

The Matrix of Postmodern Fragmentation in Ian McEwan's Atonement

 ¹ Husamulddin Alfaisali

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Keywords	Abstract
Backward Technique, Episodic Structure, Forward Technique, Fragmentation, Non-linearity, Spatial Distortion, Temporal Distortion	Postmodernist writers are known for their experimentation with modernist techniques, and among the ones that they expanded on and played with is the technique of fragmentation. McEwan instills the implementation of that concept in his work <i>Atonement</i> (2002). Thus, the text will be approached in this paper by highlighting and analyzing the utilization of fragmentation by the author. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to examine how the author used fragmentation so as to express his ideas, in addition to seeing how he dealt with temporal linearity (forward/backward techniques) and spatial linearity, plot structure, episodic structure, events, etc. The significance of this study lies in the contribution the paper shall make to the body of English literature by providing a critical input to the literary data related to McEwan's narrative. The results revealed that McEwan has employed fragmentation almost throughout the text in a manner that makes the readers confused and perplexed in understanding the text smoothly because of distorting and fragmenting his narrative through the above-mentioned list

A Brief Overview to Fragmentation

Fragmentation is a pivotal technique in postmodern literature. It was made popular in fiction, through English writers in general, and Irish and British ones in specific, by denying completeness, coherence, and linearity, and in so doing, leaving gaps and fragments concurrently. Postmodernists adopted fragmentation from the modernists, yet they played and expanded on it, letting their literary texts to possess episodic style forms, temporal/spatial distortion, and jumps in character as well. Therefore, fragmentation, as a key aspect in postmodernism, makes

¹ ALFAISALI, H. S. A., Ph.D., Department of English, Al-Iraqia Science University. Email: Husamulddin.S.Azeez@BaghdadCollege.edu.iq. ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-6945-6397>



literature more complex rather than simple and clear. One may not go so far in stating that postmodernity, as a whole, is “a culture of fragmentary sensations” (Baldick, 2001, p. 201).

Fragmentation, in essence, resists meaning and understanding (Frey, 1996, p. 2), and moreover, it is not easy to pin down, since there is no broadly accurate principle or guide to how and what constitutes fragments themselves (Elias, 2004, p. 2). However, it appears to be offering an apt mode of writing to depict the chaos and disorder of the real world in that it is unstable, discontinuous, radical, and uncentered (Harries, 1994, p. 34). Toward the turn of the century, a confusion was originated in many a medium, including society, economy, technology, and science. Eventually, that upsurge in terms of crisis led to developing fragmented forms of writing, having distortedly chronological narratives.

Thus, this type of postmodern fiction tends to confront readers with an assortment of fragments, and by utilizing multiple realities, readers vacate the narrative which unifies them, trying to reconstruct according to their understanding by piecing them together (Guignery, 2019, p. 28). Multiplicity, in voices and endings, aside from skepticism results from fragmentation. Sometimes, one literary text has more than one narrator such that as one finishes, a second one starts, resulting the work to be fragmented in a particular manner.

Of the methods through which fragmentation takes place is the forward-backward technique, which employs temporal distortion, i.e., it uses a non-linear timeline. Namely, the events could jump backwards or forwards in time to the extent that it occasionally makes readers unable to distinguish between the past and the present due to the fragmented events narrated. These fragmented events tend to hide a secret relation between one event and another, however.

Modernist literary figures regarded fragmentation as something one should mourn over. They endeavored to dissolve chaos and restore order in their societies through their artistry, wherein meaning was completely lost. They tried to uncover a pattern out of fragmentation, i.e., hope out of chaos. Conversely, postmodernist writers have embraced a different outlook in that they endorse fragmentation to establish playful works that mirror and investigate the complexities, confusion, and disintegration of the world in terms of thoughts, behaviors, social mores, etc. (Munir & Sumaira, 2021, p. 57). They stopped the quest for order and embraced the anarchy, freedom, and chaos that served as the product of the disillusionments of the societies that suffered from two world wars. Thus, they rejected the notion of the unified self, along with any kind of authoritarianism, and so they composed their literary works with relativity and multiplicity, leading themselves to receive the world as fragmented, contingent, unstable, and ungrounded and that it is a mere composition of disunities (Jones, 2000).

So, all things considered, fragmentation equals fission since it is breaking the work up to more than one part or component. A lot of postmodernist writers overlooked the four pillars in



writing—setting, plot, theme, and character. Consequently, the setting becomes transitory and unfixed. The plot becomes fragmented into various scenarios which makes it non-linear. Themes are inconsistent. Characters are also disintegrated with ostensibly sudden motions that are out of control. Thus, the postmodernist novelists reject the grand narratives and rather deal with a fragmented manner of structuring narratives.

