

## **Reading the Intersection of History, Memory and Local Narratives to Resist**

### **Grand Narratives in Ian McEwan's *Atonement***

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#### **Abstract**

It is not easy to separate a text from the context in which it has been written and the context in which it is being read. The Second World War along with the escalating industrial and technological developments primarily mark the context of Contemporary British Fiction. The kind of transformation that the post-war and the post-industrial situation had brought about in the everyday life undoubtedly led to responses that were critical of such changes and transformations. Thinkers like Nietzsche, Derrida and Foucault questioned the very idea of reality and challenged the structural hierarchy of the past. The conventional and foundational truths and legitimacy of life regarding belief, faith, language, history, art, truth etc. were distorted and questioning the politics of representation started to gain prominence. In literature as well,

through various experimentations in terms of parody, pastiche, magic realism, unconventional narrative structure and memory, local narratives were prioritized to resist the universal grand narratives. Thus, political and historical givens started to be revisited through various agencies and methods. It must be noted that contemporary/postmodern British writers very often prioritized local narratives as against grand narratives. The merging of history, memory and local narratives as often seen in Contemporary British Fiction brings out plurality of meanings and different versions of reality. The present paper is an attempt to read Ian McEwan's bestselling novel *Atonement* (2001) as a narrative that amalgamates history, memory and local narrative thereby prioritizing individual experiences of passion, guilt and atonement as against the sole grand narratives of patriotism and nationalism.

**Keywords:** Ian McEwan, history, memory, local narrative, resistance, grand narrative, contemporary British fiction, postmodernism

Contemporary British fiction which is generally dated from the late 1950s to the present times is a huge canvas consisting of narratives that transcend the conventional precincts and understanding to do with novel or fiction writing and reading as well. Mostly marked by its copious experimentations in terms of form, style and even content or subject-matter, contemporary British fiction has opened up possibilities of exploration into the deeper recesses of the human psyche, of story-telling, of narrative, of notions to do with truth, reality, reality distortion, fantasy, myth, everyday life, science and technology and its impact on the humans and civilization as such. In other words, the canon of contemporary British fiction is a response and a reaction against the extraordinary and unprecedented changes that took place and are still taking place as a result of the various social, socio-political, historical, scientific and cultural turn post the Second World War precisely.

There requires less elaboration on the disastrous impact that the Second World War had on the European civilization and most precisely on the British and German masses alike. Besides, following the Second World War, considerable amount of political and social unrest was noted via the Holocaust, the Vietnam war, the student's rebellion in Paris in 1968, in other words, events that prompted a shift and rebel against the ways of thinking and perception—perception of the world, of reality. Notably, the context of the substantial rise of industrialization which was in its pinnacle by the early 1940s and its authority on European culture was another major cause that stirred a reaction from philosophers and thinkers who voiced against its atrocities through various agencies and means. Contemporary British fiction which dates from approximately the late 1950s, i.e., precisely the post Second World War period up to the present times is predominantly a creation in response to the mechanisms of the horror, the ugliness, the story of individual struggle, of individual frustration, of the fact of cosmopolitanism that the post Second World War and the mechanisms of high industrialization incited or encouraged. In such a scenario which opened up paths for further possibilities and pluralities of human existence and human truth, of meaning, of reality it became quite difficult to adhere to a solo grand narrative either to do with nationalism or patriotism and other such conventional social and cultural structures and hierarchies. Remarkably the very attempt of challenging the idea of the “real” and the given was attempted through different agencies. With Derrida probing into the inconsistency of language, Roland Barthes's pronouncement of the “death of the author”, Foucault's penetration into the reality and the idea of historical and civilizational discourse, the plurality of meanings and possibilities gained momentum. Hence, the political and historical givens started to be revisited by writers and critics through various agencies and methods. Interestingly in fiction, very often the grand historical and political discourses and narratives were surpassed through the prominence of local or small narratives that remained earlier tangential. Individual and subjective experiences were prioritized and consequently the grand narratives were revisited and merged with local narratives that depicted individual experiences. It is seen that Contemporary/postmodern British writers notably Samuel Beckett, Kinsley Amis, Julian Barnes, David

Mitchell, Ian McEwan, Hilary Mantel, Rose Macaulay, Angus Wilson, Iris Murdoch, Anthony Powell and John Fowles very often prioritized local narratives as against grand narratives. The postmodern tendency of playfulness of the narrative to read the underlying histories that enfolds individual lives thereby bringing out individual history as against the larger context of the grand historical narrative becomes to a great extent a marked feature of postmodern or contemporary British fiction.

