As Head says of that which he terms British postmodern fiction, The Peppered Moth certainly demonstrates "a conviction about the moral

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<sup>83</sup> Maasen 33, emphasis in original.

and emotional function of narrative fiction, and its ability to make readers re-engage with the world they know” and this is nowhere better seen than in Faro’s struggles to accept her desires for a spiritual dimension to her existence, a desire which grows within her as she comes to accept her historical context.<sup>84</sup>

These interlinked themes of science, religion and archeology find their culmination in one of the text’s final scenes. Faro’s last visit to Breaseborough is ostensibly made in order to check on her great aunt Dora, who has had a stroke. However, while she is there Faro meets with her lover, Steve Nieman, the man who discovered the Cotterhall skeleton by accident whilst working on the Hammervale Millennium Earth Recovery Project, a plan for creating wildlife sanctuaries over former mining sites. The gazebo Steve has built in Faro’s honour burns down that same night in a freak explosion caused by the buildup of natural underground gasses. Whilst looking at the ruins of the site, Faro has a fantasy in which she visualises the burning ground giving up its ancient dead. As Steve speaks to the firemen, Faro sits by her car and listens to a tape recording of Handel’s Messiah, a piece of music of which her grandfather, Joe Barron, was very fond. The deeply religious music instigates a cathartic process in Faro as she thinks of all the possible ancestors within the ground of this site, of whom she will never know anything:

Tears are pouring down Faro’s face, streaked with smuts borne on the dying breeze. The music defies hell and soars to heaven, and it seems to Faro that all the caverns of the cliff will open and give up their dead, that the men of the ages of stone and bronze and coal will come forth from their subterranean mansions, and that they will be redeemed. For now is Christ risen, and hell has been harrowed, and those that sleep shall be awakened. The skeletons totter out into the blaze. Faro weeps and weeps, as she sits on the low wall, with the car doors wide open like a beetle’s wings. (375-376)

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<sup>84</sup> Head 229.



The transcendental quality of the music and its biblical lyrics bring Faro to consider the long line of relations which link her to Cotterhall Man from a spiritual perspective, those people of the intervening ages of whom she is a direct descendent. The deeply religious symbolism of this scene forms a stark contrast to Faro's previous cynicism, an aspect of her character which corresponds with descriptions of her living in the "rapid shallows" of the present moment (342). By contrast, here Faro delves into a reverie in which she bears witness to a day of divine judgment in which she meets her ancestors as they stumble towards her. This fantasy of the reparation of Faro's family line extends to include Cotterhall Man himself. Faro listens to the singers on the 1957 tape recording, all of whom are now deceased, and imagines that Cotterhall Man is also stirred by the singing and the resurrection of his offspring, "The joyful voices of the dead rise in impassioned and glorious unison. Cotterhall Man hears them, in his glass coffin. Their voices harrow hell and pierce the firmament" (377).

In forming such a stark contrast between Faro's former atheism and this apparent spiritual awakening, Drabble comments on the superficial and ineffective deconstruction of the metanarratives; religion is shown to be a perspective which has not been eradicated, merely suppressed, supporting Tom Crick's assertion in Waterland that people crave meaning (W, 140). If the postmodern is thought of as a specifically patriarchal crisis, then Drabble's work here advocates the reclamation of the metanarratives, bringing about not a complete dismissal of these philosophical ideas, rather a questioning of them which would allow for their reformation into more viable forms. David Harvey refers to Fredric Jameson's work in discussing this point, saying "Meta-theory cannot be dispensed with. The postmodernists simply push it underground where it continues to function as a 'now unconscious

effectivity.”<sup>85</sup> In Harvey’s opinion the desire for metanarrative authority is the by-product of an age in which founding philosophical precepts have been systematically reduced:

The greater the ephemerality, the more pressing the need to discover or manufacture some kind of eternal truth that might lie therein. The religious revival that has become much stronger since the late sixties, and the search for authenticity and authority in politics . . . are cases in point. The revival of interest in basic institutions (such as the family and the community), and the search for historical roots are all signs of a search for more secure moorings and longer-lasting values in a shifting world.<sup>86</sup>

Harvey’s discussion echoes Drabble’s text perfectly, highlighting the main themes of family lineage and historical connection. As mentioned above, although religious revivalism would appear to be antithetical to postmodernity, it is actually a problematic aspect of the postmodern.

The skeletons who “totter out into the blaze”, bringing the theme of archeology into the text once more, fulfill a similar function to the Gothic aspects of The Crow Road, in that they represent elements of a previous ideology which haunts the present. Their emergence from underground also corresponds well with Harvey’s interpretation of postmodernity’s effect on the metanarratives as spirituality, like the dead, reemerges in a contemporary context. As Maasen says, the authors of these texts cannot accept the complete abandonment of religious principles. However, in Waterland and The Crow Road we see them transposed to other areas as the protagonists of these texts accept the loss of Christian beliefs yet take solace from history and cosmology, respectively. The Peppered Moth diverges from this course in its refusal to relinquish religion completely and its simultaneous concern with the

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<sup>85</sup> David Harvey, The Condition of Postmodernity: An Enquiry into the Origins of Cultural Change, (Cambridge: Blackwell, 1990). Citing Fredric Jameson, “Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism,” New Left Review 146 (1984): 82.

<sup>86</sup> Harvey 292.



complex nature of this particular metanarrative which, unlike time and history, entails a spiritual dimension. The fantasised resurrection scene warns that the simplistic abandonment of religion cannot be achieved, as it will continue to haunt the present. The ambiguity surrounding this scene concerns the problematic reinstatement of former ideologies into a present moment which can no longer accommodate them. Without appropriate transformation this scene is merely exemplary of the melancholic side of postmodernity, those “nostalgic turns to the past” of which Wheeler writes.<sup>87</sup> This is one point which is tackled by Margaret Atwood’s Cat’s Eye, in which text we see the formerly problematic codes ascribed to the mother figure of Christianity reworked, and thereby reclaimed, by the text’s protagonist, Elaine Risley. Atwood’s text can be read as continuing the discourse concerning gender in relation to religious precepts which Drabble’s text opens up with the mass exhumation of ancestral and spiritual connection which Faro experiences.

### **Reforming Realism, and “Cohesion in the Face of Chaos”<sup>88</sup>**

The themes of genetic inheritance, archeology and the reclamation of metanarratives all work towards creating a particular coherence within which the subject feels grounded, as in Waterland and The Crow Road where the connection to history and geological time are shown to be of great importance for contemporary identity. Like the other two texts, The Peppered Moth creates this sense of connection on a familial dimension, not only with the discovery of an ancient relative’s remains, but also via the tiny detail of a cheap brooch which is lost by Chrissie and then found by Faro many years later.

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<sup>87</sup> Wheeler, Modernity 74.

<sup>88</sup> Massen 34.

Chrissie's father, Joe Barron, brings her a trinket back from his time fighting in World War Two, which Chrissie then loses whilst playing as a small child. Chrissie finds this brooch during her first sexual encounter with a boy as an adolescent and is inspired by this find to study architecture and "recover lost things" (190). The brooch is lost again but Chrissie seems assured that it will return to her: "she did not grieve for it, for she knew that it would be restored once more" (190). Drabble then sets up the most unlikely of chance encounters which, it is suggested, returns the brooch to Chrissie. Decades later, Faro has an argument with a driver during a car accident on a motorway which culminates in the other driver throwing Faro's car keys onto the verge. The keys appear to be lost and Faro spends several hours looking for them. After finding them, Faro waits to be picked up from the scene of the accident and, miraculously, finds her mother's lost brooch without knowing of its connection to her family (336). Faro takes the brooch home, leaving the reader with the suggestion that Chrissie will one day find the brooch again, in Faro's possession. For Massen such details are evidence of Drabble's insistence on the workings of fate which "provides the underlying unifying structure, the elusive order of Drabble's fictional universe; . . . a connecting pattern, which may be difficult to detect, but which nonetheless, so the narrative insists in its ceaseless dropping of clues and hints, is there."<sup>89</sup>

Although not impossible in itself, this recovery of the long-lost object undermines the staunchly realist narrative voice in a way which allows for the reconfiguration of realism in a contemporary context. This same narrative voice is also responsible for the inclusion of a specifically magic realist element in this narrative in which realism is not merely undermined but punctured by two appearances of an angel which is seen only by the narrator. The first

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<sup>89</sup> Massen 33.



reference to this angel is in the opening scene as Dr Hawthorn delivers a computer presentation to the Breaseborough inhabitants: “The recording angel will attend, with folded wings, by the glimmering screen, waiting for Dr Hawthorn to press the start button” (5). The second point in the text at which an angel is referred to is during an otherwise mundane scene in which Chrissie and Faro are talking in Chrissie’s living room, the narrative tells us “[a] short silence falls. It is twenty past the hour, and an angel passes” (364). The introduction and exit of this angel bookend the text, giving rise to the implication that only through a journey into one’s familial, historical and spiritual heritage can the ruptures in the mother/daughter relation be reformed and healed. As Chrissie and Faro sit chatting together, the angel leaves the narrative, its otherworldly ‘role’ seemingly fulfilled.

Similarly, Waterland gives us an apparition, this time seen by character and narrator alike, which also marks the beginning and end of a significant narrative element; in this case, Dick Crick’s life. On the evening of the first day he moves in to the lock-keeper’s cottage with his new bride Helen, who has agreed to carry her father’s child, the newly-wed Henry Crick sees a will-o’-the-wisp, traditionally a bad omen (W, 232). The apparition floats downstream, towards the lock as he watches its glowing, changing light which briefly takes on the shape of a woman. Henry Crick remains convinced of what he has seen that night and records it in his diary. The second reference to the will-o’-the-wisp is on the final line of the novel as Henry and Tom watch the surface of the River Ouse in order to see if Dick will resurface. The last line of the text shows us Dick’s motorbike “[o]n the bank in the thickening dusk, in the will-o’-the-wisp dusk,” and so the text concludes, reiterating the negative connotations of this apparition which is evoked at the scene of Dick’s suicide (358).

In The Crow Road logical realism is also baffled by the clairvoyant qualities of Prentice’s grandmother who claims to have one mole on her body which relates to each

member of her family, and which itches or tickles when that relative is talking about her or when something remarkable happens to one of them. Margot accurately predicts that her son, Rory, has died as the mole which was associated with Rory had not caused her any sensation at all for seven years (13). The time scale fits with Rory's supposed disappearance and the discovery of his body at the text's end indicates that Margot's mole gave an entirely correct indication.

These points at which realism is broken by magic realism mark an unwillingness to let an overpowering sense of reality dominate, like the strong doses of reality that we see in the Fens—the land without metanarratives which requires some enchantment. Head identifies “the ironic disruption of the self-contained fictional world” as a feature of postmodernism, yet the inclusion of these typically non-realist aspects is not merely ironic.<sup>90</sup> Puncturing the fabric of realism in this way also allows for a rewriting of conventional mimesis, this time not simply for the purpose of postmodernist play but for the sake of broadening ontological debates, allowing for new subject positions. Head's point that some contemporary British fiction causes the reader to “re-engage with the world they know” in order to revivify realism can be applied to the works discussed in Chapter Three in which we look at the use of ideas from the new physics in literature.<sup>91</sup>

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<sup>90</sup> Head 229.

<sup>91</sup> Head 229.



### Chapter Three: Rewriting Realism in Cat's Eye and The Child in Time.

Whilst realism is punctured in the texts of the previous chapter, allowing for ontological reconfigurations, the texts under discussion here seek to revise conventional perceptions of reality through an engagement with the fascinating discourse of the new physics. The Child in Time by Ian McEwan (1987) and Cat's Eye by Margaret Atwood (1988) occupy a position in the fragile gap between realism and speculative fiction, creating narratives which pertain to the expanding frontier of scientific understanding of time and matter. In its most basic terms, the new physics seeks to understand the indissoluble and interactive relationship between seemingly disparate elements of the universe, an idea which allows both McEwan and Atwood to redress typical notions of Western subjectivity in which the individual is an isolated entity.

Both texts follow the lives of middle-aged people who are undergoing traumatic phases of development. The Child in Time focuses on the life of Stephen Lewis, a writer living in London near the turn of the millennium in a future not too far removed from the date of the novel's publishing. The social climate depicted in this novel is one of widespread impoverishment due to the extreme right-wing government. The plot is driven by the abduction of Stephen's three-year-old daughter, Kate, after she is snatched from him in a supermarket. Stephen and Julie's marriage suffers greatly under the strain of losing their only child, inducing a three-year separation between them. During this time Stephen realises that in order to adjust to the huge upheavals that he has experienced he must adapt the way in which he views himself and his relation to the world around him.

The central character of Cat's Eye is Elaine Risley, a middle-aged artist living in Canada. This first person narrative depicts Elaine during the week in which she returns to Toronto, the city of her childhood, in order to attend the opening of her art exhibition which chronicles a retrospective of her life's work. The theme of retrospection continues throughout the narrative, as it is interspersed with Elaine's memories from her past, particularly those of her early years in Toronto, which allow the reader insight into Elaine's painful childhood and early teens. The memories which Elaine unearths throughout her week in Toronto are so powerful that her immediate life is sidelined in favour of an exploration of those parts of her past which have shaped her greatly; most notably her relationship with her childhood tormentor, a girl named Cordelia. Cat's Eye shows Elaine and Cordelia locked into a relationship where each doubles the other; Cordelia projects her insecurities onto the more vulnerable Elaine, and Elaine internalises these insecurities as her own, an exchange which brings the issue of the interrelated self to the fore. As Elaine wanders through her retrospective exhibition in Toronto, she comes to an admission of the effect that her experiences with Cordelia have had on her, and her life begins to fall into perspective with the objectified vision which her artwork presents.

In each text we are presented with a central protagonist whose life has been greatly disturbed, leaving them struggling with depression. This creates the need for a realignment of themselves and their relation to the rest of the world around them. Both texts foreground new physics as a paradigm which contains valuable ideas of integration and brings both Stephen and Elaine to a centred, holistic view of themselves and their relation to the world. The new physics ideas are rendered into aesthetic interpretations in these texts, rather than using their scientific details, and are shown to contain many humanist aspects which could have potential benefits for society, most notably that of creating a sense of the self as



inextricably interconnected to its surroundings. In the case of The Child in Time theories surrounding the new physics are presented not only as a viable way for Stephen to reassess his life but also as a potential antidote to the extreme right-wing political backdrop against which the novel is set. By the end of Cat's Eye, we see that Elaine comes to accept the past, forgive Cordelia and reach a state of self-perception which is integrated and whole. At the end of each text, a sense of hope for the future prevails.

However, these novels also differ greatly in their portrayal of ontology. In each case, a lot of attention is focussed on the maternal paradigm, especially insofar as it is likened to the new physics ideas concerning interconnection, yet each of these treats this theme very differently. The Child in Time explicitly relates the new physics paradigm to the maternal, which, in turn, is figured as oppositional to the excessively masculine, patriarchal social system of the novel's present. As such, maternity is expressly differentiated by the narrative position as belonging outside of political, social and historical time, and as having an empathy with abstract cosmological time instead, as does Waterland and, to a certain extent, The Crow Road. These spheres remain unreconciled at the text's end.

This problem is at the centre of Kristeva's discussion in "Women's Time" where she notes the degenerative position of one who is thought to be outside of the linear time of politics and history. Within patriarchal structures, women are associated with a "monumental temporality, without cleavage or escape, which has so little to do with linear time (which passes) that the very word 'temporality' hardly fits . . ."<sup>92</sup> Kristeva links this temporality to the depressive's perspective ("the hysteric") and writes of it as another form of the kind of

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<sup>92</sup> Kristeva, "Women's" 191.

spirituality or mysticism revered by some marginal groups.<sup>93</sup> More importantly for the terms of this study, Kristeva links monumental time to “recent scientific preoccupations”: “Is it not true that the problematic of a time indissociable from space, of a space-time in infinite expansion, or rhythmized by accidents or catastrophes, preoccupies both space science and genetics?”<sup>94</sup> In this view, the new physics, along with the genetic search of The Peppered Moth, would appear to have a misogynistic basis which is also deeply linked to the depressive’s sense of “hyperbolic time.”<sup>95</sup> However, as the two novels under discussion here demonstrate, this is only the case if we continue to revere the patriarchal notion of the ‘good mother’ as an icon. This is the difficulty encountered in The Child in Time.

By contrast, Cat’s Eye consciously works against the grain, rewriting and deconstructing the maternal archetype through various narrative passages and, most notably, through Elaine’s paintings which visually reconfigure the supreme matriarch of the Western world, the Virgin Mary. Atwood’s narrative forms a carefully considered account of the fundamental principles upon which identity is construed and treads a careful path through ancient and modern ontological ideals. In this way, Elaine’s narrative represents a complex blend of both a reconfiguration of the maternal ideal and an appropriation of the new physics theories, resulting in her attaining a profound degree of understanding of herself, and her relation to different temporalities, history and the cosmos. Like The Peppered Moth, Cat’s Eye alters some of the misogynistic aspects of the maternal ideal.

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<sup>93</sup> Kristeva, “Women’s” 192.

<sup>94</sup> Kristeva, “Women’s” 192.

<sup>95</sup> Kristeva, Black 60.



## New Physics

In A Brief History of Time Stephen Hawking gives a simple account of the two principles to dominate physics over the previous century:

Today scientists describe the universe in terms of two basic partial theories—the general theory of relativity and quantum mechanics. . . . The general theory of relativity describes the force of gravity and the large-scale structure of the universe . . . Quantum mechanics, on the other hand, deals with phenomena on extremely small scales.<sup>96</sup>

The new physics can be described as the attempt to merge these two contradictory partial theories in order to achieve an ultimate explanation of the universe. Since 1960, research has been conducted in order to attempt to reconcile these two models, particularly with reference to string theory, but science's quest for complete unification and explanation remains elusive.<sup>97</sup> However, it appears that the tendency towards inclusiveness which quantum mechanics promotes has affected scientific progress itself, favouring an approach to science which seeks to modify rather than abandon previous models, as Brian Greene notes with reference to superstring theory, a recent development in the quest for a unified physics:

Intense research over the past decade by physicists and mathematicians around the world has revealed that this new approach to describing matter at its most fundamental level resolves the tension between general relativity and quantum mechanics. In fact, superstring theory shows more: Within this new framework, general relativity and quantum mechanics require one another for the theory to make sense. According to superstring theory, the marriage of the laws of the large and the small is not only happy but inevitable.<sup>98</sup>

Quantum mechanics successfully accounts for three of the four main physical phenomena under the same law (the strong, weak and electromagnetic forces), yet it remains to be unified

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<sup>96</sup> Stephen W. Hawking, A Brief History of Time: From the Big Bang to Black Holes, (London: Bantam Press, 1988) 10-11.

<sup>97</sup> Hawking 160.

<sup>98</sup> Brian Greene, The Elegant Universe: Superstrings, Hidden Dimensions, and the Quest for the Ultimate Theory, (London: Vintage, 2000) 4, emphasis in original.

with general relativity theory which explains gravity. Proving that all four forces are unified at a fundamental level would give scientists good grounds for producing a theory of the unification of all matter but this theory remains incomplete. The crucial problem is that general relativity is a classical theory, dealing with the principles of mechanistic physics and therefore it is irreconcilable with the inherent uncertainty of quantum mechanics.<sup>99</sup> More recent developments suggest that the discovery of a single particle called the Higgs boson, would complete this aspect of particle physics.<sup>100</sup> Tom Kibble asserts the crucial nature of the Higgs boson for Unified Field Theory saying, “There are strong hints that a ‘grand unified’ synthesis is possible, but the details are still very vague. Finding the Higgs would give us very significant clues to the nature of that greater synthesis.”<sup>101</sup>

It is readily accepted that our scientific progress changes the way in which we view the world but the alteration that cultural development has upon scientific enquiry is not so commonly acknowledged. Yet, in order to adopt a truly integrated approach towards epistemology and, by inference ontology, the dominant models of both science and culture must be seen to be involved in a dialogue. Fundamentally, this is part of the ethos of quantum mechanics in which the observation process has an unavoidable effect on the object being observed, indicating a more reciprocal relationship than the traditional mechanistic view of physics in which elements act in the same way regardless of context. Quantum theory allows for the influence of circumstance and situation on the observed particles, as Bohm says of matter and energy:

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<sup>99</sup> Hawking 156.

<sup>100</sup> Tom Kibble, “Of Particles, Pencils and Unification,” Physics World 6.9.[www.phy.uct.ac.za/courses/phy400w/particle/higgs](http://www.phy.uct.ac.za/courses/phy400w/particle/higgs) 4.

<sup>101</sup> Kibble 4.



their behaviour depends on the context in which they are treated. . . . This idea is utterly opposed to mechanism, because in mechanism the particle is just what it is no matter what the context. . . . The new suggestion of quantum theory is that this context-dependence is true of the ultimate units of nature. They hence begin to look more like something organic than like something mechanical.<sup>102</sup>

This pattern of context-dependent integration is used as a way of representing identity in Cat's Eye and The Child in Time, particularly with the idea of integrating one's consciousness and memory with the cosmos, time and history.

### **New Physics: Mourning and/or Melancholia**

David Bohm discusses the formation of world-views over a period of thousands of years arguing that humankind's view of the world has become increasingly fragmented, a process which finds its greatest manifestation in the system of mechanistic physics.<sup>103</sup> Bohm argues that this fragmented approach toward matter has in turn led to a more widespread view of social, political, ecological and universal fragmentation as humanity begins to think of itself in terms of fragmented, separate particles and goes on to say that a new philosophy must be created, one which adheres to a pattern of inclusiveness rather than fragmentation:

I suggest that if we are to survive in a meaningful way in the face of this disintegration of the overall world order, a truly creative movement to a new kind of wholeness is needed, a movement that must ultimately give rise to a new order, in the consciousness of both the individual and society. This order will have to be as different from the modern order as was the modern from the medieval order.<sup>104</sup>

Here we have the search for 'meaning' again, the ideal that motivates Tom Crick's and Prentice McHoan's journeys, the product of Faro Gaulden's journey of the discovery of her

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<sup>102</sup> David Bohm, "Postmodern Science and a Postmodern World," The Post-Modern Reader, ed. Charles Jencks (London: Academy Editions, 1992) 387-388.

<sup>103</sup> David Bohm, Wholeness and the Implicate Order (1980; London: Ark, 1983).

<sup>104</sup> Bohm, "Postmodern" 384.

genetic inheritance. The search for a meaningful perspective of existence shows an attempt to rebuild in the face of deconstruction and is linked, therefore, to postmodernity's mourning, progressive side. For Bohm, as for Atwood and McEwan, the new physics offers one such model for existence.

N. Katherine Hayles has produced a great deal of work on the interrelation between science and culture and comments on the dialogic relation between these spheres:

Different disciplines are drawn to similar problems because the cultural concerns underlying them are highly charged within a prevailing cultural context. Moreover, different disciplines base the theories they construct on similar presuppositions because these are the assumptions that guide the constitution of knowledge in a given episteme. This position implies, of course, that scientific models and theories are culturally conditioned, partaking of and rooted in assumptions that can be found at multiple sites throughout the culture.<sup>105</sup>

The new physics theories are interesting in themselves, not only because of their revolutionary nature but also because of what they tell us about the current cultural climate, a change which Bohm identifies in his work. Furthermore, their transposition into literary works connotes a period in which some are seeking a new basis for understanding and representing their experience of existence as an interconnected whole; a factor which contradicts the postmodern drive towards fragmentation.

In paralleling an account of postmodernity with the development of quantum physics, some important chronological factors must be taken into account. As Hawking states, both the development of quantum mechanics and the decline of the mechanistic order as the dominant principle of physics occurred in the early twentieth century in what is referred to in cultural terms as the modernist era. So the questioning and gradual erosion of both the restrictive ethics of mechanistic science and metanarrative authority were broadly concurrent.

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<sup>105</sup> N. Katherine Hayles, Chaos Bound: Orderly Disorder in Contemporary Literature and Science, (Ithaca: Cornell, 1990) xi.



Thus, if science can be viewed as another facet of cultural development then a psychoanalytic ‘reading’ of its aims can be made.

There are certainly many similarities between Kristeva’s work in Black Sun on counterdepressants and the principles behind the search for a unified field theory. For example, quantum mechanics advanced a theory based on work with subatomic particles which tries to explain the fathomless void of the cosmos, no longer explained by mechanistic physics. This evokes Kristeva’s idea of remaking nothingness as a way of counteracting the depressive state in what Kristeva describes as the “necessary shift from depression to possible meaning.”<sup>106</sup> An equivalent to postmodernity’s mourning face can be seen in the new physics in its desire to construct significance in the wake of beliefs which were formerly held as core principles; there is the acceptance that mechanistic physics is not complete and the desire to find a more viable hypothesis instead. The new physics is moving us forwards into an era which imagines those “newly reconstituted communities and selves” of which Wheeler writes, only this time on a cosmological scale.<sup>107</sup>

The attempt to reconceive not just time and space, but also our position within it enables us to view the new physics as one form of the kind of realignment of one’s worldview which Kristeva advocates as a combatant to the depressive state; as she writes “the triumph over melancholia resides as much in founding a symbolic family (ancestor, mythical figure, esoteric community) as in constructing an independent symbolic object . . .”<sup>108</sup> To a certain extent it heals some of the gaps left by secularisation in providing a synthesised perspective of existence, akin in some ways to the theory of everything provided by the creationist

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<sup>106</sup> Kristeva Black 99-100.

<sup>107</sup> Wheeler, Modernity 74.

<sup>108</sup> Kristeva Black 162

narrative. As such, new physics seeks to rebind us in a context which resembles an infinite pattern or “cosmic web.”<sup>109</sup> This is certainly the project underway in these two novels in which the new physics is used as a way of rebuilding a sense of one’s position in the world.

However, grounds for the new physics becoming a kind of new metanarrative are highly circumspect due to its incorporation of uncertainty and change as underpinning principles. As Bohm suggests, the acceptance of the evolution of understanding is vital to the discourses of both science and philosophy:

The fact that relativity and quantum together overturned the Newtonian physics shows the danger of complacency about worldview. It shows that we constantly must look at our worldviews as provisional, as exploratory, and inquire. We must have a worldview but we must not make it an absolute thing that leaves no room for inquiry and change. We must avoid dogmatism.<sup>110</sup>

In the context of the fictions under discussion here, Elaine Risley seems aware of this provisionality while Stephen Lewis is seduced by the idea of an ultimate truth, as I shall explore below. McEwan skews the perspective, demonstrating a yearning for a return to an assumed premodern ideology which is dependent on the idea of the mystical universe and the mother-cults of ancient times. In doing so, there is a risk of turning the model offered by new physics into a regressive, melancholic outlook. The danger inherent in such a viewpoint, apart from its damaging psychological implications, is that it threatens a state of willed and blissful ignorance to the very real fragmentations which surround us in political contexts. Atwood’s novel avoids such potential problems by maintaining an acceptance of evolution, change and development, both on a personal and scientific scale. Elaine Risley’s character

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<sup>109</sup> N. Katherine Hayles, The Cosmic Web: Scientific Field Models and Literary Strategies in the Twentieth Century, (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1984).

<sup>110</sup> Bohm, “Postmodern” 386.



also demonstrates a commitment to the revisioning of women's representation which is, ultimately, a politically motivated project.

### **Time Turns Back Upon Itself Like a Wave <sup>111</sup>**

Both texts under discussion here are concerned with time as it relates to ideas from the new physics. Atwood prefaces Cat's Eye with a quotation from Hawking's A Brief History of Time: "Why do we remember the past but not the future?"<sup>112</sup> In the chapter from which this citation is taken, Hawking explains the lack of an absolute time and the idea of imaginary time in which, theoretically, one could travel in any direction. However, Hawking also adds that this concept conflicts with our real experience of time, in which we appear to move in only one direction.<sup>113</sup> It is this idea of imaginary time which is exploited in each novel, and Cat's Eye begins with a passage on the nature of time, as Elaine sets out the scientific ideas of her brother, Stephen:

Time is not a line but a dimension, like the dimensions of space. If you can bend space you can bend time also, and if you knew enough and could move faster than light you could travel backwards in time and exist in two places at once. . . .

But I began then to think of time as having a shape, something you could see, like a series of liquid transparencies, one laid on top of another. You don't look back along time but down through it, like water. Sometimes this comes to the surface, sometimes that, sometimes nothing. Nothing goes away. (CE, 3)

This narrative functions around the coexistence of all times leaving the narrator free to interject experiences from various parts of her life into the flow of the narrative. For Sherrill Grace, this theory of time is relevant in terms of the consideration of memory which this

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<sup>111</sup> Atwood, Cat's Eye, 409. As Elaine enters her own exhibition she comments, "I walk the room, surrounded by the time I've made; which is not a place, which is only a blur, the moving edge we live in; which is fluid, which turns back upon itself like a wave."

<sup>112</sup> Hawking 144.

<sup>113</sup> Hawking, 143-144.

novel foregrounds: in memory all times are coexistent, equally, all experiences are (normally) accessible at once. As Grace argues, the narrative is freed from the work of linking the past into the present in a logical, ordered way as we are told that the past is always present.<sup>114</sup>

Similarly, time is constructed as a flexible dimension in The Child in Time.

Stephen's physicist friend Thelma discusses the dimensional nature of time with Stephen, enlightening him on what she describes as the current "supermarket" of theories on time:

"But whatever time is, the common-sense, everyday version of it as linear, regular, absolute, marching from left to right, from the past through the present to the future, is either nonsense or a tiny fraction of the truth. . . . What are simultaneous events to one person can appear in sequence to another. There's no absolute, generally recognised "now" . . . ' " (CT, 117-118).

In each text, the reader is constantly reminded of the different ways of viewing time which the new physics theories have to offer and each narrative exploits the ideas offered by new physics to dramatic effect.

As the title indicates, time is a key feature of The Child in Time, both structurally and conceptually. The depression which Stephen Lewis endures as he grieves for his lost daughter is characterised by an entrapment in time, just as Kristeva describes the depressive's sense of temporality.<sup>115</sup> Smethurst links this aspect of The Child in Time to a cultural depression, a reading which evokes Connor's statement concerning the lack of forward impulsion that the postmodern entails:

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<sup>114</sup> Sherrill Grace, "Gender as Genre: Atwood's Autobiographical 'I'," Margaret Atwood: Writing and Subjectivity, ed Colin Nicholson (Great Britain: MacMillan, 1994) 201.

<sup>115</sup> Kristeva Black 60.



This is not a time of renewal and regeneration, but a time of stagnation, a perpetual present without future. In my reading of the novel, Stephen's fate after the loss of his child implies the fate of postmodern society that has also lost the child in itself. . . . But in a more obvious sense, this is a society that, by losing the child, has lost its will to renew itself, and its ability to look forward.<sup>116</sup>

Smethurst reads the temporal experimentation in McEwan's work as an attempt to realign the contemporary subject with progressive, linear time. However, as I shall demonstrate, the narrative rests on a perspective which is so haunted by the desire for the primeval that such a project is, ultimately, thwarted.

In Cat's Eye, however, Atwood creates a narrative which evades conclusion and, although deeply a-chronological in structure, concludes with the sense that the protagonist has managed to reconnect with a linear, progressive time scale. Many critics are frustrated by Atwood's apparent lack of conclusion to Cat's Eye, failing to read the open-endedness as indicative of Elaine's continuing journey. We last see Elaine literally suspended in mid-air as she flies back home, away from Toronto, a metaphor for her character's perpetual restlessness and change, as Susan Strehle writes, "She never lands, the objective product of experience restored to ongoing time."<sup>117</sup> Elaine is reintegrated in the flow of time, salvaged from her depressed, entrapping past and pushed forwards into life. Elaine captures this idea in her narrative as she enters the exhibition which represents her life's work. The paintings have been hung in order of date, at which Elaine remarks "Chronology won out after all" (CE, 404), a comment which evokes Tom Crick's comment in Waterland that "there must always be—don't deny it—a future" (W, 93). Cat's Eye, unlike The Child in Time forms a real attempt to overcome the melancholic stagnation of the postmodern via a restoration to

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<sup>116</sup> Smethurst 208.

<sup>117</sup> Strehle 189.

the linear flow of time. Unlike The Child in Time, this attempt does not rely on the birth of a child but upon the psychological ‘rebirthing’ which Elaine undertakes through her artwork.

### **Time and the Maternal in The Child in Time**

Both The Child in Time and Cat’s Eye have similar scenes in which each protagonist experiences an encounter with a point in time which cannot be logically explained, points at which time turns back upon itself. In The Child in Time this occurs in chapter three in which Stephen experiences a lapse in time’s continuity and finds himself looking in on his parents at a time which occurred before his own birth.

This episode begins while Stephen is travelling through the countryside on his way to visit Julie during their period of separation, when he is struck by a sense which begins in a similar way to *déjà vu*, the surroundings suddenly seeming familiar to him. He becomes aware that the time he is experiencing is not the time of the present moment, but that time has suddenly shifted and he is experiencing a moment which he could not logically have experienced: “the loudness—this was the word he fixed on—of this particular location had its origins outside of his own existence” (CT, 57). Stephen walks towards a pub in front of him called The Bell which looks familiar and, in looking through the windows of the pub, he sees his mother and father discussing whether or not to terminate the pregnancy. Immediately after this Stephen experiences a surreal episode where he suddenly conceives of himself as joined to the rest of history and biology:

He fell back down, dropped helplessly through a void, was swept dumbly through invisible curves and rose above the trees, saw the horizon below him even as he was hurled through sinuous tunnels of undergrowth, dank, muscular sluices. His eyes grew large and round and lidless with desperate, protesting innocence, his knees rose under him and touched his chin, his fingers were scaly flippers, gills beat time, urgent, hopeless strokes through the salty ocean that engulfed the treetops and surged between their roots; and for all the crying, calling sounds that he thought were his own, he



formed a single thought: he had nowhere to go, no moment which could embody him, he was not expected, no destination or time could be named. . . . this thought unwrapped a sadness which was not his own. It was centuries, millennia old. It swept through him and countless others like the wind through a field of grass. Nothing was his own, not his strokes or his movement, not the calling sounds, not even the sadness, nothing was nothing's own. (60)

Stephen is terrified by this experience which tears him from his isolated life, his own personal history and his family, and jettisons him into an unfathomable pattern which is governed by chaos. As with other aspects of this novel, this episode treads a fine and dangerous line between integration and disintegration of the subject; while Stephen becomes aware of his implication in a vast scheme of existence, he is simultaneously divested of his own identity, an idea highlighted by the repetition of the lack of ownership at the end of the extract. Stephen regresses as his body adopts a foetal position and he moves through "sinuous tunnels" and "dank, muscular sluices" in a grotesque birthing sequence. His body then undergoes evolutionary regression as he is turned into a sea creature helplessly splashing about in primordial soup in which his flippers and gills beat the salty ocean. Here, Stephen partly assumes the position of his own abducted daughter as the child of the "desperate, protesting innocence" with the sense of being taken from context and having no where to go.

Both Smethurst and Marc Delrez interpret this scene as a metaphorical rebirthing, yet each critic values it very differently. Smethurst reads this scene as part of a "complex cycle of loss and renewal, displacement and belonging" which is then completed soon afterwards with Julie and Stephen conceiving a second child.<sup>118</sup> Delrez also sees the idea of regeneration in this sequence of ontological crisis and conception, yet he identifies the conservatism which

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<sup>118</sup> Smethurst 214.

is left unchallenged by the abandonment of this potentially reformatory philosophy.<sup>119</sup> The new physics ideas seem to merely offer an escape route from the exaggeratedly conservative political landscape into a concept of time which, we are led to believe at the novel's end, will always remain abstracted from the 'real' world. The two spheres remain separate.

The cycle of displacement and belonging reaches its fruition in the final scene, with the birth of Julie and Stephen's second child, a scene in which some of the more troubling aspects of McEwan's use of the new physics's temporality are highlighted. Stephen and Julie cradle the new-born child in Julie's house and are described as "immune" from the harsh world outside in a scene which is "before the beginning of time" (220), positing this scene as a continuation of the primeval chronotope that Stephen experienced during his hallucination. This suggests that birth and re-birth are two of the processes by which the subject is excused from the normal progress of time. Yet these processes are predicated upon the maternal, thus, McEwan risks the danger of ostracising the maternal and, by inference, women from the socio-political order of linear time. That the primeval chronotope is associated with Julie's little cottage in the woods (reminding us of Martha Clay's cottage and suggesting the timelessness of the fairy-tale genre once again) supports such a reading as it is in this decidedly feminine space that the new family are protected from the "harsh world" outside (220). Smethurst describes Stephen's hallucinatory episode as a "voyage towards belonging", a "voyage in".<sup>120</sup> What Smethurst stops short of describing here is that the fantasy Stephen has is of a voyage 'in to' the mother's womb, indicating deep-seated Oedipal desires which weigh heavily on the male characters of McEwan's text.

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<sup>119</sup> Marc Delrez, "Escape into Innocence: Ian McEwan and the Nightmare of History," *Ariel* 26:2 (1995): 11.

<sup>120</sup> Smethurst 214, emphasis in original.



Stephen's hallucination is not simply a temporal regression which threatens his identity due to the realisation of vast chronological and biological scales, his identity is threatened by the eternal mother to whom there is an impulse to return. The maternal magnetism is so strong that it threatens to obliterate Stephen's sense of self as the separation between self and m/other threatens to collapse. Thus, the women of this text, along with the new physics ideas, are exiled to inhabit a strange space at this narrative's borders, and at the margins of the patriarchal social system which this text presents. As such, the potentially revolutionary ideas of the new physics remain peripheral, demonstrating what Delrez terms a "deep philosophical conservatism," and a restoration of the norm.<sup>121</sup>

In The Child in Time 'interdependence with' is conflated with 'dependence upon' as Stephen's search for a holistic outlook is ultimately contingent with his positioning of Julie in the role of mother, to both his children and himself. McEwan's text holds the same kind of reverential treatment of women which Waterland illustrates and which The Crow Road struggles with, to some extent. This inability to think beyond typical concepts of the all-powerful yet, in reality, powerless mother figure is bound up with Stephen's perceptions of time, with the mythical, cosmic time on the one hand and the time of politics and history on the other. Stephen's story ultimately fails to harmonise the two within one worldview, a feature of this narrative which concludes with the continuing and inescapable pull of the timeless yet marginal maternal paradigm. As such, the depressive state into which Stephen is plunged after his daughter's abduction is never truly conquered as his reconnection to the normal flow of linear time is recognised as partial and dependent on the mothering which Julie provides; in other words, it reveals the way in which Oedipal drives motivate Stephen's

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<sup>121</sup> Delrez 11.

character. These regressive aspects are never reconciled in The Child in Time, leaving its interesting and inspirational explorations of identity in relation to the new physics somewhat hollow.