In brief, fragmentation, as a key trope and practice in postmodernism, was tantamount to a steppingstone in breaking free from the traditional perceptions of wholeness and plunge into instability, isolations, and interruptions. Thus, time developed to be less linear; the syntax was subject to experimentation with different forms; characters were having their own thoughts, usually dispersed between the past, present and future, and this lack of continuity in terms of time and space reflected or replicated the postmodern society.

Fragmentation in Ian McEwan's *Atonement*

The literary text of McEwan unravels the multiplicity in splits and rifts, a major break between the core account and the 1999 coda, aside from the cracks among the different subparts and parts. The value of fragmentation generates a link between the various parts. That is, through fragmentation, McEwan's text formulates a unity out of those segments. Fragmentation in *Atonement* displays the gaps among characters and their opposing viewpoints, the difference between reality and fiction. The novel challenges continuity, coherence, and concord, reflecting the notions of cracks, fragmentation, gaps, and ruptures. Thus, the author is behind aiming to explore multiplicities, expressing the inner state of Briony that is related to a dislocated temporality and perception.

Starting in the 1st chapter with the the author referring to the “floorboard cracks” in Briony's room (McEwan, 2002, p. 11), which implies that the floor is unstable; however, those cracks may be taken literally to signify a fractured space, or figuratively to imply a perilous situation. This starting point frames the entire narrative given that this instability is reflected in the coda as Briony utters, “The floor seems to be undulating beneath my feet.” (McEwan, 2002, p. 351), aside from the talk about earthquakes on newspapers (McEwan, 2002, p. 59) which all mirror the sense of dislocation and fragmentation.

The notion of fragments displays itself in the form of separation as Cecilia Tallis is separated from Robbie Turner, and the Tallis's from Briony, echoing then with the civilians and soldiers being torn apart, having “mutilated bodies” by explosions (McEwan, 2002, p. 187) and as a case in point is Luc Cornet, whose skull is cracked. Through this, Ian conveys the fragments of war, and the dismemberment of people at war.



The conversion of the fragmentary sense in terms of the diegetic world and extra-diegetic narrative may be noticed by the glaze along with the “three fine meandering lines” (McEwan, 2002, p. 40). As a heritage of the family, its fragmenting happenstance represents the fragmentation that is to come to the family to disrupt the notion of the nuclear family. The fragmentation of the vase, through its three lines, may also stand for the three European countries, Germany, France, and England, in that the glaze was made by a German painter—Johann Gregor Herold—and was given to an Englishman by a Frenchman during the First World War. Therefore, it stands for the fragility of their peace following the Great War, and the underground conflict during the 1930s among each other which is to end up with destruction or fragmentation once again with WWII (Cavalié, 2009, p. 132).

The novel itself, as a structure, is fragmented into two major sections—the tripartite section, which is numerically titled without any description, ranges between 1935–1940, and the afterward coda that takes place in 1999 in London, which is titled as “London, 1999”, having a description of time and place unlike the previous section. As a consequence, it is misshaped, uneven, and hence different in this sense, and in the sense of balance since there is a narrative part that is enormous compared to a part that is small, functioning as an addendum. This lack of symmetry originates an eccentric construction, which is typical of postmodern literature against the traditional equilibrium.

The difference in respect of ontology and temporal and spatial dimensions between the two sections could stand for the gap between fiction and facts in that the first section was narrated out of memory, whereas the coda was more of a revelation and a moment of truth to the audience. Moreover, the first section is narrated in the past tense from the perspective of a third person, concerned with a tragic love story. The second section is narrated in the present tense from the perspective of the first person, concerned with the observations of a seventy-seven years of age writer diagnosed with vascular dementia. There is a fragment of autobiography following the long account that is partially historical and romantic. The coda, or the epilogue, and its antecedent are mismatched. That is, the two sections are of different natures. This construction, as a whole, serves as a form of episodic series.

The sense of fragmentation between the two sections is further intensified through the separation of the 1st part into three subparts that each holds a different configuration of space and time. The usage of the triple structure may evoke in the mind of the reader the three phases of the story—the exposure of the crime, the witnessing of the aftermath, and the process of atonement. It should be noted, as well, that there are gaps among the three parts, especially the omission of the five years between the 1st part and the 2nd part, a break that expresses the transference to France from England, to war from peace, etc.



Similar to what happens between the 1st part and the 2nd part, the gap between the 2nd part and the 3rd part is characterized by a spatial jump to London from Dunkirk, an analepsis of three weeks, and a shift in terms of focus—from the war front to the home front, from action to reaction, from the victim of the crime to the victimizer, from injustice to repentance.