As is known the movement of postmodernism in art, literature, philosophy is chiefly characterized by its experimentation with the form, style, content and even has to do with stories of reception or responses from the reading public. This is to some extent even true of modernism as well. In fact, it is quite difficult to outline the beginnings of postmodernism or to mark a clear-cut line of demarcation of postmodernism from the rest of the movements in European history most importantly that of modernism. By and large postmodernism and modernism see a good amount of overlapping of certain ideas and thoughts that constitute the essence of both the movements. Modernism in its inclination against the anxiety of modern living evoked by technological developments and the Great War, besides several other factors was primarily marked by its tendency to formulate various innovations and experimentations in form, style and content. Thinkers who were critical of the 'modern' or the impact of 'modernity' in the lives of the masses articulated their suspicion and concern through various philosophical and religious treatises, through literature, through the advent of popular culture, through the emergence of the avant-garde or the various movements clubbed under the banner of modernism, through even art and architecture as well. The kind of attention and response to subjectivity, to scepticism and questioning of faith, to the insistence on different ideologies that in some sense posited a challenge to the existing aesthetic familiarity, to the pillars of faith, truth, reality and morality proved modernism as an unconventional movement in itself. In this sense it will not be wrong to say that the advent of postmodernism was a few additional steps to the movement initiated earlier by modernism. It can also be possibly understood that postmodernism began from where modernism not only literally but figuratively started declining. Postmodernism can in many senses be considered an extension of modernism. The

entire movement of postmodernism can be considered to be more robust and forthright in its nature than its predecessor. The historical background of the Second World War and the exceedingly changes in lifestyle offered by industrialization, rapid urbanization and mechanization prompted an atmosphere where an unequivocal and strapping atmosphere of scepticism or cynicism and experimentation as such were strongly followed. Many possible perspectives and approaches regarding postmodernism have been put forward by thinkers and analysts time and again, where it has been quite difficult to define postmodernism within definite parameters and constraints as such. Bran Nicol rightly observes in this regard:

But postmodernism is not weird for the sake of being weird. Nor is it simply ‘the contemporary’ or ‘the experimental’. It may be ‘avant-garde’..., or it may be a continuation of the values and techniques of modernism (but then again it may just as plausibly be a break with modernism). It may be an empty practice of regarding previous artistic styles...or a valid form of political critique... (Nicol, 1)

One marked instance of the kind of experimentation within the frame of postmodernism had been the outspokenness and sternness with which it was carried out. It can be “summarized through its features if ironic, self-reflexive playfulness, formal inventiveness, and heterogeneity of genre” (Obradovic, 20).

The philosophical movement of postmodernism offered a perfect theoretical framework that sustained and adhered to the experiences that the postmodern environment offered or had to offer. While extensive attention to structure, order, form, pattern, well knitted plot and grand narratives defined the theoretical and critical framework of literary theory earlier, the postmodernist framework supplemented by the theoretical structure of poststructuralism paid attention to elements of scepticism, relativism and subjectivism, local narratives and minor literature. There was a whole lot of philosophical and critical analysis that shaped the discourse of postmodernism. With the idea of reality being challenged by Nietzsche way back in the nineteenth century the legacy of postmodern thinking was based on a strong

edifice. However, to some critics' postmodernism sounded a "contradictory phenomenon, one that uses and abuses, installs and then subverts, the very concepts it challenges—be it in architecture, literature, painting..." (Hutcheon 3)