The desire to have an unbroken, integrated affinity links quantum physics with the maternal ideal, as it is reminiscent of the intra-uterine relationship in which there is no break between mother and child. After Stephen sees his mother pregnant with him and consequently undergoes his surreal experience of regressing to a foetal state, he and Julie have sex and create another baby. During this episode we are told that Stephen has the realisation that the two moments are joined: "Obscurely, he sensed a line of argument was being continued. . . . the two moments were undeniably bound, they held in common the innocent longing they provoked, the desire to belong" (63). This text blurs the distinction between conveying a desire to feel integrated within a broader concept of the universe and the desire for the mother. In this passage in particular, the desire for the mother is so strong that the narrative combines a vision of Stephen's actual mother with the sexual intercourse he has with his wife. Whilst we are aware that confirmation of identity is achieved by linking these episodes together (confirmation that Stephen is a son, a partner and a father), there is nevertheless a troubling subtext here which cannot be ignored. Stephen's desire to belong can be translated as the desire to regress to the mother's body.

In the final scene, as Julie and Stephen cradle their new baby, they are described as existing in a moment which is removed from time altogether: "it was before the beginning of time . . ." (220). Stephen has not managed to gain a sense of himself as realigned with time's progression. He is also not reconciled with the world around him either. The couple look out of the bedroom window to the sky: "Directly above the moon was a planet. It was Mars, Julie said. It was a reminder of a harsh world. For now however, they were immune . . ." (220).



Instead of the realisation of an innate interconnection with everything, Stephen still thinks of the world as 'harsh,' and external to him and his family. The impulse toward true integration is never quite achieved, a point which Delrez comments on saying: "in the last analysis the novel's routine impulse to rehearse new forms and new ontologies is defused prematurely."<sup>122</sup> Instead, this text's positive closing message would appear to be one of biological regeneration. The biggest progression that we are shown is Stephen's realisation, during the birth of their second child, that life and regeneration are the essence of and the meaning for existence: "His thoughts were resolving into simple, elementary shapes. This is really all we have got, this increase, this matter of life loving itself, everything we have had to come from this" (219).

The acceptance of oneself as a purely biological entity whose purpose is to produce offspring is a conclusion which treads the fine line between the integration of the self into a wider pattern and the disintegration of the self through the reduction of identity to a purely biological premise. It is this thought which terrifies Stephen during his hallucinatory episode outside 'The Bell,' yet this same idea is upheld as being of great significance at the text's end. Indeed, we learn that the whole point, in structural terms, of the regressive hallucination was in order that Stephen bring himself into existence, to then allow for a further generation to be created. Stephen's mother's unwitting corroboration of these events confirms this principle of regeneration. We learn that she saw the face of a child through the window of the pub that day, and that this vision strengthened her resolve to continue with her pregnancy:

'I can see it now as clearly as I can see you. There was a face at the window, the face of a child, sort of floating there. It was staring into the pub. It had a kind of pleading look, and it was so white, white as an aspirin. It was staring right at me. Thinking about it over the years, I realise it was probably the landlord's boy, or some kid off

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<sup>122</sup> Delrez 12.

one of the local farms. But as far as I was concerned then, I was convinced, I just knew that I was looking at my own child. If you like, I was looking at you.’  
(175, emphasis in original)

The curious and as yet undefined dimensions of time offered by the new physics only go some way towards explaining this event which is still, in the final analysis, a romantic exploration of Stephen’s connection to a biological concept of existence which is tightly bound up with a fixation on the mother figure.

The narrative marginalisation of women and the new physics in this text can also be traced in the handling of Thelma Darke’s character, the physicist who introduces the new physics ideas to Stephen. Thelma is the wife of one of Stephen’s friends, the politician Charles Darke, and forms an interesting counterpart to Julie. Although older, more educated and involved in an atypical domestic situation (Charles is forty-nine and Thelma is sixty, and the couple have no children), Thelma is subject to the same authorial treatment as Julie. It is their maternal capacity which allows the narrative to attribute these female characters with the greatest reverence, regardless of the fact that each of them also has their personal intellectual/creative pursuits. Julie’s string quartet is granted “one small, favourable notice in a national newspaper” (21). Thelma wants to retire and write her book, which is convenient as she has to look after Charles during his time of regressing into an infantile state. Both women do moderately well in careers that they have worked very hard for whereas Stephen, by contrast, has a bestselling book by sheer accident. Both women are benign, mature, and exiled in their strange houses in the countryside where they practice the mothering that they are, naturally, so good at. Angela Roger also sees the link between maternal capacity and the admiration granted McEwan’s female characters by the narrative voice, “McEwan’s women characters are given objective existence in a man’s world and their characterisation is a male



construct of their womanhood. Interest in them is essentially in their ‘otherness’ from men, but this ‘otherness’ is seen from a man’s point of view.”<sup>123</sup>

The different ontological principles accorded to the sexes in this text are displayed as metaphors for the different scientific developments of mechanistic physics and the new physics. While this concept may hold some useful ways of understanding the differences between the scientific positions, the effect is to support the damaging gender essentialist premise that society consists of feminine women and masculine men. The narrative summarises Stephen’s views on this topic:

Against the faith men had in the institutions they and not women had shaped, women upheld some other principle of selfhood in which being surpassed doing. Long ago men had noted something unruly in this. Women simply enclosed the space which men longed to penetrate. The men’s hostility was aroused. (55)

This comment indicates some of the machinations of patriarchal structures. The language used to express this carries with it connotations of rape (“penetrate”, “hostility”, “arouse”) which is effective in describing the misogynistic basis of patriarchy. The language used to express Stephen’s theory and his desire to appropriate its principles once again belies his disturbing oedipal drive.

Moreover, the women in this text are seen to hold an innate understanding of the philosophical implications which the new physics carries. The ontological positioning that we see in The Child in Time, which links feminine, female and the new physics is reinforced through the descriptions of Julie. Stephen views Julie as a feminine person who is driven by her maternal instincts and, therefore, biologically implicated within this holistic view of the universe:

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<sup>123</sup> Angela Roger, “Ian McEwan’s Portrayal of Women,” Forum for Modern Language Studies 32.1 (1996): 11.

Julie could set about transforming herself, purposely evolving some different way of understanding life and her place within it. . . . She was not beyond confusion or irrationality, but she had an inviolably useful way of understanding and presenting her own morasses within the terms of a sentimental or spiritual education. With her, previous certainties were not jettisoned so much as encompassed, rather in the way, according to Thelma, scientific revolutions were said to redefine rather than discard all previous knowledge. . . . Such faith in endless mutability, in remaking yourself as you come to understand more, or changed your version, he had come to understand as an aspect of her femininity. (54)

Roger comments on the passage above saying: "Here femininity is seen as a positive attribute, not an indicator of weakness or meekness . . ." <sup>124</sup> It is beyond question that this text concentrates on bringing to light those valuable aspects of femininity which excessively masculine, patriarchal society represses and the new physics theories are deeply linked to this principle, suggesting that it could be a viable path of enlightenment. Nevertheless, Thelma and Julie are homogenised in this text as possessors of innate mystical knowledge which Stephen has to try to understand yet is always excluded from. The only way in which Stephen feels he can partake in such a philosophy is by allowing Julie and Thelma to mother him. In some ways the links between femininity and the new physics are valuable here in that they serve to reevaluate a gender which is typically denigrated. Yet their operation within the boundaries of essentialist assumptions is limiting and conservative as far as representations of gender are concerned.

McEwan demonstrates female complicity in such opposing ideas through the character of Thelma, in whom we see the relationship between the new physics as a feminine discourse, women's sense of their own identity and the maternal ideal as she explains the new physics ideas to Stephen:

Science was Thelma's child (Charles was another) for whom she held out great and passionate hopes and in whom she wished to instill gentler manners and a sweeter

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<sup>124</sup> Roger 23.



disposition. This child was on the point of growing up and learning to claim less for itself. The period of its frenetic, childish egotism—four hundred years!—was drawing to a close. (43-44)

The masculine objectivity upon which the mechanistic form operates is, undoubtedly a problem, implying as it does the desire to categorise the universe into manageable segments, thereby fragmenting it. However, while Thelma's hopes for the development of science are all admirable, McEwan's reliance on received notions of the maternal as the sole locus for this new development is disturbing. Ultimately, such a divisive attitude towards gender supports the principles of the mechanistic, classical physics as it upholds patriarchal norms.

### **Time and the Maternal in Cat's Eye**

Cat's Eye also contains two episodes in which linear time is disrupted and turns back upon itself. Like The Child in Time, no logical explanation is reached for Elaine's experiences but the narrative's preoccupation with new physics temporality suggests a strong link between these scenes and the new physics. While Stephen's hallucinatory episode pertains to the ideas of biological and personal regression, Elaine's visions relate to the theme of identity in relation to others, an idea which propels a great deal of this narrative. Stephen's vision is of a past time while Elaine's experiences can be interpreted as visions of the future, a point which highlights the difference between the regressive tendencies of The Child in Time and the urge for salvation through development in Cat's Eye. As mentioned above in relation to Elaine's artwork, the a-chronological episodes also rework entrenched notions of the maternal icon, the Virgin Mary, complying with this text's questioning of archetypal constructs of femininity within a patriarchal order.

The first incident occurs during Elaine's childhood when she is forced by her friends Cordelia, Grace and Carol to go into a dangerous, icy ravine near her home in order to

retrieve her hat which they throw in as a torment. The ravine is a site of compelling terror for these children, having a stream running through it which “comes straight from the cemetery, from the graves and their bones” (188). In the ravine Elaine begins to suffer from hypothermia, to the extent that she feels faint and can no longer focus properly: “My head is filling with black sawdust; little specks of the darkness are getting in through my eyes” (188). The crucial part of this episode occurs while Elaine is drifting in and out of consciousness, and sees a vision of a lady dressed in black floating down through the air from the bridge above her with her arms held open. Elaine feels this vision envelop her, like “a small wind of warmer air” and the vision speaks to her: “You can go home now, she says. It will be all right. Go Home. I don’t hear the words out loud, but this is what she says” (189, emphasis in original). After this vision, Elaine begins to defy Cordelia’s overbearing attitude and distances herself from her tormenting companions in an act of self-preservation.

Strehle interprets the scene as one which demonstrates a similar flirtation with the regressive death-drive as we see in Stephen’s hallucination. Like Stephen’s experience, Elaine’s potential regression is avoided by the intervention of maternal power:

Punished, sent into the ravine alone in the dark, she falls through the ice and is powerfully tempted by numbness, stasis, pure objecthood, the annihilation of death. She has a vision of Mary as the nurturing mother who walks to earth, speaks, warns, acts to preserve her daughter . . . Her words stand in opposition to the father’s will to estrange and banish the daughter; they affirm her right to life and warmth.<sup>125</sup>

The dilemma which subsists in Waterland, The Child in Time and Cat’s Eye is, in each case, the choice between finding a continuation of one’s life through the maternal, or regressing into the state of the foetal, primeval object, the temptation which overpowers Dick Crick, a character for whom there can be no regenerative continuation. Most powerfully, Atwood’s

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<sup>125</sup> Strehle 176-177.



portrayal of this contrast demonstrates the way in which this depressive death drive can be overcome, in finding the regenerative power within oneself, allowing the individual to remake themselves anew without recourse to either a mythologised or actual maternal transcendent. This becomes clear as we learn of further ways in which the vision can be interpreted, primarily, that Elaine's vision is of herself as an adult.

This reading is reinforced by the narrative on the day after the opening of her retrospective exhibition, when Elaine walks along the path by the ravine. Just as she is about to leave, Elaine senses that she is not alone and turns around, half expecting to see herself as a child—instead she sees Cordelia as a child. Elaine momentarily experiences the same sense of shame that she used to feel in Cordelia's presence but immediately realises that these feelings were never hers and acknowledges them as internalisations of Cordelia's insecurities: "these are not my own emotions any more. They are Cordelia's; as they always were" (419). Elaine's reappropriation of Cordelia's feelings incites her to forgive Cordelia in a gesture in which Elaine mirrors her childhood vision of the Virgin Mary: "I reach out my arms to her, bend down, hands open to show I have no weapon. It's all right, I say to her. You can go home now" (419, emphasis in original).

Rather than this being a simple case of Elaine imitating her vision of the Virgin, Atwood suggests the superimposition of chronotopes through the congruities between this later scene and Elaine's childhood vision, which are apparent in the descriptions of the surroundings. For example, in Elaine's childhood vision we are told that the bridge suddenly appeared different, "more solid" with "pools of light along it, greenish yellow" (189). When Elaine revisits the bridge in the later scene she describes renovations which have been carried out since she last visited; the bridge is now "concrete and lighted up at night, not wooden and falling apart and rotten smelling" (418). Also, Elaine wakes up that morning in the black

dress she wore for her exhibition the night before, a detail which corresponds with the childhood vision in which Elaine is confused by the fact that the Virgin Mary is wearing a black dress instead of her traditional blue gown (190). Nicola King discusses this aspect of Cat's Eye in detail, noting the theme of self-salvation that such an interpretation engenders:

One interpretation of this, . . . is that the child Elaine was 'saved' by a vision of her adult self, an idea that belongs to the realm of the mystical and irrational if taken literally: Elaine grows up to become the woman who saves her own life as a child. But this moment also metaphorically suggests the way in which the adult who has fully come to terms with the past frees the part of the self which is still 'stuck' there.<sup>126</sup>

Whilst King's interpretation of the metaphors at work here is a valuable reading of this scene, those "mystical and irrational" properties are at least partially clarified by the model of time with which this novel begins. This scene, in which "time turns back upon itself like a wave" (409), is the best illustration the narrative has to offer of Elaine's brother's theories on time as it also engages in the kind of reconfiguration of reality with which both the new physics and Atwood are concerned. Chinmoy Banerjee denigrates Atwood's use of new theories surrounding time, arguing that they are banal and outdated: "This banality opens Atwood to the possible charge of double opportunism: the quotation of 'exotic' knowledge as intellectual decor and the use of conventional form for easy consumption."<sup>127</sup> But the ambiguities which subsist over the interpretation of this event construct the subject's relationship with time as more complex than a set of scientific theories. Atwood is not simply trying to be 'clever' here, as temporality and identity are inextricably bound together by these phenomenal episodes.

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<sup>126</sup> Nicola King, Memory, Narrative, Identity: Remembering the Self, (Edinburgh: Edinburgh UP, 2000) 90.

<sup>127</sup> Chinmoy Banerjee, "Atwood's Time: Hiding Art in Cat's Eye" Modern Fiction Studies 36.4 (1990): 521.



In her analysis of the use of memory in contemporary literature, King identifies the desire for reconnection with lost origins; a desire for a memory which “would enable an unmediated access to the past and the restoration of lost continuities.”<sup>128</sup> The ravine scene at the novel’s end would seem to allow that ‘access to the past’, as it also certainly invokes the possibility of repairing ‘lost continuities’. This theme is also central to The Child in Time and Waterland, in which all of the characters are engaged in the search for lost continuities, especially concerning the lost child or childhood. This theme becomes a metaphor, as Smethurst notes in reference to The Child in Time above, for the desire for unity and reparation occasioned by the fragmenting experience of contemporary life, desires which are not always attainable in a practical sense .

It is significant that this scene takes place within the chapter named “Bridge,” invoking the suggestion that the actual bridge over the ravine symbolises this opportunity which allows Elaine to ‘bridge the gap’ between her disturbed childhood and her adulthood. J. Brooks Bosun identifies a similar impetus within the first scene at the ravine, arguing that this section acknowledges a desire for restoration of a lost bond between Elaine and the mother figure: “Disrupting the realistic surface of the text with this sudden intrusion of the fantastic, the narrative acts out a reparative urge through its dramatisation of a healing union with the idealised mother.”<sup>129</sup> For Brooks Bousun, the ravine scene is a “fantasy of restitution, an attempt by the narrative to convert trauma into a magical—and purely fictional—rescue.”<sup>130</sup> The past so pressingly irrupts into the present consciousness here in an

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<sup>128</sup> King 29.

<sup>129</sup> J. Brooks Bousun, Brutal Choreographies: Oppositional Strategies and Narrative Design in the Novels of Margaret Atwood, (Amherst: Massachusetts UP, 1993) 170.

<sup>130</sup> Brooks Bousun 170.

urge to overcome the traumatic break between one's present self and lost origins. This is an idealisation, yet the narrative ends with a sense of the possibility of this huge task.

The circularity formed by these diachronous episodes serves not only to illustrate progressive ideas concerning time, they also allow for reconfigurations of the maternal archetype and women's representation. The vision of the Virgin Mary/adult Elaine works alongside several other elements in this novel in order to rupture stereotypical female roles and instead create Elaine's own subjective approach to her position as a woman. Rather than supporting a misogynistic view of women as othered, unchanging examples of maternal benevolence, Atwood consciously reworks damaging and restrictive female stereotypes, using the new physics as a vehicle for such change. The scenes at the ravine, Elaine's paintings, Elaine's relationship to Cordelia, a Mexican icon of the Virgin Mary and the recurrent, crucial emblem of the cat's eye marble all concur in the reworking of the maternal and women's representation.

### **Revisions and Representations in Cat's Eye.**

Themes of identity and the new physics are joined in the crucial symbol of the cat's eye marble which Elaine wins as a child. The marble has multiple interpretations: it is a symbol of the childhood which Elaine has to revisit in order to conquer her depression and it is a symbol of the temporal structure as described at the beginning of the novel, being a transparent, circular dimension, like time itself; a structure in which everything is held and simultaneously available. More importantly, the cat's eye marble is a symbol for the unification of physics, being that tiny piece of the jigsaw which makes the entirety cohere: this quality of unification also suggests its importance as an emblem of Elaine's enduring identity. Like the Higgs boson, the marble is that particle which makes Elaine's unification



complete. On finding the marble as an adult, this unification is with her past, as she says: “I look into it and see my life entire” (398). The marble becomes representative of the particle which makes unification of a wider kind possible.

As a child, Elaine is immediately fond of her marble’s cold blue centre and it becomes an object which is very precious to her:

The cat’s eyes really are like eyes, but not the eyes of cats. They’re like the eyes of something that isn’t known but exists anyway; like the green eye of the radio; like the eyes of aliens from a distant planet. My favourite one is blue. I put it into my red plastic purse to keep it safe. I risk my other cat’s eyes to be shot at, but not this one. (62-63)

As something which is unknown yet in existence, the marble resembles the Higgs boson which, according to one group of theories, must exist in order that particles acquire mass. The marble is described in terms of detachment and is an emblem of Elaine as an outsider. But this quality of detachment is something which Elaine values. It allows her the ability to shut off from her surroundings in a way which lets her protect herself. This detachment affords Elaine an objectivity which will later prove invaluable to her as an artist, allowing her to manipulate the codes by which she is supposed to live.

The blue marble becomes a talismanic object which permits her to distance herself from reality while she is holding it. We see this when Elaine retrieves her marble one year later when the children start playing with them again at school:

The eye part of it, inside its crystal sphere, is so blue, so pure. It’s like something frozen in the ice. I take it to school with me, in my pocket, but I don’t set it up to be shot at. I hold onto it, rolling it between my fingers. . . . [Cordelia] doesn’t know what power this cat’s eye has, to protect me. I can see people moving like bright animated dolls, their mouths opening and closing but no real words coming out. I can look at their shapes and sizes, their colours, without feeling anything else about them. I am alive in my eyes only. (141)

The marble symbolises Elaine’s ability to crystallise part of her own selfhood, conserving some essential element of her identity, in order that it is not damaged (shot at) by the

struggles which she endures in her childhood. The most notable of these is the scene in which Elaine falls into the ravine and risks freezing to death, a factor which applies to the marble's icy interior. If identity, like time, is a fluid structure, here we see it 'frozen', held and suspended, stored away for another time. That time eventually comes when the adult Elaine is helping her mother sort out the family's belongings in her basement. The marble is discovered inside the red plastic purse that Elaine had as a child:

'A marble!' says my mother, with a child's delight. 'Remember all those marbles Stephen used to collect?'

'Yes,' I say. But this one was mine.  
I look into it and see my life entire. (398)

As King writes, it is from this point that the novel's earlier action is remembered.<sup>131</sup> Judith McCombs reads the marble as a symbol of both detachment and distanced protection, linking it with the shard of glass lodged in Little Kay's eye and heart in H.C. Anderson's fairy tale The Snow Queen, and the Hispanic and Mediterranean tradition of amulets against the evil eye, which are also blue.<sup>132</sup> Coral Howells discusses the symbol of the cat's eye marble, this time reading it as representative of Elaine's position as a 'seer', an artist, as it is a "lens of imaginative vision, becoming that Third Eye . . ."<sup>133</sup> The marble indicates that there is an irreducible element of self, a part of Elaine's identity which is fixed and unchanging. As Grace says, "none of the other images for the self in this novel quite captures the sense of harmonious completion-in-multiplicity as well as the marble."<sup>134</sup>

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<sup>131</sup> King, Memory 65.

<sup>132</sup> Judith McCombs, "Contrary Re-Memberings: The Creating Self and Feminism in Cat's Eye," Canadian Literature 129 (1991): 10.

<sup>133</sup> Coral Howells, "Cat's Eye: Elaine Risley's Retrospective Art," Margaret Atwood: Writing and Subjectivity, ed. Colin Nicholson (Great Britain: MacMillan 1994) 210.

<sup>134</sup> Grace, 200.



The first encounter that Elaine has with what she believes to be a vision of the Virgin Mary is, as mentioned above, the scene at the ravine when the child Elaine sees the vision floating above her, encouraging her to go home. It is only ten pages after this scene that Elaine has another significant experience with an icon of the Virgin Mary while holidaying in Mexico. Here, Elaine sees the a statue of the Virgin Mary, again dressed in black and without a crown. These details confirm to Elaine that her childhood vision was of the Virgin Mary, dressed in a manner which the child Elaine found to be atypical. The Mexican icon's dress is covered with little ornaments, symbolic of the lost things which the locals hope will be returned to them, as Elaine comments,

I could see what these were for: she was a Virgin of lost things, one who restored what was lost. . . . There could be some point in praying to her, kneeling down, lighting a candle. But I didn't do it, because I didn't know what to pray for. What was lost, what could I pin on her dress. (198)

However, immediately after this it becomes apparent that it is her sense of self which has been misplaced, as Elaine remembers the bullying she experienced as a child and the chapter ends poignantly with Elaine remarking "Cordelia, I think. You made me believe I was nothing" (199). The suggestion is, then, that the discovery of Elaine's cat's eye marble, lost and forgotten about since childhood, marks the recovery of that sense of self. Like the Higgs boson in the new physics, the marble is symbolic of the missing element of Elaine's identity, her memory, her perspective of her life. This interpretation is illustrated by Elaine's painting "Unified Field Theory".

Cora Howells sees Elaine's narrative as feminising the master discourse of science through the medium of visual art: "The boundaries between science and art are dissolved here in what might be seen as an act of gendered transgression, where Elaine's paintings and drawings show one way in which a woman deals with the master discourse of science,

transforming it through another medium or ‘another mode of figuration’”<sup>135</sup> While the new physics provides the conceptual basis for many of Cat’s Eye’s concerns, art provides the structural framework for this text, essentially through the titles of her paintings which structure the chapter divisions of Elaine’s narratives. Also significant is the exhibition itself at the novel’s close which provides what Howells terms a “final statement, a *summa* of all the elements of her life already contained in the narrative.”<sup>136</sup>

The most radical revision of the maternal archetype which Elaine’s paintings present is in “Our Lady of Perpetual Help” which depicts the Virgin Mary in an altered version of the vision Elaine had as a child, floating down to a snow-covered floor.

She is wearing a winter coat over her blue robe, and has a purse slung over her shoulder. She’s carrying two brown paper bags full of groceries. Several things have fallen from the bags: an egg, an onion, an apple. She looks tired. (345)

Strehle reads these dropped objects as the discarded “symbols of mythic femininity,” metaphors for the way in which Elaine’s work erodes entrenched traditions of the maternal in art.<sup>137</sup> Elaine invests this archetype with the trappings of her own experience of the drudgery she associates with her role as a woman, already aligning herself with the Virgin Mary, something which becomes increasingly apparent towards the novel’s end.

One other revision of Virgin Mary iconography takes place in a painting from the same era of Elaine’s work, in which she paints the Virgin with the head of a lioness, arguing “If Christ is a lion, as he is in traditional iconography, why wouldn’t the Virgin Mary be a lioness?” (355). Elaine goes on to comment on the relevance of this modification, saying “Anyway it seems to me more accurate about motherhood than the old bloodless milk-and-

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<sup>135</sup> Howells 210.

<sup>136</sup> Howells 205, emphasis in original.

<sup>137</sup> Strehle 181.



water Virgins of art history. My Virgin Mary is fierce, alert to danger, wild. She stares levelly out at the viewer with her yellow lion's eyes. A gnawed bone lies at her feet" (355). This fierce, challenging icon is a marked contrast to the severely depressed Elaine who struggles with self-abuse and clinical depression as a young mother. Elaine's response as an artist to the world around her forces questions concerning the representation of her sex throughout history. McCombs argues that the figures with which Elaine identifies provide a positive, feminist comment: "...Risley creates a Mary in her own, human image that re-credits and re-claims female history."<sup>138</sup> These paintings reconfigure the system of female icons by which women are measured, as well as tracking a process of reconfiguration in Elaine herself.

This process reaches its artistic culmination in the final painting of Elaine's exhibition, "Unified Field Theory" in which Elaine's full use of the new physics and her transformative approach towards her identity reach their full expression. In this piece, we are shown a figure whose identity is potentially a composite of the Mexican Virgin of lost things, the vision of the Virgin as she appeared to Elaine as a child, and the adult Elaine herself, situated within a surreal landscape and holding an oversized version of Elaine's cat's eye marble at the level of her heart, indicating its position of utmost importance to her being. She floats just above the bridge over the ravine, against a sky which is half night, half sunset, yet which could also be the ground: "Underneath the bridge is the night sky, as seen through a telescope. Star upon star, red, blue, yellow, and white, swirling nebulae, galaxy upon galaxy: the universe, in its incandescence and darkness. Or so you think. But there are also stones down there, beetles and small roots, because this is the underside of the ground" (408). The

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<sup>138</sup> McCombs 18.

cat's eye marble is 'found' for us in this painting by the Virgin of lost things who gives back that essential element of selfhood, thereby allowing a chance not only for Elaine's identity to cohere, but also for it to become integrated into a wider, universal perspective. The Virgin of lost things, who is also Elaine, hovers in a landscape where all things are interconnected: hence the sky and earth are indistinguishable from one another with "swirling nebulae" positioned next to "beetles and small roots" (408). This holistic view of the universe in which matter can appear to be many different things at once complies with the new physics model in which all matter is interconnected within a unified field of existence.

Howells characterises this painting as figuring "the relationship between the cosmic and the humanly particular."<sup>139</sup> For King this painting also suggests the trope of memory which is used in this novel: "'Unified Field Theory' suggests the 'unified field' of moments in which past and present are held together; the moment when she 'meets' the past on the bridge . . ."<sup>140</sup> Grace also identifies similar qualities within this painting, as she writes, "In the painting, all things are interconnected, contained, and joined by the repeated curves of the night sky, the bridge, the moon and the marble. The image of Self portrayed in this painting remains enigmatic and mysterious, but the mystery nevertheless exists in a unified field of time-space where nothing is lost and everything connects."<sup>141</sup> Not only does this provide us with an illustration of Elaine's brother's scientific concerns, but this painting shows us how Elaine has adopted these ideas as a basis for her own philosophical outlook and the success of Elaine's holistic worldview. "Unified Field Theory" demonstrates that Elaine has achieved a state of self-discovery from which she can heal the wounds which she carries from her past,

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<sup>139</sup> Howells 213.

<sup>140</sup> King, *Memory* 90.

<sup>141</sup> Grace 202.



preempting the last scene at the ravine in which she forgives her memory of Cordelia and exorcises her influence. King also discusses the way in which “Unified Field Theory” relates to the second ravine scene: “the text sets up a framework of reference for this [scene] in terms of Stephen’s ideas about time so that understanding and acceptance come about not as an effect of memory alone, nor as the result of a long process of construction and reconstruction in therapy, but by means of a supposed re-creation of an earlier moment as time ‘doubles back’ upon itself.”<sup>142</sup> This is a structural manifestation of memory as the realist frame of the text buckles, allowing moments to come together so that identity can cohere within both itself and a wider perception of the universe.

Much of the credibility of Cat’s Eye’s ontological maxim lies in the symbolic strength of this marble, suggesting as it does the dual possibilities of integration of the subject with its surroundings whilst maintaining the individuality and stability of the subject. However, we are aware that Elaine has gone through a very long process of self-discovery in order to develop this worldview. Although her brother Stephen’s theories on time and space have been gradually introduced to her since her childhood, the process of translating these theories into a way of viewing ontology has been a long and complex one.

Elaine presents many different yet mutually complementing versions of herself, all of which contradict representational norms, all of which express her particular subjectivity.

McCombs discusses the multi-layered concept of selfhood which this novel explores:

[Cat’s Eye’s] contrarily re-membering seer-narrator is Atwood’s most elaborate representation of the human self as complexly layered, with fluid and sometimes buried layers. This stratified, metaphoric concept of the self builds upon Atwood’s idea of the self . . . as a place where things happen and that is changed by their happening in it; and leaves Cat’s Eye free to play with not only feminist literary concepts of the self , but also with other, pre-literary and non-literary concepts of the

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<sup>142</sup> King, Memory 90.

self, drawn from folklore and faith, physics and life sciences, psychology and games, popular and visual art.<sup>143</sup>

McCombs's reading of identity as "stratified" and "metaphoric" is similar to the way in which the narrative discusses time. However, that Atwood 'plays' with these concepts is an ambiguous claim. Whilst entrenched notions of the sovereign self are certainly deconstructed in the narrative, Atwood's project is to create an ontological paradigm which favours interconnection; to others, to the past, to the cosmos. Atwood is not involved in facile play but in the construction of a complex yet radical model for identity. The reader is presented with various representations of Elaine; as an ethereal icon (the Virgin of lost things), as a lioness, as Cordelia's double, as well as in the roles of mother, daughter, lover and sister. All these realist and fantasy versions of Elaine's identity are equally credible for the reader as being alternating facets of her complex psychological composition.

### **Charles and Cordelia.**

Both texts work with the idea that identity is interconnected but that this is complicated by the pressures of an excessively masculine, patriarchal society which necessarily favours singularity and an insular, rigid model of selfhood. Cordelia's role as Elaine's double is certainly one of the most important aspects of *Cat's Eye*, being the impetus for the uncovering of Elaine's complex identity. In *The Child in Time* it is Charles who represents a similar counterpart to the protagonist. Through these figures, McEwan and Atwood demonstrate the effect of oppressive social codes upon relationships as it is the power-hungry machinations of the patriarchal social hierarchy which has such a negative psychological effect on these figures. For Cordelia, her father's need to dominate the women in his family

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<sup>143</sup> McCombs 9.



takes its toll on her self-perception, leaving her feeling vulnerable and in need of revenge against his dominance. This revenge is taken out on Elaine who is, for Cordelia, a much easier target than her own father. In the case of Charles Darke, the extreme right-wing political spheres in which he moves necessitate a repression of his inner-child which becomes an insurmountable nemesis for Charles by which he is eventually consumed. In each case, these counterparts represent a cautionary note upon the protagonists' lives; both Elaine and Stephen risk lapsing into the suicidal state which eventually kills Charles and, one assumes, Cordelia. While the connection is only suggested to the reader through the narrative of The Child in Time, within Cat's Eye the connection between protagonist and double is very deep and openly acknowledged by Elaine, who thinks of herself and Cordelia as "like the twins in old fables, each of whom has been given half a key" (CE, 11), an image which stresses, once again, the interconnective approach to identity which this text takes.

Like Stephen, Charles's desire to escape the social order and regress to a childlike state belies a desire to belong to a mother figure. Charles's regression has parallels with Stephen's experience of seeing his parents before the time of his birth, when his mother sees him as a child, and the subsequent hallucinatory episode in which he regresses to the state of an unborn foetus/primeval entity, an event which leads him to 'reconnect' with another child through conceiving with Julie. Both adult men attempt or are forced to recognise their relation to their childhoods, albeit with vastly differing results. Charles's regression into the innocent state of childhood neatly portrays the dangers of attempting to escape the pressures of adulthood, as Thelma explains to Stephen:

"He wanted the security of childhood, the powerlessness, the obedience, and also the freedom that goes with it, freedom from money, decisions, plans, demands. He used to say he wanted to escape from time, from appointments, schedules, deadlines. Childhood to him was a timelessness, he talked about it as though it were a mystical state." (CT, 200-201)

The qualities of timelessness and mysticism link Charles's perception of childhood to the new physics ideas and the particular concept of femininity which this text constructs; the "feminine quantum magic" which Stephen identifies in Thelma (CT, 45). Thelma's support for this regression in her partner again outlines this text's concern with women being mothers, first and foremost, to their partners, conveniently enabling the childless Thelma to expend her 'store' of maternal affection.

However, as Thelma notes, Charles's regression is a reaction to the pressures of modern life, where he was expected to be a successful, powerful man. Charles abandons the adult male world in favour of a childlike world which is dominated by the mother figure:

"... it was all frenetic compensation for what he took to be an excess of vulnerability. All this striving and shouting, cornering markets, winning arguments to keep his weakness at bay. And quite honestly, when I think of my colleagues at work and the scientific establishment and the men who run it, and I think of science itself, how it's been devised over the centuries, I have to say that Charles's case was just an extreme form of a general problem." (CT, 204)

Science and culture are brought together again in this comment as indicative of concurrent and interrelated issues. In the light of this comment, it would seem that adopting the philosophical principles which the new physics provides is a way of evolving a sense of self which would be valuable and progressive. This strategy is presented to us in this text as the antidote to a harsh, patriarchal world which centres on an isolating, fragmented precept. However, this admirable ideal is problematised by being placed within an oedipal struggle to unite with the maternal.

However, an entirely suspicious reading of Charles's regression is not possible given that he commits suicide. This provides a cautionary footnote to the desire to escape, insinuating that ontological changes can only be approached philosophically, not practically.



Jack Slay also comments on the cautionary note that Charles's regression provides, making the distinction between adopting a childlike perspective and trying to become a child again:

Through Charles's regression into childhood, McEwan suggests that although it is important, even crucial, for the adult to accept the child that resides within him- or herself, it is dangerous, even suicidal, to become wholly that child-self or to surrender entirely to that desire. Acceptance and acknowledgement of that child-self can lead to a greater joy in life; submersion of that child-self can lead to a breakdown of the adult spirit.<sup>144</sup>

Again, we are presented with the fine distinction between a desired integration and a possible disintegration of subjectivity, exactly that threat to subjectivity which Stephen senses during his hallucinatory episode in which he feels that he is merely an infinitesimally small part of a huge biological progression. For Elaine, this is prevented by an acute sense of her personal history and her memories of her life which have informed her subjective development: this barrier against disintegration of her identity is symbolised by her cat's eye marble.

Thelma's encouragement for Charles to resume his career in politics is interpreted by Charles as a withdrawal of maternal affection, at which he becomes petulant and accuses Thelma of putting him "out in the cold"(CT, 203), which is how Thelma interprets his suicide by exposure to hypothermia. Thelma comments on this to Stephen, saying,

"I told him I had tried to help him in every way I could. Now he would have to take responsibility for his own life. And that is exactly what he did. He wanted to hurt me by hurting himself, thoroughly depressive reasoning. He went out into the woods and sat down. He put himself out in the cold. As suicides go it was petulant and childish." (CT, 203)

Charles's reaction is against the withdrawal of maternal affection, as he sees it, mimicking the death that awaits the abandoned child starved of its mother's warmth. The parallels between the two texts become striking in this aspect as this suicide recalls Elaine's

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<sup>144</sup> Jack Slay, "Vandalising Time: Ian McEwan's The Child in Time," Critique 35.4 (1994): 212.

experience in the ravine in which Strehle says she is “tempted by numbness, stasis, pure objecthood, the annihilation of death.”<sup>145</sup> Again, in this instance, it is the warm maternal figure who appears to Elaine, encouraging her to go home and recover from her hypothermia. The possible interpretation of this scene as being one in which Elaine saves herself is the point at which the two texts differ, as Charles appears to have no aptitude for self-preservation.

Entrapment in childhood is an idea which haunts Elaine, a point which becomes apparent as she revisits the ravine and says, “Get me out of this Cordelia. I’m locked in. I don’t want to be nine years old forever” (CE, 400). Unlike Charles, Elaine realises the urgent need to free oneself from the trauma of one’s past. Elaine also realises that it is not just herself who is psychologically trapped in childhood but also her memory of Cordelia who is still, for Elaine, a spiteful nine-year-old girl, as she says of her vision of Cordelia; “If she stays here any longer she will freeze to death; she will be left behind, in the wrong time” (CE, 419). The ‘freezing’ refers to both the physical threat of hypothermia that being trapped in the ravine entails but also the static nature of Elaine’s memory of Cordelia which is unable to think of her as the teenage or adult Cordelia that Elaine also knew. Cordelia and Charles are both presented as the counterpart to the protagonist who is frozen in the time of childhood; metaphorically, in Cordelia’s case, but mentally in the case of Charles. While we see that this stasis causes Charles’s death, we are aware that Cordelia’s perception of herself as the undermined daughter have left her with suicidal urges which, as far as Elaine is aware, are never overcome.<sup>146</sup> Cordelia’s suicide is suggested by Elaine’s narrative but never completely

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<sup>145</sup> Strehle 176.

<sup>146</sup> As in Shakespeare’s *King Lear* (1605) in which Lear’s daughter, Cordelia, is cast out of her father’s fortune and later killed whilst trying to avenge his bad treatment by her



shown. After we learn that she has disappeared from the psychiatric hospital, Elaine never sees Cordelia again, and, many years later, Elaine begins a grieving process for her on the night after the exhibition whilst she is drunk on her own. Elaine's conversation with an imagined ghost reveals that she is coming to an admission of Cordelia's death:

"You're dead, Cordelia.  
 No I'm not.  
Yes you are. You're Dead.  
Lie Down." (CE, 414)

Banerjee reads Elaine and Cordelia's relationship as a sinister power struggle, and sees Elaine's identification with the mother figure as a way of breaking this: "This is a freedom from Cordelia and from 'being Cordelia' within a Master-Slave relationship . . . and it is effected by the alternative identification with the mother imago Elaine had projected as her own saviour . . . The dialectic of power, the alternative positions of victim and victor, is transcended through maternity."<sup>147</sup>

In The Child in Time, Kate is the 'ghostly child' who acts upon Stephen in the same way that Cordelia's 'ghost' acts upon Elaine, pulling Stephen into a static time where he is trapped. Stephen creates a fantasy of Kate's continued existence which is ostensibly a way of constructing her into the present moment, yet the actual effect is of Stephen being trapped in the wrong time: "Her phantom growth, the product of an obsessive sorrow, was not only inevitable—nothing could stop the sinewy clock—but necessary. Without the fantasy of her continued existence he was lost, time would stop. He was the father of an invisible child" (CT, 8). As Elaine does with Cordelia, Stephen constructs false memories of Kate,

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sisters, Regan and Goneril. In Cat's Eye, the daughter suffers for the actions of her father and becomes a martyr.