Fragmentation not only dominates Briony's narrative structure, but also involves itself in terms of her ideas, particularly as she understands “the chasm that lay between an idea and its execution” (McEwan, 2002, p. 16). This chasm or difference reflects itself in the use of irony that prevails in the text through “the discrepancy between the narrator's discreet, ambiguous wisdom and the characters' foolishness or ignorance” (Miller, 2017, p. 94). For instance, in the scene where Briony fakes her drowning, she says to Turner, “I want to thank you for saving my life. I'll be eternally grateful to you” (McEwan, 2002, p. 218), the irony is that her gratefulness winds up being switched to harm, accusing him of the rape and later on he meets his death as a consequence. So, the chasm can also stand for the huge gap between the notion of atonement and its fulfilment.

Fragmentation in the literary text manifests itself ideologically and structurally as a sovereign principle, hence having a fragmented aesthetic. Displaying it as a continuance and expansion of the modernist fragmentation represents an adherence to the zeitgeist of postmodernism (Gutleben, 2001, pp. 139–142). The multiplicity of perspectives in the 1st part misleads readers because it is not truly multiple since every single perception that takes place stems from the fragmented imagination or questioned memories of Briony Tallis. Aside from affecting the false outlook in the 1st part, it also affects the reformulation of Briony's entire story.

In the 2nd part, the mature narrator forms suppositions, which are unreliable and questionable, about the impressions of Robbie Turner during the war instead of his own true impressions because the two have not seen each other ever since she was thirteen years of age. The 2nd part, all together, illustrates the fragmentation of civilization and Robbie Turner's breakdown while he endeavors to survive the injury so as to go home (Ellam, 2009, p. 28). In the 3rd part, every single thing that is related to her visit to Cecilia is invented, and in so doing, there lies a false narrative to highlight the blur of fiction and facts.

The different fragments, be it mnemonic or narrative, are gathered through the traumatic mode that governs the whole text of Briony. That is, what links the four fragments of Ian's work—the first three parts and the coda—is “the persistence of trauma” (Letissier, 2011, p. 214), and even that trauma is fragmented, in essence, into three—one related to Briony's crime, the other one related to understanding the repercussions of that crime, and another one related to perceiving the terrors of WWII. Thus, the fragmented structure of her account mirrors the overlaid strata of her trauma, and the incoherence of the fragmented narrative is connected to the aspect of traumatic memory since if one with traumatic background is subject to form narratives, then it



must be done through a literary form that breaks free from the traditional linear sequence (Whitehead, 2004, p. 6).

The fragmentation of the novel allows Ian to express his own skepticism regarding narrative and coherence which represent the chaos, disorder, and the fragmentation of the European family members, in specific, and the European continent, in general, during the war. The author presents fragments of truth via splitting the structure with multiple narrative pieces, and in so doing, he shows his stand toward metanarrative. Thus, everything that is discussed, from the various literary modes to the omission and temporal and spatial distortion, defines the work as an infinite jigsaw of fragments of experience (Waugh, 1993, p. 8).

The three main parts may refer to the fragmentation of sin since the crime is done by three people who are complicit in the criminal activity: the performer—Paul Marshal, the receiver—Lola Quincey, and the witness—Briony Tallis, and, of course, the fourth part, the coda could be standing for Robbie Turner himself as a victim, or for the passivity of Cecilia since she, as well, does not utter the truth in front of others. Each served as a fragment to form the whole abstract of sin. Neither one of them revealed the truth about what has happened, in that the rapist and the girl remained silent to avoid a scandal and jail for Paul, while Briony asserted the truth despite she is not sure of the identity of the person. She does so for a variety of reasons, one of which is that she formed an erroneous and misleading impression earlier that day due to the letter that Turner wrote to her sister and the instance when she caught them having sex in the library, and also because she had a crush on him back in time; hence, making her incentives fragmented in essence.

Cecilia's recurrent words serve as a means of connecting Robbie Turner's fragmented memories in that they distort time persistently. Turner keeps on remembering his beloved's words, "It's only a dream. Come back." (McEwan, 2002, p. 41), "I'll wait for you. Come back." (p. 190), and "You're in my thoughts every minute. I love you. I'll wait for you. Come back." (p. 201). These sentences keep on appearing abruptly throughout the narrative (pp. 197, 246, 249, 250, 324, 330) to break the linearity of space and time. The amalgam of the horrors and the bedlam of the battlefield, along with Turner's scattered feelings and thoughts make his memories emerge in mere fragments. That messy description and presentation of his conscious crosses the boundaries of the present and past, leading to make readers confused and depressed (Ying, 2020, p. 68).