Michel Foucault in several of his treatises, *Madness and Civilization* (1961), *The Birth of the Clinic* (1963), *The Order of Things* (1966) and *The Archaeology of Knowledge* (1969) expressed improbability on the very fact of the institutionalization of knowledge as well as the mechanisms of knowledge formation, discourse, collection, power, archives and the dissemination of knowledge as well. There are possibilities that postmodernism was all about questioning the very edifice or the very idea of centrality, of *the* centre. Almost all the advocates of the philosophy and movement of postmodernism denied the presence of any kind of centrality. The question of power politics thus came to be the prime target of postmodernism. It is this play of power politics that most of the thinkers tried to locate in the several domains of thought and discipline. Roland Barthes located the issue of power politics in the authors control over the text and argued over the role and participation of the reader in the equal formation and configuration or understanding of the text. As Prof. Pramod K. Nayar remarks "while Foucault's work involved detailing the structures of power and their discourse, Roland Barthes' later writings began to make the first moves in rebelling against structuralist readings of texts" (Nayar, 37). While the structuralist frame confined meaning within definite parameters that too defined and laid down by the author, Barthes proposed through his major works like *The Death of the Author* (1967), that the meaning of a text is enclosed in the reader or the reception community. It thus came to be accepted that after a text is produced by an author, it is free from the author and has its meaning and essence embedded within the consciousness and understanding of the reader. It is the reader who actually defines the text by interpreting it from the context and situation in which s/he is placed or rooted. The author/reader binary thus came to be dismantled on the grounds of "text" and "work", where Barthes "was proposing that meaning was not embedded within the text but within the reader who derived meaning from the textual process" (Nayar, 37). To add to this entire structure of pluralities of meanings and possibilities, Jacques

Derrida's philosophy of 'deconstruction' emphasized upon the problematics which the acceptance of a centre, or a fixed point, or '*the*' meaning can possibly lead to. The philosophy of deconstruction heavily stressed upon the point that it was not possible to accept that meaning is fixed and static. The deconstructive turn initiated by Derrida focussed upon the "endless play in language and literary texts, the unreliability of meaning, the openness of texts, the instability of language, the unfinalizability of any meaning or text, the relationship between words, meanings and texts as intrinsic to meaning rather than the words themselves" (Nayar, 40). With Derrida and his deconstruction, the huge edifice of the centre or the interior was dismantled and the periphery, the margin came to receive as much attention and consideration as the centre had all the while. The deconstructive move in literary theory and criticism was a huge movement from a fixed or static point to a more variable and divergent conglomeration. Many theorists apart from Derrida but following Derrida importantly, like Paul de Man, Geoffrey Hartman, Harold Bloom, J. Hillis Miller, Jean Baudrillard, Gilles Deleuze, Jean Francois Lyotard, Julia Kristeva and others have formulated different ways of perceiving and understanding the possibilities and pluralities of meaning thereby dislocating the earlier conventional idea and attitude regarding meaning, truth, knowledge and reality. The theoretical framework of Postmodernism thus was a major move in resisting and contradicting the idea of fixed meaning and grand narratives. Also, the different theories contiguous to deconstruction emphasized on the point that texts are undecidable and infinite in terms of their meaning, and further that there is a crisis of meaning in the postmodern age. As such the postmodern or the poststructuralist theorists have come up with different conceptions like Derrida's relativism, conditions of difference and deference. Deconstruction says Prof. Nayar is chiefly characterized by its strategy to "discover impurities, contamination, border-crossing that upset purity, structure, linearity and origins...In every statement you can see the remainders of something else, and detect what else remains to be said" (Nayar, 41). Considering the crisis of meaning and in accord with the plurality of meanings and possibilities, the idea of the hyperreal, simulation, representation, implosion, television and screen culture, the semiotic and the *chora* have come to define the idea of the real and the actual. Hence, a move against

the totalizing systems of thought became the defining feature of the postmodern (which is in many sense the contemporary) theoretical framework. One marked feature of the frame was resistance, resistance to conventional acceptance and understanding of language, meaning, perception of reality and truth. It is often understood that as against the distortions, demolitions, devastations triggered by the Second World War and similar agencies associated to it, an acceptance of the earlier conventional idea of truth, meaning and knowledge became quite difficult in the post war scenario. As such grand narratives started to be replaced by marginal or what is also best known as local narratives. The marginal, the diminutive, the fragmentary and the alternative started gaining prominence against notions of fixed and static meanings. This got reflected in the playfulness of narrative that basically defined the postmodern narratives.