<sup>147</sup> Banerjee 517.

attempting to comfort himself by filling in the three years since her disappearance with hypothetical details (CT, 12). Just before Kate's sixth birthday, Stephen goes to a toyshop and buys presents for her as an "act of faith" in his daughter's existence (CT, 126). He tries to choose her presents with some consideration of her character in mind, a character he no longer knows but upon whom he conjectures: "She was a reticent girl, in company at least, with a straight back and a dark fringe. She was a fantasist, a day-dreamer, a lover of strange-sounding words, a keeper of secret diaries, a hoarder of inexplicable objects" (CT, 127). Stephen's fantasies become so consuming that time is eventually described as "inert" for him (CT, 131), as the depression which Kate's loss has induced confines him to the 'hyperbolic past' which Kristeva identifies: "Almost three years on and still stuck, still trapped in the dark, enfolded with his loss, shaped by it, lost to the ordinary currents of feeling that moved far above him and belonged exclusively to other people" (CT, 130). While Elaine is afraid of being nine-years-old forever, the opposite pathology takes place in this text where the child who will only ever be three-years-old is made to grow and age in Stephen's mind. Stephen's melancholic fantasy is not dispelled until Julie is about to give birth to their second child and says to Stephen "She was a lovely daughter, a lovely girl" (CT, 214). Julie's use of the past tense forces Stephen to realise that Kate will probably never return, at which point the couple begin to grieve together for the first time. In bringing about this realisation in Stephen, Julie effectively forces him back into the present moment, just minutes before physically pushing their new child into the world. The result is a scene in which two people are 'birthed' by Julie. Yet their emergence is not quite into the linear flow of time, the continuum which Elaine rejoins at the end of her narrative, it is into a point before the beginning of time: Stephen has passed from the hyperbolic overinflated past of the depressive into the cosmic eternity of the primeval maternal, leaving his essential problem of disintegration unresolved.



Elaine's identity is shown to be bound up with that of Cordelia to a greater extent than with any other character in Cat's Eye, including her daughters, her husband, brother or parents. Atwood portrays the concept of interdependent existence in its most frightening aspects as we see both women undergo a life of serious depressive illness which is portrayed as interlinked manifestations of the same problem, namely Cordelia's sense of worthlessness, instilled in her by her father. In the scene at the ravine, Elaine forgives her ghost/memory of Cordelia and acknowledges that the sense of shame and wrongdoing which she felt was an internalisation of Cordelia's feelings in relation to her father. This is commented upon by King :

This awareness of Cordelia's own sense of failure and rejection, projected on to and internalised by Elaine, is a complex interpersonal psychological process which the text subtly suggests to the reader at the time of its occurrence, when Elaine is too young and vulnerable to realise it. It is the counterpart of Elaine's teenage internalisation of Cordelia's defensive childhood cruelty.<sup>148</sup>

As with Charles, again we see the petulant, abandoned child who cannot reconcile her adult and childhood selves, only this time the aggrieved child is Elaine's memory of Cordelia with whom she connected so strongly. It is Elaine's bond with Cordelia which allows this transference to happen, a point which demonstrates the deep capacity for empathy which the two girls had. As with Thelma's analysis of Charles's psyche, the struggle between Elaine and Cordelia represents "an extreme form of a general problem" as Atwood highlights the fracturing, negative effect that the system of male domination can have on female relationships (CE, 204).

Grace reads Cat's Eye as fictional autobiography and stresses the interconnective approach to identity which this text portrays: "The female model for autobiography . . .

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<sup>148</sup> King, Memory 89-90.

stresses interdependence, community, multiplicity and a capacity for identification with rather than against. . . . The female autobiographical 'I' is more like a process than a product, and its discourse is more likely to be iterative, cyclical, incremental and unresolved, even a mystery."<sup>149</sup> Grace's interpretation is certainly a good model for perspectives of subjectivity, time and the new physics which Cat's Eye presents. As mentioned above, Elaine's identity is certainly shown to be in process, as unresolved at the text's end as it was at the beginning, and thereby connected to a progressive flow of time. While this 'capacity for identification with' is consciously brought to the fore of Cat's Eye it becomes an eerie aspect of both texts as the boundaries between self and other are shown to be, at times, in a state of dangerous confusion, again bringing the closely linked themes of integration and disintegration to the fore.

Cat's Eye is not only concerned with the close relationship between the two women, it dramatises the idea of the dual self to a troubling extreme, as King writes:

The novel is full of doubles and twins, Elaine tormenting the teenage Cordelia with the idea that she is the vampire twin of a human girl who sleeps in "a coffin full of earth", suggests an unconscious memory of her burial in the black hole. When, as a young woman, Elaine paints her one and only "portrait" of Cordelia, she realises that she is "afraid of being Cordelia. Because in some way we changed places, and I've forgotten when."<sup>150</sup>

The shaky boundary between self and other is hinted at in The Child in Time as Stephen carries Charles's corpse back to Thelma's cottage and he has a morbid fantasy that Charles's frozen body will steal his body warmth and come back to life: "It drew the heat from him greedily, as if they might soon change places and the corpse, warmed to life, would carry Stephen's cold body to the cottage" (CT, 198). A similar theme is brought into Cat's Eye

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<sup>149</sup> Grace 191.

<sup>150</sup> King, Memory 88.



with the two girls presented as joint possessors of only just enough energy to create one whole person, as if a vital energy is exchanged between them but never equally distributed. Brooks Bosun calls this “psychic vampirism” in which Elaine seems “to grow stronger at Cordelia’s expense”, thus while Cordelia is hospitalised due to psychiatric illness, Elaine reaches a period of her life where she begins to express herself as an artist, the means by which she will eventually learn to conquer her own depression.<sup>151</sup> McCombs also notes this aspect of the narrative structure in which Elaine and Cordelia are “each other’s mirroring, complementary, and sometimes darker Others; and their basic narrative structure of their now-told women’s story is their counterpoised rise and fall.”<sup>152</sup> At the base of this exchange of fortunes, the same power struggle resides; ultimately each woman is competing for validation within a social system which will never grant them, individually, enough sense of legitimacy. Instead the two women battle for primacy. However, this power struggle for fatherly approval cannot be won by either of the women who, as Atwood painstakingly illustrates, will never be given full acknowledgement by the system of fatherly domination in which they live. Their respective fates show that while Elaine develops methods of self-validation through her art, Cordelia, on the other hand, never manages to outgrow the position of undermined daughter.

Applied to the scene in which Stephen carries Charles’s body, this reading shows these two men as starved of maternal affection to a similar degree. Given the way in which the maternal is presented as the marginalised force in the futuristic society of the novel’s present, this would make a similar point: as women are not integrated within the social

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<sup>151</sup> Brookes Bosun, 160 and 175, respectively.

<sup>152</sup> McCombs 16.

system, men face a choice of either aligning themselves completely with an extreme patriarchal system or collapsing into a perceived timeless regression in an attempt to rejoin with the mother. While the patriarchal political system allows Charles great success, it requires him to negate his 'inner child,' who then feels starved of the maternal attention he craves. In this light, both novels concur in their condemnation of patriarchy which causes relationships and psyches to fracture, sometimes irreparably. The method of overcoming this problem, as Elaine's story displays, is through one's own creative process, a point which complies with Kristeva's ideas concerning the power of artistic creation as a counterdepressant.

### **Signification, Depression and Postmodernity**

Both Cat's Eye and The Child in Time commit the ultimate crime against postmodernity in attempting to look for overriding principles of being in an age which ostensibly resists such perspectives. However, as Pierre Nora writes, the postmodern drive toward fragmentation is exactly the thing which incites the desire to forge a sense of belonging: "Never have we longed in a more physical manner to evoke the weight of the land at our feet . . . Yet only in a regime of discontinuity are such hallucinations of the past conceivable"<sup>153</sup> The ideas of unification which are portrayed by both texts signal the emergence of a holistic view of the self in relation to the universe, however, each text tackles this perspective in subtly different ways, giving drastically different results.

In a study of the archetype in contemporary culture, Marzena Kubisz looks at the problem of creating totalities in a postmodern context and poses the question "is it a

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<sup>153</sup> Pierre Nora, "Between Memory and History: Les Lieux de Mémoire," trans. Marc Roudebush Representations 26 (1989): 17.



postmodern blasphemy to attempt to look for the Absolute in a world of dispersed realities?"<sup>154</sup> Given that postmodernity insists on there being games without end, on always finding the paralogous offshoot from any absolute, it would appear that the answer to Kubisz's question would be 'Yes'. Kubisz goes on to say that binding concepts or absolutes need to be revised and redefined in order to create a new postmodernity:

Redefinition plays a key role in postmodern discourse: the quest for binding concepts, ideas and paradigms in their previous, unchanged forms has no justification at present. The redefinition of concepts like Oneness, Wholeness and the Sacred is indispensable if the creation of a new postmodern paradigm is to be undertaken.<sup>155</sup>

However, the ideas of oneness, wholeness and the sacred are so at odds with the postmodern that surely what Kubisz is discussing here is the formation of a new movement entirely, rather than a reformation of the postmodern. Cat's Eye is largely in agreement with the above citation; for instance, Elaine revises the traditional image of the Virgin Mary in order to create an icon in her own image. Cat's Eye alters concepts such as oneness, wholeness and the sacred yet these are not presented to us as the 'new postmodern'; postmodernity is purposefully dismissed in this novel. This is effected several times at the narrative level, most notably by Elaine in relation to her paintings. Whilst walking around the gallery, Elaine notes the decor which she finds ugly: "I don't give a glance to what's on the walls, I hate those neo-expressionist dirty greens and putrid oranges, post this, post that. Everything is post these days, as if we're all just a footnote to something earlier that was real enough to have a name of its own" (CE, 86). This sense of the present being insubstantial is supported by her comment on the transient faddishness that characterises twentieth-century art: "The

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<sup>154</sup> Marzena Kubisz, "Permutations of the Absolute: Archetypal Memory of Mass Culture," Memory - Remembering - Forgetting, eds. Wojciech H. Kalaga and Tadeusz Rachwał (Frankfurt: Peter Lang, 1991) 52.

<sup>155</sup> Kubisz 59.

present tense is moving forward, discarding concept after concept, and I am off to the side somewhere, fiddling with egg tempera and flat surfaces as if the twentieth century had never happened” (CE, 345).

Elaine’s traditional approach to artistic techniques is juxtaposed to the more avant garde forms used by her peers at art college, including those of her partner Jon. These artistic differences pinpoint Elaine’s dilemma in relation to the postmodern, highlighting the fact that she feels completely ostracised from its irreverent play and deconstruction. Elaine’s project as an artist is to attempt to create a sense of identity, making new forms, and to explore figurations of her identity in relation to traditional representations of women in a valuable, constructive process of revision. While Jon “smashes things, and glues the shards into place in the pattern of breakage,” Elaine paints two-dimensional art in the traditional way (CE, 346). Elaine feels that Jon is dismissive of her art, thinking it “irrelevant” and “lumped in with the women who paint flowers” (CE, 345). This indicates Jon’s failure to see the challenging revisions which Elaine’s work presents, a fact which reveals his dismissal of Elaine’s feminist project as something which is, ultimately, so threatening to his sense of propriety. Persistently dismissive of the mother to his children, Jon tells a friend that Elaine is ““mad because she’s a woman,”” to which Elaine replies, ““I’m not mad because I’m a woman . . . I’m mad because you’re an asshole”” (CE, 345). To a degree, Elaine’s angst as an artist stems from her realisation that the world of postmodern fashionable art is, underneath all of its radicalism, an arena which cannot allow Elaine her autonomy as an artist. Instead, Elaine rejects the postmodernist movement, occupying a position which is “off to one side”, a position which has its benefits, as Elaine comments: “There is a freedom in this: because it doesn’t matter what I do, I can do what I like” (CE, 345). Elaine is perfectly happy with both



her work as an artist and her gender, but Jon's diminishment of both reflects postmodernity's distance from feminist endeavours.

The same dissatisfaction with the postmodern is found in The Child in Time and is again purposely linked to the development of a holistic approach to the world. As Thelma describes some of the philosophical implications of the new physics to Stephen she berates the modern in comparison with intellectual ideas inspired by the new physics:

"The measurers of our world can no longer detach themselves. They have to measure themselves too. Matter, time, space, forces—all beautiful and intricate illusions in which we must now collude. What a stupendous shake-up, Stephen. Shakespeare would have grasped wave functions, Donne would have understood complementarity and relative time. They would have been excited. What richness! They would have plundered this new science for their imagery. . . . As far as I can make out, you think that some local, passing fashion like modernism—modernism!—is the intellectual achievement of our time. Pathetic!" (CT, 44).

Thelma and Elaine's mutual espousal of the new physics and their rejection of the modern/postmodern engenders the suggestion that women's relationship to the postmodern is necessarily problematic, to the extent that identification with another paradigm becomes increasingly attractive, indeed necessary.

As discussed in the Introduction, postmodernity is based on the crisis of white, Western male-dominated perspectives. While the dismantling of such ideologies is necessary and beneficial if formerly marginalised groups are to be truly integrated, the postmodern reticence towards new constructions, new ideologies is such that it prevents progressive thought. Waugh comments on the conceptual vacuum created by the postmodern saying,

It seems to me that postmodern writing is pervaded by a nihilism produced through nostalgia. . . . Often in such texts the possibility of humanist affirmation is destroyed by an insistent and excessive but familiar enough Romantic desire to rediscover a transcendent metaphysical truth, an essence of Being, whose impossible realization

produces the urge to render absurd or destroy altogether what can be: the human subject as an ethical, affective and effective historical agent.<sup>156</sup>

This nostalgia is for the sovereign self and Waugh identifies the postmodern melancholic reliance on this form of identity. For example, in Cat's Eye, Jon's shatter-art forms evoke that deconstructed coherence, the damaged sovereign self which is acknowledged in the broken objects. Elaine "can see the appeal" of these objects (CE, 345), indicating her desire to destroy such outmoded notions of subjectivity, notions with which she cannot identify, yet her art does not eulogise these forms. In creating them, Jon's nihilism demonstrates his underlying nostalgia for the insular, bourgeois self.

Waugh's ideas complicate the readings of the new physics paradigms, as their quest for a 'transcendent metaphysical truth' would appear to devalue the ontological paradigm which accompanies it, cancelling out its validity. Also, with particular reference to Cat's Eye, Elaine's marble could be interpreted as the 'essence of Being' which pertains, in Waugh's opinion, to bourgeois subjectivity, thereby counteracting the possibility of a humanist affirmation. However, Waugh's argument rests on the conclusion that marginalised groups do not symbolise a nostalgia for the universal subject in its "pure or original form."<sup>157</sup> This point supports Elaine's constructions of identity in which we see the struggle to reconfigure the female subject. Elaine's element of essential 'Being' pertains to her history, and personal memory, and her concept of the universe is transcendental but it is also inclusive of all the humanist qualities of a subject who is historically grounded, politically aware and fully accepting of her interdependence with others.

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<sup>156</sup> Waugh, "Stalemates" 326.

<sup>157</sup> Waugh, "Stalemates" 328.



It is in The Child in Time where the ideological basis falls into exactly the kind of trap which Waugh identifies. In its reliance on the maternal archetype, in a “pure or original form”, McEwan’s narrative is a testament to the kind of postmodern nostalgia which attempts to disguise itself with an insubstantial veil of humanism. For instance, at the text’s end, as their new baby is being born, Julie and Stephen resolve to devote their lives to the greater good: “In the wild expansiveness of their sorrow they undertook to heal everyone and everything, the Government, the country, the planet, but they would start with themselves” (CT, 215). This position is far removed from Stephen’s earlier thoughts on humanity which are revealed as he watches the threat of nuclear war unfold between Russia and America on the television:

Stephen honestly did not mind that life on Earth was to continue. . . . The universe was enormous, he thought wearily, intelligent life was spread thinly, but the planets involved were probably innumerable. Among those who stumbled across the convertibility of matter and energy, there were bound to be quite a few who blew themselves to bits, and they were likely to be the ones who did not deserve to survive. The dilemma wasn’t human, he thought lazily, scratching himself through his underpants, it was in the very structure of matter itself, and there was nothing much to be done about that. (CT, 36)

By contrast, the grand claims made at the novel’s end seem futile and hollow. While the text hints at the promise of new ontological developments, they never materialise. The decision to revise one’s relation to the world is taken quickly in the closing stages of the text, unlike in Cat’s Eye where the end result is a revised ontological paradigm which has been consistently worked towards over many decades. The extremes of opinion revealed in Stephen’s case demonstrate both ends of the spectrum from nihilism to nostalgia and show them to be related, as Waugh writes. Stephen’s apathy is directly related to his desire to regress to the maternal. By contrast, Elaine’s differentiation from postmodernity and her insistence on constructing new forms indicate that if Cat’s Eye is at all linked to the postmodern, it is only

through postmodernity's mourning aspect. Atwood's text acknowledges no such nostalgia for past forms and takes no delight in deconstructing them; the emphasis is on progressive reconstruction.

This is the desired course of the novels we turn to now in Chapter Four, yet such a process of reconstruction of the self proves to be virtually impossible in a postcolonial context, thereby casting a shadow over the philosophical principles which have been discussed above. The potential solution to the identity crisis presented by the new physics ideology proves to be merely a contemporary fiction which, while it is interesting to note its emergence in a supposedly postmodern Western context, holds little currency in the distressing postcolonial situations of the texts in the next chapter. However, the reservations concerning postmodernity which have been discussed with reference to Cat's Eye and The Child in Time continue in Chapter Four, and the debate concerning women's position in a rapidly changing society develops the feminist aspect of this study further.



## Chapter Four: Postcolonial Mourning in

### Clear Light of Day, The God of Small Things, and Midnight's Children.

Clear Light of Day (1980) by Anita Desai, Midnight's Children (1981) by Salman Rushdie and The God of Small Things (1997) by Arundhati Roy are set in post-colonial India, after its independence from British rule. Each narrative shows its central character (or characters) engaged in the attempt to reunite themselves with pasts from which they feel fractured. The pervasive desire to achieve a sense of cultural connection and historical positioning gives the impetus for each text. However, these narratives also demonstrate the difficulties of such an attempt and, particularly in the case of The God of Small Things, the impossibility of achieving this connection.

Clear Light of Day is set in the time of the novel's writing in Old Delhi and its third person narrative shows us the protagonist, Bimla Das (Bim), coming to a state of deeper self-understanding. Bim is the oldest sibling of four children of a middle-class family, having two brothers, Raja and Baba (who has severe communication difficulties) and a sister, Tara. Now a middle-aged History lecturer, the responsibility has fallen to Bim to look after Baba and their elderly alcoholic aunt Mira. Within traditional Indian culture, it is the responsibility of the nearest male relative to look after female relatives. In this case, the responsibility belongs to Raja but he leaves the family home to live with his wife in Pakistan. Partly estranged from their society-loving parents, the Das children are brought up by their aunt who proves to be a loving and devoted carer. However, we learn that the aunt's position of submissive servant in her sister's home stems from the fact that her husband died and his family returned Mira to her own family; the shame attached to this rejection shapes her destiny. A similar story of

female submission is traced in the characters of the Das's neighbours, the Misra sisters, who slavishly work several jobs at once in order to keep their brothers in the luxuriant lifestyle to which they are accustomed, leaving no financial resources for themselves. Old Delhi, the Das household and Bim herself are portrayed as dusty outposts of colonial rule in India, becoming a "faded old picture in its petrified frame . . ." (CLD, 5). Raised under the values of the British colonial system, the ultimate challenge faced by Bim is to remember her authentic Indian heritage and to learn to reconnect herself with a concept of continuing existence in which she and her family can "reach out to new experiences and new lives, . . . always drawing from the same soil, the same secret darkness" (CLD, 182). Desai's text explores the line between a return to and a connection with a sense of origins, demonstrating the potentially positive effect of this idea(1) through Bim's character, with the character of Baba serving as a warning against the threat of total regression.

Midnight's Children is also set in the late 1970s, thirty years after the declaration of Indian independence. The protagonist Saleem Sinai, born in Bombay at the stroke of midnight on the first day of independence, tells the story of his life as one which is intertwined with the fate of his homeland, fulfilling the statement in Jawaharlal Nehru's letter to him, in which he wrote to Independent India's first-born, "We shall be watching over your life with the closest attention; it will be, in a sense, the mirror of our own'"(MC, 122).<sup>158</sup> However, Saleem's story presents many complications and magical events, of which the most notable is his position as head of the Midnight Children's Conference. Aged nine, Saleem discovers his telepathic link with the thousand and one other children born across India during its first hour of independence. Further complications arise

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<sup>158</sup> Bombay is now known as 'Mumbai'.



from the discovery that Saleem is not the son of middle-class Indian parents at all, but is instead the illegitimate product of a brief extra-marital affair between Vanita, a destitute street-singer and performer who dies giving birth to him, and the English colonial William Methwold, a descendant of Officer Methwold of the East India Company who envisioned the building of Bombay. Saleem is swapped at birth with the Sinais' real son, Shiva, who later becomes Saleem's arch-enemy. Although Saleem and Shiva are born synchronously, only the middle-class Sinais are attributed with the birth of the first child of independence. This switch at birth changes the fates of the penniless couple's baby and the Sinais' real child, Shiva, who later becomes Saleem's arch enemy. Through this device, Rushdie suggests that there can be no such thing as a 'pure' Indian child, even during India's independent era, as all India's children are actually Anglo-Indian: "In fact, all over the new India, the dream we shared, children were being born who were only partially the offspring of their parents—the children of midnight were also the children of the time: fathered, you understand, by history. It can happen. Especially in a country which is itself a sort of dream" (MC, 118, emphasis in original).

The idea of a 'Mother India' is juxtaposed in this text with harrowing descriptions of Indira Gandhi and her dictatorial policies. Rushdie blends these elements to give a monstrous ambiguity to the concept of a motherland which is, usually, a nurturing cultural base with which one can associate oneself. Again, issues of parenting become focussed on hybridity, confusing the parameters upon which Saleem's identity is founded. These uncertainties lead to a fracturing of his sense of selfhood, a process which is symbolised in the narrative by Saleem's bodily dispersal into fragments as the narrator 'cracks up'. As he tells the reader, "I ask you only to accept (as I have accepted) that I shall eventually crumble

into (approximately) six hundred and thirty million particles of anonymous, and necessarily oblivious dust” (MC, 37)

Sixteen years after the publication of Midnight's Children and fifteen years after the publication of Clear Light of Day, Arundhati Roy's The God of Small Things shows India after fifty years of independence and proves that the issue of 'parentage,' both in the practical and cultural sense, is still problematic for a country heavily under the sway of Western cultural imperialism. Like Midnight's Children, the idea of the motherland runs throughout this novel but, as in Desai's text, it is complicated by the portrayal of women's position in society, which is shown to be just as damaging during the 1990s as it was in Desai's novel of 1980s.

The God of Small Things follows the story of a pair of non-identical twins; a girl named Rahel and her brother Esthappen (Estha) who share a supernatural closeness, particularly in their joint telepathic ability. Growing up in Kerala in the late 1960s, the twins experience the separation and divorce of their parents, the stigma subsequently attached to both them and their mother, Estha's sexual abuse, the death by drowning of their English cousin, Sophie, and the brutal police murder of their close friend Velutha, their mother's lover. All of this happens before the twins have reached seven years of age, at which point they are separated and their mother, Ammu, sends Estha to live with his father while Rahel is sent to boarding school. Shortly after this, Ammu dies alone in poverty and the twins do not see each other again until they are thirty-one years of age.

The deaths of Velutha and Sophie both happen on the same day and are a result of a tragic collision of events. The twins decide to run away, taking Sophie with them, and accumulate a hoard of toys and provisions for this purpose on the opposite side of the river behind their house. However, while travelling across the river, the children's boat overturns



and Sophie drowns. The twins reach the shore alive. At that moment, Velutha is out on the river fishing and finds Sophie's body, which he pulls into his boat and rows ashore. At the same time his father, distraught at his son's disregard for the boundaries of caste, is divulging Velutha's secret affair with Ammu to her family. In order to salvage the family's reputation, Ammu's aunt, Baby Kochamma, locks Ammu up inside the house and goes to the police to report that Velutha the paravan has tried to sexually abuse her niece. The police then use this unfounded information as an excuse to justify the brutality which they exercise against Velutha that night: their real motive being that they want to attack Velutha for his association with unruly communist groups.

To compound the situation, Velutha is then framed for the murder of Sophie and the attempted abduction of the twins, as the police speculate that the toys had been set on the opposite riverbank by Velutha in order to lure the children. Rahel and Estha witness the moment at which Velutha is found and beaten to death by police and Estha is later asked to make a positive identification of the dying man and name him as his abductor. Baby Kochamma forces Estha to tell this lie in order to confirm Velutha as a criminal and protect the family's reputation. However, this lie leaves Estha with a guilt which he never manages to assuage. This guilt, the sexual abuse he suffers in an unrelated incident, his separation from Rahel and the rest of his family and the loss of his mother leaves Estha mentally destroyed and he grows up to become a mute obsessive-compulsive, a state which his father cannot bear as he rejects Estha and sends him back to the house in Kerala. Rahel tries to make a life for herself in America but the separation from Estha eventually becomes intolerable and Roy's novel begins with Rahel's return to the family house in the Keralese town of Ayemenem.

The narrative of the twins' childhood is conveyed through third-person analepsis, with the narrative voice demonstrating particular empathy for the twins' view of the world. Events which take place in the novel's present span only two days and show the final tragedy of the twins' story. After the separation of twenty-three years, during which time they are unable to grieve for the events of their childhood, Rahel and Estha's reunion takes on an uncontrollable velocity and the present-day action of the novel concludes with the twins committing incest.

As in Swift's Waterland, Roy portrays her protagonists as being implicated in a dense web of history which demands the explanation of its entirety in order to understand one specific event. The narrator comments on the story's entanglement in history:

it could be argued that it actually began thousands of years ago. Long before the Marxists came. Before the British took Malabar, before the Dutch Ascendency, before Vasco da Gama arrived, before the Zamorin's conquest of Calicut. . . . It could be argued that it began long before Christianity arrived and seeped into Kerala like tea from a teabag.

That it really began in the days when the Love Laws were made. The laws that lay down who should be loved, and how. And how much. (GST,33)

Responsibility for the events of this narrative extend back through various layers of social, political, national and religious historical pressures, a perspective which, while it exculpates many characters of their guilty parts, also portrays the utter helplessness of the situation Roy's protagonists are born into. This same perspective of the subject's deep implication in history is a feature of each novel in this chapter.

As with all the previous texts in this study, these novels attempt, in various ways, to show their protagonists in the process of re-memembering their lives, their identities and histories whilst also demonstrating a concern with creating meaning, with discerning significance, even in the most unlikely places. Their relationship to the fashionable postmodern ideologies of the West is necessarily complex. Like Elaine in Cat's Eye, the characters in this selection of texts illustrate ontological positions which can neither mourn



for nor play with the fragmentation of a bourgeois subject with whom they never identified: such a concept of insular subjectivity was central to the state of Empire, a regime which dominated the world with the idea of 'civilising the savage'. These texts encourage the reader to think beyond the postmodern in an attempt to open a debate about identity politics which involves concepts such as history, religion and nationality and accounts for such aspects rather than attempting to abandon them entirely. An ontological mode is offered in each text which focusses on relationality and connectivity. The identities of the characters in these novels are shown to be deeply rooted in the existence of others, often regardless of boundaries of caste, class and gender.

Postmodern ideas can be read as directly damaging to postcolonial discourse, as R. Rhadakrishnan writes, following a similar argument to that which Waugh takes in her writing on feminism and identity. Rhadakrishnan notes that neither the insular selfhood of Enlightenment thought, nor the fragmented, decontextualised subject of postmodernism is sufficient to represent the subject of diasporan realities and warns against an apathetic lapse into postmodern thought, saying that such a conflict, "...calls for multi-directional modes of representation and not the premature claim that 'representation no longer exists.'"<sup>159</sup> For Rhadakrishnan, representation is evidence of political potency: "I do not see how representation 'can no longer exist,' until the political 'no longer exists,' and I for one must admit that I do not know what 'the post-political' is all about."<sup>160</sup> Writing about identity, nationality, history and memory are thus politically motivated acts which contest the dominant ideologies of the West and their potential encroachment onto the rest of the world.

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<sup>159</sup> R. Radhakrishnan, "Postcoloniality and the Boundaries of Identity," *Callaloo* 16.4 (1993): 765.

<sup>160</sup> Rhadakrishnan 765.

Barbara Christian and bell hooks are also wary of the postmodern for the purposes of contemporary critical discourse concerning identity. While Christian forwards this opinion in her work on postcolonialism, bell hooks deals specifically with the issue of black writers, yet both writers find the concurrence of the postmodern with the rise of non-Western, non-White peoples in the West highly suspect. As mentioned above in reference to Cat's Eye, while posing as a plural discourse which is open to all, the postmodern proves to be an exclusive, elitist ideology which denies access to those social groups who cannot partake in the dismantling of bourgeois subjectivity, a problem which Elaine Risley identifies in saying that she is "off to the side" as an artist, unable to engage in the deconstructive projects of her peers.<sup>161</sup> Similarly, Christian views postmodernity as a reactionary jargon which withholds power from emergent literary circles:

. . . I feel that the new emphasis on literary critical theory is as hegemonic as the world which it attacks. I see the language it creates as one which mystifies rather than clarifies our condition, making it possible for a few people who know that particular language to control the critical scene—that language surfaced, interestingly enough, just when the literature of peoples of colour, of black women, of Latin Americans, of Africans began to move to 'the centre.'<sup>162</sup>

hooks writes of a very similar perspective, emphasising the urgent need for identity politics and the simultaneous rejection of postmodernism. Like Atwood, Christian, Waugh and many others, hooks also identifies the steady possession of selfhood which lies at the core of its postmodern fragmentation:

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<sup>161</sup> Atwood, Cat's Eye 345.

<sup>162</sup> Barbara Christian, "The Race for Theory," The Post Colonial Studies Reader, eds. Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin (London: Routledge, 1995) 459.



It never surprises me when black folks respond to the critique of essentialism, especially when it denies the validity of identity politics, by saying, 'Yeah, it's easy to give up identity, when you got one.' Should we not be suspicious of postmodern critiques of the 'subject' when they surface at a historical moment when many subjugated people feel themselves coming to voice for the first time.<sup>163</sup>

Each argument here belies an element of bitterness concerning the synchronicity of emergent voices and the postmodern negation of the subject, a point which requires further analysis. If the perceived 'centre' is only that which is white, Western, middle-class and male, then it is necessarily a small percentage of our global population, albeit a percentage which holds a vast amount of political and economic power. The arguments above seem to neglect the possibility that it is the very presence of emergent voices themselves which have had a hand in unsettling the centre's perception of itself. Postmodernity can be read as evidence of the burgeoning influence of marginalised voices upon an increasingly crisis-ridden, panic-stricken centre. Ultimately, as Rhadakrishnan writes, representation is one way of resisting the spread of "unsituated anarchism" inherent in the crisis and panic of the postmodern.<sup>164</sup>

While the previous chapters in this thesis take postmodern mourning as their point of departure for the creation of new ontologies, in this section a specific kind of postcolonial mourning presents itself, a form which is concurrent with postmodernity but which, like feminism, has a very different agenda.

## Motherland

Gender, personal identity and nationality coalesce in the concept of the motherland, an idea which provides a useful tool for analysing the literature of postcolonial countries in

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<sup>163</sup> bell hooks, "Postmodern Blackness," *Modern Literary Theory: A Reader*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. eds. Philip Rice and Patricia Waugh (1989; London: Arnold, 1996) 345.

<sup>164</sup> Rhadakrishnan 765.

particular. The links between the mother and the idea of the motherland imply that state of origin with which one feels a primary identification. Thus, as Elaine Savory Fido writes, the mother's body and the country with which one identifies inhabit a space in the psyche which informs our sense of self at a basic level: "Mother belongs to a culture and a country, which becomes ours, and gives us our first social identity."<sup>165</sup> The problems with such an identification are numerous, however, particularly within a study of postcolonial literature which addresses oppressive attitudes towards gender. Firstly, in the postcolonial nation, the motherland is far from being an uncomplicated site of origin: as the texts under analysis here demonstrate, the motherland of India has been permanently altered by a distinctly patriarchal imperial rule. Thus, the very idea of an uncomplicated relation with a pure cultural base is a delusion, creating a situation in which one must instead accept a fundamentally hybrid identity, as mentioned above with reference to Saleem's parentage in Midnight's Children. Although the longing for reconnection with a pure motherland-India may persist within the mind of the postcolonial Indian, such a relation is impossible.

Secondly, the attribution of an originary essence to a maternal locus necessarily problematises a woman's position in society. In figuring the nation as a 'given' a-historical maternal locus, women become divested of political agency, associated instead with the myth of the eternal mother. Florence Stratton encapsulates this idea in her discussion of the potentially damaging aspect of the related Mother-Africa trope, as she writes "[m]etaphorically she is of the highest importance, practically she is nothing."<sup>166</sup> The situation of women in postcolonial countries is doubly difficult compared with that of men:

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<sup>165</sup> Fido 89.

<sup>166</sup> Florence Stratton, Contemporary African Literature and the Politics of Gender, (London: Routledge, 1994) 52.



not only have they also to rediscover or recreate a sense of cultural belonging, they must simultaneously negotiate their stereotypical alignment with the motherland archetype in an attempt to integrate with a changing culture. This search for a reconstituted sense of identity has a great deal of similarity to Elaine Risley's journey in Cat's Eye. Like Elaine, the characters in these postcolonial texts are not concerned with mourning the passing of an essentially Western bourgeois subjectivity, the very same ideal which facilitated the arrogant domination of their country. Rather, the characters in Midnight's Children and The God of Small Things in particular demonstrate a mourning of the motherland, a recognition that an original Indian authenticity has passed, irretrievably. Still, the motherland is remembered and desired but the dangerous and harrowing results of this desire are explored in each narrative, warning that there can be no regression to a past time.

The motherland concept adds a complex polemic to the discussion of postcolonial literatures. While the gender implications of this idea cannot be ignored, the argument for a reconnection with the motherland is overwhelming. Rhadakrishnan argues for this point, saying that,

to be a postcolonial is to live in a state of alienation, alienation from one's true being, history or heritage. The return takes the form of a cure, or remedy, for the present ills of postcoloniality. . . . I would caution against facilely dismissing this option as 'fundamentalist' or nostalgic. The return does not have to be based on either notions of ontological or epistemological purity. The return is a matter of political choice by a people on behalf of their own authenticity, and there is nothing regressive or atavistic about people revisiting the past with the intention of reclaiming it.<sup>167</sup>

This return is particularly achieved by Bimin Clear Light of Day, however, while Rhadakrishnan's interpretation of the possible motives for such a return are undoubtedly

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<sup>167</sup> Rhadakrishnan 758.

admirable, all three of the texts in this chapter suggest that such a feat is far from being an unproblematic journey.

Similarly, in the search for authenticity, care must be taken to avoid the gender essentialist notion of the pure cultural base as the original 'good mother', the figure who "cement[s] a nation" as Narlini Natarajan writes with reference to Midnight's Children:

She suggests common mythic origins. Like the land (which gives shelter and "bears"), she is eternal, patient, essential. National claims have always been buttressed by claims to the soil. The linking of "Mother" with land gains strength from Sita, who was the daughter of Mother Earth. During moments of "national" resurgence, the land is figured as a woman and a mother. . . . Thus, "Mother India" is an enormously powerful cultural signifier, gaining strength not only from atavistic memories from the Hindu epics, Sita, Sati Savitri, Draupadi, but also its use in moments of national (typically conflated with Hindu) cultural resurgence.<sup>168</sup>

This mythical figure has the effect of denying women's ontology, because, as Stratton writes, "such a vision implicitly gives men the licence to exploit, rape, oppress, and dominate nations" and, by implication, the women within those nations.<sup>169</sup> This is an extreme form of the kind of archetypal deification of women which we see in Waterland and The Child in Time.

The call for a new sense of cultural coherence is particularly present in Clear Light of Day and The God of Small Things, in which Desai and Roy force a readerly awareness of the continuing effect of some aspects of the motherland paradigm and its negative implications for women. Within certain aspects of the Indian cultures portrayed in these novels, women are still viewed as representatives of that lost motherland ideal. This chauvinism is manifested in the various methods of social control of women who remain voiceless and

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<sup>168</sup> Nalini Natarajan, "Woman, Nation, and Narration in Midnight's Children," Rushdie's Midnight's Children: A Book of Readings, ed. Meenakshi Mukherjee (Delhi: Pencraft International, 1999) 174.

<sup>169</sup> Stratton 54.



powerless in many situations. Women are the bearers of the loss that these cultures experience and are expected to provide a continuing connection to a sense of cultural authenticity in a time which simultaneously recognises that the motherland ideal no longer exists.

One such method of social control exists in the caste system which dominates Indian politics. In an analysis of The God of Small Things, Rajyashree Khushu-Lahiri discusses the strict social structures which make up Indian society. Khushu-Lahiri acknowledges that, like most of the world, Indian social structure is inherently patriarchal with the added facet of the caste system. Thus Indian society is divided by class, gender and the four main caste groups.

<sup>170</sup> Within each of these categories, women are always necessarily at a disadvantage due to prejudice premised on the view that the female body is inherently inferior, as Khushu-Lahiri explains:

Within a caste, a hierarchy exists between the sexes. In fact, the entire system is premised upon the cultural perception of a fundamental difference in male and female sexuality. Moreover, the cultural schemes which underlie the caste system are predicated upon a basic difference between male and female bodies in respect of their vulnerability to incur impurity through sexual intercourse.<sup>171</sup>

As we see in our own patriarchal society, women are demoted to the lowest echelons of any hierarchy. This is certainly the case when we look at the depiction of women's status in the novels under discussion here where we see, particularly in Clear Light of Day and The God of

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<sup>170</sup> Rajyashree Khushu-Lahiri, "Broken Laws, Shattered Lives: A Study of The God of Small Things," Arundhati Roy: The Novelist Extraordinary, ed. R. K. Dahwan (London: Sangam Books, 1999) 112-113. Khushu-Lahiri categorises the different caste categories thus: "The Brahmin (priestly caste) at the top, followed by the Kshatriya (warrior caste), then the Vaishya (commoners, usually known as trading and artisan castes), and at the bottom the Sudra (agricultural labourers) some of whom are beyond the pale of caste and are known as untouchables."

<sup>171</sup> Khushu-Lahiri 114.

Small Things, the unchallenged primacy of the sons and the subservient position of the daughters in each family. There are numerous examples of such sexism in each of the three novels and in every case the effect of psychological torment on each woman is portrayed.