The English author makes use of an episodic style of writing in his novel. Even though this technique of episodes is originally related to theater and film, it has become a significant technique in writing fiction. Through it, the author can have flexibility in terms of space and time. The utilization of such an approach does enable the spatial jump from France to England to happen, not to mention the temporal jump from past to future and vice versa. Furthermore, the cross and parallel movement of space and time can result in different suspension and tension. It



can as well be employed to illustrate the emotional state or relationship among people in various places—like how Cecilia and Robbie yearn for a glimpse of each other. Consequently, Ian makes use of episodes to depict the inner world of his characters, and in so doing, reaching a mixture of objective and subjective account simultaneously.

The episodic style of writing in *Atonement*, as a technique which gathers separate pieces that function as fragments and places them together, provides readers with a chain of illusions, scenes, along with changing the setting, perspective, and character, and as a consequence, there lies barely any correlation between the adjoining paragraphs. As a result, readers must read carefully, having to commit to memory, so as to have a thorough understanding of the events, because the narrative series of episodes is employed in the literary work to remove the restriction of place and time. Moreover, it is an operative way of writing about truth and life.

The structure of the novel is in keeping with the plot. Given that the author splits the work into four fragments, each fragment can be seen as an episode. Apart from this, there are fragments of scenes that are gathered to correspond to the theme. Such a way of fragmentation allows the author to surpass the limitation of space and the linear sequence of time, so as to highlight merely particular fragments of time and place by employing episodic forms.

Regarding time and place, the text covers a long range of it—from just before WWII to Just before 2000—and many descriptions regarding the war, the remorse, and the atonement. The 1st part of the novel, which approximately covers half the book, ends with the same day and place it started, i.e., the house of Tallis on a hot summer day. This part can be considered a novel by itself as a whole. However, the 2nd part jumps forward with a totally different time and place, i.e., France, Dunkirk in 1940 where the British army is evacuating. By the same token, the 3rd part jumps to England at the same year, creating a parallel structure.

Namely, the episodic narrative enables two storylines—which run the same/different time/space—to operate a single theme. In the literary text, the idea of war is formed by that episodic structure, containing double subplots, i.e., the account in France regarding the retreat of the soldiers from Robbie's perspective in the 2nd part and the account in England regarding the homecoming of the soldiers from Briony's perspective in the 3rd part.

The utilization of episodes is done via the forward/backward technique, aside from free association (Martin, 2006). This makes readers oftentimes face difficulties to find out what the author wants to convey. However, that is a mirror to the authors inner world that can be regarded as a reading guidance. The functionality of episodes is represented by the fact that it makes readers think and imagine in the same manner to that of the author.



Ian distorts the chronology of time in that he occasionally informs readers about events that are to come; namely, he goes forward, and sometimes he goes backward, informing readers about events that took place in the past. For example, the 6th chapter finishes with Emily in bed meditating; the 7th chapter, on the other hand, shifts to the island temple in which Briony having fun with stinging nettle. This, however, occurs prior to the coming of Paul and Leon and the subsequent sex scene. Through that, Ian moves the passage of time backward.

Later on, the interval of time becomes confusing because the storyline keeps moving backward and forward like, for instance, jumping to the time of the event tackling the preceding half hour of Briony's crime, and afterward the story goes backward to Briony searching for the twins. This distortion of time governs the comprehension and expectation of the readers concerning the events and hence the theme of the literary work deepens.

CONCLUSION

Since there is no one approach that unites postmodernist writers, each one of them follows his own tendency. Thus, as a postmodernist writer, Ian McEwan performed a somewhat aesthetic experimentation in his own style to convey his thoughts of the world through fiction. To that end, he had twists in the novel that are seemingly meant to engage readers in various ways. Therefore, the article examined how Ian McEwan utilized fragmentation in his novel, and how he relied on it in composing the structure of his narrative.

McEwan also makes use of the temporal distortion as well as the spatial distortion, besides, of course, using these distortions to express the sense of fragmentation in postmodernism, be it in family, societies, identities, fiction, etc. The author's configuration of time and space forms a necessity to refer to memories; for instance, there is a record of the events in the context of the narrative, and also, how these events have an impact on the characters. Briony, as an old author with vascular dementia, cannot recall every single detail in linearity.

McEwan does not wish to follow the traditional methods of narrating stories. He wanted readers to reread the text from different perspectives, and, thus, he offered accounts on narration like the first-person narrator, and the third-person narrator. He creates an element of confusion—an undecidability. This happens even in the way the novel lends itself such that it blends the well-known elements of the realist, modernist, and postmodernist novel, and so, one can sense fragmentation even in that vein. That is why one may look at the text as a narrative concerned mainly with writing a narrative rather than the themes it holds. Namely, *Atonement*, as a novel, is also fragmented in the sense that it is realistic due to the fact that the novel is mostly narrated from a third-person perspective, along with the theme which is Victorian in respect of the image of the war and the suspense. However, it moves away from the realistic novel in the sense that it



does not build on a linear plot, i.e., having causes and events, and rather it employs fragmented episodes.

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