Jean-Francois Lyotard in *The Postmodern Condition* (1979) has argued on resistance to grand narratives or metanarratives and totalizing aspects or agencies and has urged for the marginal and the fragmented points of view which he believed has also the potentiality to make up the meaning or the sense of a real. Prof. Nayar observes in this regard:

Poststructuralism with its notion of contamination, difference, textuality and intertextuality destroyed the notion of a single author, meaning or text. By positioning multiplicities, lines of flight, openness, rhizomes, reproductions and anti-totality, postmodernism proposed fragmentation, freedom and simulation. (Nayar, 58)

Narratives that followed the postmodern or the poststructuralist tempo were to a great extent influenced by the insights of such a tempo. Contemporary British fiction to a great extent adopted the insights of the postmodern configuration of knowledge and knowledge formation and accordingly offered a completely different version of the text, of narrative and story-telling, of the author, the reader, of certainty and meaning, of reality and distorted notions of reality, alternatives, marginal, fragmentary, the idea of history, individuality and subjectivity, which had “certain arguable advantages” (Rosaldo, 171) narrative playfulness, memory, local narratives. Interestingly these components counter the objective, conventional



and the solo grand narratives that had defined so far, the idea of the text and the author (with little or no position for the reader), the totalizing perspectives of history and narratives. The design of a fixed and static understanding of meaning and knowledge in postmodern fiction was thus dismantled. The postmodernist tendency attempts to discard the world of totality and acknowledge the pluralities, fragmentations and decentralization of existence. Hence, it is suspicious of master narratives or metanarratives (Ning, 264).

In addition to the theoretical framework which is in alliance with the postmodern condition as has already been discussed above the postmodern or contemporary British fiction and fictional narratives since the 1950s mark a startling difference from the kind of fictional accounts of the earlier periods. However, it must be mentioned here as has already been pointed above in the discussion that it is very difficult indeed to chronologically demarcate the postmodern or the contemporary British fiction from the fiction that preceded it entirely. For, certain tendencies of postmodernism or poststructuralism can be clearly sensed in certain fictions written during the modern period as well. Nevertheless, contemporary British fiction marks a wide range of experimentation in terms of subject and narration. Noted novelists including Samuel Beckett, Kinsley Amis, Julian Barnes, David Mitchell, Ian McEwan, Hilary Mantel, Rose Macaulay, Angus Wilson, Iris Murdoch, Anthony Powell and John Fowles are found to have adopted most of the postmodern/poststructuralist tendencies in their narratives. Thus, very often it has been seen how local narratives to do with individual experiences, memory, subjectivity in association with a different version of history gets prioritized as against the grand narratives and structural hierarchies of the past. Notably, contemporary British fiction is marked by a merging of history, memory and local narratives which in turn brings out pluralities of meaning and different versions of reality.

In the introduction to *Contemporary British Fiction* (2018), Nick Bentley observes:

Each of the three turns in the main title of the book requires a certain amount of scrutiny. The term ‘contemporary’ suggests a periodizing approach to literature that is subject to the application

of what might be seen to be arbitrary cut-off points. Indeed, what constitutes the ‘fiction’ can also be put under scrutiny, especially in an age that has seen the development of experimental techniques, the blurring of boundaries between generic categories... ‘British’ especially in an age that has seen increased interest in postcolonial, cosmopolitan and transnational literature... (Bentley, 1)

Importantly the canon of contemporary British fiction is a vast terrain of exploratory and experimental trend that surpasses notions of nationhood and region and encompasses more of subjective and individualistic traditions which stands true to the present-day context of post-industrial, post-war, cosmopolitan, multi-cultural and the global environment. It attempts to record, document and articulate as well as comment upon the important events, movements and the cultural apprehensions of the contemporary world and its impact on the living as well as the non-living entities on it.

Ian McEwan, an eminent contemporary British fiction writer, well-known for his works *The Cement Garden* (1978), *The Comfort of Strangers* (1981), *Enduring Love* (1997), the Booker Prize winning fiction *Amsterdam* (1998), *Atonement* (2001), *Machines Like Me* (2019), *Lessons* (2022), *Finn’s Christmas Wish* (2024) and many more is noted for his experimental techniques in his fiction writing particularly in terms of its form and content. Importantly, McEwan’s writings depict several concerns and contents of the postmodern and the post war situation and delves deep into questions of the human psyche, subjectivity, individualism and particularly draws attention to the very act of writing itself as against the changing social strata, the backdrop of the war and the post war situation. *Atonement* (2001) with which the present paper deals with is set in three phases or time periods. The first period covers the 1935 England, the second period covers the Second World War England and France and the third period covers the then present-day England.