The fictions under discussion here all begin nostalgically by going back to a perceived site of origin, in the literal sense of a yearning to return home.<sup>172</sup> In each case a central character returns home after a period of some years: in Clear Light of Day, Bim's younger sister, Tara, returns to the family home on a visit, bringing her husband, Bakul, and their two daughters. For Tara, this visit becomes a trip into her past, a fact which highlights Bim's own entrapment in the past, thus stirring her sense of dissatisfaction with her stagnant life. In Midnight's Children, Saleem begins to tell us the story of his life from his birth-city of Bombay, from which he has been estranged for some years. Compliant with the theme of regressing into one's past, Saleem takes the story of his birth back to the events of his grandfather's meeting with his grandmother in 1915 in the state of Kashmir, which is itself portrayed as an Edenic site of Indian cultural origin which has "hardly changed since the Mughal Empire . . ." (MC10). Rahel's return to Ayemenem after an absence of 23 years is heralded by the monsoon rains which slam into the ground, "carpet bombing still tea-coloured puddles the way memory bombs still, tea-coloured minds" (GST,10). The reference to Rahel's mind as "tea-coloured" carries connotations of colonial exploitation, referring to the British Empire's consumption of Indian tea, and provides an early indication of the invasion of Rahel's consciousness by colonial rule, as well as its scarring of a broader cultural consciousness. This simile links place and identity, implying that part of Rahel's psyche is

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<sup>172</sup> From the Greek, 'nostos a' meaning 'return home' coupled with 'algia' meaning 'pain.' Collins English Dictionary and Thesaurus, (Glasgow: Harper Collins, 1993). 775.



inherent in the land of her birth, in its soil. Ashcroft notes this common theme of land and identity in postcolonial literatures:

The dialectic of place and displacement is always a feature of post-colonial societies whether these have been created by a process of settlement, intervention, or a mixture of the two. Beyond their historical and cultural differences, place, displacement, and a pervasive concern with the myths of identity and authenticity are a feature common to all post-colonial literatures in english. (sic.)<sup>173</sup>

It is to these myths of authenticity and place that I now turn.

### Nostalgia and Lost Origins in Clear Light of Day.

The first paragraph of Clear Light of Day depicts Tara waking up and walking out into the garden of her old childhood home whilst she is there on a visit to see her family. The garden is figured as a site of origin, maternal influence and femininity in this scene as the sisters take a morning stroll together by the rose beds and remember walking there as girls with their late mother when she was heavily pregnant with their youngest brother, Baba. Immediately, we are introduced to dramatic tensions between Tara's association with youth, light and the present on the one hand, and the age, darkness and history with which Bim is linked. For Tara, who has left home some years ago, married and had children, it is essential that she engages in the process of recollection of her former home life, strengthening her connections with Bim and their younger brother, Baba. Bim, by contrast, feels that she lives within what Tara thinks of as the past, as she has never left their Old Delhi home and has devoted her life to the care of their brother Baba, who is mentally retarded, and their Aunt Mira who died of alcoholism some years before. Now in old age, Bim has no family of her own and an exceptionally limited social circle. Bim clings to her job as a lecturer in History as a way of

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<sup>173</sup> Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin, The Empire Writes Back: Theory and Practice in Post-Colonial Literatures, (London: Routledge, 1989) 9.

giving her life form and meaning, the implication being that while she can deal with facts that may not pertain directly to her own past, her personal history proves to be a restrictive weight.

These tensions are gradually resolved throughout the narrative's course with the description of past events in both the dialogue and the third person narration, until we are presented with a final resolution of them via Bim's concluding thoughts in the final pages, where she begins to feel reconnected to her family, her past and the environment around her.

This difference between the past and present, one sister and the other, is further illustrated by the descriptions of the roses. Tara compares the rose bed's present flowers, "small negligible crimson heads that lolled weakly on their thin stems," to the flowers that used to grow there when she was a child, which she remembers as "luscious shaggy pink ones, small crisp white ones tinged with green, silky yellow ones that smelt of tea"(1). Symbolic of femininity, the roses become emblematic of Bim's wasted fertility and alert the reader to Bim's embodiment of unfulfilled promise: Bim has allowed her vigour and attractiveness to slip away, in the same way that she has neglected the rose beds. By contrast, Tara has gone out into the world and become a wife and mother, while Bim has decayed slowly in her childhood home with a mentally disabled brother and alcoholic aunt.

Bim explains that the British creation of New Delhi as India's capital city moved the focus away from the Delhi in which she has grown up, leaving the old town feeling stagnant. As Bim tells Tara, all significant Indian action happened

"long ago—in the time of the Tughlaqs, the Khiljis, the Sultanate, the Moghul—that lot." . . . "And the British built New Delhi and moved everything out. Here we are left rocking on the backwaters, getting duller and greyer, I suppose. Anyone who isn't dull and grey goes away—to New Delhi, to England, to Canada, the Middle East. They don't come back." (5)

In this case the colonisation has caused a cessation of India's long and vibrant past, leaving the now Old Delhi stranded in time, like Bim.



A similar metaphor of female barrenness is used in reference to Bim's neighbours, the elderly Misra sisters who run a nursery during the day and give dance lessons at night in order to bring in enough money to support their elderly father and their two lazy brothers who spend their days sitting on the lawn drinking whisky. During an argument between the brothers and sisters of the Misra family, in which the brothers accuse the sisters of not giving them enough money for music concerts, the downtrodden sisters' emotional state is revealed in the following description of them: "Then the sisters cracked like old dry pods from which the black seeds of protest and indignation spilt, infertile" (38). Rebellion is futile as the sisters realise they are not only against two extremely arrogant men, but also the cultural ideology of a nation which views women as abundant providers and men as privileged beneficiaries of their labour. The language used to describe the sisters is reminiscent of the descriptions of the roses in the Das's garden. The "old, dry" "infertile" bodies of the sisters are linked here to Bim's own wasted fertility and in the parallel created here we see that both Bim and the Misra sisters occupy positions which are viewed as marginal and of lesser importance; all three women effectively 'mother' their families as they work to support them, whilst suffering the same sense of entrapment. Their father laments the situation to Bim:

"Look at my sons there . . . Look at them—fat lazy slobbs drinking whisky. Drinking whisky all day that their sisters have to pay for—did you ever hear of such a thing? In my day, our sisters used to tie coloured threads on our wrists on Rakhibandhan day, begging for our protection, and we gave them gifts and promised to protect them, and even if it was only a custom, an annual festival, we at least meant it." (32-33)

Mr Misra's comments show concern for the position of his daughters but at the same time indicate a culture of subservient women, heavily dependent on their male relatives for protection. His questionable sentiments are then undercut by his admission that he no longer knows where his own widowed sister is (33).

Desai's most striking example of a woman in impossible social circumstances is Aunt Mira, who, as explained above, is forced into a life of subservient dependency on her sister's family purely because she is widowed at a young age and her husband's family refuse to take care of her. It is this character who carries out the primary mothering role until her health begins to deteriorate due to alcohol abuse, at which point Bim takes her place. The two characters are associated with the symbols of bees and cows; the bees are emblematic of industry and the slavish work expected of the women, while the sacred cow becomes symbolic of the position of provider in which each woman is placed, the milk for which the cow is kept is linked to the inexhaustible store of maternal nourishment which each woman is under pressure to provide.

Desai gives an early indication of the martyrdom which awaits Bim in later life during the scene in which Bim and Tara go for a picnic at Lodi Gardens with their neighbours. Whilst exploring the area around the picnic site, the two girls go off to look in an old tomb. A hive of bees is disturbed while the girls are in there after a boy throws a pebble into the tomb. The bees then swarm at the girls as they run out into the gardens. The swarm settles upon Bim, who manages to warn Tara to run away, without helping her:

They had settled about her head and shoulders till they had wrapped her about in a helmet of chainmail that glittered, gun-metal blue, and shivered and crept over her skin, close-fitting, adhesive. . . . [Bim] seemed locked into the hive, as if she were the chosen queen, made prisoner. . . . It was a bee's festival, a celebration, Bim their appointed victim, the sacrificial victim on who they had draped the ceremonial shawl, drawing it close about her neck as she stood drooping, shivering under the weight of their gauzy wings, their blue-black humming.(135)

The descriptions of Bim as queen, prisoner, victim and sacrifice clearly paint her as the single most important mother figure of this text. Bim tells Tara to run away in order to save herself and, in doing so, symbolically relieves her from the pain of maternal sacrifice by taking on the 'shawl' herself. It is this identity under which Bim suffers and the guilt of letting her



sister adopt this role weighs heavily on Tara's shoulders so that during her visit to her childhood home Tara wishes to rid herself of "years of sticky guilt . . ." (174) the viscosity of the guilt evoking the "adhesive" swarm of bees (152).

Aunt Mira is associated with both this image of bees, connotative of maternal sacrifice, whilst also being similarly linked to the recurrent motif of the cow. The Das family acquires a cow on Mira's advice that the milk will be particularly good for the children. However, the cow becomes untethered one night and falls into the well at the back of their garden where it drowns. Despite attempts to remove it from the water, the corpse of the animal remains in the well where it rots away slowly, contaminating the water and turning the well into a place of morbid fascination for Bim and Tara as children. The cow's calf is shot soon after its mother's death because the family cannot find enough milk to feed it, bringing yet another picture of maternity characterised by pain and loss to the text. We are also told that the cow has "something bride-like" about her face, and that, as it stands under the lilac tree in the Das's garden, the lilac flowers shower down on it as if it is "at a wedding," directly linking the cow to the sacrificial nature of the woman given in marriage. (107)

Mira's position as both nurturing cow-like mother and as a martyr covered in bees is encapsulated in the narrative's description of her maternal devotion to her nieces and nephews:

if [the children] sucked her dry of substance, she would give in without any sacrifice of will—it seemed in keeping with nature to do so. In the end they would swarm over her, reach up above her, tower into the sky, and she would be just the old log, the dried mass of roots on which they grew. She was the tree, she was the soil, she was the earth.(111)

This passage depicts Mira as an emblem of plenitude and martyrdom. The reference to her as a "dried mass of roots" reflects Bim's links with the lolling weak roses on wasted stems and the metaphor of the dried seed-pods used to describe the Misra sisters. In each case, the

woman being presented is childless yet forced into a state of maternal subservience to those around them. The excerpt's concluding description of Mira as earth evokes the issue of the motherland which is viewed as central to one's sense of belonging. It is fortunate for the Das children that Mira provides this base as their own parents are virtually estranged from them. However, the self-effacement of this role becomes clear as Raja and Tara grow up and move away, greatly reducing the necessity, and therefore the status, of Mira's function in the Das household.

This period marks the start of Mira's alcohol abuse, in which she experiences hallucinations partly based on the bee swarms at Lodi Gardens. In a delusion which relates to her time of raising the Das children, Mira views herself as a worker bee, relentlessly feeding the larvae in the cells of its hive:

dragging her heavy wings behind her. Crawl[ing] from cell to cell, feeding the fat, white larvae that lived in the cells and swelled on the nourishment she brought them. The cells swarmed with them, with their little tight glistening lives. And she slaved and toiled, her long wings dragging. The air was filled with the angry buzzing of the queen bee. It bored through her ears and zoomed through the greyness like a lurid meteor, making her shut her eyes and burrow down into her cell . . . (89-90)

The queen bee in this instance is Mira's own sister, Mrs Das, her superior in both the sense of social rank and as an employer. The growing larvae of Mira's hallucination symbolises the Das children in their infancy and the illusion thus becomes representative of Mira's role in the house.

During her hallucinations, Mira also links her need for alcohol to the child's need for milk. By this time perpetually intoxicated, Mira associates the thought of the cow with the well in which it died: "that well, deep and stony and still, in which all must drown to die. The navel of the world it was, secret and hidden in thick folds of grass, from which they all emerged and to which they must return, crawling on their hands and knees" (90). The well is



overlain with many images here, becoming a place of death but also a place of birth and its description as the “navel of the world” links it to birth, the umbilical chord being the point of anatomical connection to the mother.

The language which describes it stretches this metaphor further, suggesting female genitalia in its depiction of the well as a secret hidden in thick folds, the deep, moist convexity of the well thus becoming a vaginal image. The well becomes a site which represents the ambiguity of the maternal, being a place of both originary potency and destructive power. While initially life-giving, the mother also embodies a threat to one’s autonomous selfhood within Freudian psychoanalysis; however, the threat that the well represents in this case is not so much the obliteration of one’s individuality by returning to the mother, but rather the threat that motherhood itself represents for the Das girls. After the cow’s death in the well, the site begins to take on this symbolic significance for the girls: “The well then contained death as it had once contained merely water, frogs and harmless floating things. The horror of that death by drowning lived in the area behind the carvanda hedge like a mad relation, a family scandal or a hereditary illness waiting to re-emerge. It was a blot, a black and stinking blot” (107-108). Instead of being representative of a morbid fear of the all-powerful maternal presence, the well comes to represent a morbid fear of impending motherhood. The “mad relation” trapped by this role is Mira herself, driven mad by the precarious social positioning of wives and mothers. The “family scandal” is Mira’s rejection by her husband’s relations and maltreatment by her own. All these risks are presented as threats to Bim and Tara as they grow into adulthood. Both Mira’s alcoholism and Baba’s mental retardation are referred to in the “hereditary illness,” insinuating that in becoming mothers each daughter risks her own sanity and that of her child in the possibility of passing on the mental health difficulties which Baba has. Further links are made between

Mira's position and the ominous well as Bim tells Tara that she used to see Mira's ghost walking towards the well, "quite white and naked" (41), a description which evokes the cow wandering towards the well "like a white ghost" (107). Desai forces the awareness of the sacrificial nature of motherhood within a society which simultaneously devalues women at the same time as it expects them to provide sustenance for all.

In such a society, the term 'independence' has a double meaning for women, indeed it signifies sexual equality as much as national independence. This comes to the fore when Tara and Bim try on their brothers' trousers whilst playing as teenagers. In this scene, Desai explores the saying 'to wear the trousers', meaning 'to be in control':

Great possibilities unexpectedly opened up now they had their legs covered so sensibly and practically and no longer had to worry about what lay bare beneath ballooning frocks and what was so imperfectly concealed by them. Why did girls have to wear frocks? Suddenly they saw why they were so different from their brother, so inferior and negligible in comparison: it was because they did not wear trousers. Now they thrust their hands in their pockets and felt even more superior—what a sense of possession, of confidence it gave one to have pockets, to shove one's fists into them, as if in simply owning pockets one owned riches, owned independence. (132)

The desire for a sense of self possession is as great as the desire to own property, but the placing of the word independence at the end of this passage indicates that this is the greatest prize of all for the Das sisters who are aware that they are expected to live a life of dependence on their male next-of-kin. The reality of their situation is that they have no "great possibilities" to look forward to. While Tara, as the younger, shy sister, accepts this as an inevitability, Bim questions the need for a woman to marry, viewing it as a direct insult to her autonomy as a woman. In discussing the Misra sisters' marriages, Bim tries to impress this point upon Tara, to no avail:



“...They should go to college,” [Bim] insisted.

“Why?” said Tara, suddenly rebellious . . .

“Why?” repeated Bim indignantly. “Why, because they might find marriage isn’t enough to last them the whole of their lives,” she said darkly, mysteriously.

“What else could there be?” countered Tara. “I mean,” she fumbled, “for them.”

“What else?” asked Bim. “Can’t you think? I can think of hundreds of things to do instead. I won’t marry,” she added, very firmly. . . . “I shall earn my own living—and look after Mira-masi and Baba—and be independent. There’ll be so many things to do—when we grow up—when all this is over—” and she swept an arm out over the garden party, dismissing it. “When we are grown up at last—then—then—” but she couldn’t finish for emotion, and her eyes shone in the dusk.

(140, emphasis in original)

However, Bim’s desires for independence only bring her into a more oppressive situation than the marriage offer from Dr Biswas would have led her to, an offer which she declines. In getting married to Bakul, Tara escapes the responsibilities of care for their brother Baba and aunt Mira, in the same way that she escaped the shawl of bees in the Lodi Gardens, leaving Bim to suffer in solitude. Bim’s speech to Tara belies her desire for maturity in order that she can lead an independent life with all its opportunities. In reality her brother, Raja, and her sister both move away and Bim is forced into the only position available to an adult woman in Old Delhi society; that of a primary carer whose needs are placed after others’.

### **Cultural Imperialism and Cultural Authenticity in Clear Light of Day.**

Although Tara ostensibly seems to have ‘escaped’ the trappings of the Old Delhi society and the Das household by marrying and moving to Washington with her husband, it appears that she is just as constrained as Bim, in many ways. Although living in the West, Tara is still subject to her husband’s command in the way that she would have been had she stayed in Old Delhi. As a foreign ambassador, Bakul’s attitude towards India belies a nostalgic and unrealistic ideal of India which he perpetuates around the world, discouraging people from acknowledging the political unrest and poverty of India. As he says to Bim,

“I refuse to talk about famine or drought or caste wars or—or political disputes. I refuse—I refuse to discuss such things. ‘No comment’ is the answer if I am asked. I can discuss such things here, with you, but not with foreigners, not in a foreign land. There I am an ambassador and I choose to show them and inform them only of the best, the finest.” . . . “The Taj Mahal—the Bhagavad Gita— Indian philosophy—music—art—the great, important values of ancient India. But why talk of local politics, party disputes, election malpractices. Nehru, his daughter, his grandson—such matters as will soon pass into oblivion? These aren’t important when compared to India, eternal India.”

“Yes, it does help to live abroad if you feel that way,” mused Bim . . .

(35, emphasis in original)

In sustaining such a glorified perception of a mystical motherland-India, Bakul panders to the Western need to see India as an a-historical site of cultural authenticity, as a place which remains static in an otherwise changing world. In doing this, Bakul is taking part in an exchange which puts the West in the position of operating a different form of imperial domination. Although India has gained legal independence from Britain, such attitudes indicate that India is still under the ideological domination known as cultural imperialism. In keeping with the long tradition of Western exploitation of the East, Bakul is perpetuating the image of ‘Oriental’ India, which is what Edward Said describes as “one of [Europe’s] deepest and most recurring images of the Other.”<sup>174</sup>

This domination extends to Bakul’s treatment of Tara, as if she is a dependent child. During their early years together, Bakul becomes fearful that the partition riots will affect Tara and insists that he take her away to safety, without wishing to hear of Tara’s opinions on the matter: “He smiled at her fondly, like an indulgent father. She smiled back gratefully—she had not had an indulgent father, after all. She wore a white chameli flower in her hair. She was very like it herself. He told her so” (71, emphasis in original). Tara’s embodiment of submissive femininity complies very well with Bakul’s colonialist aspiration

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<sup>174</sup> Edward Said, Orientalism, (1978; London: Penguin, 1995) 1.



to maintain a pure and authentic India. His decision to remove Tara from political turmoil reflects his desire to preserve Orientalist notions by conserving a timeless, unaffected India. He views Tara as emblematic of that motherland ideal which is so appealing to imperialist perspectives.

Desai recognises Indian culture's complicity in this process of cultural imperialism. During the riots, Tara and Bim look through the house of the Hyder Alis, their neighbours who flee to Pakistan. In his daughter Benazir's bedroom, the girls find "American foxtrots and quicksteps that the World War and the American GIs and British Tommies had brought to India" and marvel at the "profane" music that the young Muslim girl listened to in secret (74). American music is upheld as having far more subversive appeal than the traditional music of India and is therefore more attractive to the young Benazir. On a more sinister note, Baba also favours Western music, particularly American records from the 1940s, and listens to them with a persistence that begins to emphasise his mental impairment. Baba's music dominates the Das household during Tara's visit, to the point that it makes conversation impossible, the music becoming a "monstrous body of noise . . ." (7), yet Baba cannot stand to be in the house unless the music is blaring out. When the needle wears out and his copy of "I'm Dreamin' of a White Christmas" no longer plays he becomes frustrated and has to leave the house, something which he would not usually do. For Baba, American music hides the sounds of normal life that "did not soothe or protect him" (14), such as birdsong, children playing and people riding bicycles. The choice of "I'm Dreamin' of a White Christmas" also forms a marked distinction to the intense heat of the Delhi summer, forming another uncomfortable contrast in the text. While Baba enjoys the fact that the American music distances him from his surroundings, this decontextualisation adds to the depiction of his withdrawn mental condition. Baba's attention to Western music is so obsessive that it divides

him from his cultural origins and can be read as a metaphor for the large-scale effect of cultural imperialism.

Music is used to similar effect by Desai in her characterisation of Dr Biswas who develops an obsession with Mozart whilst studying for his doctorate in Europe:

“Mozart,” said Dr Biswas with great earnestness, leaning forwards with his elbows on the table on either side of a glass of beer, “when I first heard Mozart Miss Das, I closed my eyes, and it was as if my whole past vanished, just rolled away from me—the country of my birth, my ancestors, my family, everything—and I arrived in a new world, a shining new world. I felt that when I heard Mozart for the first time—not when I stepped off the boat at Hamburg, or saw strange white faces and heard the strange language, or drank my first glass of beer—no. These experiences were nothing by comparison. After that there was nothing in my life—only Mozart.”

“Only Mozart, hmm?” (83)

Like Baba, Dr Biswas also allows Western music to come between himself and his sense of connection to his own cultural context. Although his claims to intellectualism attempt to justify his love of European classical music, Dr Biswas’s obsession is little different to Baba’s fixation with American popular tunes. The span between ‘high’ and ‘low’ culture represented by the different musical styles and the span of social status represented by the juxtaposition of the highly educated Doctor with Baba, indicate the pervasiveness of such cultural imperialism. We see the lingering sway of European ideals in India as well as the encroaching claim of American commercialism on the entire globe. The reverence accorded European culture is also shown as an escape from the turbulent state of Indian politics. Dr Biswas invites Bim to a performance of Brahms and Schubert in New Delhi which is experiencing political unrest over the issue of the partition of India and the creation of Pakistan. Bim’s reaction is one of incredulousness at Dr Biswas’s resemblance to Bakul in their ignorance of Indian politics: “Suddenly she was struck by the humour of it . . . the doctor inviting her to a concert of eighteenth-century European music in the middle of the riot-torn city . . . ” (80).



Resolution for these fractures in cultural alignment is sought at the text's end as Bim listens to traditional Indian musicians performing in the Misra sisters' garden next door. This scene concludes the novel and shows us Bim's sudden awareness of her connection to time and history, her connection with and love for her family and her links with her house and the land on which it stands. The musicians are led by two singers; their neighbour's brother, Mulk, and his elderly guru. These singers represent a direct line of Indian cultural heritage and Bim recognises their "similarity despite the gulf between them" (182). In listening to the older guru sing, Bim recalls her brother Raja reading T.S. Eliot and quoting from the Four Quartets, "'Time the destroyer is time the preserver'" (182), at which point Bim experiences a feeling which mirrors her experiences in the bee swarm of many years before:

Its meaning seemed to fall out of the sky and settle upon her like a cloak, or like a great pair of feathered wings. She huddled in its comfort, its solace. She saw before her eyes how one ancient school of music contained both Mulk, still an immature disciple and his aged, exhausted guru with all the disillusionments and defeats of his long experience. (182)

In contrast to the swarm, this scene represents a resolution, as that which descends upon Bim is not a mantle of martyrdom but a calm understanding of her involvement with everything around her, as the narrative goes on to say:

With her inner eye she saw how her own house and its particular history linked and contained her as well as her whole family with all their separate histories and experiences—not binding them within some dead and airless cell but giving them the soil in which to send down their roots, and food to make them grow and spread, reach out to new experiences and new lives, but always drawing from the same soil, the same secret darkness. That soil contained all time, past and future, in it. It was dark with time, rich with time. It was where her deepest self lived, and the deepest selves of her sister and brothers and all those who shared that time with her. (182)

The themes of the motherland as a base of cultural identification, and personal links to this base are combined here, on the novel's penultimate page. However, this passage is not free of the gender implications which are attached to the motherland ideal. The "secret darkness"

of the soil evokes the mysterious space of the well at the back of the Das' garden with all its conflicting symbolism of maternal power and matricide. This soil contains the embryonic identities of Bim and her siblings and is also linked to Aunt Mira in the reference to both the soil and the growth it encourages, just as Mira encouraged the Das children to grow above her. Through these references, the narrative implies that Bim's self-perception has shifted so that she begins to view herself not as the burdened mother but as the daughter, accepting of the sustenance, comfort and solace that her cultural, familial and historical context can provide for her.

Along with this, Bim also steps from the a-historical time-warp in which she lived into a progressive, liner chronology, like Elaine Risley does at the end of Cat's Eye and like Prentice in The Crow Road. While the problematic gender associations are not entirely resolved in this conclusion, a connection is made by Bim with a continuing, thriving Indian culture. More importantly, Bim's conclusion shows her development from being an isolated figure in a decaying house to being someone with a sense of the "social self" of which Flax writes. Desai's text finishes with an illustration of Bim's interconnected identity, a principle which distinguishes her ontological perception from the paradigm which dominates Western thought, a point which Rhadakrishnan notes; "the canonization of individuality as a first principle is a western and not a universal phenomenon."<sup>175</sup>

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<sup>175</sup> Rhadakrishnan 754.



### **Midnight's Children and Postcolonial Mourning.**

This view of the interconnected self provides the main thematic focus for Midnight's Children, whose title refers to the telepathic network of the one thousand and one children born in the first hour of Indian independence. While this magic realist element of Rushdie's text makes us aware of the huge synchronous network within which Saleem is implicated, we are also shown his vast historical connections. Saleem begins by writing of these in order that his son, Aadam, will know of his origins. Inset within Saleem's tale of coming home to Bombay is his narrative of his grandfather's return to the state of Kashmir after an absence of five years during which he undertook his medical training in Germany. Whilst on this visit, his grandfather, Dr Aadam Aziz, meets Nasseem, Saleem's grandmother. For both Saleem and Dr Aziz, Kashmir is an Edenic paradise, highlighting the Biblical connotations of his grandfather's name. On the young doctor's return home, Kashmir is described as a country which is 'hatching out': "The world was new again. After a winter's gestation in its eggshell of ice, the valley had beaked its way out into the open, moist and yellow" (20). It is described as a timeless environment which "had hardly changed since the days of the Mughal Empire", firmly situating Kashmir as motherland with its descriptions of being ancient and its capacity for rebirth (10).

Saleem's paternal inheritance begins to emerge in this opening scene as we meet Tai, the boatman, who is emblematic of a male 'eternal India' to complement the motherland paradigm. Tai's timelessness is demonstrated by the fact that nobody, including himself, knows how old Tai is yet he claims to remember meeting Jesus when he came to Kashmir to "live it up a little" (16). Tai is the ancient "spirit of the valley" who steers his "magical boat through the enchanted waters of the morning" (15). The theme of paternity reaches a more practical level in that Tai passes his laugh on to Aadam, who later passes it on to his

own son, Hanif, a detail which comforts Saleem with the thought that until his uncle Hanif died “a piece of Tai lived in Bombay” (17). This prefigures the theme of false lineage and non-biological inheritance on which so much of Saleem’s story rests. That Saleem’s family should be shown to originate from this paradise-on-Earth magnifies the greatness of Saleem’s own origins at the same time that it undercuts them because we learn that these are not his biological origins.

In the present time of the novel, Saleem states that his grandfather’s memory of returning home to Kashmir, although sixty-three years old, “demands to be recorded”, yet we are aware that Saleem is actually referring to his own desire to create a seamless, total history, holding every detail of his family history and the history of his nation within his memory (19). This memory is then condensed and recorded in the thirty chapters of his story, each chapter symbolising one year of Saleem’s/India’s life. History is preserved by Saleem’s narrative, a process which is likened to the chutney produced by his family; the text becomes a “chutney of memory” which is ‘pickled’ and stored in thirty ‘jars’ or chapters (456).

Through his writing about his heritage, which is symbolically that of India, Saleem’s text becomes a work of mourning as the narrative reflects a state of national and political decay which appears irreversible. However, this text is not evidence of the kind of postmodern mourning discussed above: Midnight’s Children is a product of a specific combination of cultural and political influences which distinguishes it, along with The God of Small Things, as an example of postcolonial mourning. Postcolonialism and postmodernism are coexistent yet distinctly different areas, each having its own political and historical concerns. As Charles Larson comments, it is important to remain vigilant about the differences between them: “Post-colonialism is not simply a kind of ‘postmodernism with politics’—it is a sustained attention to the imperial processes in colonial and neo-colonial



societies, and an examination of the strategies to subvert the actual material and discursive effects of that process.”<sup>176</sup> Associating the narratives of these two texts with a postmodern analysis divests them of these specific concerns and amalgamates them with a Western perspective in a move which mimics the power structures of imperial domination.

These narratives mourn the broken connection to the motherland which is only fully realisable in the wake of colonial power. They are representative of the postcolonial’s recognition that there can be no return to the way things were, that one is, as Stuart Hall writes, irreparably broken from that base:

cultural identity is not a fixed essence at all, lying unchanged outside history and culture. It is not some universal and transcendental spirit inside us on which history has made no fundamental mark. It is not once-and-for-all. It is not a fixed origin to which we can make some final and absolute Return. Of course, it is not a mere phantasm either. It is something—not a mere trick of the imagination. It has its histories—and histories have their real, material and symbolic effects. The past continues to speak to us. But it no longer addresses us as a simple, factual ‘past’, since our relation to it, like the child’s relation to the mother, is always-already ‘after the break’. It is always constructed through memory, fantasy, narrative and myth.<sup>177</sup>

After his indoctrination into European ideals, including learning that “India—like radium—had been ‘discovered’ by the Europeans . . .”(11), Aadam’s return to Kashmir is an attempt to “reunite himself with an earlier self which ignored their influence . . .”(11). Saleem describes his grandfather kneeling down to pray and recognises that Aadam had been “trying, absurdly, to pretend that nothing had changed”(11). However, we are told that Aadam’s prayer that morning is merely a “charade” as he is already “caught in a strange middle ground, trapped between belief and disbelief . . .”(12), as his Muslim faith is slipping

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<sup>176</sup> Charles Larson, “Heroic Ethnocentrism: The Idea of Universality in Literature,” The Post Colonial Studies Reader, eds. Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin (London: Routledge, 1995) 117.

<sup>177</sup> Stuart Hall, “Cultural Identity and Diaspora,” Contemporary Postcolonial Theory: A Reader, ed. Padmini Mongia (London: Arnold, 1996) 113, emphasis in original.

away. This is the point at which Aadam bends to the ground and hits his nose upon a tussock of earth sticking up underneath his prayer mat and causes his nose to bleed, which in turn encourages him to renounce religion: "Three drops fell. There were rubies and diamonds. And my grandfather, lurching upright, made a resolve. Stood. Rolled cheroot. Stared across the lake. And was knocked forever into that middle place, unable to worship a God in whose existence he could not wholly disbelieve. Permanent alteration: a hole"(12). At this point, Aadam acknowledges that things have changed irreparably. The irony of his homecoming is that it reveals to him the extent to which he has become detached from his birthplace, particularly ideologically in forsaking his religion. The theme of irreversible change is introduced here, an idea which is expressed in various different ways over the following four hundred and thirty nine pages, as Saleem's narrative highlights a history which is a sequence of disconnections.

Postcolonial mourning finds its expression partly through the recurring image of the hole, which appears for the first time in Aadam Aziz following his loss of faith and his inability to entirely reject religion, which implies that the need to believe is still there, thus making him aware of that vacuum. This acknowledgement of a need for a spiritual dimension to existence evokes Waterland, The Crow Road, The Peppered Moth and Cat's Eye, texts in which we also see that the metanarrative of religion cannot be abandoned outright. Saleem's narrative becomes an attempt to fill the hole with the fantastic or with other forms of meaning in an attempt to assuage postcolonial mourning. Ultimately, the attempt is shown to be futile but this does not necessarily make the narrative an example of postmodernity because Saleem's narrative remains rivetted to the themes of national struggle and political development throughout.



Ultimately, the magical, grand epic style of Midnight's Children marks an attempt to imbue India with a new cultural coherence through the use of narrative. Rushdie's own journey in writing Midnight's Children corresponds with that of his fictional character, as Booker comments, "Rushdie himself admits that he, too, has suffered such an experience of loss: 'Unable to accept the unarguable absolutes of religion, I have tried to fill up the hole with literature.' Rushdie's fiction, then, can be seen as his contribution to the development of alternative myths for the modern age."<sup>178</sup> This development of new myths, possibly of metanarrative status, contradicts the postmodern incredulity towards such overarching ideals at the same time as it demonstrates a specifically postcolonial desire to create a new network within which to view one's radically altered sense of identity. By contrast with the view of apocalyptic postmodern deconstruction, this creative impulse can be viewed as a positive move, a point upon which Rushdie himself comments in Imaginary Homelands:

The story of Saleem does indeed lead him to despair. But the story is told in a manner designed to echo, as closely as my abilities allowed, the Indian talent for non-stop self-regeneration. This is why the narrative constantly throws up new stories, why it 'teems'. The form—multitudinous, hinting at the infinite possibilities of the country—is the optimistic counterweight to Saleem's personal tragedy. I do not think that a book written in such a manner can be called a despairing work.<sup>179</sup>

The most notable way in which this is attempted is through the Midnight Children's Conference, of which Saleem, the mirror of the nation, is leader. As mentioned above, the Midnight Children's Conference is the telepathic network between the remainder of the one thousand and one children born in the first hour of Indian independence and represents one of

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<sup>178</sup> M. Keith Booker, "Beauty and the Beast: Dualism as Despotism in the Fiction of Salman Rushdie" ELH 4 (Winter, 1990): 994. Citing from Salman Rushdie, "The Book Burning," New York Review of Books (March 2, 1989): 26.

<sup>179</sup> Salman Rushdie, Imaginary Homelands: Essays and Criticism, (London: Granta, 1991) 16.

the most important images of unity in the newly independent country which negates, to some extent, the hole left by religion in the Aziz family psyche.

Saleem's telepathic ability is instigated by a sequence of three events. Firstly, as a child Saleem notices that he receives telepathic communications from Toxy Catrack, a twenty-one-year old "gibbering half-wit, the product of years of inbreeding"(130). Some years later Saleem sees his mother's naked body whilst he is hiding in the family's dirty-laundry basket in the bathroom. The shock of seeing her causes him to breathe in sharply, accidentally inhaling a pyjama-chord which forces mucus to rise high up into his brain:

Waste fluid, reaching as far, perhaps, as the frontiers of the brain . . . There is a shock. Something electrical has been moistened .

Pain.

And then noise, deafening many tongued terrifying, inside his head!

(162, emphasis in original)

Complete comprehension of these voices is not achieved until Saleem's bulging temples connect with the forceps hollows of his friend Sonny Ibrahim during a bicycle accident:

Over nine years ago I had been born with bulging temples, and Sonny had been given hollows by forceps; everything is for a reason, it seems, because now my bulging temples found their way into Sonny's hollows. A perfect fit. . . . they were there in my head, in the front now, no longer a muffled background noise I'd never noticed, all of them, sending their here-I-am signals, from north south east west . . . the other children born during that midnight hour, calling 'I,' 'I,' 'I' and 'I.' (187)

From this point on, Saleem finds that he is able to communicate with all the other children of midnight and can hold a conference for them in his head, which he does every midnight, "during that hour which is somehow reserved for miracles, which is somehow outside time . . ." (212). This magical connection which takes place in an a-temporal zone evokes the power of the motherland once more, exempt from the rationale of the modern world and relating to the kind of national mythologies which have been interrupted by colonialism.



Along with the magical occurrence of the Midnight Children's Conference itself, Saleem learns that each of the thousand and one members is magical in their own way, although their powers decrease the further away their birth times are from the stroke of midnight. For example, Saleem's future partner, Parvati-the-Witch, born just seven seconds after midnight in the magician's ghetto of Old Delhi, has the gifts of "conjuraton and sorcery, the art which required no artifice . . ." (200). Conversely, the children born towards the end of India's first hour of independence are "little more than circus freaks . . ." (198). Shiva, born at the same time as Saleem inherits the gifts of war, which he later uses to devastating effect. Four hundred and twenty of the children die before their tenth birthday and, as such, are never part of Saleem's telepathic network. Saleem writes to confirm the existence of the magically gifted telepathic children:

Midnight's Children can be made to represent many things, according to your point of view: they can be seen as the last throw of everything antiquated and retrogressive in our myth-ridden nation, whose defeat was entirely desirable in the context of a modernizing, twentieth-century economy; or as the true hope of freedom, which is now forever extinguished; but what they must not become is the bizarre creation of a rambling, diseased mind. No: illness is neither here nor there. (200)

Josna E. Rege views the midnight's children as a romanticisation of the Congress Party's ideal of unity in diversity, an ideal which stands in marked contradistinction to the "over-centralised nation state" under which Saleem lives, an interpretation which agrees with the hypothesis above to a certain extent but which neglects the resistance to a disenchanting global capitalism which the phrase "modernizing, late twentieth-century economy" implies.<sup>180</sup>

During India's Emergency, Saleem writes that he is captured and tortured by Indira Gandhi, whom he calls the Black Widow, and surrenders the names and addresses of every

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<sup>180</sup> Josna E. Rege, "Victim into Protagonist? *Midnight's Children* and the Post-Rushdie National Narratives of the Eighties," *Critical Essays on Salman Rushdie*, ed. M. Keith Booker (New York: G. K. Hall & Co., 1999) 268.

other living midnight child. The magical siblings are then rounded up and taken to a prison where they are all sterilised, thus preventing another such magical generation on earth. The children of midnight come to represent hope, and their sterilisation is described by Saleem as a mass “Sperectomy: the draining-out of hope” (437). This forms another aspect of the postcolonial mourning in this narrative as not only is Saleem fractured from his history, his current context is also taken away with Indira’s attempt to systematically eradicate India’s new magical people.

However, Shiva’s multitudinous offspring are overlooked, as Saleem ominously says, “a new generation of children, begotten by midnight’s darkest child, was being raised towards the future” (441). Saleem’s son, Aadam, is also of this generation and is born at the moment that Emergency is declared: “On the stroke of midnight . . . at the precise instant of India’s arrival at Emergency, he emerged” (419), heralding a new era in the history of the Indian nation, an era in which the children “would grow up far tougher than the first, not looking for their fate in prophecy or the stars, but forging it in the implacable furnaces of their wills”(447). The hope represented by the first generation of midnight’s children is regenerated at the text’s end with this indication of a brighter, if less magical future. This is the final indication that hope is not entirely abolished from India, although Saleem does not disclose what kind of regeneration is to take place, as he says “the nearly thirty-one-year-old myth of freedom is no longer what it was. New myths are needed; but that’s none of my business ” (457-8). These new myths are not dependent on mythology as it stood but on a new vision of the future, thereby demonstrating the close of postcolonial mourning in these texts. This is not to suggest that the difficulties are resolved but rather that the yearning for a magical Indian identity has ceased. The admission that “new myths are needed” marks a point at which mourning ends and the search for regenerative spaces begins. As Wheeler



writes, the end result of this mourning process leaves the subject at a point in which s/he is willing to enter a “radically changed future in which both self and world are utterly transformed in the castrating experience of permanent loss.”<sup>181</sup>

Although this call for self-regeneration is a positive ending to Saleem’s narrative, in 1987 Rushdie acknowledged that, in retrospect, the hopeful ending was inappropriate: “If anything, the book’s last pages, with their suggestion of a new, more pragmatic generation rising up to take over from the midnight children, now seem absurdly, romantically optimistic.”<sup>182</sup> The current conflict over nuclear weapons in Pakistan and India brings the sadness of this admission to even greater depths.

### **Partitioned Mother(land) and Holey Fathers**

For Martine de La Rochère, the regenerative capacity is a direct result of the uprooting experience of migrancy, a point which can be applied to the experience of the postcolonial as they, like the migrant, are also cut off from “family, native tongue, cultural values and familiar references. . . . severed from his past and from his self.”<sup>183</sup> La Rochère goes on to say that this experience of loss is exactly that which inspires the creation of new ideologies as it “hollows out a void at the core of identity which generates confusion, anxiety and distress, but also releases all kind of energies, among which is the capacity to begin anew and to become the agent of one’s own destiny.”<sup>184</sup> This point is expressed in a way which evokes the

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<sup>181</sup> Wheeler, Modernity 74.

<sup>182</sup> Rushdie, Homelands 33.

<sup>183</sup> La Rochère, Martine Hennard Duthiel de, Origin and Originality in Rushdie’s Fiction, (Bern: Peter Lang, 1999) 24.

<sup>184</sup> La Rochère 24.

hole at the centre of Aadam Aziz's body description, while it also parallels Kristeva's ideas on using creation to overcome depression, and Wheeler's argument that revisioned selves mark the end of periods of mourning.

In Aadam this hole becomes an actual perforation which is visible to his daughter, Saleem's mother; "through a trick of the light, Amina thought she saw, in the centre of her father's body, a dark shadow like a hole" (138). Although not biologically related to Aadam, the hole finds its way into Saleem too, thereby showing how the sense of an inner void is perpetuated after independence. Saleem makes an attempt to fill this void with the community of his Midnight Children's Conference, yet the gap in his identity is never quite plugged sufficiently. Saleem speculates that perhaps his relationships to women ought to have fulfilled him in this way instead:

Women have fixed me alright, but perhaps they were never central - perhaps the place which they should have filled, the hole in the centre of me which was my inheritance from my grandfather Aadam Aziz, was occupied for too long by my voices. Or perhaps one must consider all the possibilities - they always made me a little afraid.  
(192)

Despite his attempts to fill this hole, Saleem's body is never made whole and gradually splits apart throughout the novel, a metaphor for the destruction of India's hope at the beginning of independence. The incomplete or fragmenting body is also a metaphor for the complicated history of the postcolonial state which is likewise full of gaps and inconsistencies. The postcolonial nation's history is typically written by the colonisers rather than the indigenous people and is not, therefore, representative of their past: for example, as mentioned above, Aadam Aziz learnt that India had been 'discovered' by Europeans. These discrepancies extend to the characterisation in Midnight's Children as the incomplete fathers represent the cultural inconsistencies and present-day political impotence of India.



While fathers are hollowed in the middle, the women of this text are partitioned in various ways, largely by clothing, and are symbolic of the division of India. La Rochère recognises the gender dualities at work in Rushdie's narrative by identifying the "Father History and Mother India" principles around which the characterisation and the novel's metaphorical content are organised.<sup>185</sup> Again, we have the association of the mother's body with the land while the sphere of politics belongs exclusively to men. When these boundaries are transgressed, however, the result is monstrous, as we see with Indira, a woman in a 'man's world' who represents the greatest aberration of the text and the most significant threat to India.

The first example of a partitioned woman is seen as Dr Aziz examines his future wife, then Naseem Ghani, from behind a veil under the guard of her burly maidservants. Muslim law dictates that the female body must be covered to protect women's modesty, and Dr Aziz is only permitted to examine his young patient one section at a time through the veil. Aadam falls in love with his future bride piece by piece and remains fixated by the "phantasm of a partitioned woman" throughout their courtship (25). This custom continues, however, when their marriage is consummated and Naseem insists on having the traditional marriage-sheet, with a similar hole cut in it, laid over her body. Saleem's sister, Jamila, also takes on the partitioning that is so common among the women in her family, carrying out her singing career from behind a sheet with a hole cut in it for her mouth, the sheet thereby resembling the marriage-sheet that her grandmother used (321).

The sheet becomes a confine which ensures that the woman's experience of life is only partial, whilst also preventing the outside world from interacting with the woman who is

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<sup>185</sup> La Rochère 11.

veiled. Maria Couto discusses this point with reference to its implications in Midnight's Children: "Traditionally, the women of North India were in purdah, and from within its confines peered at a limited view of the world. The metaphor of the hole drawn from this custom suggests the development of a fractured self . . ." <sup>186</sup> However, the hole imagery which prevails in the male lineage differs greatly from the partitioning which the female characters undergo. While their bodies are veiled, this alteration proves to be superficial as, with the exception of Indira Gandhi, the women in this narrative are portrayed as fundamentally coherent and unchanging, unlike their male counterparts. Veiling shows the strict confines placed upon women in a Muslim society while it also serves as a metaphor for the partitioned land, subject to both the vagaries of colonial interference and the tensions of its own people.

Saleem's nostalgic attachment to the motherland is represented through his obsession with mother-figures: "Child of an unknown union, I have had more mothers than most mothers have children; giving birth to parents has been one of my stronger talents—a form of reverse fertility beyond the control of contraception, and even of the Widow herself" (243). Yet, the primacy of the mother is simultaneously undercut by Rushdie as he attributes this role of mother-figure to many women who all only partially mother Saleem: while Vanita conceives and births Saleem, Amina, Mary Perira and Naseem all raise him, Parvati also gives Saleem back his name after his bout of amnesia in Pakistan and smuggles him back over the Indo-Pakistan border back into India, thus effectively re-birthing him into his former identity. Padma, Saleem's partner in the present time of the text, is a very important mother figure to Saleem also, listening to his tales and providing him with food while he writes.

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<sup>186</sup> Maria Couto, "Midnight's Children and Parents: The Search for Indo-British Identity" Encounter 62 (1982): 62.



The one 'mother' who does not share her role is Indira Gandhi, who is portrayed as the terrifying matriarch of the nation. If Saleem is the newly independent nation then Indira Gandhi is certainly one of his 'mothers': as her advertising slogan says, "Indira is India and India is Indira" (427, emphasis in original). This slogan attempts to portray Indira as the locus for primary cultural identification, as the epitome of the motherland ideal. In this instance the mother figure is a damaging, dangerous example of the motherland paradigm, exerting excessive control over her 'children' (India's citizens) and denying them the right to have children of their own, thereby maintaining an unchallenged primacy over the 'mothering' of/in India. Indeed, Saleem goes to the lengths of suggesting that Indira's main plan in the Emergency was to rid India of its midnight children: "the truest, deepest motive behind the declaration of a State of Emergency was the smashing, the pulverising, the irreversible discombobulation of the children of midnight" (427).

The holes in the fathers and partitions in the mothers riddle history and lineage to the point that coherency cannot be achieved any more with reference to the past, only in the regenerative potential of the future, a point which demonstrates a massive "forward impulsion."<sup>187</sup> This is not to suggest that Saleem/India is simply cut adrift from history; on the contrary, it is grounded within history, deeply and painfully, but that appalling past inspires a hope for a better future. However, it is left to the dependable, capable mother-figures of the text to carry this to fruition as Saleem admits that he cannot fulfill this task: "New myths are needed; but that's none of my business"(458).

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<sup>187</sup> Connor 21.

### Nostalgia and Lost Origins in The God of Small Things.

The God of Small Things also begins with a homecoming. After an absence of twenty-three years Rahel returns home to the town of Ayemenem to meet her non-identical twin brother Estha, a return which is heralded by the deluge of a June monsoon. Rahel's journey into the territory of her past is one fraught with pain, a factor of which the reader is made aware by being informed that three of the novel's main characters are already dead before any of the novel's action has been narrated: the twin's mother, her lover, Velutha and the twins' cousin Sophie Mol. Conversely, Rahel's elderly grand aunt, Baby Kochamma, who is partly responsible for splitting the family apart, is described as "still alive," a horrific figure lurking inside the old family home (2).

As Rahel returns to Ayemenem the rains begin, breaking the "hot, brooding" atmosphere that is described in the first line of the novel. The description of the rains is very dramatic with a poetic use of language wherein the repetition of the "s" and "l" sounds lend a harshness to the words which emphasise the destructive effect of the water: "Slanting silver ropes slammed into loose earth, ploughing it up like gunfire" (1). As in Clear Light of Day, the earth is a metaphor for memory and the puddles which form on the land on this day are described in a way which evokes the painful effect that returning memory is having on Rahel's previously calm mind. There is a pervasive sense of lack and absence in this scene which denotes the difficulty of Rahel's homecoming: "Heaven opened and the water hammered down, reviving the reluctant old well, greenmossing the pigless pigsty . . ." (10). The pigsty holds no pigs, and the well does not want to hold water; it is reluctant to be revived, a metaphor for the sense of foreboding that Rahel has about remembering her past.



This concept of linked identity is central to this text. Although Rahel and Estha are non-identical twins, we are told that the confusion over their identities lay in “a deeper, more secret place” (2):

In those early amorphous years when memory had only just begun, when life was full of Beginnings and no Ends, and Everything was For Ever, Esthappen and Rahel thought of themselves together as Me, and separately, individually as We or Us. As though they were a rare breed of Siamese twins, physically separate but with joint identities. (2)

After the time of the action described in 1969 the twins are separated and the whole which they formed is shattered. Rahel’s return visit is an attempt to reforge the links she had with Estha, to re-member their wholeness, an idealisation which goes disastrously awry.

Interlinked identity is figured in the opening scene with the emphasis on indistinct outlines as nature overflows its usual bounds with the breaking of the monsoon:

Boundaries blur as tapioca fences take root and bloom. Brick walls turn mossgreen. Pepper vines snake up electric poles. Wild creepers burst through laterite banks and spill across the flooded roads. Boats ply in the bazaars. And small fish appear in the puddles that fill the PWD potholes on the highways. (1)

Rahel and Estha’s telepathy blurs their identities and their love blurs the boundaries laid down by the ‘Love Laws’, or the unspoken social codes of conduct that determine behaviour. Such transgressions become a recurring theme throughout this text as Ammu crosses the caste divide and falls in love with an ‘untouchable’ and the family find themselves arguing over the “the jam-jelly question” which determines whether the banana preserve they produce is runny enough to be called ‘jam’ or thick enough to be called ‘jelly’ (30).

Like Aadam Aziz, Rahel’s return home is motivated by the desire for a reunion “with an earlier self” (MC, 11), which becomes manifest in the incestuous urges she feels for Rahel. These urges are reciprocated by her brother and, as I shall discuss below, the ‘earlier self’ which is sought in this instance is a pre-Oedipal, intra-uterine state of wholeness as both

twins long to return to the unity they shared with Ammus as babies. However, another form of nostalgia is at work in this text as it is the nostalgia of a culture for a past time which dominates the events of the twins' childhood. Many of the difficulties which are encountered by the protagonists are caused by the conflicting desires to return to a colonial state in which western values are upheld and to perpetuate an ideal of Indian society which is greatly at a variance with progressive modernisation. The protagonists struggle under their family's desire for a past characterised by order and conformity, but Roy's focus on Ammu and Rahel's lives in particular highlights the effect that these constraints have on women.

These factors are nowhere better illustrated than in the narrative's portrayal of Baby Kochamma's opinion of the twins and Ammu, who returns to her family home with her children following her divorce from her abusive husband:

In the way that the unfortunate sometimes dislike the co-unfortunate, Baby Kochamma disliked the twins for she considered them doomed, fatherless waifs. Worse still, they were Half-Hindu Hybrids whom no self-respecting Syrian Christian would ever marry. She was keen for them to realise that they (like herself) lived on sufferance in the Ayemenem House, their maternal grandmother's house, where they really had no right to be. Baby Kochamma resented Ammu, because she saw her quarrelling with a fate that she, Baby Kochamma herself, felt she had graciously accepted. The fate of the wretched man-less woman. . . .

She subscribed wholeheartedly to the commonly held view that a married daughter had no position in her parents' home. As for a divorced daughter — according to Baby Kochamma she had no position anywhere at all. And as for a divorced daughter from a love marriage, well, words could not describe Baby Kochamma's outrage. As for a divorced daughter from an intercommunity love marriage—Baby Kochamma chose to remain quiveringly silent on the subject. (GST, 45-46, emphasis in original)

Baby Kochamma's grievances with Ammu and her children demonstrate both her nostalgia for a pure Indian society and for a sense of submission to order that evokes colonialism. In expecting Ammu to "graciously" accept a "wretched" fate in which one has "no position at all" Baby Kochamma defers to the attitude of colonial powers which divest the individual of social and political presence. Her belief in Christian supremacy also associates her attitude



with that of the British Empire. Raised during a colonial era, Baby Kochamma cannot think beyond the restrictions under which she was raised and shows a disturbing longing for that sense of strict order to be reinstalled in her community. The above extract also shows Baby Kochamma's desire to uphold the traditional caste-based structures of Indian society along with its traditions of arranged marriages as a means of upholding family lineages. Like Aunt Mira in Clear Light of Day, Baby Kochamma lives "on sufferance" in her sister's house where she takes a perverse pleasure in having Ammu and her children as her social inferiors, thereby raising her place in the ranking order. The hybridity of the twins is referred to here, evoking once more the confusion of boundaries which this novel explores on so many levels. Underpinning all of these factors which Baby Kochamma views as failures in her niece and her children is the fault of Ammu's femaleness for which she can never atone. By contrast, it is interesting to note that Chacko, also divorced, is highly revered in the Ayemenem house, indicating the double standards of gender.

The idea of Ammu having "no position" is carried throughout the novel and is referred to by the narrative which occasionally adopts a child's perspective and which is expressed through its play with words and spelling. When Chacko tells Ammu that she has no Locus Standi, a term meaning legal position or voice, the narrative voice interprets this as "Locusts Stand I"(188). Although set in post-independence India, the position of women is little better than that of the lowest castes. This lack of legal position is highlighted when Ammu goes to the police in order to clear Velutha's name of the rape, child abduction and murder of which he was accused. Although the police know by this time that no rape took place, the Inspector in charge of the case still wishes to exert his power over Ammu in order to stop her from changing the story which covers the police force's motives for murdering

Velutha. As Ammu tells the Inspector that Velutha was innocent, the Inspector approaches her in an intimidating manner:

“If I were you,” he said “I’d go home quietly.” Then he tapped her breasts with his baton. Gently. Tap, tap. As though he was choosing mangoes from a basket. Pointing out the ones that he wanted packed and delivered. Inspector Thomas Mathew seemed to know whom he could pick on and whom he couldn’t. Policemen have that instinct. (8)

Later in the text, the narrator clarifies that this act was “a premeditated gesture . . . An attempt to instil order into a world gone wrong”(260). The Inspector’s refusal to think that there could be any lack of distinction between caste boundaries, his treatment of Ammu and ‘the police force’s attempts to stop the communist uprisings confirm a need to prevent social change and maintain the former “order” of a heavily oppressed colonial society. However, by contrast, as a man Chacko is permitted transgression of such boundaries as we learn that he frequently has sexual relations with the girls who work at his pickle factory, a point which his mother Mammachi excuses by saying that he is simply fulfilling his “Man’s Needs” (168).

### **Cultural Imperialism and Cultural Authenticity in The God of Small Things.**

The rigid social demarcations of former times are appealing because of their apparent safety compared with the fluctuations which independence has brought. At the heart of such longing for order is the issue of cultural imperialism: Roy demonstrates that although British rule has left India, its impression remains embedded in the minds of each Indian citizen who views all things Western as inherently superior. Chacko explains cultural imperialism to the children thus: “our minds have been invaded by a war. A war that we have won and lost. The very worst sort of war. A war that captures dreams and re-dreams them. A war that has made us adore our conquerors and despise ourselves” (53). The loss of connection to one’s



culture which Chacko laments here is akin to that which Bakul and Dr Biswas in Clear Light of Day represent, and appears in many different forms in The God of Small Things.

Chacko goes on to describe Indian history, after colonisation, as being like “an old house at night. With all the lamps lit. And ancestors whispering inside”(52), yet they can never hear what the ancestors are saying because of their invaded minds. To the young Estha and Rahel, Chako’s metaphor becomes conflated with an actual house across the river from them, the house of an old colonial who had ““gone native”” and became known as Kari Saipu (52). This then becomes the History House for the twins, a pivotal setting for the narrative, not just because of the symbolic significance which the twins invest in it, but also because it is here, in its abandoned grounds that Ammu and Velutha’s affair takes place and in which Velutha is killed. For the twins, the History House is full of ghostly “map-breath’d ancestors with tough toe nails [who] whispered to the lizards on the wall”(199). Estha and Rahel think of it in hindsight as a headquarters for a personified idea of history which “used the back verandah to negotiate its terms and collect its dues”, to “square its books . . .” by killing Velutha there (199).

The History House is a locus of colonial power, initially used as a colonial’s residence then taking on its symbolic significance for the children as a point at which a combination of Anglophile and conservative ideologies combine to bring about the tragedy of Velutha’s death and their family’s subsequent destruction. In addition to this, as Rahel returns to Ayemenem as a thirty-one-year old adult, she discovers that the History House has been transformed into a plush hotel for rich Western tourists which is named ““Heritage”” (126). The hotel chain advertises Ayemenem as ““God’s Own Country”” (125), a description which contrasts sharply with the abject poverty Rahel witnesses on the short walk to the hotel. The complex prides itself on its collection of old ancestral homes, brought from elsewhere in

India and reconstructed on site, which to Rahel become “Toy Histories for rich tourists to play in” (126). This is a poignant example of the West’s quest for cultural authenticity, being also an example of that ‘Other-ing’ of former colonial countries which superficially sustains the West’s sense of primacy.

Like the ancestral houses, the ancient stories of the kathakali dancers are disassembled and reconstructed for the tourists’ convenience:

In the evenings (for that Regional Flavour) the tourists were treated to truncated kathakali performances (‘Small attention spans,’ the hotel people explained to the dancers). So ancient stories were collapsed and amputated. Six-hour classics were slashed to twenty-minute cameos.” (127)

The use of the verbs “collapsed” and “amputated,” indicates the violent damage done by the imperialist desire to feel connected with cultural ‘authenticity’ whilst blinding itself to the political actuality of India. In a bid to reconnect with that which they experience as culturally authentic, Estha and Rahel see the kathakali dancers perform a night-long epic tale at the temple, where the dancers seek forgiveness for earning a living from abridged dances: “to ask pardon of their gods. To apologize for corruption of their stories. For encasing their identities. Misappropriating their lives” (229). This reconnection evokes many nostalgic feelings in the twins, the culmination of which is their incestuous union, as I shall discuss below.

Such amputation of Indian identity and its compliance with a Western perspective is also figured in the minute narrative detail where Rahel notices a man’s prosthetic leg when she is at the train station with Ammu to put Estha on the train:

A man sitting on a red weighing machine unstrapped his artificial leg (knee downwards) with a black boot and nice white sock painted on it. The hollow, knobbled calf was pink, like proper calves should be. (When you recreate the image of man, why repeat God’s mistakes?) Inside it he stored his ticket. His towel. His stainless-steel tumbler. His smells. His secrets. His love. His madness. His hope. His ininnate joy. His real foot was bare. (301, sic.)



The contrast between the painted clothing on the prosthetic foot and the man's own bare foot, along with the list of things he keeps in his prosthetic foot insinuate that the man is extremely poor with few possessions. Metaphorically, the prosthetic leg represents the imperialist desire to 'correct' Indian faults by applying Western methods, but, like the leg, this project is hollow being merely a means of covering the actual problems of poverty, caste rivalry and the oppression of women and the lower classes.

This contradistinction is brought to the fore of the narrative as the twins go to see The Sound of Music with their mother and Baby Kochamma, a trip which Chacko calls "an extended exercise in Anglophilia" (55). The on-screen tale of Western romance and domestic happiness which the film presents becomes a sickeningly idealised fantasy when contrasted with the sexual abuse Estha suffers from the refreshments salesman in the foyer of the cinema, the "Orangedrink Lemondrink Man" (2). Without being fully aware of what he is doing, Estha is forced to masturbate the salesman behind the refreshments counter as the man gives him a free drink. Fearful of repercussions from the salesman, Estha does not tell Ammu what has happened and returns to his cinema seat, holding the hand which the salesman used, which the narrative now refers to as his "Other Hand," out in the air so that it cannot touch anything (105). As the capitalised description suggests, the sexual abuse forces a split in Estha's identity as he cannot bring himself to think of this hand as part of his Self anymore as it has been used by somebody else in a way which violates his own sense of coherent selfhood. This split in his identity is exacerbated by the trauma and multiple deaths which occur in his family over the ensuing days, and his mental breakdown is completed when Ammu sends him on a train to live with his father, away from her and Rahel.

This fractured sense of self and Estha's feeling that he has been contaminated is contrasted with the images Estha then sees on the cinema screen:

And there was Captain von Clapp-Trapp. Christopher Plummer. Arrogant. Hardhearted. With a mouth like a slit. And a steelshrill police whistle. A Captain with seven children. Clean children, like a packet of peppermints. He pretended not to love them, but he did. He loved them. He loved her (Julie Andrews), she loved him, they loved the children. They all loved each other. They were clean, white children, and all their beds were soft with Ei. Der. Downs. (105)

Captain von Trapp's paternal authority evokes the sterile, harsh yet superficially protective bearing of British colonial domination, which simultaneously exploited India at the same time as it declared itself involved in its civilisation. Uncomfortable associations are also rendered with the "steelshrill police whistle" which provides loaded reference to Velutha's killing. We are told that Velutha's arms were bound by steel handcuffs, another association between steel and authority which allows the narrative to underscore the description of the Captain with unnerving murderous connotations (31).

However, lack of this paternal presence is something of which Estha is acutely aware and his envy of the family unit is clear in its distinction from Estha's own experience of family life. The whiteness and cleanness of the "peppermint" "Clapp-Trapp" family not only contrasts with the defilement of Estha's body, but also the comparison of Caucasian skin with that of Asians makes Estha aware of a racial polemic whereby that which is white is good. Estha begins to view himself as doubly stained. The use of the term "Clapp-Trapp" as a substitution for "von Trapp" demonstrates a childish yet poignant disregard for all that the Captain represents, insinuating Estha's deep anxiety with the imperialist perspectives which come into question in this scene.



## Regression and Psychosis

Although in many cases the representations of identity in these texts involves showing the subject as split or fractured, this is not upheld as a desirable ontological principle; rather it is a condition to be lamented, even examined and corrected. The fractured, split, fragmented selfhood of postmodernity is similar to the state into which some of the characters of these texts find themselves thrust, not by choice but by circumstances which prove to be unbearable and which provoke psychic collapse, often manifest in regressive states and death.

Clear Light of Day and The God of Small Things each portray incidents in which characters demonstrate an impulse to regress to a perceived state of former wholeness, which is in both cases a misplaced desire to rediscover the mother from whom the characters were traumatically split. In both cases, characters attempt to realise this desire through a sense of unity with their siblings. While in Clear Light of Day this desire eventually takes on a non-threatening form in which Bim has a philosophical acceptance of her interconnection with her siblings, in The God of Small Things this regressionary impulse overwhelms the brother/sister bond between the twins and results in them committing incest. In each novel, the fine line between a healthy recollection and overwhelming nostalgia is explored.

Examples of psychic splitting in a Western cultural arena represent postmodern melancholia for the coherent subject, yet in the texts here it relates to a postcolonial mourning for a motherland. Nicola King explores this relation, saying that the desire to reconnect with the maternal is another manifestation of the desire for the interconnected identity promised by the nation, the community: “it is in the imaginary plenitude of the pre-Oedipal that the socio-political longing for a lost ‘unity’ or ‘community’ locates itself.”<sup>188</sup> Simultaneous longings

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<sup>188</sup> Nicola King, Memory 30.

for the motherland and the mother are superimposed in these texts, to greatly differing extents, in the quest to discover a lost unity.

The search for an understanding of the past, usually of one's childhood, is a key feature of the texts under discussion here, as it was in the previous chapter with Cat's Eye and The Child in Time. Like Charles Darke in The Child in Time, Baba Das's character is ominous, warning against the dangers of regressing too far and becoming trapped in childhood. Tara's nostalgia trip is one which reaches back to her childhood and is something which she approaches with pleasure, yet this venture is difficult in a place which houses a grown man who cannot escape his childhood. He stays in his room or on the verandah of the house, venturing out occasionally but only under pressure from his sisters. His trips out, however, are extremely stressful for Baba who cannot cope alone and returns to the house in a perturbed state.

Following Aunt Mira's alcoholism and death, Baba is almost entirely dependent on Bim for care. This sets up a peculiar dynamic as Bim is effectively mother to her own younger brother and one of his only points of connection with the outside world. The pressures of being virtually confined to her childhood home with a mute sibling lead Bim to great depths of frustration as she experiences violent urges towards this silent brother: "It was Baba's silence and reserve and otherworldliness that she had wanted to break open and ransack and rob . . ." (CLD, 164). This urge is then expressed using the imagery of a hunter killing prey, shooting it so that it becomes a "a cold package of death" (CLD, 165). This curious manifestation of aggressive urges in Bim demonstrates the extent to which her life has become entwined in his. Instead of having a normal sense of separation from her brother, she feels so entwined in his life that the only way she can claim some sense of difference



from him is by 'killing' him. Bim entertains this fantasy only briefly but then goes on to imagine a scenario which presents the opposite emotional extreme.

Immediately after experiencing an urgent need for separation, Bim contemplates a physical union with Baba. Feeling remorseful for her outburst in which she suggests he move to live with other relatives, Bim takes Baba's tea in to his room where he is lying on the bed. She touches Baba on the cheek in order to wake him and the cheek is described as white like "a saint's that suffers itself to be kissed" (CLD,166) This time Baba's other-worldliness is angelic, and the word 'kissed' sets up the possibility of an erotic reading of the ensuing ambiguous passage as Bim looks at him:

an immense, almost irresistible yearning to lie down beside him on the bed, stretch out, limb to limb, silent and immobile together. She felt that they must be the same length, that his slightness would fit in beside her size, that his concavities would mould with her convexities. Together they would form a whole that would be perfect and pure. She needed only to lie down and stretch out beside him to become whole and perfect. (CLD, 166)

Bim resists this urge and, instead, goes out into the garden. The desire to become whole by regressing into a state of foetal bliss, particularly in the description of being "silent and immobile," suggests the trapped, muteness of gestation. This regression appears to hold the promise of healing the lost continuities spoken of above, so that what Bim is seeking is not necessarily physical fulfilment but a sense of belonging and connection to others.

Specifically sexual contact is not suggested here as it is in The God of Small Things,

however, some form of bodily connection is suggested in the fitting together of the

'concavities' and 'convexities,' making the troubling undertones of the scene more explicit.

This point has its far less sinister counterpart in Midnight's Children where Saleem's bulging temples fit precisely with Sonny's forceps hollows, a connection which brings about Saleem's

ability to hear the children of midnight. The possibility of sibling unification is taken into a sinister area in Clear Light of Day with the inclusion of an incestuous undertone.

Ultimately, Bim's realisation of her love for her largely estranged family is expressed in terms which are resonant with the language used in the narrative of The God of Small Things. Like Rahel, Bim senses a fundamental connection between her siblings and herself, admitting that their love goes right back to the time when they were born: "There could be no love more deep and full and wide than this one, she knew. No other love had started so far back in time and had had so much time in which to grow and spread. They were really all parts of her, inseparable, so many aspects of her as she was of them . . ." (CLD, 165). This realisation marks a turning point in Bim's development through this text as Desai shows her protagonist overcoming many years of guilt over the resentment she feels for Tara and Raja. As Bim lies on her bed and realises her love for her siblings, we are told that her room is "shaded" yet "[a]lthough it was shadowy and dark, Bim could see as well as by the clear light of day that she felt only love and yearning for them all . . ." (165). This, coupled with Bim's final sense of connection to history and her culture, which she experiences as she listens to the guru singing in her neighbours' garden, provides a satisfying conclusion to Desai's text, unlike those of Rushdie and Roy.

In the case of Rahel and Estha, the desire to return to an intra-uterine state of wholeness is taken to its most extreme level and provides a catastrophic denouement to the present-day narrative line. In their first meeting for twenty-three years, as Rahel returns to the Ayemenem house, the twins' relationship is presented in many different ways by the narrative, hinting at the incestuous drives which underlie the love between them and which indicate the inconsolable grief they feel for their mother, her lover, their cousin and the years of separation:



Rahel watched Estha with the curiosity of a mother watching her wet child. A sister a brother. A woman a man. A twin a twin.

She flew these several kites at once.

He was a naked stranger met in a chance encounter. He was the one that she had known before Life began. The one who had once led her (swimming) through their lovely mother's cunt.

Both things unbearable in their polarity. In their irreconcilable far-apartness.  
(GST, 93)

Rahel becomes mother, sister, lover and twin to Estha. Whilst being aware of the mutually exclusive nature of some of these relations, she is loath to let any of them go, holding on to each "kite", each possibility. The desire to return to the unitary wholeness of the womb is superimposed over her desire to reunite with her brother: Estha is the one she knew when she was in there and Estha led her out of there, giving rise to the supposition that he can also, in a sense, lead her back in to the mother's body.

Incest and the search for the mother are themes which are prefigured by the kathakali dance that the twins watch when Rahel returns to Ayemenem. This kathakali dance sequence includes the story of the mythical warrior-figure, Karna finding his long-lost mother, Kunti, and as the twins watch the performance they are joined by both the story "[a]nd the memory of another mother" (GST, 234). The kathakali dancers enact the first kiss between mother and son who have been separated for many years which the narrative describes with erotic overtones: "Karna shuddered in delight. A warrior reduced to infancy. The ecstasy of that kiss. He dispatched it to the ends of his body. To his toes. To his fingertips. His lovely mother's kiss" (GST, 233). The discovery of the mother is the principal episode in the epic tale which the dancers perform, just as the loss of the mother and their subsequent attempts to recover her memory are the principal elements in the telling of the twins' life story.

The twins then walk home together but the ensuing events are not narrated for over one hundred pages, within which space we are informed of the events surrounding Sophie

Mol and Velutha's deaths. In terms of the narrative structure, the interruption which these events form symbolises the interruption that they caused in the twins' relationship, being the reason why the twins became split up and separated from their mother. The chapter in which the incest scene appears, "The Madras Mail," is split into two halves. The first four pages narrate Estha's departure from the Chocin Harbour Terminus as he leaves on the Madras Mail train, in order to be returned to his father's house. The first section of this chapter ends with Estha's train pulling away as he wails to his mother that he feels like he is going to be sick, a comment which corresponds with the crippling stomach pains Rahel has at that same moment: "On the station platform Rahel doubled over and screamed and screamed" (326). While on one level this points to the telepathy which the twins share, with one feeling the pain of the other's sickness, Rahel's pain also refers to the trauma of separation as the other half of her is pulled away. This pain at the point of separation forms a metaphor for the separation of mother and child during birth, as Estha also now embarks on a new life, never to see his mother again. As the train departs Estha's voice fades from Rahel and Ammu's hearing which the narrator conveys by saying "He left his voice behind" hinting at Estha's later muteness and identifying this as the point at which his voice became 'lost,' underlining the scene's traumatic long-term effects (GST, 326).

This is followed by a break in the text, after which the next four pages narrate the incest scene. The chapter finishes with an analeptic passage which refers back to the time when Ammu was realising her love for Velutha, the two passages forming a disturbing echo concerning love, lust and longing. In this second half of the chapter, Rahel and Estha lie on Estha's bed after seeing the kathakali dancers perform and Rahel calls Estha by the name she used for him as a child, "Esthapappychachen Kuttapen Peter Mon" and in doing so takes on, once again, the role of mother to him, the woman who named him and owned him (GST, 327).



Through Estha's eyes, Rahel's identity is overlain with that of Ammu as Estha examines his sisters' features and finds that they closely resemble their mothers', especially her mouth which is, for Estha "Their beautiful mother's mouth" (GST, 327). This line forms a textual parallel with the description of Kunti kissing Karna in the kathakali dance, where Karna shudders at "His lovely mother's kiss" thus blending eroticism and the desire for reconnection with the mother once again (GST, 233). Rahel's maternal feelings towards her brother are evoked as she thinks of their former unity within Ammu's body, reminding us again of that urge to reunite with the mother: "They were strangers who had met in a chance encounter. They had known each other before Life began" (GST, 327)

Here, at the novel's end, we are reminded of the monsoon which breaks on the first page as we are told that Estha's hand is held against Rahel's rain-splashed cheek: "Pressed against the coldness of a cheek, wet with shattered rain" (GST, 327) This play on the word 'shattered' indicates that the rain is 'already-broken,' in the sense that it has fallen, but carries with it connotations of a wasting of vitality and strength. This is both the strength of the monsoon which we saw burgeoning at the novel's beginning, but it is also the dwindling of two lives, two exhausted people whose identities are collapsing into an indistinguishable whole once again after years of traumatic separation.

The incest between the twins is hinted at rather than graphically portrayed, taking emphasis away from its physicalities. Instead the narrative concerns itself with conveying the details, and the inadequacy of language to describe what is actually happening:

There is very little that anyone could say to clarify what happened next. Nothing that (in Mammachi's book) would separate Sex from Love. Or needs from Feelings.

...

Except perhaps that it was a little cold. A little wet. But very quiet. The Air.

But what was there to say?

Only that there were tears. Only that Quietness and Emptiness fitted together like stacked spoons. Only that there was a snuffling in the hollows at the base of a lovely throat. Only that a hard honey-coloured shoulder had a semi-circle of teethmarks on it. Only that they held each other close, long after it was over. Only that what they shared that night was not happiness but hideous grief.

Only that once again they broke the Love Laws. That lay down who should be loved. And how. And how much. (GST, 328)

Sex between the twins is reduced to a pronoun which indicates merely that something has taken place without being explicit: "long after it was over." The perfect whole which the twins form is evoked again here in the image of the stacked spoons, only this time with definite sexual overtones. Once again, the theme of boundaries being breeched recurs, showing how the twins' relationship exceeds all forms of classification while becoming an aberration to all levels of human interaction.

Urbashi Barat notes that incest is seen as healing and generative in some cultures, featuring in mythological tales as a positive force, and it is certainly an urge to heal which brings the twins to commit incest, yet, in this instance it only perpetuates the despair wrought by Ammu's relationship with Velutha.<sup>189</sup> The hideous grief which the twins share is brought on, not particularly by a sense of 'wrong-doing,' but rather by the realisation that those continuities can never be retrieved. For Rama Kundu it is precisely the sharing of that hideous grief that brings the twins to seek comfort in such a physical way. Kundu views the incest scene as the most obvious culmination of decades of mutual guilt and grief and writes:

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<sup>189</sup> Urbashi Barat, "Arundhati Roy's The God of Small Things: Great Stories and Small Ones," Explorations: Arundhati Roy's The God of Small Things, eds. Indira Bhatt and Indira Nityanandam (New Delhi: Creative Books, 1999) 76.



“Who else would/could have shared this sorrow that had sent roots so deep down within the psyche . . . ?”<sup>190</sup>

Directly after the description of the incest, there is a passage showing Ammu’s realisation of her love for Velutha. We then come to the final section of the novel, the chapter entitled “The Cost of Living” in which we see Ammu and Velutha making love, in all its explicit detail (GST, 331). Through the structure of the text, the incest scene is shown to be a continuation of Ammu and Velutha’s affair which was abruptly finished twenty-three years before. Further links are made in that the language here directly mirrors the incest scene with the phrase:

It was a little cold. A little wet. A little quiet. The Air.  
But what was there to say? (GST, 338)

As Ammu is fractured from Velutha, Estha is fractured from Rahel and the two are now embroiled in the attempt to reforge lost continuities which appear to have been handed down through the generations. In this reading, the incest is an attempt to re-member many things: Ammu and Velutha’s arrested relationship, the twins’ own separation from each other and their separation from their mother. The final indication is that this is never possible.

Many writers question the postmodern interest in fragmented, decentred identity forms, particularly those with an interest in feminist and postcolonial concerns. Flax’s work as a psychotherapist, in which she helps patients with borderline personality disorders, means that her perspective of postmodern play with identity points out some deeply hypocritical ideas: “Those who celebrate the call for a ‘decentered’ self seem self-deceptively naive and unaware of the basic cohesion within themselves that makes the fragmentation of experiences

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<sup>190</sup> Rama Kundu, “Arundhati Roy: In the Light of Linguistics and Literary Criticism,” Arundhati Roy’s Fictional World: A Collection of Critical Essays, ed. A. N. Dwivedi (Delhi: B.R. Publishing Corporation, 2001) 100-101.

something other than a terrifying slide into psychosis.”<sup>191</sup> Each text in this chapter includes a character who has undergone a “terrifying slide into psychosis”: Aunt Mira with her alcoholism in Clear Light of Day, Estha’s muteness and obsessive-compulsive disorder in The God of Small Things and Saleem’s amnesia and communication difficulties in Midnight’s Children which I shall discuss below. In no way do any of these texts suggest a purely cerebral experimentalism with the concept of identity. In each case the “terrifying slide into psychosis” is the direct result of, or a metaphor for the experience of living within an oppressive political context. Linda Hutcheon highlights this same perspective, saying,

The current post-structuralist/post-modern challenges to the coherent, autonomous subject have to be put on hold in feminist and post-colonial discourses, for both must work first to assert and affirm a denied or alienated subjectivity: those radical post-modern challenges are in many ways the luxury of the dominant order which can afford to challenge that which it securely possesses.<sup>192</sup>

Such an interpretation as postmodern discourse may offer us would deny the attempt to interrogate the root causes for these psychological manifestations.

For Estha is it a sense of worthlessness coupled with a low self-worth brought on by guilt which occasions his gradual loss of language. As he falsely identifies Velutha to the police we are told that

Childhood tiptoed out.  
Silence slid in like a bolt. (GST,320)

Estha’s muteness relates to his journey towards regression in that it is described in ways which evoke the maternal:

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<sup>191</sup> Flax 218.

<sup>192</sup> Linda Hutcheon, “Circling the Downspout of Empire,” The Post Colonial Studies Reader, eds. Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin (London: Routledge, 1995) 130-131.



Once the quietness arrived, it stayed and spread in Estha. It reached out of his head and enfolded him in its swampy arms. It rocked him to the rhythm of an ancient, foetal heartbeat. It sent its stealthy, suckered tentacles inching along the insides of his skull, hoovering the knolls and dells of his memory, dislodging old sentences, whisking them off the tip of his tongue. It stripped his thoughts of the words that described them and left them pared and naked. Unspeakable. Numb. (GST,11)

This description relates to the pre-linguistic union the mother and child share, before the separation marked by that child's entry into language. Estha's muteness is in many ways a denial of the loss of his mother and an attempt to get back to that state of closeness which he shared with her. Further significance can be found by comparing this bond with the telepathic bond which he shared with Rahel, yet another example of a broken connection which existed both before and outside of language.