The story unfolds focussing on the lives of three characters, namely, Briony Tallis, her elder sister Cecilia Tallis and Robbie Turner. Although, largely set up against the backdrop of the war, the story

primarily deals with the inner deliberations and contemplations of the different characters and their situations, but most importantly it highlights upon the story of the journey of Briony Tallis a 13-year-old girl. It is the story of the girl's half-innocent mistake, a naive or childlike fantasy which leads to the destruction of the lives of Cecilia Tallis and Robbie Turner. Further it is to her mistake and sense of guilt and atonement, under the shadow of which she has to live the rest of her life until she attempts to find atonement in the writing of the book where she showcases the union of Cecilia and Robbie Turner which in reality never occurred and of which she is partly or fully perhaps responsible.

It is interesting to note the attention to memory and local narrative that has been the prime focus in the entire metafiction. The play of the narrative, the play in the construction of the plot, storytelling shown through the very plot of the fiction itself is remarkable indeed. What is equally arresting is the spotlight and shift of the narrative from the conventional grand narratives to individual memory, subjective perception of history and thus on local narratives.

It has already been pointed above that most of the postmodern or poststructuralist writers posit a kind of resistance to the structural hierarchy of the past, to conventional forms of story-telling, objectivity and singularity of meaning and truth and thus on grand narratives. Jean Francois Lyotard makes an important observation:

I define postmodern as incredulity toward metanarratives. This incredulity is undoubtedly a product of progress in the sciences. But that progress in turn presupposes it. To the absolution of the metanarrative apparatus of legitimation corresponds, most notably, the crisis of metaphysical philosophy and of the university institution which in the past relied on it. The narrative function is losing its functions, its great hero, its great dangers...each of us lives at the intersection of many of these... (Lyotard, 27)

He further emphasizes that:

In contemporary society and culture—postindustrial society, postmodern culture—the question of legitimation of knowledge is formulated in different terms. The grand narrative has lost its credulity, regardless of what mode of unification it uses, regardless of whether it is a speculative narrative or a narrative of emancipation (Lyotard, 28).

It turns out that, according to Lyotard, a metanarrative or a grand narrative is an idea or a conception that is no longer applicable in the context of postmodernism or the culture and multiplicity of existence and essence that postmodernism or the post-industrial/post war period incites. The institutions of religion, faith, hierarchy, marriage etc.—those upon which even modernism has relied heavily for emancipation, and those which constitute the quintessence of grand narratives or metanarratives are hardly considered to be pertinent in the postmodernist environment. Instead, the idea of local narratives and subjective or individual experiences and memory offering layers or series of possibilities in terms of truth and meaning, come to permeate the postmodern experience. As Lyotard remarks, that the “rules defining a game and the ‘moves’ playable within it *must* be local, in other words, agreed on by its present players and subject to eventual cancellation” (Lyotard, 37).

*Atonement* offers such a probability into layers and layers or series of ‘truth’ and ‘meaning’. The young author Briony Tallis (in the novel) right from her composition of *The Trials of Arabella* a fantasy and to her final destination as an established and celebrated author has endeavoured to situate and unearth such notions of ‘truth’, ‘reality’ and ‘meaning’. It was not until her confrontation of the scene between Cecilia and Robbie near the fountain and in the library that she discovered that the reality was far removed from what she thought and attempted to depict as an ‘author’ in *The Trials of Arabella*:

Briony leaned back against a wall and stared unseeingly down the nursery’s length. It was temptation for her to be magical and dramatic, and to regard what she had witnessed as a tableau mounted for her alone, a special moral for her wrapped in a mystery. But she knew very well that if she had not stood when she did, the scene would still have happened, for it was not about her at

all...This was not a fairy tale, this was the real, the adult world in which frogs did not address princesses, and the only messages was the ones that people sent.