In Saleem's case his loss of language is accompanied by complete amnesia in which he forgets not only how to communicate normally but also his name and his past, along with a complete loss of affect as his normal senses stop working and he forgets how to feel. Whilst walking to his house during the Indo-Pakistan war of 1965, Saleem sees his house, with all his family inside, directly hit by a bomb. The explosion unearths his mother's precious silver spittoon which is thrown through the air by the blast and hits Saleem on the head:

the past plummeting toward me like a vulture-dropped hand to become what-purifies-and-set-me-free, because now as I look up there is a feeling at the back of my head and after that there is only a tiny but infinite moment of utter clarity while I tumble forwards to prostrate myself before my parents' funeral pyre, a minuscule but endless instant of knowing, before I am stripped of past present memory time shame and love, a fleeting but also timeless explosion in which I bow my head yes I acquiesce yes in the necessity of the blow, and then I am empty and free, because all of the Saleems go pouring out of me, . . . pouring out goes shame and guilt and wanting-to-please and needing-to-be-loved and determined-to-find-a-historical-role . . . free . . . liberated . . . absolved . . . beyond caring . . . restored to innocence and purity by a tumbling piece of the moon, wiped clean as a wooden writing-chest, brained (just as prophesied) by my mother's silver spittoon. (MC, 343)

This cataclysmic event in which the past plummets down upon Saleem's head can be linked to Stephen's experience of regression in The Child in Time, as this idea of being extricated from one's present context and divested of identity links both passages. The 'innocent' state to which Saleem is restored recalls the "desperate protesting innocence" of Stephen's lidless eyes as he sees himself returned to a foetal/primal state (CT, 60). In both texts, the protagonist concerned is made acutely aware of the ways in which their identity is founded within a family network, and their need for such a foundation overwhelms them just at the point at which this is threatened, or in Saleem's case, destroyed.

During the ensuing period of amnesia, Saleem does not let anyone take the spittoon away from him, even in the depths of the jungle he has to track during his intelligence work for the Pakistan army. Saleem's accident with the spittoon has its parallel in Cat's Eye as this event relies on the uncovering of an old object which takes the owner out of normal linear time and leaves her/him detached from reality, as Elaine feels when she holds the marble as a child. Also, this abstraction has the effect of preserving one's identity, forcing it into a suspended state in order to protect the character from intense pain: the marble protects Elaine from the bullying at school and the spittoon protects Saleem from fully experiencing his family's annihilation. The experience of war has the effect of suspending Saleem, and the country of India for which he is a mirror, from normal, linear, historical progression as both individual and nation are "fated to plunge memoryless into an adulthood whose every aspect grew daily more grotesque" (MC, 345, sic.). Not only is the country of India split but the psychology of Saleem is split as well. As the other men in his troop begin to recognise this they become deeply uneasy about the man they call 'the buddha' because of his silence, a point which Saleem discusses in his narrative:



Did they sense, in the buddha's numbed blankness, a trace of 'undesirability'?—For was not his rejection of past-and-family just the type of rejection that they were dedicated to 'rooting out'? . . . And . . . I suggest that at the deep foundations of their unease lay the fear of schizophrenia, of splitting, that was buried like an umbilical chord in every Pakistani heart. In those days, the country's East and West wings were separated by an unbridgeable gulf. Religion was the glue of Pakistan, holding the halves together; just as consciousness, the awareness of oneself as a homogenous entity in time, a blend of past and present, is the glue of personality, holding together our then and now. Enough philosophizing: what I am saying is that by abandoning consciousness, seceding from history, the buddha was setting the worst of examples - and the example was followed by no less a personage than Sheikh Mujib, when he led the East Wing into secession and declared it independent as 'Bangladesh'! . . . even in those depths of my withdrawal from responsibility, I remained responsible, through the workings of the metaphorical modes of connection, for the belligerent events of 1971. (MC, 351)

Secession from history is thus both evidence of psychological damage as well as a protection, a way of avoiding complete psychological collapse. This idea of suspension has links with Estha's muteness which is described as "a sort of aestivation, a dormancy, the psychological equivalent of what lungfish do to get themselves through the dry season . . ." (GST,10). Saleem's mental abstraction is symbolic of the destruction of the dream of Indian unification which is represented by being ripped from context; Saleem and nation are ripped from historical continuity, "past-and-family" or communal memory and both are split apart due to the war damages sustained by each. The idea that a personality is 'glued' together by a "blend of past and present" shows that Saleem's bodily dispersal into fragments is caused by his persistent removal from his own history through false parentage, partition and amnesia.

Language and the "desperate need for meaning. . ." <sup>193</sup>

Given back his name by Parvati, who then smuggles him back into India, Saleem's memory returns and he writes it into his narrative in order that his son, Aadam (who is in truth Shiva's

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<sup>193</sup> Rushdie, Midnight's Children 166.

son), will know his father's story. Due to Saleem's conviction that he is breaking into fragments and, therefore, will not be around to explain his life to Aadam, his need to be understood is reiterated throughout: on the first page of the narrative Saleem declares "I admit it: above all things, I fear absurdity" (MC, 9). This desire to be understood manifests itself in the densely packed narrative as Saleem insists that "To understand just one life, you have to swallow the world," once again implying that web of meaning in which one's context gives one's life significance (MC, 109). The particular use of language reflects this multiplicity and the concern with communication which dominates both Midnight's Children and The God of Small Things. An innovative approach to finding linguistic forms is demonstrated in these texts yet pure innovation is not the principal point of interest as the voices created express a distinctive subjectivity and position.

Although it would be very easy to view the writing techniques on display in Midnight's Children and The God of Small Things as postmodern, such simplistic definition blinds us to the specifically postcolonial issues which Rushdie and Roy's treatment of language evokes. These two writers play with language in order to raise two issues, the first of which is the detraction of authority from conventional modes of English language usage. The language of the coloniser carries with it connotations of authority and status and Rushdie and Roy both seek to divest English of some of this centrality through their own specific usage. This then allows them to achieve their second goal: to create a language, albeit a hybrid one, which allows these writers the means of expression of their own particular identity. La Rochère notes the manner in which language and identity are bound together in the postcolonial text:



For postcolonial theory and practice, the question of origin and language is an even more crucial area of enquiry, insofar as the critical and creative texts developing from their perspective have to negotiate with the languages and conceptual frameworks imposed as part of the traumatic legacy of colonialism. The necessity of finding a voice and a language distinct from the Western critical heritage, yet avoiding the pitfall of a nostalgia for pre-colonial ‘authenticity’ (in the form of an unproblematic ‘return to origins’) is still a much debated issue.<sup>194</sup>

The hybridity of language indicates an acknowledgement of English influence whilst simultaneously showing an irreverence for its forms. Thus Rushdie runs words together so that their sound rather than their meaning as a phrase is emphasised, giving us “Talldarkhandsome,” “lockstockandbarrel,” “whatsitsname” and “everywhichthing.”<sup>195</sup>

This subversion of English is practised at a conscious level in Roy’s text by Estha and Rahel, notably in their reading backwards. Although the twins are not aware of it, Roy suggests political subversion with this technique, particularly when they read the sign in the police station on which each letter of the word ‘police’ is written as the capital of a noun which supposedly describes the police:

‘ssenetiloP,’ he said. ‘ssenetiloP, ecneidebO,’  
 ‘ytlayoL, ecnegilletnI,’ Rahel said.  
 ‘ysetruoC.’  
 ‘ycneiciffE.’ (313, emphasis in original)

Vanden Dreisen interprets the reading backwards as “a powerful subversion of the established order: they read the word as they read the world in oppositional mode to that ordained by the powers that be.”<sup>196</sup> Similarly, the twins enjoy dissecting the English language, an example of which is remembered by Rahel as an adult:

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<sup>194</sup> La Rochère, xxviii-xxix.

<sup>195</sup> Rushdie, *Midnight’s Children* 101, 102, 138 and 236 respectively.

<sup>196</sup> Cynthia Vanden Dreisen, “When language Dances: The Subversive Power of Roy’s Text in *The God of Small Things*,” *Arundhati Roy: The Novelist Extraordinary*, ed R. K. Dhawan (London: Sangam Books, 1999) 368.

Nictitating membrane, she remembered she and Estha had once spent a whole day saying. She and Estha and Sophie Mol.

Nictitating  
ictitating  
titating  
itating  
ating  
ting  
ing (189, emphasis in original)

Although at one level this simply shows children's natural experimentation with language as they learn its sounds and forms, it has the effect of disabling the usual power and influence accorded English within Indian society, deconstructing it in order to expose it as merely a system of communication like so many others. Behind this is the motivation of the postcolonial writer to demonstrate the power systems at work in a society where Anglophilia is a dangerous disease.

Elleke Boehmer recognises this in Roy's writing, saying that it "persistently works at unsettling and undoing the English language."<sup>197</sup> We see many examples of this, one such instance being given in a scene where Rahel's Uncle Chacko is talking to her one night during her childhood:

'Anything's possible in Human Nature,' Chacko said in his Reading Aloud voice. Talking to the darkness now, suddenly insensitive to his little fountain-haired niece. 'Love. Madness. Hope. Infinite joy.'

Of the four things that were Possible in Human Nature, Rahel thought that Infinite Joy sounded the saddest. Perhaps because of the way Chacko said it.

Infinite Joy. With a church sound to it. Like a sad fish with fins all over.

(GST, 118, sic., emphasis in original)

Upper case letters are used frequently throughout the novel in order to lend emphasis to words which the child's imagination believes to be important. Rahel's lack of understanding of the word 'infinite' is played with here, so that Rahel splits down the sound of 'infinite' and

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<sup>197</sup> Elleke Boehmer, "East is East and South is South: The Cases of Sarosini Naidu and Arundhati Roy," Women: A Cultural Review 11.1 (2000): 70.



gets 'in-fin-nate' which provokes an image of a fish encumbered by fins, which makes it unhappy.

One other example of this reappropriation of the sounds of English is in the repeated references to the barn owl or "Bar Nowl" which Estha sees sheltering in the pickle factory's rafters. Estha and Rahel reduce the phrase into more familiar words: they understand the word 'Bar' and thus assume that a 'Nowl' is a kind of bird who sits on a bar, thus giving a Bar Nowl (GST, 193). This is a kind of fragmentation of language but in the most non-violent of ways. We are simply shown how the English language, in this instance, does not correlate with reality as the children experience it. Language is reduced to a series of sounds and reassembled as the twins see fit.

However, this play with language should not be confused with the postmodernist's experimentalism. Vanden Dreisen, in discussing Roy's novel as a post-realist text, argues that while Rushdie and Roy's techniques may appear postmodern "it is misleading to label them post-modern. The post-realist challenges the earlier (largely male) legitimating narratives in the name of the ethical universal of humanism, whereas the post-modernist rejects humanist ideals."<sup>198</sup> The language techniques which Rushdie and Roy employ force a rethinking of the linguistic domination which the English language is achieving worldwide. Rather than simply refusing to use the language, these Indian English writers are remaking the language so that it can represent their experience of reality. Boehmer comments further on this aspect, saying,

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<sup>198</sup> Cynthia Vanden Dreisen 374.

Through a restless layering and contortion of accepted meanings, postcolonial fictions, plays and poems . . . continually chafe at Western self-reference and convention. Emerging from beyond established cultural borderlines, such texts assert an irreconcilability or recalcitrance, an ‘enunciatory disorder,’ as Homi Bhabha puts it: a strangeness which antagonistically and creatively interrupts western forms of understanding.<sup>199</sup>

In response to this, I would firstly add that many people would think of India as having very well-established cultural borderlines. However, that postcolonial fiction captures a tension between antagonism and creation is a point which relates not only to the linguistic innovations but also to the recognition that new perspectives are required in order that a truly progressive postcolonial voice can be developed: as Saleem writes, “new myths are needed” (MC, 458).

The linguistic dynamic of cultural imperialism is highlighted by Roy in the scene in which Chacko visits his friend, Comrade Pillai, and his children recite verse for Chacko. Comrade Pillai encourages his six-year-old son, Lenin, to recite from Shakespeare’s Julius Caesar, prompting the boy at first by beginning the desired lines for him; “‘Friends, Romans, countrymen . . .’” Then, in a fit of exasperated excitement, Lenin rushes out into the garden and recites the whole passage at breakneck speed, which is represented in the text thus:

‘lend me yawYERS;  
I cometoberry Caesar, not to praise him.  
Theevil that mendoo lives after them.  
The Goodisoft interred with their bones.’  
He shouted it fluently, without faltering once. Remarkable considering he was only six and didn’t understand a word of what he was saying. (GST, 275, sic.)

The undeniable humour of this episode points to the ridiculous imposition of the proclivities of English high culture upon Indian culture. That the revered language of one of England’s greatest playwrights is being decimated in this scene is no postmodern comment on the

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<sup>199</sup> Elleke Boehmer, “East” 69- 70.



shortcomings of language but a specifically postcolonial comment on the persistence of cultural imperialism.

Telepathy links both Midnight's Children and The God of Small Things and stands in contrast to language as a pure form of communication, unhindered by the linguistic influences of colonisation. On the topic of the Midnight Children's Conference, Saleem says "below the surface transmissions . . . language faded away, and was replaced by universally intelligible thought-forms which far transcended words" (MC, 168). The telepathy which the twins shared as children comes back to Rahel as she returns to the Ayemenem household:

Now, these years later, Rahel has a memory of waking up one night giggling at Estha's funny dream.

She has other memories too that she has no right to have.

She remembers, for instance (though she hadn't been there), what the Orangedrink Lemondrink Man did to Estha in the Abhilash Talkies. She remembers the taste of the tomato sandwiches—Estha's sandwiches, that Estha ate—on the Madras Mail to Madras.

And these were only the small things. (GST, 3, emphasis in original)

That these two novels set such store by the possibility of telepathic communication indicates many conflicting desires. On one level, there is the postcolonial desire to not have to use a hybrid language which is partly that of the coloniser. However, another aspect to consider is the link to the idea of regression to the pre-Oedipal state in which there need be no communication of the Self and the Other as both are One. The telepathic communication also implies that there is no way of returning completely to an un-colonised language, that to revert to linguistic norms as they were before colonisation is impossible.

### Loss and Recovery

Clear Light of Day and Midnight's Children end with a cautious optimism, yet in The God of Small Things, the most recent of the three texts, we are shown the desperation caused by centuries of problems. These memory-narratives are different from those shown in my

previous chapters in that they do not attempt to recreate philosophies of metanarrative status or, if any such idea is hinted at, then we are shown its dramatic failure, particularly so in the case of the desire to reunite with lost origins and historical perspectives within a postcolonial context. Michael Reder elaborates on the real challenge that this presents: "The project of mediating between the past and the present is not uniquely postcolonial; all psychologically healthy humans must bridge this gap. However, when an individual's historical past is disrupted—by personal or political events—then negotiating between the past and the present is more difficult."<sup>200</sup>

The effects of colonialism and cultural imperialism are interrogated in these texts, with an emphasis on memory and the importance of turning memory into narrative in order that one's experience and identity does not go unacknowledged: this is the catalyst which urges Saleem to write his story for his son. Reder discusses the ontological questions which Saleem's narrative provokes: "By placing Saleem at the centre of his own universe, Rushdie offers us a radically humanist view of history, narration and identity. The answer to Saleem's questions 'Who am I? Who are we?' is actually quite simple: we are the stories we tell about ourselves."<sup>201</sup> Rege notes a similar point in a discussion of contemporary Indian writing in English which surpasses postmodern thought and works towards a view of the future: "Rather than taking Indian English writing down a slippery slope into global capitalism, with its post-modern free play and radical indeterminacy, the post-Rushdie novel would seem to be moving beyond ambivalence to new commitments."<sup>202</sup>

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<sup>200</sup> Michael Reder, "Rewriting History and Identity: The Reinvention of Myth, Epic, and Allegory in Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*," *Critical Essays on Salman Rushdie*, ed. M. Keith Booker (New York: G. K. Hall & Co., 1999) 228.

<sup>201</sup> Reder 224

<sup>202</sup> Rege 276



Although The God of Small Things focuses on the devastation caused to Estha and Rahel's family, it too ends with some kind of "forward impulsion."<sup>203</sup> The final word spoken is "'Naaley'" translated for us as 'Tomorrow', as Ammu and Velutha make tacit arrangements to meet again on the following day (GST, 340). Although this word has been spoken many years ago by two characters who are already dead at the beginning of the narrative, Roy's placing of the word right at the end of the text can be interpreted as a metafictional comment on the future of India, asking if it will be brighter.

As in texts discussed previously in this study, both Midnight's Children and The God of Small Things have scenes in them in which a lost object is found once again. Like the blue marble of Cat's Eye, the encrypted documents in The Crow Road, and the ancient skeleton and the brooch in The Peppered Moth, these two texts also bring fragments of the past into the present in a way which gives a strong sense of the value of being able to link oneself in to one's past.

Saleem's lost object is a toy tin globe which he buried under the house in Bombay where he grew up. The globe contains a photograph of himself as a baby which was taken for The Times of India, a newspaper clipping which documents his birth at midnight and his letter from the Prime Minister, Jawaharlal Nehru. Saleem unearths his buried childhood object in middle age, but the discovery only serves to highlight a demise in his circumstances. From being the 'mirror of the nation', Saleem is now a man falling apart. His toy globe, which once represented a shiny, new world, a world which, as the child of midnight, he held in his hands and played with, is now "badly dented and stuck together with Scotch Tape," and the treasures it holds are tainted by "yellowing and mildew . . ." (MC, 119). Saleem's

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<sup>203</sup> S. Connors 21.

comparison of himself as an adult with the hope and promise he embodied as a child paints a depressing picture yet, at the very least, this picture marks the progress of time, unlike the object which is recalled in The God of Small Things.

On her homecoming, Rahel remembers the plastic wristwatch she had as a child which had the time painted on it so that it permanently read ten to two. This watch is something which the twins had in their 'store' on the other side of the river, where they were making a nest of provisions that would enable them to run away from home, a task which they were undertaking because they felt they had become a burden to their mother. The watch represents this period of immense sadness and fear for Rahel and as she recalls this childhood object as an adult the narrative is rendered in a dramatic way, making full use the pauses afforded by line endings:

Something lay buried in the ground. Under grass. Under twenty-three years of June rain.

A small forgotten thing.

Nothing that the world would miss.

A child's plastic wristwatch with the time painted on it.

Ten to two it said. (GST, 127)

As the June rain bombs the ground, stirring up dirt the way that memory stirs up the past, we are reminded of this simple child's toy which is accompanied by an immense sadness: while it carries immense significance for Rahel, it will not be missed by the rest of the world, indicating the obscurity of her and Estha's pain. The watch represents Rahel and Estha's entrapment in time as they are unable to move beyond the tragic death of those whom they loved, and, more importantly, unable to forgive themselves for their inadvertent part in it.

Torn between the desire for the pre-colonial motherland and the attractions of the commercialised Western world, the characters in the texts studied here have no hope of building a sense of connection to a new independent India. The comforting connection to



history which fulfills the characters in many of the texts studied in the first and second chapters is not possible in a country which has been so irreparably severed from its historical continuum. As part of that which is Other to the West, India is expelled from linear temporality and forced to occupy a position which resembles that monumental time of which Kristeva writes.

This condition of stasis pervades the texts under discussion in the following chapter of this study which also focus on the unearthing, not of a lost object, but of a displaced person. In each case, as with the recovered objects in other texts in this study, the person symbolises a connection to the past. This link is particularly beneficial on both personal and broader, social levels, helping to overcome the kind of entrapment in a static temporality represented so poignantly by Rahel's fake wristwatch. Having looked at the attempt to reconstruct identity within a Western context in the first two chapters, then examining the issues of identity in a postcolonial situation in this chapter, we now turn to two texts which occupy an ambiguous space between Western and postcolonial areas of discussion. These novels cover the dispossession of national and cultural identity by oppressive forces, while also showing how individuals struggle to recreate a sense of belonging and coherent identity once they have been repositioned within a Western context.

## Chapter Five: Communal Memory in

### Beloved and Fugitive Pieces.

The era of modernism is typically thought of as beginning in the early twentieth-century with the events of World War One. This period is attributed with a breaking up of cultural consciousness due to the experience of violence on a scale which had not been seen before in Europe. Yet, to invest this war with so much significance that it could be singularly responsible for such a massive shift in the development of culture denies the impact of three hundred years of African slavery, during which at least sixty million Africans died.<sup>204</sup>

Cynthia Dobbs begins her discussion of Beloved with Morrison's revisioning of the modern and argues that the standard acknowledgement of World War One as the root of modernist angst betrays a "profound amnesia about the 'kinds of dissolution' that were part and parcel of slavery, but it also ignores, as Morrison points out, the radical new epistemologies of psychology and sociology necessitated by the nearly unthinkable atrocities of slavery."<sup>205</sup> In interview, Morrison makes clear the unarguable links between slavery and the modernity crisis:

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<sup>204</sup> Toni Morrison. Interview. "The Pain of Being Black," with Bonnie Angelo, Time May 22, 1989. <http://www.time.com/community/pulitzerinterview.html>; 2. In her Pulitzer Prizewinner interview, Toni Morrison discusses the research she carried out before writing Beloved and states that the most conservative estimate for the number of African deaths due to the three hundred years of slavery was sixty million. Some historians estimated the number of deaths at two hundred million.

<sup>205</sup> Cynthia Dobbs, "Toni Morrison's Beloved: Bodies Returned, Modernism Revisited," African American Review 32.4 (1998): 563-564.



These things had to be addressed by black people a long time ago: certain kinds of dissolution, the loss of and the need to reconstruct certain kinds of stability. Certain kinds of madness . . . You can call [modernity] an ideology and an economy, what it is is a pathology. Slavery broke the world in half, it broke every way. It broke Europe. It made them into something else, it made them slave masters, it made them crazy.<sup>206</sup>

For Morrison, this splitting of the human race created the mass-cultural equivalent of psychology's 'Self' and 'Other' which has subsequently had terrible effects on humanity; "Everybody remembers the first time they were taught that part of the human race was Other. That's a trauma. It's as though I told you that your left hand is not part of your body."<sup>207</sup> Like Dobbs, Morrison acknowledges the "national amnesia" which still blinds us to the enormity of slavery.<sup>208</sup> Beloved works to counteract this amnesia by forcing a remembrance of things which contemporary, largely white, Western society would rather not remember.

The Holocaust, however, is given its due recognition as a system which had enormous impact on Western culture. Like Morrison, Kristeva identifies the psychic splitting of cultural consciousness which World War Two in particular brought about as it "brutalised consciousness through an outburst of death and madness that no barrier, be it ideological or aesthetic, seemed able to contain any longer. This was a pressure that had found its intimate, unavoidable repercussion at the heart of psychic grief."<sup>209</sup> Kristeva goes on to say that "systems of perception and representation" are inevitably damaged by such violence.<sup>210</sup> It is the possibility of representing the horrors of the Holocaust and slavery with which the writers

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<sup>206</sup> Morrison in interview with Gilroy 26.

<sup>207</sup> Morrison in interview with Angelo 3.

<sup>208</sup> Morrison in interview with Angelo 3.

<sup>209</sup> Kristeva Black 222.

<sup>210</sup> Kristeva Black 223.

under discussion here struggle. The inability to adequately communicate the scale of violences sustained by Africans and Jews is the inescapable element at the core of each narrative. As Primo Levi says in writing about his experiences of the Holocaust:

There is no proportion between the pity we feel and the extent of the pain by which the pity is aroused: a single Anne Frank excites more emotion than the myriads who suffered as she did but whose image has remained in the shadows. Perhaps it is necessary that it can be so. If we had to and were able to suffer the sufferings of everyone, we could not live.<sup>211</sup>

Levi's conjecture points to the necessity of forgetting in order that consciousness is allowed some kind of reprieve, a survival, but Morrison and Michaels write narratives which insist on the inevitability of memory, and one's recognition and acceptance of that memory. The relative positions of Levi, Morrison and Michaels must be taken into account at this point: while both Morrison and Michaels have experienced the continuing effects of prejudice against Afro-Americans and Jews respectively, neither writer has witnessed slavery or the Holocaust first-hand, supporting Levi's suggestion that adequate remembrance may never be possible.

Instead, each writer attempts to present ways in which identity can be reconstructed with reference to the memory of trauma. As with every other work in this study, the concept of identity which is constructed is an interrelated one which is constituted as much by community as it is by history. These narratives are linked by a set of common themes which are treated in very similar ways throughout: the ghost who represents the past's continuity in the present moment, land and water as symbolic centres of connection to wider perspectives of time and memory, dehumanisation through language and the need to forge channels of

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<sup>211</sup> Primo Levi, "The Gray Zone," The Holocaust: Origins, Implementation, Aftermath, ed. Omer Bartov (London: Routledge, 2000) 265.



communication which compensate for this. The central character of each text is a child who witnesses the events of institutionalised torture and returns in order to instigate a survival of traumatic memory for their community.

### Beloved

Set in 1873, Morrison's protagonist in Beloved is Sethe, a middle-aged Afro-American woman who lives in house number 124, Bluestone Road, Cincinnati, Ohio, around which much of the action of the novel oscillates.<sup>212</sup> A former slave, Sethe escaped from her life of abuse and hardship on the ironically-named 'Sweet Home' farm as a six-months pregnant woman who is already a mother of three young children she had with her husband Halle; her boys, Howard and Buglar, and her as yet unnamed baby daughter—her youngest child. The bungled escape plan means that her children go ahead of Sethe to the safety of their free paternal grandmother, Baby Suggs, who lives in 124. Sethe follows afterwards on foot and, during her escape, gives birth to another daughter whom she names Denver. After a month of living with Baby Suggs and all her children, happy but for the unexplained absence of Halle, Sethe's owner, referred to only as "schoolteacher" (36), finds Sethe. As Sethe sees him coming down the road, she takes her children into the garden shed and tries to kill them all in order that they never experience a life of slavery. Sethe manages to kill only her eldest daughter, the still unnamed girl, by cutting her throat with a handsaw, while newborn Denver is snatched to safety and Baby Suggs revives the two boys (149-150). Sethe is imprisoned with Denver for the murder but as soon as she is released she prostitutes herself to a stonemason in order that he will carve a headstone for the daughter she murdered. On the

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<sup>212</sup> The house is hereafter referred to as '124.'

headstone, she has the stonemason engrave the word 'Beloved', the second word of the sermon given at her baby's funeral (5).

Her reputation as a murderer means that after prison Sethe is free as no slave-owner can trust her, and she and her children live on Bluestone Road together with the ghost of the dead baby which troubles the house daily, as we see in the opening line, "124 was spiteful. Full of baby's venom" (3). The haunting deeply affects Howard and Buglar who have some memory of the day their mother tried to kill them, and the boys eventually run away on their own. Sethe and Denver live alone with the baby's ghost, ostracised because of Sethe's crime by many of the black community living in their neighbourhood.

Eighteen years after the murder of her daughter, Sethe, Denver and Paul D, another escaped slave from Sweet Home, return to 124 to find a young woman sat outside the house. The woman says her name is Beloved and Sethe takes her in and looks after her. With time, Beloved's curious questions and fragmented stories lead the reader to several possible interpretations as to her identity. Narrated largely in the third person with some first person passages, Morrison handles Beloved's characterisation in such a way that all of these readings are simultaneously possible, investing Beloved with a wealth of significance, all of which relates to the theme of memory, as Sethe's past, Sethe's mother's past and a whole history comes to bear upon the narrative present.

Fugitive Pieces is a narrative which begins during World War Two and is split between two voices. The first part of the text (5-195) is formed from the collected manuscripts of a poet called Jakob Beer who escaped a pogrom in Poland, aged seven. As the Nazi soldiers invade his family home, Jakob manages to hide behind a cupboard and escapes detection. When the soldiers leave the home, Jakob emerges from his hiding place to find his mother and father dead in the living room but his fifteen-year-old sister Bella is nowhere to



be seen. Jakob never finds her or any information on where she was taken. Immediately, Jakob runs away on his own into the countryside. He walks by night and digs a shallow hole for himself to hide in by day, still fearful of detection even though he is lost in countryside and undergrowth. Nearing starvation, Jakob is found by a Greek archeologist named Athos who smuggles Jakob out of the country, across Europe and down to the Greek island of Zakynthos where Athos hides Jakob in his attic room until the war is over.

While in hiding, Athos teaches Jakob the Greek language and all he knows about archeology and geology. At the same time, Athos encourages Jakob to maintain his knowledge of Hebrew and Judaism in order that he keeps a sense of connection to his own cultural heritage. During Jakob's teenage years, he and Athos emigrate to Toronto where Athos works as a lecturer and Jakob takes further studies. When Jakob is a young man, Athos dies and while Jakob is clearing out Athos's flat he finds hidden papers which give evidence that Athos had been searching for his missing sister Bella until he died to no avail. Jakob becomes a poet using the fields of archeology and geology as sources of inspiration through which to express his loss. As a sixty-year-old man, Jakob returns to the Greece, to the island of Idhra this time, with his young wife, Michaela, who is heavily pregnant with Jakob's first child, and it is from this point that he writes the memoirs which form the first part of the novel. Jakob and Michaela both die in a car accident in Athens, before the child is born.

Ben's narrative (201-294) is the story of his search for Jakob's notebooks. The child of Jewish parents who had survived a concentration camp, Ben finds an empathy with Jakob's poetry which blends literature and landscape in a way that correlates with the thesis on which he is working. Ben learns of Jakob's death and hears from a colleague of Jakob's that the poet was involved in writing memoirs at the time of his death. Ben travels to Idhra to find the notebooks and, in reading them, comes to a deeper understanding of his parents'

experiences during the holocaust. The missing sibling is also evoked in Ben's narrative as we learn that while Ben is clearing out his parents' possessions after their death, he finds a photograph of his parents with two young children, Ben's older siblings who we later learn were separated from his parents during the concentration camp. Ben's parents never know what happened to their other children and never speak about them to Ben.

Jakob and Ben's tales are joined with the themes of loss and longing which they express in intensely personal ways in order that the world know their stories and those of their parents. Through texts which identify the extent to which the individual is always implicated in the historical and the social, these two novels form a moving testament to the power of memory, not simply in the sense of an individual's recollection, but a communal integrity which never ceases and which must be acknowledged and respected. Both Fugitive Pieces and Beloved show the reverberations of trauma on personal and social levels yet in each case these novels explore a process of remembering and healing which King describes as "the need to acknowledge the traumas of the past in order to leave them behind."<sup>213</sup>

### **"All of it is now" and Beloved**

In Morrison's novel, this returning child is Beloved whose identity is a text in which are written many different interpretations which range over the whole experience of African slave history: capture, shipment, enslavement in America and being born into freedom, a status which is quickly taken away again. There are four simultaneous interpretations as to Beloved's identity, the first being that she is the embodiment of the child whom Sethe murdered, in order that she would not be taken into slavery. A second interpretation is that

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<sup>213</sup> King, Memory152.



she is a manifestation of the deep-rooted yet largely unacknowledged African memory of the Middle Passage, the route that many slave ships took across the Atlantic from Africa to America. Interpretations of Beloved's narratives of the Middle Passage also indicate that Beloved is Sethe's own mother who witnessed her mother, Sethe's grandmother, commit suicide by throwing herself overboard.

Finally, there is also the suggestion that Beloved is the former sex-slave of an Ohio man. Stamp Paid, a close friend of Sethe's suggests this possibility to Paul D, saying "'Was a girl locked up in the house with a whiteman over by Deer Creek. Found him dead last summer and the girl gone. Maybe that's her. Folks say he had her in there since she was a pup'"(235). This reading is suggested again when Beloved asks Sethe if there are any white men near and Beloved says "'One of them was in the house. He hurt me'"(215). These are the only suggestions that Beloved is anything other than a ghost, yet her ability to disappear and reappear at will, the tell-tale scar across her throat and the way in which she possesses Sethe, Denver and Paul D indicate that if she represents this sex-slave girl at all, it is because the girl died and Beloved's ghostly persona now also encompasses that of the girl from Deer Creek.

For Sethe and Denver, Beloved's name is linked to the epitaph on the headstone, yet the reader is also shown that Beloved's name marks the sexual abuse she experienced on the slave ship, as Beloved tells Denver, "'In the dark my name is Beloved'"(75). From the story told in Beloved's ensuing narrative, it becomes apparent that the "dark" refers to the cargo-hold where 'Beloved' was the name given to her in the night by the crew who systematically raped her (241). Denver's questioning of Beloved's previous experiences shows her misinterpretation as she understands Beloved's responses to be evidence that she is her sister come back from the grave:

“You see anybody?”

“Heaps. A lot of people is down there. Some is dead.”

“You see Jesus? Baby Suggs?”

“I don’t know. I don’t know the names.” (75)

Denver also fails to pick up on the fact that Beloved does not differentiate between her enquiry about Jesus and her enquiry about Baby Suggs; to Beloved they are just names for people she doesn’t know. So convinced is Denver that Beloved is her sister, she does not question the fact that only some people are dead in the place Beloved speaks about in her fragmented narrative passages which Denver interprets as stories about the afterlife.

Beloved focuses obsessively on this one hellish scene which can only be interpreted with any degree of consistency if one reads it as describing existence on board a slave ship:

All of it is now    It is always now    there will never be a time when I am not crouching and watching others who are crouching too    I am always crouching . . . if we had more to drink we could make tears    we cannot make sweat or morning water so the men without skin bring us theirs    one time they bring us sweet rocks to suck    we are all trying to leave our bodies behind    the man on my face has done it . . . storms rock us and mix the women into the men and the men into the women (210-211)

In this place, the dead are eventually thrown into the water below them and Beloved later describes waiting on a bridge; it never occurs to any other character that she is speaking here of a bridge aboard a ship and not one over a river, an interpretation which would support the explanation of her being the girl from Deer Creek (212). The “men without skin” are the white crew-members who appear, to one who has never seen a European before, not to have any skin. Thirst prevents the slaves from crying, sweating or urinating and they are forced to drink the urine of the crew who also give a kind of sugar-lump to the slaves to keep them alive. Such bodily fluids are later used in the text as a powerful symbol of connection between characters, as I shall discuss below. Beloved lies under a dead man for a lot of her time on the ship and many of the other slaves are attempting to kill themselves by sheer will



power, there being no room in which to move around and inflict harm upon themselves.

Beloved's elliptical narrative passages give the impression of one who does not fully understand what is going on around her, thereby conveying very well the sense of bewilderment which must have prevailed in the captured Africans' minds. The elliptical narrative also indicates the impossibility of fully explaining the horror of the Middle Passage through language alone, as Beloved says in her attempts to describe what she witnessed, "how can I say things that are pictures"(210).

Beloved's composite identity indicates the interlinked nature of individual memory, cultural memory and collective history, a relationship which dictates that in order to remember one's own past, one must also remember its interrelation with a wider history. This reflects the connected historical perspectives of Saleem in Midnight's Children and Tom Crick in Waterland in which these characters are aware of their inescapable implication in history. As Robert L. Broad notes, there can be no personal reclaiming without a "communal reclaiming": "Looking for their 'beloved,' Sethe and Denver get their people too. All sixty million of them."<sup>214</sup> The possibility of reconnection which materialises in Beloved's presence is a contradiction of typical Western perceptions of identity as singular and fixed, as Broad comments with direct reference to Morrison's own opinions on this subject:

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<sup>214</sup> Robert L. Broad, "Giving Blood to the Scraps: Haints, History and Hosea in Beloved," African American Review 28.2 (1994): 192.

This denial of any solid or clear boundary between the individual and the group rubs painfully against the grain of Western American social mythology, and that is exactly the way Morrison wants it. . . . Morrison articulates her effort, expressly rooted in African culture, to contest Western culture's veneration of individuality: ". . . I want to point out the dangers, to show that nice things don't always happen to the totally self-reliant if there is no conscious historical connection." <sup>215</sup>

Yet the politics of such a remembering are not only radical in their opposition to conventional forms, they are also essential for a revision of the Afro-American community's collectivity and a way for that community to approach the future. Indeed, this process of remembering the individual with the communal and the historical affected Morrison herself in the writing of Beloved as she felt that she was getting in touch with "some collective memory." <sup>216</sup>

Brogan comments on this aspect of recuperation that the process of remembering can have for a community, especially one which has had its identity depleted: "Through the agency of ghosts, group histories that have in some way been threatened, erased, or fragmented are recuperated and revised." <sup>217</sup> Brogan goes on to discuss the potential of developing a "new and enlarged group identity" that such a process can bring about: <sup>218</sup> "When the ghost in Morrison's Beloved speaks of her life before 124 in terms appropriate to the slave ships, she clearly becomes more than an externalization of one character's longing and guilt; her return

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<sup>215</sup> Broad 192. Citing from Toni Morrison, "Rootedness: The Ancestor as Foundation," Black Women Writers (1950-1980): A Critical Evaluation, ed. Mari Evans. Garden City: Doubleday, 1984. (339-345). 344.

<sup>216</sup> Caroline Rody, "Toni Morrison's Beloved: History, 'Rememory,' and a 'Clamour for a Kiss'," American Literary History 7.1 (1995): 97. Citing from Toni Morrison in interview "Toni Morrison," with Claudia Tate. Black Women Writers at Work, ed. Claudia Tate. New York: Continuum, 1983. 131.

<sup>217</sup> Kathleen Brogan, Cultural Haunting: Ghosts and Ethnicity in Recent American Literature, (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1998) 6.

<sup>218</sup> Brogan 92.



represents the return of all dead enslaved Africans.”<sup>219</sup> This then becomes what Arthur Redding describes as “ethnic self-determination,” in which *Beloved*’s multiple identities become a counterbalance to the amorphous identity imposed upon African Americans by their oppressors.<sup>220</sup>

*Beloved*’s recollections of the Middle Passage erupt into the text sporadically, yet few characters manage to understand their significance. Denver and Sethe only read *Beloved*’s narrative as being about her experiences in the afterlife, a misrecognition which highlights the extent to which these women are broken from their own histories as they cannot identify the scenario of which *Beloved* speaks. The experiences of the Middle Passage can no longer be remembered by the American-born residents of Bluestone Road due to the fragmenting effects of slavery on families which has thereby prevented memories from being handed down through the generations, thus denying each Afro-American access to their collective history. Only towards the text’s end do we see some indication from Denver that she comprehends *Beloved*’s greater significance; when Paul D asks Denver if she thinks *Beloved* really was her sister, Denver replies ““At times. At times I think she was—more”” (266). As Jean Wyatt notes, the word ‘more’ evokes the “Sixty Million and more” of the epigraph and gives a small indication that Denver’s relationship with *Beloved* has inaugurated her into a sense of her communal memory.<sup>221</sup>

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<sup>219</sup> Brogan 5.