...She could write the scene three times over, from three points of view; her excitement was in the prospect of freedom, of being delivered from the cumbrous struggle between good and bad, heroes and villains. None of these three was bad, nor were they particularly good. She need not judge. There did not have to be a moral. She need only show separate minds, as alive as her own, struggling with the idea that other minds were equally alive. (McEwan, 40)

Perhaps this very fact of the several interfaces of reality is something that eventually turns out in the structure of the narrative, in the unfolding of the several layers of the story. It must be noted that Briony was deceived several times in her insinuation of finding *the real, the truth*. Although she thought she had ‘finally’ been confronted with the truth, the playfulness of the narrative structure turns out as against the very reality of the love that existed between Cecilia and Robbie, of which Briony was unaware of. What she perceived as the real was her perception, her point of view of the entire affair. The irony of the whole situation, the point of contradiction explicitly turns out to be Briony’s ignorance and her utter belief of perceiving truth where in reality she was constantly being the victim of it:

They were safe, Cecilia was with Leon...All she had to do now was to discover the stories, not just the subjects, but a way of unfolding them, that would do justice to her new knowledge. Or did she mean, her wiser grasp of her own ignorance. (McEwan, 160)

Apart from deciphering Briony’s ignorance of the matter, her situation of being far behind from the truth and reality in the unfolding of the plot and the narrative, McEwan quite interestingly discloses it through the review/letter that she receives from the publishers on her copy that attempts to disclose her atonement, *Two Figures by a Fountain*:

We found *Two Figures by a Fountain* arresting enough to read with dedicated attention...Something unique and unexplained is caught...Our attention would have been held even more effectively had there been an underlying pull of simple narrative...

So, for example, the child at the window whose account we read first—her fundamental lack of grasp of the situation is nicely caught. So too is the resolve in her that follows, and the sense of initiation into grown-up mysteries. (McEwan, 312)

There are possibilities that in the letter Briony gets some of her own answers, the questions that seem to have confronted her all throughout. What appeared ‘real’ and *the narrative* to Briony is very arrestingly shown as a figment of fantasy and mystery or curiosity from the other point of view. What turns out is the very possibility of the different layers of narrative and understanding to get overlapped and form a narrative which has its own essence and meaning. Hence acceptance of one solo narrative as grand narrative is not without its criticism and disillusionment.

Against this very backdrop of the storyline revolves the sense of guilt and the need for atonement. And most importantly this has been shown to be or projected as the grand narrative, as against the grand narrative of war which happens to be one of the constituent backgrounds of the story but not the theme of the story entirely. It is important here to quote a segment from the narrative where a comment has been succinctly put forward by the author through the reviewers of *Two Figures by a Fountain*. Commenting upon the lack of historical and political reference to the war, the publishers write:

You apologise, in passing, for not writing about the war...we do not believe that artists have an obligation to strike up attitudes to the war. Indeed, they are wise and right to ignore it and devote themselves to other subjects. Since artists are politically impotent, they must use this time to develop at deeper emotional levels...Warfare, as we remarked, is the enemy of creative activity (McEwan, 314-315)

Importantly, it shall not be wrong to say that the entire narrative of the fiction has been shaped in response to the above quoted statement from the story. Quite interestingly, McEwan has laid ample emphasis on individual memory to do with sensuality, love, sense of guilt, the need for atonement as against the background or the grand narrative of war, patriotism or nationalism. The memory of Robbie and Cecilia's sensual encounter in the library was their sole moment of repose and respite during the time of war. Throughout the narrative it must be noted that the author has devoted long passages describing the sexual/sensual encounter between Cecilia and Robbie, the memory of which happens to pervade the thoughts of the two during the time of the war.

Also, it is the sense of individual guilt and atonement that dominates the narrative against the backdrop of the war. The narrative is more concerned about the intersections of subjective positions, individual perception of history (here the war), individual memory and local narratives and the possibility of multiple layers of meanings and understandings of reality and truth against the conventional solo grand narratives and hierarchical structures. The narrative is an exploration into the multiplicity of experiences, confrontations in a post-war, post-industrial environment dealing with discrepancies in meanings and understanding, truth and reality which is the postmodern narrative—a narrative which to great extent pervades into the present contemporary global scenario as well.

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