<sup>220</sup> Arthur Redding, “‘Haints’: American Ghosts, Ethnic Memory and Contemporary Fiction,” *Mosaic: A Journal for the Interdisciplinary Study of Literature* 34.4 (2001): 174-175.

<sup>221</sup> Jean Wyatt, “Giving Body to the Word: The Maternal Symbolic in Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*,” *PMLA: Publications of the Modern Language Association of America* 108.3 (1993): 479.

Only in Beloved's presence does Sethe begin to have a fleeting memory of hearing that her mother was aboard a slaveship. This information is related to her by Nan, Sethe's carer, who tells Sethe as a small girl that herself and Sethe's mother were "together from the sea"(62). This is the only example of a memory of the Middle Passage being recounted by a living person, indicating that this cataclysmic period is already dying from the store of collective memory. No character recognises the historical significance of Beloved, who also holds memories of Africa, the neglected motherland, the locus of cultural identity. Herein lies the reason for Beloved's resurgence; Morrison suggests that these memories should never be allowed to die out completely and places this ghost in the midst of a struggling community in order to force them to acknowledge their past.

Although the child/mother relationship which is of primary importance is that of Beloved and Sethe, in reading Beloved as a woman from the Middle Passage we learn of another search for the lost mother. In this superimposed narrative, Beloved as the daughter captured in Africa is searching for her mother, the woman who threw herself overboard from the slave ship. Beloved's main fragmented narrative section begins with "I am Beloved and she is mine" and then goes on to describe her view of the woman she claims as hers as she picks flowers and puts them in a round basket. Such a reading also explains Beloved's apparent acrimony towards the mother of whom she asks "All I want to know is why did she go into the water in the place where we crouched? Why did she do that when she was just about to smile at me?"(214), leading us to see that Beloved projects another mother's identity on to Sethe. Beloved confirms this, saying "Sethe is the one that picked flowers, yellow flowers in the place before the crouching," mistakenly placing Sethe firmly in Africa (214). Thus the drama of the abandoned child searching for the long-lost mother is multiplied. Jennifer Holden-Kirwan reads Beloved's identity this way and discusses Beloved's accusatory



questioning of Sethe, as Sethe attempts to explain why she killed her baby: “The scene is tragic, as Sethe pleads for forgiveness from a woman who may not be her child, and Beloved begs for an explanation from a woman who may not be her mother.”<sup>222</sup>

However, the layering of meanings takes another twist in Beloved’s recognition of Sethe’s face: if Sethe so closely resembles the suicide victim of the Middle Passage this suggests a direct genetic inheritance in which Beloved is also Sethe’s own mother, which would mean that the two African women taken aboard the slave ships were in fact Sethe’s mother and grandmother. This reading would also explain why Beloved has such instant recognition of Sethe’s face: “I sit    the sun closes my eyes    when I open them I see the face I lost    Sethe’s is the face that left me”(213). Another connection which supports such a reading is that Beloved’s narrative is dramatically punctuated by reference to “a hot thing”(210) which find its correlation in the brand-mark which Sethe’s mother bears (61). At one level of interpretation, Sethe’s mother returns to her as a ghost, but daughter-Sethe doesn’t recognise her mother and mother-Beloved doesn’t recognise the daughter so many decades on. Sethe’s own unfulfilled longing for the mother she hardly knew is stirred by her conversations with Beloved and she shows a longing to be the daughter she was never allowed to be. Speaking to Beloved, Sethe says:

“You came right on back like a good girl, like a daughter which is what I wanted to be and would have been if my ma’am had been able to get out of the rice long enough before they hanged her and let me be one. You know what? She’d had the bit so many times she smiled. When she wasn’t smiling she smiled, and I never saw her own smile.” (203)

Both characters talk about the loss of their mother’s smiles, an expression which gives confirmation of their status as an accepted and loved daughter. Beloved repeats her desire to

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<sup>222</sup> Holden-Kirwan, Jennifer L., “Looking into that Self that is no Self: An Examination of Subjectivity in *Beloved*,” *African American Review* 32.3 (1998): 422.

see her mother smiling at her and is deeply affected by the fact that she jumped overboard before doing so. This recognition of the mother's/child's face is a theme at the core of this text: Beloved's narrative mourns the loss of her mother's face and her smile, Sethe recognises her daughter's face as it casts a silhouette on the kitchen wall, and the newly-arrived Beloved recognises Sethe's face in the garden of 124.

During the scene in which Denver and Beloved are in the woodshed together, the building in which the baby Beloved was murdered, Beloved begins to relive the experiences on board the slave ship once more because the cracks of sunlight in the shed roof remind her of being on the ship below deck and looking at the light coming in through the decking above. Beloved tells Denver that she can see a face in the shed which she recognises as both "Her face", indicating another woman, and her own face; "Me. It's me"(124). The reader understands that Beloved is identifying the similarities between her face and that of her mother, yet Denver interprets the scene as Beloved remembering the day on which she was murdered. This scene thrives on the tension created between the superimposition of these two differing chronotopes, an idea which, while it is at the heart of the ghosting paradigm also relates to the idea of rememory which is brought up in the narrative many times.

Rememory is slightly different to memory in that, while memory is a basic recalling of past events, the 're' prefix suggests a freshly composed, reinvented version of events. Yet, in contradiction to this, Sethe also uses the term to describe an exterior memory, something which is not dependent on the interior memory of the psyche but something which has reverberated out into the world. The most readily identified example of this remains the scene in which Sethe talks with Denver about why she was praying:

"I was talking about time. It's so hard for me to believe in it. Some things go. Pass on. Some things just stay. I used to think it was my rememory. You know. Some things you forget. Other things you never do. But it's not. Places, places are still



there. If a house burns down, it's gone, but the place—the picture of it— stays, and not just in my rememory, but out there, in the world. What I remember is a picture floating around out there outside my head. I mean, even if I don't think it, even if I die, the picture of what I did, or knew, or saw is still out there. Right in the place where it happened.” (35-6)

Using this reasoning, Sethe warns Denver never to go near Sweet Home in case she experiences the same events as Sethe. Denver is confused by this and says, “‘If it's still there, waiting, that must mean that nothing ever dies.’ Sethe looked right in Denver's face. ‘Nothing ever does,’ she said” (36). Dobbs discusses this concept of rememory, saying:

the prefix suggests the idea of memory as always already re-created: that memory is never a stable, singular calling up of the past, but rather a partially invented, subjectively selective narrative of that past. . . . However, Sethe uses the phrase my rememory not only to convey the sense that any particular memory or recall of a past event is always inflected with the subject's desire, but also to describe a certain mode of remembering that, as Sethe experiences it, is horribly constant, unchanging.<sup>223</sup>

Beloved is a rememory, an exterior reverberation of the past which interacts with this family. Christian makes a similar connection between rememory and Beloved's identity, saying, “As many critics have commented on, Beloved is the embodiment of the past that all the major characters want to disremember but cannot forget. Her role in the novel is interested in Morrison's use of the folk concept of ‘rememory,’ common to many African and African diasporic peoples and a term my mother uses.”<sup>224</sup>

This concept of memory as an external reality with which one interacts is an ambiguous concept. Jürgen Wolter argues that rememory deconstructs the self-reliant premise of Western memory as individual, introspective and subjective. Wolter goes on to explain that rememory is based on interactivity between the memory of a person and an exterior reality, and cites Morrison's useful explanation of this idea:

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<sup>223</sup> Dobbs 568, emphasis in original.

<sup>224</sup> Christian 42.

The history of African Americans has been dis-membered through slavery, racial prejudice, and a perspective that rendered them invisible; the novel re-members, re-collects African American history through what Morrison calls rememory, i.e. "Something which possesses and haunts one, rather than something which one possesses."<sup>225</sup>

While it positively contradicts typical Western perceptions of memory in order to favour a sense of communal shared memory, it also displays a psychic depression in which one is unable to completely escape the past, as Beloved says, "All of it is now it is always now" (210) which can be interpreted as the "hyperbolic past" which Kristeva identifies as the mark of the depressive's time scale.<sup>226</sup> Dobbs comments on this collapsing of chronology in Beloved's narrative sequences which she relates to the infant's undeveloped sense of chronological progression:

What's striking here is not only the lack of punctuation . . . but also the absence of time. That is, Beloved's first version of her story, much like Sethe's initial description of her 'rememory,' is trapped in a timeless present; rather than narrating a story of discrete events and characters through time, Beloved, in her infant's state of undifferentiation, can only try to say 'things that are pictures,' images divorced from cause and effect, from a progression through time, from the stream of the narrative itself.<sup>227</sup>

Essentially, the ghost is always representative of such a rupture in linear time as the ghost is always a return into the present moment of that which ought to have passed. With Beloved's ultimate expulsion from Bluestone Road, this entrapment in the past is erased and Sethe can begin to look to a future with Paul D, as he says to her "'me and you, we got more yesterday than anybody. We need some kind of tomorrow'" (273).

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<sup>225</sup> Jürgen C Wolter, "'Let People Know Where Their Power is': Deconstruction and Re-Membering in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*," *Zeitschrift für Anglistik und Americanistik* 45.3 (1997): 237. Citing from Mae G. Henderson "Toni Morrison's *Beloved*: Re-membering the Body as Historical Text."

<sup>226</sup> Kristeva *Black* 60.

<sup>227</sup> Dobbs 570-571.



Beloved's unpunctuated, elliptical narrative can also be read through Abraham and Torok's ideas of trans-generational haunting, the crypt of meaning whose troubling contents haunt the family line, which were explored in the first chapter with reference to The Crow Road in particular. Beloved's speech is an illustration of the concept of cryptonymy in which the disturbance of language inhibits communication of meaning, allowing their secret trauma to go unacknowledged. For Beloved this crypt of meaning is the cargo-hold of the slave ship itself, that "isolated region within the psyche in which an experience that is shameful, and therefore unspeakable, has been 'buried alive.'"<sup>228</sup> For the reader, the idea that anything in Beloved's narrative can be shameful is inappropriate yet the incommunicable nature of the horrors which she witnessed is undoubtable.

However, as Sethe's memories of her mother are stirred, she recalls a secret or repressed shame connected to her mother's past. Denver asks Sethe about her maternal grandmother and Sethe tells of how her mother was hung, at which moment a disturbing long-forgotten memory occurs to Sethe: "She had to do something with her hands because she was remembering something she had forgotten she knew. Something privately shameful that had seeped into a slit in her mind" (61). Sethe remembers being told by Nan, the childcarer of the farm where Sethe grew up, that her and Sethe's mother were "together from the sea" and that Sethe's mother had been raped many times by the crewmen and had given birth to many babies from these rapes. These children were thrown into the sea. However, Nan tells Sethe that she is the product of her mother's love for another slave, a man called Sethe whom she "put her arms around" (62):

What Nan told her she had forgotten, along with the language she told it in. The same language her ma'am spoke, and which would never come back. But the

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<sup>228</sup> Rand 59.

message—that was and had been there all along. . . . she was picking meaning out of a code she no longer understood. (62)

It is unclear whether it is the rape experienced by her mother or the infanticide carried out by her which is the “privately shameful” memory for Sethe. This question aside, Sethe’s interpretation of this forgotten code is another manifestation of those secret spaces in her heritage, it is only by attempting to understand these ‘crypts’ of meaning that the ghost can be exorcised, as Abraham and Torok write, “what haunt[s] are not the dead, but the gaps or ‘silences’ left within the living by the secrets of others. The ‘phantom’ . . . is understood to mean a delusion of the living provoked by the tormenting unconscious suspicion that something had been left unsaid during the life of the deceased.”<sup>229</sup> Beloved’s existence is partly dependent on Sethe’s projection of these unacknowledged meanings, both the things in her past that she cannot admit to and those aspects of her communal past which are so seldom discussed in the present; capture in Africa and the slave ships themselves.

### **“Each moment is two moments” and Fugitive Pieces**

In Fugitive Pieces, Jakob is the child who returns and perpetuates the memory of institutionalised torture in a way which demonstrates the inevitability of the past’s reverberation into the present and the subject’s inescapable connection to history. Time is divided in Jakob and Ben’s narratives between history and memory, with each concept having a different temporality accorded to it, a different value system. Jakob sums up his basic distinction between the two thus:

History is amoral: events occurred. But memory is moral; what we consciously remember is what our conscience remembers. History is the Totenbuch, The Book of

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<sup>229</sup> Rand 60.



the Dead, kept by the administrators of the camps. Memory is the *Memorbucher*, the names of those to be mourned, read aloud in the synagogue.

History and memory share events; that is, they share time and space. Every moment is two moments. (138)

In light of this reasoning the obsessive focus on memory in *Fugitive Pieces* and *Beloved* is symptomatic of a moral duty to remember the dead and this mourning process is an inevitable and necessary one which connects the individual to the communal and the communal to the historical.

Jakob's relationship to his cultural lineage is confirmed in an explanation of the Jew's connection to their ancestors, who are always thought of as present and alive within the Jewish community: "It's Hebrew tradition that forefathers are referred to as 'we,' not 'they.' 'When we were delivered from Egypt. . . .' This encourages empathy and a responsibility to the past but, more important, it collapses time. The Jew is forever leaving Egypt" (159). The themes of empathy and responsibility to the past and the idea of time collapsing all evoke Jakob's perception of his relationship to his family whom he thinks of as being always beside him and to whom he still feels a responsibility. This concept of time also relates to Kristeva's idea of the depressive's sense of time as a dimension which does not progress but only dilates, like *Beloved*'s insistence that "'All of it is now'" (B, 210). The experience of trauma that each cultural group has undergone sets up a difficult dilemma as the sense of belonging to one's ancestors can no longer be a simple linear relation: in order to be free of the violence experienced some degree of forgetting must take place.

The fine balance between history and memory which is achieved in this text is reminiscent of Andreas Huyssen's writings about the memorialisation of the Holocaust. Like Levi, Huyssen argues that the scale of the Holocaust makes it impossible for anyone to

remember it in its totality and the only way in which it can be represented is by reference to the minutiae of personal memory, by

mimetic approximation, a mnemonic strategy which recognizes the event in its otherness and beyond identification or therapeutic empathy, but which physically enervates some of the horror and pain in a slow and persistent labour of remembrance. Such mimetic approximation can only be achieved if we sustain the tension between the numbing totality of the Holocaust and the stories of the individual victims, families, and communities.<sup>230</sup>

Huyssen's phrase 'numbing totality' relates to the 'Totenbuch' of history of which Jakob writes, while the 'Memorbucher' is evoked here by Huyssen's reference to individual stories. It is the 'Memorbucher' which Michaels writes in *Fugitive Pieces*, producing interlinked narratives from two very different men. There is a suggestion of generational continuity in the positioning of the narrators as Jakob lived through World War Two while Ben is born after it, yet the reverberations of its effects dramatically influence both lives.

In both characters, the impulse to write and, in Ben, to uncover the writings of other survivors is overpowering and confirms once again the central importance of remembering. Méira Cook discusses the creativity of both narrators in their respective memorial projects:

The post-Holocaust world, the world that has permitted the horror of Auschwitz and gone on, despite Adorno's caution, to "write poetry" in its wake, inevitably raises the spectre of remembrance lest we forget that forgetfulness is a guarantor of nothing so much as an immediate and vengeful return of the repressed. In this world, there is little so unbearable, so immediately punishable, as amnesia . . .<sup>231</sup>

The danger with this outlook, however is that it throws the development of the self through history into what Hilliger terms a "fundamental paradox" in which one risks being trapped in such an all-encompassing process of memorialisation that one must eventually learn "[h]ow

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<sup>230</sup> Huyssen, *Twilight* 259.

<sup>231</sup> Méira Cook, "At the Membrane of Language and Silence: Metaphor and Memory in *Fugitive Pieces*," *Canadian Literature* 164 (2000): 20.



to progress while the weight of the past is holding you back; how to affirm what has been negated long ago.”<sup>232</sup> Both Jakob and Ben’s narratives are also representations of the past and present as interchangeable and concurrent. This is particularly noticeable in Jakob’s narrative, especially during his early life in Greece, and represents his dual experience of time, so akin to the “hyperbolic past” which Kristeva identifies as the mark of the depressive’s time scale.<sup>233</sup>

For the characters in Fugitive Pieces the incommunicable crypt of meaning concerns the events of the Holocaust, with the narrators Jakob and Ben being repositories for the memory of the traumatic experiences by themselves and their families. In Jakob’s case, the ghosting of which he writes is clearly what Nicolas Abram terms a “metapsychological fact”, a projection of his anxieties over what happened to his family while he was hiding behind the cupboard. Jakob is haunted by this gap in understanding of his sister’s disappearance: “I couldn’t keep out the sounds: the door breaking open . . . My mother, my father. Worse than those sounds was that I couldn’t remember hearing Bella at all. Filled with her silence, I had no choice but to imagine her face” (10). This lack of information instigates Jakob’s haunting by his sister and her ghost follows Jakob everywhere throughout his life. Although he also feels he is haunted by his parents, it is Bella’s ghost which Jakob feels most intensely:

I felt her presence everywhere, in daylight, in rooms I knew weren’t empty. I felt her touch on my back, my shoulders, my hair. I turned around to see if she was there, to see if she was looking, to see if she was standing guard, though if anything were to happen to me, she wouldn’t be able to prevent it. Watching with sympathy and curiosity from her side of the gossamer wall. (31)

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<sup>232</sup> A. Hillger, “Afterbirth of the Earth: Messianic Materialism in Anne Michaels’s Fugitive Pieces,” Canadian Literature 160 (1999): 35.

<sup>233</sup> Kristeva Black 60.

Jakob makes allowances for the presence of his sister, trying to treat her ‘ghost’ in the way he would have treated her had she been there in the flesh. We are told that Jakob allows her time to eat from his plate, pausing between mouthfuls in order that she too has the opportunity to take food, and that he walks slowly around the house, politely allowing her to go through doors before him: “Athos didn’t understand, as I hesitated in the doorway, that I was letting Bella enter ahead of me, making sure she was not left behind” (31).

Jakob’s involvement in the haunting begins to feel reciprocal as he comes to believe that he may be haunting his family from the other side of the “gossamer wall” between life and death. Jakob begins to question how ‘alive’ he is and how ‘dead’ his family really are after dreaming of them: “When I woke, my anguish was specific: the possibility that it was as painful for them to be remembered as it was for me to remember them; that I was haunting my parents and Bella with my calling, startling them awake in their black beds” (25). As in Beloved, ghosts are also indicative of cultural memory and Jakob does not want to let the memory of his family rest as he fears that they would then leave him and it is only his feeling of connection to the imagined presence of his family which gives him a sense of personal history.

Despite this specific anguish, Jakob never truly manages to lay the ghosts of his family to rest. For Jakob and Ben, the history and memory which such ghosts represent are parts of their communal identity which they can never leave behind as the pain experienced stands in directly inverse proportion to the love felt for their people. The complex relation between love and grief is captured by Jakob when, as an old man, he speaks to Ben’s wife, Naomi, a comment which Ben narrates after Jakob’s death:

The night you and I met, Jakob, I heard you tell my wife that there’s a moment when love makes us believe in death for the first time. You recognize the one whose loss,



even contemplated, you'll carry forever, like a sleeping child. All grief, anyone's grief, you said, is the weight of a sleeping child. (280-1)

It is only by consciously hanging on to the weight of this grief that one may maintain a connection to one's cultural memory, and it is this same connection which is broken in Beloved. In Morrison's text, the returning ghost has the potential to evoke such a grief in the community but her power is lost as that community cannot recognise the historical event of which she speaks. Only as the reader do we recognise her import and the extent of disconnection from the past which the residents of Bluestone Road have undergone. Jakob and Ben manage to evade this disconnection but the price they pay for maintaining this link is to carry the dead-weight of grief throughout their lives.

This exchange is at the crux of the disintegration of Jakob's relationship with his first wife, Alex. In this case such a substitution becomes a real problem for Jakob as he feels that Alex's attempts to make him inhabit only the present, forgetting those ghosts which haunt him, is a wrench because his identity is so intertwined with the memories he holds. As Jakob says of his first wife:

She never understands; thinks, certainly, that she's doing me good, returning me to the world, snatching me from the jaws of despair, rescuing me.

And she is.

But each time a memory or a story slinks away, it takes more of me with it. (144)

Jakob is firmly aware that his identity is constituted of memories and that letting them go will entail some loss of some important aspects of his selfhood. However, as Hilliger notes it is only in "mourning, in acknowledging her loss, that he can eventually escape the 'melancholia of bog'" and reach the point at which we see him at the end of his memoirs, aged sixty, a content man looking forward to the birth of his child.<sup>234</sup>

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<sup>234</sup> Hilliger 36.

This connection between ghosts and cultural memory is highlighted when Jakob and Athos are travelling across Greece and pass through the site of a massacre at Kalavrita, where Nazi soldiers murdered fourteen-hundred men. The absolute nature of this massacre is expressed by Jacob in his comment that it was “[a] place so empty it was not even haunted”(61). Although ghosts mark the pain of the living’s knowledge that people died in anguish, these spectres are also a positive connection of a culture to a time and place, a memorial of that culture’s presence. The total eradication of the community of Kalavrita is reflected in the fact that there is no one left who can be aware of the deceased’s pain, no one can invent their ghosts.

At the heart of the ghosting paradigm is the haunting of one time by another. As we see in Beloved, the essential role of the ghost figure is to collapse the perceived distance between times and places. This example is used throughout Fugitive Pieces as a textual device with narratives bound together to form a dialogic interaction. The memoirs of Jakob and the narrative of Ben are placed consecutively to form the body of the text, with Ben making several references to Jakob’s manuscripts, often in the form of a direct response to the persona of a man whom he knows to be dead. For Ben, Jakob is a person in the position of the reader whom he refers to as “you” (280). In this case, Jakob becomes the ghost figure, the deceased who haunts the text through Ben’s narrative. Ben pursues the task of unearthing Jakob’s manuscripts and, through this task, manages to exorcise the ghost of Jakob which has been haunting him. The reader is left with the sense that once this ‘ghost’s’ final words have been printed into the form of the novel we hold in our hands, Ben’s quest is complete and our role as a reader is also complete. In terms of Abraham and Torok’s work, this amounts to the excavation of that secret crypt of meaning which haunts the living, and Ben’s uncovering of Jakob’s texts ensures the survival of his final words.



## Memory in Matter

The concept of rememory in Beloved, wherein memory is thought of as partly an exterior reality with which one can connect, has its parallel in Fugitive Pieces with its focus on the metaphor of memory in matter, in land, stones, fabric, molecules and blood. That memory can be passed through the blood relates to the trans-generational haunting of which Abraham and Torok write, as Ben believes that the pain which his parents experienced is handed down into Ben's body, a belief which makes him wary of having a child of his own with his wife Naomi. In Ben's view, his parents' fear is written into his genetic make up and he imagines that his father's tattooed number from the concentration camp will surface on his child's skin like a birth-mark:

Naomi says a child doesn't have to inherit fear. But who can separate fear from the body? My parents' past is mine molecularly. Naomi thinks she can stop the soldier who spat in my father's mouth from spitting into mine, through my father's blood. I want to believe she can rinse fear from my mouth. But I imagine Naomi has a child and I can't stop the writing on its forehead from growing as the child grows. It's not the sight of the number that scares me, even as it bursts across the skin. It's that somehow my watching causes it to happen. (280)

Ben's vision here reveals many aspects of the relationship he had with his father, who relentlessly forced his son to look at photographs and read documents and eye-witness accounts from the concentration camps, literally passing his fears into the mind of his son. Ben's fear that the memory will perpetuate through the generations is partly bound up with the Jewish belief that each generation is always part of the exodus from Egypt, that there is no differentiation between one generation and those who have gone before.

One example of this same genetic memory in Jakob's narrative is conveyed in a fragment in which Jakob writes about the prisoners of war who were forced to excavate the mass graves of those slaughtered by Nazis. This fragment links Jakob's narrative to Ben's as

later in the text we discover that Ben's father was one such prisoner. Jakob describes the horrific task which captives had to carry out and speculates that during the process the memories of the dead would pass through the skin of the diggers and into their bodies, effecting a transmission of the deceased's memories into living memory:

When the prisoners were forced to dig up the mass graves, the dead entered them through their pores and were carried through their bloodstreams to their brains and hearts. And through their blood into another generation. Their arms were into death up to the elbows, but not only into death—into music, into the memory of the way a husband or son leaned over his dinner, a wife's expression as she watched her child in the bath; into beliefs, mathematical formulas, dreams. As they felt another man's and another's blood-soaked hair through their fingers, the diggers begged forgiveness. And those lost lives made molecular passage into their hands. (52)

For Adrienne Kertzer, this is one of the many comforting myths constructed in this text which “distracts readers from the problematic ethics” of “transformation and redemption . . .”<sup>235</sup>

The implication that these people's memories can be perpetuated by their corpses coming into contact with the living is a metaphor of the kinds of communal memory which fill the text while being a prime example of the power invested in memory, suggesting as it does that memory, like matter, can never be truly destroyed but is only ever transferred. This, then, puts a negative interpretation on the holism presented by the new physics, the interrelated nature of matter being a means of perpetuating painful memories.

In answer to Kertzer's concerns that such a metaphor potentially lessens the enormity of the trauma experienced, the paragraph which follows the above excerpt states that the dead can never be fully remembered, even through physical contact with the digger:

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<sup>235</sup> Adrienne Kertzer, “*Fugitive Pieces*: Listening as a Holocaust Survivor's Child,” *English Studies in Canada* 26.2 (2000): 198.



How can one man take on the memories of even one other man, let alone five or ten or ten thousand; how can they be sanctified each? He concentrates on the whip, he feels a face in his hand, he grasps hair as if in a passion grasp, its matted thickness between his fingers, pulling, his hands full of names. His holy hands move, autonomous. (52)

The enormity of the destruction cannot be comprehended by the digger who must divorce himself from his body, giving his hands autonomy to do their job independent of his will.

This is exactly the ‘numbing totality’ of which Huyssen writes, and which is counterbalanced perfectly in the previous excerpt by the personal details of the memories which Jakob suggests the corpses once held. As Levi says, the kind of empathy and remembrance which could have been possible for the diggers, as this metaphor indicates, would have entailed their psychic collapse. Instead, the diggers must divorce themselves from their hands, thereby shutting off part of their own consciousness, in order that the task can be carried out. In some way, then, amnesia is a necessary survival tactic for the deeply traumatised.

The idea of memory in matter extends to inanimate objects. Whilst looking through Jakob’s house on Idhra, Ben senses that just being there is bringing him closer to Jakob and Michaela as their presence is imprinted on articles around the house:

It’s a strange relationship we have with objects that belonged to the dead; in the knit of atoms, their touch is left behind. Every room emanated absence yet was drenched with your presence. When I uncovered the couch, I found a blanket still dripping from one end of it, and the indentations of your bodies—invisible weight—still in the cushions. (265)

The phrase “invisible weight” reminds us of Jakob’s description of grief as being exactly the weight of a sleeping child, a link which highlights Ben’s sense of loss over the tragic deaths of Jakob, Michaela and their unborn child. Yet the idea of memory’s transference in matter is not left at this metaphorical level. Jakob himself disputes the idea that his relationship with his family is merely a figment of his imagination when he writes,

It's no metaphor to feel the influence of the dead in the world, just as it's no metaphor to hear the radiocarbon chronometer, the Geiger counter amplifying the faint breathing of rock, fifty thousand years old. (Like the faint thump from behind the womb wall). It is no metaphor to witness the astonishing fidelity of minerals magnetized, even after hundreds of millions of years, pointing to the magnetic pole, minerals that have never forgotten magma whose cooling off has left them forever delirious. We long for place; but place itself longs. Human memory is encoded in air currents and river sediment. Eskers of ash wait to be scooped up, lives reconstituted. (53)

The images at work here are very revealing as Jakob makes out his case for the permeability of conventional divisions between life and death, matter and memory. The Geiger counter's amplification is likened to the heartbeat of an unborn baby from "behind the womb wall", a simile which evokes the whisperings of Bella that Jakob claims to hear from behind the "gossamer wall" that separates Jakob from his dead family (31). In Jakob's narrative, the equation is indisputable: just as radiation seeps from rock, the influence of the dead can still be felt in the world. Not only does matter contain memory, but matter has a memory of its own as is shown in the magnetic forces here. This magnetism also evokes Jakob's own longing for home. At the end of this excerpt is death, once more, in the eskers of ash, a reference to the bodies burned during the regime of Nazi concentration camps, waiting to be gathered together again and 're-membered' into the human lives they once were.

### **Land in Fugitive Pieces**

Archeology and geology are paired in this text to give a theory of memory in the land which dominates the lives and work of not only Athos, who teaches these disciplines, but also Jakob and Ben whose narratives are filled with archeological and geological motifs which signify a wider concept of history, one which reaches back far beyond the Totenbuch of the Nazi regime. Through his studies in geology, Jakob becomes "transfixed by the way time buckled, met itself in pleats and folds; . . ." (30), a description of time which is reminiscent of the



ghosting which Jakob experiences, only in this instance the collapse in time has the effect of allowing Jakob to evade his personal past in favour of aligning himself with a much broader time-scale: “To go back a year or two was impossible, absurd. To go back millennia—ah! that was . . . nothing” (30). This knowledge gives him a sense of the relative insignificance of his own life, putting in some kind of perspective the trauma that he has experienced.

Athos is most intimately linked to geology, with metaphors of the earth and sea being used by Jakob to describe his appearance as he writes that he is a man whose hair resembles “good silver ore”, who has “deep furrows” in his scalp and hair which becomes “thick as foam” when it dries (22-23). It is through Athos’s knowledge of the ground beneath their feet that Jakob is made to feel at home when he and Athos emigrate to Canada. The suggestion is that, via an understanding of geology and archeology, one can feel a sense of belonging anywhere in the world as the processes of geology and evolution happened in much the same way the world over, irrespective of later national boundaries

With a few words (an incantation in Greek or English) and the sweep of his hand, Athos sliced a hill in half, drilled under the sidewalk, cleared a forest. He showed me Toronto cross-sectioned; he ripped open cliffs like fresh bread, revealing the ragged geological past. Athos stopped in the middle of busy city streets and pointed out fossils in the limestone ledges of the Park Plaza Hotel or in the walls of a hydro substation. “Ah, limestone, accumulating one precious foot every twenty-five thousand years!” Instantly, the streets were flooded by a subtropical salt sea. I imagined front lawns crammed with treasure: crinoids, lamp shells, trilobites. (97-98)

The emphasis here is on a prehistoric, primaeval past and for Jakob this presentation of the earth untouched by humans allows him to feel connected to prehistory and geological time scales. Athos strips the environment of its present time, and instead shows how the workings of time on the land operate by the same principles globally. In this way, the land is presented as common ground, a description which extends to become the proverbial ‘common ground’ shared by the human race. This point, however, has angered some critics of this novel who

would argue that such a comparison lessens the horror of the Holocaust in favour of portraying a more humanist view of history. Kertzer argues that this view of history and Jakob's assimilation of himself with it draws the reader away from the reality of the Holocaust, by deluding us into thinking that Jakob's history is already healed and transformed.<sup>236</sup>

Conversely, Paul Malone unproblematically asserts that Fugitive Pieces is a text in which "identity is found as much by finding one's proper landscape as by finding one's true love or true vocation."<sup>237</sup> Malone's reading is certainly representative of a very strong theme in Fugitive Pieces, a theme often commented on by Athos and Jakob in particular. Before leaving Greece for Canada, Athos muses on the connection between identity and place:

"In xenetia—in exile, . . . in a foreign landscape, a man discovers the old songs. He calls out for water from his own well, for apples from his own orchard, for the muscat grapes from his own vine."

"What is a man," said Athos, "who has no landscape? Nothing but mirrors and tides." (86)

This conviction of the relationship between the body and the land seeps through in Athos's dialogue on many occasions, most notably when Jakob asks Athos how big the human heart is and Athos illustrates his reply by saying "Imagine the size and heaviness of a handful of earth" (113). For Malone, this response encapsulates Athos's view of "the close connection between humanity and geography . . ."<sup>238</sup> This link between identity and earth is evoked again in Athos's advice to Jakob that he be buried in land which 'remembers' him, "Jakob, try to be buried in ground that will remember you" (76). Many years later, out of respect for these

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<sup>236</sup> Kertzer 198.

<sup>237</sup> Paul M. Malone, "The Geography of Identity in Anne Michaels' Fugitive Pieces," West Virginia University Philological Papers 46 (2000): 91.

<sup>238</sup> Malone 92.



beliefs, Jakob writes to Athos's old Greek friends, Kostas and Daphne, to tell them that he will take Athos's ashes from Toronto to Zakynthos "to land that remembers him," (118). However, in response to Malone's opinions here, the strength of Athos's belief in the importance of a homeland only highlights Jakob's severance from his native Poland as it reminds us of the fact that he does not know where his family were buried or if they received a burial at all. As such, the humanist ethics which Kertzer finds so offensive are deeply undercut, demonstrating the improbability of a complete healing.

### **Land in Beloved**

The issue of land and its relationship to identity is far more ambiguous in Beloved largely due to the fact that none of the African American characters remember the land from which their ancestors originate. The only characters we know of who have memories of Africa are Nan and Sethe's mother, but neither woman passes on any memory of their life in Africa to Sethe. Beloved, however, indicates that she has memories of Africa in her elliptical narrative sequences, in which she speaks of a place where a woman puts flowers in a round basket in "the place before the crouching" (214), meaning before the slave ship, yet Beloved only remembers this single African scene.

The characters in Beloved have no sense of connection to a homeland. Africa is never discussed by the residents of Bluestone Road and their relationship to America is complicated by the white powers who dominate both the country and their bodies. The seductive beauty of America is recalled by Sethe in her memories of escaping from Sweet Home where the landscape

rolled itself out before her in shameless beauty. It never looked as terrible as it was and it made her wonder if hell was a pretty place too. Fire and brimstone all right, but hidden in lacy groves. Boys hanging from the most beautiful sycamores in the world.

It shamed her—remembering the wonderful soughing trees rather than the boys. Try as she might to make it otherwise, the sycamores beat out the children every time and she could not forgive her memory for that. (6)

During his five attempted escapes, Paul D also looks at the beauty around him in the American countryside and feels unable to belong to it:

in all those escapes he could not help being astonished by the beauty of this land that was not his. He hid in its breast, fingered its earth for food, clung to its banks to lap water and tried not to love it. On nights when the sky was personal, weak with the weight of its own stars, he made himself not love it. (268)

In both examples, Morrison paints a picture of the natural America as a benign, beautiful, nurturing motherland who forms a stark contrast to the devastating political and social spheres. However, there is the sense that in feeling a connection to this land, Paul D and Sethe would be supporting the system which objectifies and exploits them, therefore they must refrain from feeling connected to the land hence Sethe's 'shame' at her love of the sycamores. Identity and place are still shown to be firmly related in Beloved in which the lack of ownership which the slaves feel over themselves translates to into a sense of not belonging to the country they are in, a feeling which has particular impact upon both characters as they escape only to realise that they still do not belong.

An awareness of America as a colonial country surfaces in this text. Paul D's inability to sense his 'roots' in the land he inhabits is contrasted with the colonised native Americans. Paul D senses the unrest of the dead Miami people, outraged at the desecration of their sacred ground, as he walks home from work via a route which takes him

smack dab through the middle of a cemetery as old as sky, rife with the agitation of dead Miami no longer content to rest in the mounds that covered them. Over their heads walked a strange people; through their earth pillows roads were cut; wells and houses nudged them out of eternal rest. Outraged more by their folly in believing land was holy than by the disturbances of their peace, they growled on the banks of Licking River, sighed in trees on Catherine Street and rode the wind above the pig yards. (155)



Morrison's sarcasm in the use of the word 'folly' is echoed in a passage that describes the meeting place of Sixo, the native American slave of Sweet Home, and Patsy, his lover. The narrator describes their venue as a "deserted stone structure that Redmen used way back when they thought the land was theirs" (24). Sixo still reverts the ancient ways of his culture and asks for his ancestors' permission to enter this sacred site and use it as a place to meet his lover (24). We also see Sixo keeping the traditions of his people alive in the dance which he occasionally does in the trees of Sweet Home at night, "to keep his bloodlines open" (19). Although still oppressed in the extreme, Sixo's position is slightly different to that of the other slaves at Sweet Home because of his perception of the white's as colonisers and his deep conviction that America still very much belongs to his people.

## Water

Unable to present an individual's, or the collective's, relation to land, Morrison uses water to symbolise a sense of transcendental connection. Like geological history, water also figures as a similar kind of 'common ground' in its reference to the maternal symbolic, indicating the uterine origins of every human being, the pre-social self which, within the frame of the text, has not yet been overinscribed with the violences of the regime of slavery. The reverence accorded to the maternal marks out a specific kind of postmodern mourning which complies with Morrison's ideas that the modern begins with slavery. Thus, in struggling to recast their identities in a post-slavery situation, the characters of *Bluestone Road* are shown to be engaged in the acceptance of loss and the search for new moorings which this mourning inspires.

With reference to *Beloved*, the association with water evokes the borderline state of the Middle Passage in which Africans became redefined in their passage across the Atlantic,

to be re-born into new identities. As Linda Koolish notes, this transformation leads us to read the slave ships as “a womb for a monstrous birth. Captive Africans are ripped from the womb of their homeland for a new existence, . . . they undergo a grotesque birthing process in which human beings enter the ships whole and are transformed by journey’s end through torture and dehumanization into a new species, a grotesque, sub-human Other.”<sup>239</sup> In evoking the sense of connection through the fluid imagery of the maternal symbolic, Morrison takes the identity of these people back to a state when they were not Other, but very much part of a Self; a communal ontological model defined by social integration and a sense of connection to heritage and place which is symbolised in this pre-Oedipal unity.

Beloved’s first transgression as a ghost is not only that she crosses the border between life and death but that she emerges from the water of the Ohio river, that body of water which Schmudde notes “marks the boundary between slave and free territory . . .”<sup>240</sup> As the last child of this text which is born into slavery, Beloved’s return marks the emblematic resurfacing of the past into the free(er) space occupied by the black residents of Bluestone Road, as well as the resurrection of the “60 million and more” drowned Africans of the Middle Passage. The boundary between the enslaved and ‘free’ territories is thus traversable only by the medium of water. From Beloved’s narrative, we can deduce that there is a connection between the water of the Atlantic and the river, as we know that the Beloved of the Middle Passage watches her mother throw herself overboard and in doing so, takes part of

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<sup>239</sup> Lynda Koolish, “Fictive Strategies and Cinematic Representations in Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*: Postcolonial Theory/Postcolonial Text,” *African American Review* 29.3 (1995): 435.

<sup>240</sup> Carol E. Schmudde, “The Haunting of 124,” *African American Review* 26.3 (1992): 410.



Beloved's identity with her; "she goes into the water with my face" (212). This event is then continued with Beloved's own emergence from the river behind Bluestone Road:

I am gone now I am her face my own face has left me I see me swim away a hot thing I see the bottoms of my feet I want to be the two of us I want the join.  
I come out of blue water after the bottoms of my feet swim away from me I come up I need a place to be the air is heavy I am not dead I am not there is a house (213)

The ocean is a medium which allows transcendence between times, places and identities. In jumping into the water, the mother takes some of her daughter's identity with her which then reemerges in the composite character of Beloved in another time and space. In Brogan's interpretation "the mediate nature of ghosts (always associated with water imagery) cannot be separated from the disaster of the Middle Passage" but the power of the maternal bond is also inseparable from the symbol of water.<sup>241</sup>

This indistinct association is made again while Beloved drinks several cups of water on her arrival at 124. Her thirst is linked to both the thirst which Beloved complains of in her memories of the Middle Passage and Sethe's child's thirst for the milk which Sethe has. Mother's milk becomes another symbol of fluid connections between mothers and daughters and Sethe's narrative reveals her own sense of indignation at the severed bonds between her and her mother, because she was not allowed to suckle from her and was instead fed by Nan, but never until the slave masters' white children had first had their share of the milk. This bond is threatened again at Sweet Home when Schoolteacher's boys hold Sethe down and suck the milk from her breasts. The indignation she feels after this abuse is not only at the violation of her own body, but that they took milk that "belonged" to Sethe's baby, a rape which for Sethe presents a direct threat to the relationship between mother and daughter

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<sup>241</sup> Brogan 16.

(200). Sethe's sense of victory in managing to get the threatened milk to her baby daughter is evident; although tormented by the visions of the boys hanging in the trees as she escapes from Sweet Home, Sethe carries on as she tells Beloved: "I walked right on by because only me had your milk, and God do what He would, I was going to get it to you. You remember that, don't you; that I did? That when I got here I had milk enough for all" (198).

However, the thirst alone does not prove to Sethe that Beloved is her daughter, the drink that Beloved takes on arrival at 124 is also related to the spit that Beloved dribbled on Sethe's face when Sethe arrived at 124 after her escape from Sweet Home. In acknowledging this, Sethe also mentions her urgent need to urinate on seeing the adult Beloved outside 124:

I would have known at once when my water broke. The minute I saw you sitting on the stump, it broke. . . . I would have known who you were right away because the cup after cup of water you drank proved and connected you to the fact that you dribbled clear spit on my face the day I got to 124. I would have known right off but Paul D distracted me. (202)

Sethe connects this copious urination to both to the breaking of her amniotic fluid while in labour with Denver and a time in her childhood when she recognised her mother, confirming again the strong link between the maternal bond and liquid:

Not since she was a baby girl being cared for by the eight-year-old girl who pointed out her mother to her, had she had an emergency that unmanageable. She never made the outhouse. Right in front of its door she had to lift her skirts, and the water she voided was endless. Like a horse, she thought, but as it went on and on she thought, No, more like flooding the boat when Denver was born. So much water Amy said, 'Hold on, Lu. You going to sink us you keep that up.' But there was no stopping water breaking from a breaking womb and there was no stopping now. (51)

The unstoppable tide of bodily fluids confirms the unstoppable nature of the mother/daughter bond in which each female in the text recognises their indelible connection to others.

It is after Beloved, Denver and Sethe go skating on the frozen river that Sethe experiences a moment of absolute conviction that Beloved is her daughter, the frozen water of the creek being an opportunity for the three women to connect simultaneously with their



maternal and ancestral origins as they slip and slide on the ice (175-6). On returning to 124, the three women drink warm sweetened milk which Guth says is “reminiscent of the milk [Sethe] had obsessively carried to freedom for her child” and it is while they drink this milk that Sethe clearly recognises Beloved’s features in silhouette on the kitchen wall, the milk shared between them relating to the maternal bonds which they share.<sup>242</sup> This recognition is confirmed by the fact that Beloved hums a tune which Sethe made up for her children.

That her murdered child has returned to her fills Sethe with a sense of victorious absolution which we see conveyed in the passage where she alights to her room, immediately after this realization: “With that, she gathered her blanket around her elbows and ascended the lily-white stairs like a bride. Outside, snow solidified itself into graceful forms. The peace of winter stars seemed permanent” (176). These lines are filled with images of feminine purity conveying the sense of an unbroken mother-daughter union. Absolution radiates from the interior to the garden of 124 where it becomes expressed in the feminine grace of freshly-fallen snow; water in a frozen form which, like the eternity of the stars, represents the unbroken and unbreakable maternal bond between Sethe and Beloved. The freshly fallen snow and this scene’s peaceful ambience symbolises Sethe’s apparent absolution for the infanticide she committed.

Beloved’s association with water becomes a threatening aspect of her character for Paul D who senses her connection with the sea during the episodes in which she seduces him and forces him to have sex with her in the woodshed. During these scenes, Paul D feels that Beloved has escorted him, against his will, to “some ocean-deep place he once belonged to” (264). This conveyance releases Paul D’s suppressed memory, described as a “tobacco tin”

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<sup>242</sup> Deborah Guth, “A Blessing and a Burden: The Relation to the Past in *Sula*, *Song of Solomon* and *Beloved*,” *Modern Fiction Studies* 39.3-4 (1993): 586.

lodged in his chest, which metaphorically ‘opens’ while he has sex with Beloved (117). His sexual exploitation by Beloved occasions a flood of memory within Paul D, unleashing his traumatic experiences of working in a chain-gang in Alfred, Georgia and his time as a fugitive. The “ocean deep place” refers to both the sea over which his ancestors were transported, which became the final resting place of so many of them, and a connection with a primordial self and an intra-uterine self. Jill Matus discusses these latter examples, saying that this “ocean deep place” represents Paul D’s “individual beginning—the womb—as well as the oceanic beginning of life forms” and goes on to write about the multiple complex of identities which Beloved encompasses, saying,

Beloved’s amphibious nature indexes her ambiguous identity. Her association with the sea and submergence allows Morrison to overdetermine her composite identity as the drowned from slave ships, the child who loses its mother, the aquatic, foetal, pre-self, and the transgressor of human boundaries between air and water.<sup>243</sup>

The bonds with this maternal and primordial symbolic are welcomed by Sethe, Denver and Beloved yet remain threatening to Paul D who eventually moves from 124 as he cannot endure the power Beloved has over him. This power threatens a dissolution of Paul D’s identity rather than a connection to broken sites of origin. However, this connection soon proves to be overpowering for Sethe who becomes trapped under Beloved’s possession, as Denver notes: “it shamed her to see her mother serving a girl not much older than herself. . . . Listless and sleepy with hunger Denver saw the flesh between her mother’s forefinger and thumb fade. Saw Sethe’s eyes bright but dead, alert but vacant, paying attention to everything about Beloved . . .” (243).

The merging of identity, as mother and daughter, ghost and living begin to change places finds linguistic expression as the voices of the three women combine and the narrative

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<sup>243</sup> Jill Matus, *Toni Morrison*, (Manchester: Manchester UP, 1998) 117.



prose collapses into poetry, with each woman speaking different lines. It is possible to place the identity of the character who speaks each line but it is often ambiguous, again suggesting the interchangeability of each woman:

I have your milk  
I have your smile  
I will take care of you

You are my face; I am you. Why did you leave me who am you?  
I will never leave you again  
Don't ever leave me again  
You went in the water  
I drank your blood  
I brought your milk (217)

The emphasis on possession which is reiterated throughout this piece, and the frequent references to blood, water and milk evoke that mother and child bond once again through images of feminine contiguity. The linguistic collapse in these passages is evidence of the desire to remember the connection beyond the typical boundaries which frame the individual, regressing instead to the unity of the mother/child bond. However, as in other texts, this regression into the maternal, while giving a sense of connection also risks the dissolution of the self, as we see with Sethe's subservience to Beloved. In risking this dissolution, Morrison proves that a sense of coherent identity can only really be achieved in the present moment with an acknowledgement of one's past, not in an attempt to reconnect with it. As King notes, "The reliving of the pre-Oedipal mother-infant dyad in the relationship of Sethe and Beloved enacts the trope of memory as nostalgia for the 'pure' past, seen in this instance as both necessary but ultimately destructive"<sup>244</sup> Denver realises the danger that such a bond with the past entails and this understanding forces her to overcome her agoraphobia and go out into the community to ask for help to look after the spectres her family have become.

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<sup>244</sup> King, *Memory* 151.

### **Language in Beloved**

Not only do the community of Bluestone Road assist Denver by giving her food, they also manage to exorcise Beloved in an assertion of communal identity which acts as an acknowledgement of all that Beloved represents; once this acknowledgement is made, the memory no longer persists in resurfacing and troubling the present. This exorcism is carried out through a breaking of linguistic norms as thirty women from Sethe's neighbourhood form a chorus of wailing outside 124. As the women yell Sethe realises that they have come to send Beloved away and at that point William Bodwin approaches the house, a white man who sympathises with the abolitionists and has come to take Denver to her new position of employment with his family. His appearance reminds Sethe of schoolteacher coming into the yard years before to take her back into slavery and she rushes to kill him with an ice pick but is prevented from doing so by the yelling women. In the commotion, Beloved vanishes. The communal memory which Beloved represents brings the community together in acknowledgement of that past and marks a turning point in Sethe and Denver's lives as they are reclaimed by the community which shunned Sethe for her crimes.

The site of the exorcism itself is set up as a memorial space. As the women approach 124, they find themselves thinking back to the last time they were gathered there together, many years ago, at Baby Suggs's celebration for the arrival of her grandchildren and daughter-in-law, and they see "themselves. Younger, stronger, even as little girls lying in the grass asleep. . . . Mothers, dead now, moved their shoulders to mouth harps" (258). Again, the mother/daughter bond is recalled by each woman who recognises her identification with Sethe. The narrative then gives us an example of one woman's specific empathy with the



task in hand, as Ella, formerly very critical of Sethe's infanticide, remembers that she too let her child die, a baby who was the product of the habitual rape she endured for years.<sup>245</sup>

The idea of that pup coming back to whip her too set her jaw working, and then Ella hollered.

Instantly the kneelers and the standers joined her. They stopped praying and took a step back to the beginning. In the beginning there were no words. In the beginning was the sound, and they all knew what that sound sounded like. (259)

This abandonment of linguistic order is responsible for Beloved's exorcism. At one level, the women access a pre-linguistic stage of communication, that stage which is before the child has entered into language and undergone the necessary break from the mother. This pre-linguistic stage is evocative of the as-yet-unbroken union between mother and child, but this reading has other connotations when we consider that it is the oppressor's language which these women suddenly abandon; the linguistic form used by the system which ripped their ancestors from their motherlands and their mother tongues. The sadness inherent in this abandoning of language is that there once was a language, in another time and place, which was germane to these women's sense of cultural belonging, the language which Sethe knows that her mother and Nan used, but cannot recall. None of the women of Bluestone Road now remember the African languages which their parents spoke as they have been institutionally erased from their collective memory.

For Brogan, the moment at which Ella drops to her knees and cries out represents the pained individual calling for communal support, "translating the isolated cry of pain into a communal battle cry; the fact that it is based on a collective memory ('they all knew what the sound sounded like') gives the women's cry its power over the ghost."<sup>246</sup> As these women

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<sup>245</sup> Ella's disowning of Sethe is evident as she tells Stamp "I ain't got no friends take a handsaw to their own children'" (187).

<sup>246</sup> Brogan 86.

‘holler’, they search their intrinsic knowledge for this combination of sounds which proves to be so much more effective than language that it ‘breaks’ it:

For Sethe it was as though the Clearing had come to her with all its heat and shimmering leaves, where the voices of women searched for the right combination, the key, the code, the sound that broke the back of words. Building voice upon voice until they found it, and when they did it was a wave of sound wide enough to sound deep water and knock the pods off chestnut trees. It broke over Sethe and she trembled like the baptized in its wash. (261)

This pre-linguistic, liquid ‘wash’ of sound breaks over Sethe in the same way that amniotic fluid, urine, milk, spit, sea, rivers and all attendant maternal symbolism ‘break’ throughout the text. In saying that the sound ‘breaks’ the narrative implies the engulfing, overflowing of the maternal which ‘breaks the back’ of the white oppressor’s language which is insufficient to carry their meaning. This “wave” of sound is strong enough to permeate “deep water” and, therefore, to disturb the maternal bond with Beloved who threatens to destroy Sethe’s selfhood.

### Language in Fugitive Pieces

Acknowledging the past in order to progress is also at the heart of Jakob’s personal struggle with language. Unlike Sethe, Jakob is not completely severed from his mother tongue but rather chooses to leave it behind in a bid to get away from his past. Ultimately, he realises that this cannot be done and learns to accept his past, at which point it ceases to haunt him so much. The disconnection from cultural roots is also expressed through the relation to language in Fugitive Pieces, although in this instance Jakob has full knowledge of the language from which he has been severed. Jakob describes his experiences of writing poetry and struggling to represent his life which “could not be stored in any language but only in silence . . .” (111). To Jakob, all language is foreign, indicating his inability to use it in a



way which will adequately represent the unreal experiences of his life, an idea which he expresses using the image of a typist who presses the wrong letters and is therefore unable to use language effectively:

So I lived a breath apart, a touch-typist who holds his hands above the keys slightly in the wrong place, the words coming out meaningless, garbled. Bella and I inches apart, the wall between us. I thought of writing poems in this way, in code, every letter askew, so that loss would wreck the language, become the language. (111)

Loss breaking and becoming language recalls the wailing women of Bluestone Road, unable to convey their meaning via conventional forms and instead finding a code which ‘breaks the back’ of language.

Jakob’s introduction to another language induces a psychic split in the young boy, as it divorces him in some measure from his former identity. As a new way of structuring reality, Greek offers Jakob a way of forgetting his recent past until Yiddish becomes “a melody gradually eaten away by silence” (28). Jakob’s acquired language skills become “sad new powers” which make him aware of a break between his present and his traumatic past: “I longed to cleanse my mouth of memory. I longed for my mouth to feel my own when speaking [Athos’s] beautiful and awkward Greek . . .” (21). However, Athos is insistent that Jakob’s Yiddish ‘melody’ should not disappear entirely and makes Jakob review his Hebrew alphabet every day, insistent that he should not forget his mother tongue and aware of the repercussions that such a loss could have on the boy’s future: “He said the same thing every day: ‘It is your future you are remembering’” (21). In saying ‘remembering’ Athos speaks here not of the power of recall but of the ability to cohere. Athos encourages Jakob to maintain part of his past by revising Hebrew as he is aware that this will help Jakob feel connected to his family and his cultural heritage. While this will also be another way of ensuring that Jakob remembers the love he felt for his family and therefore the pain he

experienced after their deaths, Athos is aware that to not have that connection would create a gap in Jakob's selfhood, that same gap which Sethe carries and can never fill again, the code of her mother tongue having disappeared completely.

On his arrival in Canada, Jakob has the opportunity to immerse himself in a third language, thereby removing himself even further from his cultural origins and his trauma. English becomes "food" for him which simultaneously nurtures this new identity: "I shoved it into my mouth, hungry for it. A gush of warmth spread through my body, but also panic, for with each mouthful the past was further silenced" (92). As he matures, this ambiguous relationship to language becomes clearer, particularly during a scene in which he visits a Jewish market in Toronto where he finds himself surrounded by people speaking Yiddish:

the ardent tongue of my childhood. Consonants and vowels: fear and love intertwined.

I listened, thin and ugly with feeling. I watched old men dip their numbered arms into barrels of brine, cut the heads off fish. How unreal it must have seemed to them to be surrounded by so much food. (101)

This language is marked, like the old men's arms, by a history of violence and pain yet it is also the language Jakob spoke to his family. Thus, Jakob chooses to write his memories in what is for him an unmarked language, English: "And later, when I began to write down the events of my childhood in a language foreign to their happening, it was a revelation. English could protect me; an alphabet without memory" (101).

Jakob's journey away from his past in language reaches its climax with his relationship to his first wife, Alexandra. A master of palindromes, crosswords and anagrams, Alexandra's use of English is "dangerous and alive, edgy and hot" and she attempts to instill this freshness and vitality in Jakob (132), unfortunately at the expense of removing him from his past. Jakob discusses the different linguistic effects of his relationships with Alexandra and Athos: "Athos replaced parts of me slowly, as if he were preserving wood. But



Alex—Alex wants to explode me, set fire to everything. She wants me to begin again” (144).

This desire to forget his past and start again also motivates Jakob in his relationship with Alexandra as he wishes to illuminate the trapped space which he inhabits, psychologically, with the “finger of light” which Alexandra represents in his life:

She never understands; thinks, certainly, that she’s doing me good, returning me to the world, snatching me from the jaws of despair, rescuing me.

And she is.

But each time a memory or a story slinks away, it takes more of me with it. (144)

This erosion of his sense of connection to his past through language eventually destroys his marriage as he comes to realise that in trying to escape the horrors of his past by overwriting them with new languages, he puts himself in the position of a fugitive once more. This realisation is expressed through reference to his time running away when he stood in a river to clean the mud from his skin: “Again I was standing under water, my boots locked in mud” (139). Eventually Jakob learns to write poetry in his mother tongue, a point which marks one of his most significant progressions. Ben reads the manuscript of one of Jakob’s poems and sees Jakob’s attempt to unite all three of his languages: “the Greek translation written in ink under the English, a shadow; the Hebrew translation written above, an emanation” (267).

## **Remembered Bodies**

These novels include several examples of identities being split from the body, a point which is epitomised in the ghosts of the texts: in Beloved we have a ghost that is all body with no definable identity, whilst in Fugitive Pieces we have a mental projection of Bella’s identity but it is a presence with no physical dimension at all. While we saw Saleem Sinai’s disintegration in Midnight’s Children as a metaphor for the partitioning of his country, the bodily disintegration in these texts serve as metaphors for the dehumanising effects of the

regimes which these texts present in which Afro-Americans were valued only for their bodily worth while the Jewish were thought of as inhuman and therefore expendable. In the case of the Nazi regime, the convention was to refer to those in the ghettos and concentration camps as 'dolls' or 'figures,' thus divesting them of their human dimensions:

Nazi policy was beyond racism, it was anti-matter, for Jews were not considered human. An old trick of language, used often in the course of history. Non-Aryans were never to be referred to as human, but as "figuren," "stücke"— "dolls," "wood," "merchandise," "rags." Humans were not being gassed, only "figuren," so ethics weren't being violated. (165)

Once again, language is used to overwrite the identity, denying these people their consciousness and engendering a split between the body and the identity which haunts Jakob for the rest of his life. This haunting most poignantly expresses itself while Jakob is lying in bed next to Michaela, telling her about Bella. Michaela shows great sympathy for Bella and begins to cry for her (182). Jakob imagines that this sympathy is then reciprocated by Bella as he imagines that she comes into their bedroom and asks Michaela to describe how her body feels in the bed: "Bella sits on the edge of the bed and asks Michaela to describe the feel of the bedcover under her bare legs, 'because you see, just now I am without my body . . .'" (182).

The desire to reunite consciousness with the body once more has its parallel in Beloved, where slaves are thought of as little better than animals. However, whereas the Nazi regime completely dehumanised its victims, under slavery the body took precedence over the person: persecuted Jews were 'no-bodies' yet the Afro-American slaves were only bodies, like working animals. Schoolteacher thinks of himself as "hunting" slaves when he goes to find Sethe and cautions against their 'mishandling' in case they "revert" and bite one's hand off, as a badly treated "creature" might do (149-150). He pursues the categorisation of the slaves at Sweet Home, dividing up the parts of slave's bodies which are human and those



which are animal, and teaches his nephews to do the same, perpetuating the dehumanisation of the slave for future generations (193).

Beloved shows the greatest effort to hold her body together, providing a metaphor for the struggle of every slave and ex-slave's relationship to their body. When she arrives at 124, Beloved already has trouble keeping her head upright on her neck, the suggestion being that this is due to the cut throat she suffered in early life (50 and 56), and during her time in the house she begins to fall apart, a foreshadowing of her dissolution in the final pages where she "erupts into her separate parts" (274). This is prefigured when Beloved loses a tooth, something which both the very young and the very old experience, capturing both her childlike status and her huge age-span as a representative of slavery's history. Beloved interprets the loss of the tooth as a sign of her encroaching dissolution:

Beloved looked at the tooth and thought. This is it. Next would be her arm, her hand, a toe. Pieces of her would drop maybe one at a time, maybe all at once. Or on one of those mornings before Denver woke and after Sethe left she would fly apart. It is difficult keeping her head on her neck, her legs attached to her hips when she is by herself . . . (133)

Beloved's identity coheres more efficiently when Sethe and Denver are conscious and present, a point which stresses the importance of the relationship between self and community. We are also made aware at this point that Beloved knows full well that she is masquerading as a living being, and that the longing she experiences as a ghost is to be both in her body and in the body of a family unit.

However, as a living person, Denver also experiences similar fears of bodily fragmentation, demonstrating the lasting effect of slavery, even on those born into freedom. While the maternal bond between Beloved and Sethe obviously has a very strong grounding in the body, given that Beloved grew within her, a similar physical link is made between Denver and Beloved, as we are told that Denver "swallowed her blood right along with [her]

mother's milk" thereby linking them physically, again through the use of fluid maternal symbolism (205). Denver's feelings for Beloved are similar to those Beloved holds for Sethe, each being convinced that the other is in some way vital for their actual bodily existence. So, when Beloved momentarily disappears whilst in the woodshed with Denver, she finds that "the loss is ungovernable" as Denver feels she has lost part of herself (122). This loss disorientates Denver who "does not know where her body stops, which part of it is an arm, a foot or a knee. She feels like an ice cake torn away from the solid surface of the stream, floating on darkness, thick and crashing against the edges of things around it. Breakable, meltable and cold"(123). The reference to the frozen stream evokes the day the three women go skating, the day on which Sethe identifies Beloved as her daughter thereby consolidating the women's bonds. The snow which fell outside 124 that night and "solidified itself into graceful forms" is now an "ice cake" breaking apart, indicating the ruptures in their connection and wasting Denver's selfhood away: "She can feel her thickness thinning, dissolving into nothing" (123). This reading is premised upon psychological concepts yet Dobbs is keen to note that bodily disintegration is not merely a figurative device in Beloved but also represents the lived experience of slavery and Afro-American life in Southern America:

Indeed, a purely psychoanalytic reading of loss and fantasies of physical dissolution in Beloved must find itself at a glaring impasse at the collapse of the Imaginary and the Real; for whereas a character such as Denver may feel as if she is flying apart at the loss of a beloved other, the spectre of dismemberment is never merely figurative in Beloved or the world it depicts. . . . a violent dissolution of the body is always a very real possibility. Loss of mother and self are thus not only psychological phenomena, but also historically determined, physical realities.<sup>247</sup>

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<sup>247</sup> Dobbs 571.



Physical dismemberment is always a possibility in the society which Sethe and Denver live, yet it also manifests itself in a psychological dimension based on the desire for the maternal.

However, Denver's desire for Beloved is not entirely reciprocated, as the reader is made fully aware of the fact that it is Sethe who Beloved really needs in order that her body cohere. Using imagery which strongly evokes Denver's thoughts above, Beloved says of her mother, "I am not separate from her There is no place where I stop" (210). There is a repeated emphasis on her desire to "join" with her mother too: "I want to be the two of us I want the join" (213). Toward the end of this monologue, Beloved describes opening her eyes and seeing Sethe for the first time whilst sitting on the stump outside 124, and says "now we can join" implying that this is the close physical connection she yearned for (213). It is not only contiguity with the mother which Beloved longs for when she speaks of wanting to find the "join:" in its most macabre extreme, Beloved's longing for the "join" recalls the fragility of her head on her neck and the cut which the handsaw made on her throat. This murder creates a fear of Sethe in her children, causing Howard and Buglar to run away and leaving Denver with nightmares of being beheaded by her mother. In these dreams, Denver has the morose fantasy that Sethe cuts off her head and then takes it downstairs to braid it: "I know she'll be good at it, careful. That when she cuts it off it'll be done right; it won't hurt" (206). In Denver's dreams, beheading is construed as a normal motherly task, like removing a splinter or getting a cinder out of an eye (206). Other mutilated body parts which proliferate in the text include Sethe's beaten back, Baby Suggs's twisted hip, Nan's missing lower arm, and the tiny piece of scalp with a lock of hair and a red ribbon still attached which Stamp Paid finds in a stream. These elements show the fragmenting of the body which the regime of slavery entails, a point which evokes Morrison's interpretation of the modern era as beginning with slavery and the dismemberment of the human race into compartmentalised

Self and Other. The pathology which this engendered is what we now call the modern era, in which we struggle to re-member the 'body' of society.

For the residents of Bluestone Road, freedom marks the beginning of a process of self-reclamation which begins with the body. On gaining her freedom, Baby Suggs looks at her hands and begins to think of them as part of her Self for the first time in her life:

suddenly she saw her hands and thought with a clarity as simple as it was dazzling, 'These hands belong to me. These my hands.' Next she felt a knocking in her chest and discovered something else new: her own heartbeat. Had it been there all along? This pounding thing? She felt like a fool and began to laugh out loud.

(141, emphasis in original)

This concept of self-ownership finds its way into her preachings in the clearing, where she inspires the same love of one's own body in the community around her. As an "unchurched preacher"(87), Baby Suggs is given the suffix "holy" to her name by the local community who listen to her speak to them about self-ownership where she encourages them to laugh, sing and dance in praise of their bodies, "their deeply loved flesh" (89), a communal ritual which binds and gives strength to a community composed of the dispossessed. The emphasis of the scenes in the Clearing is always on remembering; of the community, alive or dead, and of the body. Instead of the traditional authoritarian role adopted by the Christian preacher, Baby Suggs asks that the gathered community love their hands, their mouth, their feet, neck, liver, lungs, their genitalia and their hearts (88-89). This praising is presented as an act of defiance against a system which sees these people only in terms of their bodily worth, a psychological form of physical re-membering.

After Beloved's exorcism, Sethe is a broken woman, lying in bed and lamenting the loss of Beloved, her "'best thing'" (273). Paul D takes on the nurturing role of looking after Sethe, offering to wash her and rub her feet. Psychological trauma is again expressed as physical collapse as Sethe muses "if he bathes her in sections, will the parts hold?" (272).



Paul D sees that he must perform the same healing on Sethe that Sixo's lover, Patsy, gave to him. Paul D recalls Sixo's description of Patsy's effect on him: "'She is a friend of my mind. She gather me, man. The pieces I am, she gather them and give them back to me in the right order. It's good, you know, when you got a woman who is a friend of your mind'" (272-273).

Paul D must continue the re-membering of Sethe's identity which the thirty women of Bluestone Road began, allowing her to become, an individual within a community. In contrast to this re-membering, the body of Beloved becomes "disremembered and unaccounted for," as she "erupts into her separate parts" somewhere by the river (274).

### **Exhumation**

Beloved and Fugitive Pieces contain references to unearthed objects which correspond to similar discoveries in many other novels which have been analysed in this study: the blue cat's eye marble in Cat's Eye, the tin globe in Midnight's Children, the child's wristwatch in The God of Small Things, the secret documents in The Crow Road, the skeleton in the cave and the brooch in The Peppered Moth. In each case the unearthed object has an intimate connection with the protagonist, symbolising something which they must remember, a broken connection to history. In the case of these two texts it is a person who returns and articulates, as best as they can, the memories which need to be acknowledged not only by the communities to which they return, but also by the reader themselves.

Sethe's sense of wonder at Beloved's return is expressed in terms which are similar to the way in which Elaine Risley describes finding the cat's eye marble in Cat's Eye, and the way that Saleem Sinai describes the discovery of his tin globe in Midnight's Children. As soon as Sethe realises that Beloved is her daughter, the narrative relates her feelings of wonderment by reference to the metaphor of finding a chest of treasure:

A hobnail casket of jewels found in a tree hollow should be fondled before it is opened. Its lock may have rusted or broken away from the clasp. Still you should touch the nail heads, and test its weight. No smashing with an ax head before it is decently exhumed from the grave that has hidden it all this time. No gasp at a miracle that is truly miraculous because the magic lies in the fact that you knew it was there for you all along. (176)

As a magic realist character, *Beloved* allows Sethe a connection to a cultural memory which she has never understood. However, this access is taken away again even before Sethe can properly comprehend it, and the 'casket of jewels' closes up again on the novel's final page, as *Beloved*'s body explodes and disappears:

They forgot her like a bad dream. . . . Remembering seemed unwise. They never knew where or why she crouched, or whose was the underwater face she needed like that. Where the memory of the smile under her chin might have been and was not, a latch latched and lichen attached its apple-green bloom to the metal. (275)

The treasure chest is closed again and its lock is covered once more in lichen as if it had never been opened, a detail which relates to the conscious decision by the community to forget that *Beloved* had ever been amongst them. The sadness conveyed by the narrator here is not only that *Beloved* is a disintegrating, rejected character, but that nobody understood her significance. The effect upon the reader is that, unlike the residents of Bluestone Road, we cannot forget the tale of *Beloved* and the narrator's warning that "It was not a story to pass on" becomes translated by the reader (275): instead of accepting that *Beloved*'s tale is unrepeatable, we are made to feel that it is vital that its import is perpetuated, that it is not a tale to pass on. The duty of remembering is left with the reader.

To illustrate the obverse of Sethe's situation, William Bodwin rides toward 124 and thinks of his time growing up there. He remembers some of his old toys that he buried in the garden when he was a boy:

There was a time when he buried things there. Precious things he wanted to protect. As a child every item he owned was available and accountable to his family. Privacy was an adult indulgence, but when he got to be one, he seemed not to need it. . . .



Where, exactly, was the box of tin soldiers? The watch chain with no watch? And who was he hiding them from? (259-260)

As a white man from a comparatively affluent background, William Bodwin is fortunate enough to have a sense of historical connection to his surroundings. He knows where he grew up, who his family were and roughly where his personal effects are from that time. Sethe and Jakob represent people who have no practical recourse to their past. What these texts demonstrate, above all, is the intense longing for a sense of one's own origins, communal memory and a family unit.

The magic realist aspect of this text allows Sethe recourse to a connection with her past which the mimetic narrative of Fugitive Pieces does not allow. Jakob's narrative opens with his 'rebirth' into his life with Athos, describing the way in which he "squirmed from the marshy ground" into Athos's sight,

like Tollund Man, Grauballe Man, like the boy they uprooted in the middle of Franz-Joseph Street while they were repairing the road, six hundred cockleshell beads around his neck, a helmet of mud. Dripping with the prune-coloured juices of the peat-sweating bog. Afterbirth of earth. (5)

Emerging like the preserved bog bodies with which Ben is so fascinated, Jakob crawls out of a bog which sweats like a mother in labour, as Jakob is born into a new life with Athos. This rebirth is identified by Jakob as he says "No one is born just once. If you're lucky, you'll emerge again in someone else's arms . . ." (5). This process of rebirth is used in the same way that the maternal symbolic is used in Beloved to illustrate each protagonist's shift from one existence to another. That Jakob relates himself to the preserved bog bodies is doubly significant as it also encapsulates the themes of history and excavation which run through both his and Ben's narrative, whilst also evoking the burial and subsequent exhumation of the Jews murdered during the Holocaust.

Preserved bog bodies become a metaphor in Fugitive Pieces for the burial of one's identity, one's heritage, but also for the endurance of the self. Part of Ben's empathy with Jakob is conveyed in his references to the preserved bog bodies about whom he reads in magazines. The exhumation of the bog bodies is linked in Ben's mind to the uncovering of the mass graves which his father was forced to unearth as a prisoner of war, photographs of which he insists on showing to Ben. The preserved bodies form a counterbalance to the horrific photographs his father shows him as they are, by comparison, perfect: "[I] derived a fascinated comfort from their preservation. These were not like the bodies in the photos my father showed me. . . . The faces that stared at me across the centuries . . . were the faces of people without names. They stared and waited, mute. It was my responsibility to imagine who they might be" (221). This speculation is underneath Ben's impulse to discover Jakob's story, thereby reconnecting the identity to the unearthed body. The references to bog bodies also recalls the trope of ghosting which these novels explore, as the preserved body is another way of representing the idea of the past erupting into the present.

In Fugitive Pieces the primary lost objects are Jakob's manuscript and the photograph of Ben's parents and the siblings he never knew about, which he discovers after his parents' deaths whilst clearing out their home. On seeing the photograph Ben sees not only an aspect of his unexplained past but also an indication of his future: "We think of photographs as the captured past. But some photographs are like DNA. In them you can read your whole future"(251-252). The reference to DNA is another suggestion of the memory that matter can hold, being the code for a life form, as this image of his siblings is the only other family Ben has seen, making him aware of a wider genetic inheritance for the first time. The past implied by the photograph is all too obvious to Ben as he works out the respective birth dates of the baby in his father's arms and the toddler by his father's leg:



On the back floats a spidery date, June 1941, and two names. Hannah. Paul. I stared at both sides of the photograph a long time before I understood that there had been a daughter; and a son born just before the action. When my mother was forced into the ghetto, twenty-four years old, her breasts were weeping with milk. (252)

When coupled with the fact that Jakob's narrative ends with his prayer for his unborn child, who dies before birth, we realise that each man's narrative has been concerned with the loss of both children and childhood, another point which connects this text with Beloved. As Ben flies back to Canada at the text's end he thinks again of their relationship:

Like a miraculous circuit, each draws strength from the other.  
I see that I must give what I most need. (294)

This leaves the reader with the impression that Ben will return home to rebuild his crumbling marriage with Naomi and possibly go on to have the children he was formerly so afraid of having.

As mentioned above, these texts delineate the extent to which the individual is always implicated in history and the community. In each case, an admission is reached that a complete remembering of the atrocities of the respective regimes of slavery and the Holocaust cannot be achieved: Jakob never finds out what happened to Bella and the community of Bluestone Road never openly acknowledge Beloved's full significance. To come back to Levi, such gaps in understanding may be necessary in order that survival be possible. However, through an exploration of some aspects of living memory, the protagonists of these novels manage to construct a sense of connection to others, their environment and their language. In both texts this connection marks a cessation of the haunting which troubles each narrative, threatening to trap the characters within an ever-expanding present.

### Conclusion.

As an illness which comprises two primary aspects, melancholia and mourning, the postmodern must be followed by a period of reconstruction in which identity is remembered. Postmodern mourning proves to be the focus of many texts in this study, which take as their starting point a cultural consciousness pervaded by fragmentation and a depressive/regressive sense of temporality. Each text then demonstrates the way in which these situations can be reformed, or, if this project is not entirely successful, then the reader is at least left with the sense of the importance of such a process and the value of representation in performing this healing. Along with the reclaiming of certain historical concepts and a reconnection to linear temporality, realism itself is revised in a number of the texts in this study, often with recourse to elements of the spiritual and magic realist aspects, but most importantly with influences from the new physics.

Waterland, The Crow Road and The Peppered Moth work to reassess the historical disconnections experienced in the late twentieth and early twenty-first century, showing instead the reconnection of identity to enormous scales of cosmological, geological, genetic and familial history. These examples of British realism demonstrate the necessity of the subject's connection to the metanarrative of history which was formerly denounced by postmodern ideology. Drabble's text contrasts with those of Banks and Swift in order to highlight a gender issue concerning representations of women and motherhood in a contemporary context. Feminism's distance from the postmodern is expressed in The Peppered Moth in which we see that the struggle to create a interconnected mode of identity is contradictory to the postmodern drive toward fragmentation. Similarly, the insular form of



subjectivity which postmodernity mourns is found to be equally incongruous with feminist reconstructions of identity.

This point is explored further in Cat's Eye in which Atwood revises archetypal female iconography and combines these revisions with an ontological paradigm based on the new physics. The need to reform archetypal constructs of women and motherhood is highlighted when Cat's Eye is debated alongside The Child in Time. Although the new physics inspired ideology presents a useful model of interconnectedness, an analysis of its use in The Child in Time shows the risk of creating an a-historical, de-politicised subject, particularly if existing problematic constructions of gender are not reformed. McEwan's text strays into the depressive/regressive realm of infantile desire for reconnection with the maternal in a way which makes the representation of new identity forms for women problematic, if not impossible.

The impossibility of progression becomes a politically determined actuality in the texts discussed in Chapter Four as Midnight's Children, Clear Light of Day and The God of Small Things demonstrate the specific difficulties in constructing a coherent sense of self in a postcolonial situation. Mourning in these texts is not for the passing of the bourgeois, insular self, but for the broken connection to the motherland, engendered by colonial invasion. Cultural imperialism and its psychological effects are brought to the fore in this chapter, showing the ways in which imperial ideals force the postcolonial subject to accept a hybrid identity. In such a difficult political scene, women are doubly oppressed, not only by the machinations of an imposed Western patriarchal system and the indigenous caste hierarchy, but also because they are socially aligned with an idealised paradigm of a culturally authentic, pre-colonial India. Language, often considered to be a site of play for the postmodern and its disputes with meaning, becomes another form which allows the postcolonial subject the

opportunity to express an essential hybridity which simultaneously shows a reformed Indian identity, as it works to deconstruct the effects of English rule.

Chapter Five brings together the themes of gender, history, time, memory, colonisation and the reconstruction of the self in an analysis of Beloved and Fugitive Pieces. In both novels, communal memory is reclaimed as an effective and necessary antidote to institutionalised violence and dispossession, thereby constructing a form of identity which progresses from postmodernity. Again, the issue of language is raised in these texts in which the ambiguous relation to the mother tongue, if there is a relation at all, both helps and hinders the attempt to recreate a coherent sense of identity within a new cultural context. Morrison's revisions of modernity's parameters in particular show that, while the World Wars are commonly believed to have inspired the ideological crisis of postmodernity, its roots are situated several hundred years before these events, in the advent of African slavery. Beloved seeks to show the necessity of finding ways to mourn loss and go on to represent identity as historically and socially connected. The difficulty of representing the scale of loss haunts both texts, and amnesia is accepted as an inevitability, as it is impossible to account for the deaths and suffering which either the Afro-American slave trade or the Holocaust entailed. Until this impossibility is accepted, the gaps in knowledge haunt.

The mourning process which the postmodern inspires is the only possible counterbalance to the mania which constitutes its other symptoms, as well as being the only way in which the postmodern can be eclipsed. As every text in this study demonstrates, the need to remember identity in the wake of postmodern deconstruction marks the stage at which postmodernity undergoes what Harvey calls a "subtle evolution, perhaps reaching a point of self-dissolution into something different. But what?," a question which echoes



Huyssen's "what comes next?" at the beginning of this study.<sup>248</sup> As illustrated many times, 'postmodern' is a term which does not do justice to the collection of texts discussed above which are linked by their "forward impulsion" and their reclamation of supposedly outmoded ideas.<sup>249</sup> Identity is reconnected to time and history, realism is revised in order that new ontological forms have the space to develop, and a process of remembering is taken into the future.

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<sup>248</sup> Harvey 358 and Huyssen, Twilight 95.

<sup>249</sup> Connor 21.

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