The Fractured Self in Julian Barnes' Postmodern Fiction: Identity Crisis and Deflation in *Metroland* and *the Sense of an Ending*

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the theme of identity fragmentation and the deflation of self in Julian Barnes' postmodern fiction, specifically analyzing *Metroland* (1980) and *The Sense of an Ending* (2011). Drawing on the theoretical framework of postmodernism and existential philosophy, the study explores how Barnes depicts characters struggling with loss of identity in contemporary British society. The analysis reveals that Barnes' protagonists—Christopher and Tony in *Metroland*, and Tony Webster in *The Sense of an Ending*—embody the postmodern condition of fractured selfhood, characterized by rootlessness, alienation, and the failure to maintain authentic relationships. Through close textual analysis, the paper demonstrates how Barnes employs narrative techniques such as non-linear structure, memory fragmentation, and intertextuality to reflect the psychological disintegration of his characters. The study argues that Barnes' fiction serves as a mirror to postmodern British society, where traditional values have collapsed, leaving individuals adrift in a world devoid of absolute truth and meaning. The characters' journeys from youthful rebellion to adult disillusionment illustrate the broader cultural shift from modernist certainties to postmodern uncertainties. This research contributes to the understanding of contemporary British literature's engagement with questions of identity, memory, and the human condition in the postmodern era.

Key Words: Postmodernism, Identity Fragmentation, Julian Barnes, British Fiction, Alienation

The conspicuous feature of the postmodernism fiction of Julian Barnes is the pervasive vogue of the fracture of the identity of characters who live in a harsh British environment. Ihab Hassan (1961) made serious efforts to resolve the issues of loss of self and disruption of human relationships. Hassan argued that the predominant features of postmodern society are violence, aggression, fear, oppression and alienation. In this chapter, the loss of self of the protagonists of Julian Barnes is explored. Interestingly, the British novelist focuses on the gradual and continuous deflation of self. He was confronted with the problem of deflating self since there was no absolute reality and truth. The brutalities of the Great War brought about moods of nihilism and despair as man lost faith in religion and God. Primo Levi exposed the atrocities perpetrated on the Jews and the grotesque, and the scenes of genocide in the concentration camps shattered the faith of people. They believed that there was no God. How could He be silent when the Jews were killed on a whole scale? Darwin revolutionized the domain of philosophy, declaring that man is the result of long evolution and that all the mythical stories of the Bible are figments of imagination. Spengler's The Decline of the West further eroded man's faith in God as he pointed out that man's civilization is on the verge of destruction.

Julian Barnes was the product of a new revolution of science and technology as he had witnessed the growing pessimism and nihilism. A new wave of uncertainty and absurdity had gripped the people's minds. People believed that all rituals were false and misleading and that no spiritual power was operating in the universe. The only power is money and state power, which can rule and crush people's liberty anytime. People are freely robbed and killed in the streets, and there is no saviour. Love had been a source of eternal domestic happiness in the past, but in the post-world war society, all values are meaningless, and even life has no purpose. They argue that all religious ideas are misleading. Man found himself lonely in the crowd as he struggled for his identity. The loss of self had become a reality. Truth had no relevance in British society. In the present Paper, the process of deflation of self-man is explored. The wave of pessimism and nihilism got impetus by the Holocaust of the concentration camps of Auschwitz. Scott Fitzgerald's The Great Gatsby and Tender is The

Night depicted the nightmarish experiences of the American Dream. All values of human society collapsed, and the dollar became God in America. Barnes deals with the themes of loss of life and the decline of human values that sustained human beings.Virginia Woolf and James Joyce created new themes and plots based on life's instability. Their characters have no future as the fears of death and failure of projects always haunt them. Giraud argued that "man is a split personality; he has no solid and stable self like the Greeks. He is bound to suffer alienation and depression in the postmodern world" (Giraud 229). The quest of Hamlet is meaningful. He is alone but fights against the forces of disorder and chaos. The heroes of Barnes are defeated people; they are sick and defeated. According to Julian Barnes, literature is derived from the day-to-day life of people. His novels explore the themes of human relationships; the characters come in contact with others and develop relations to enjoy romance, love and sexuality. Barnes explores the fundamental nature of love and romance and depicts people's strange behaviour and attitude. He is a postmodern novelist who dramatizes real-life situations to explore the reactions and attitudes of people about love and sex. Barnes depicts the themes of love from a postmodern perspective. The characters are not serious about love as they are selfish and money-minded. Adultery and betrayal in love are everyday things in his novels. Barnes' Talking it Over and Love, Etc. deal with postmodern human relationships. It is not high love found in the plays of Shakespeare, but the feelings of love are non-serious. For the characters, love is not a way of life; it doesn't sustain their life, but it is past time pleasure. The characters find a lack of faith, ambiguity and loss of truths.Barnes observes that values have changed as the postmodern society is based on money culture. His characters are helpless people groping in the darkness. They fail to maintain any sound relationship because their priority is sex, money and power. At the very outset, it is imperative to explore the new role of fiction in the postmodern world. Malcolm Bradbury (2000) articulates his views: "In the postmodern age the very purpose of writing fiction has changed; the writers don't celebrate the glories of war; they are not interested in writing fantasies but depict the hard reality confronting the people" (Bradbury xxxi). Matthew Pateman (2002) observes, "The novels of Barnes depict man;s search for identity and truth about life. Each character struggles for survival in the harsh environment of the postmodern world. His characters are forced to live in a cruel and oppressive world where values are declining and man has no future" (Patterman 234). Barnes's 1980) is the debut novel characterized as a meta-historical romance describing the culture of two cities, Paris and London. The book explores the truth that is there and highlights the struggles of two young men, Toni and Chris, who struggle to escape their roots. The story is set in the suburbs developed due to a complex mix of economic and commercial advancement. The Prime Minister of England, Lloyd George, dedicated this suburb to commemorate the memories of the heroes who had won the war. Barnes describes the landscape of *Metroland* thus: Metro-Land is a country with elastic borders which each visitor can draw for himself. It lies mostly in Bucks but choice fragments of Middlesex and Herfordshire may be annexed at pleasure. A much of the country side as you may conveniently cover afoot from one Metropolitan Railway Station to another you may add to your private and individual map of *Metroland*. (Barnes, *Metroland* 38) The novel's plot depicts the characters' struggles to develop relations with the "Other" and the gradual growth of the self in the suburban environment of London and Paris. "I" in this novel is the narrator and the character in the story world. The plot is narrated from the adult perspective as Toni and Chris revolt against the bourgeoisie values and middle-class life. The plot focuses on the characters' self-development; this is the central metaphor in the novel to reveal to the world what happens to the adults as they grow in the oppressive environment of big cities like London and Paris. The main theme of the novel *Metroland* is growing up and the growth of self-consciousness in developing relations with the Other. Barnes's main focus is to depict the trajectory of the adolescent identity of the main characters. 1963 is the beginning of their identity, and both are or 16 years of age schoolboys at the City of London School. They make notes, hoping to discern and record the experiences and reflections of life. Christopher is haunted by the fear of death and is disturbed by the art. Barnes observes thus: "Belief in art was initially an effective simple against the routine ache of big D" (55). Toni and Christopher are two 16-year-old schoolboys, sneering, contemptuous and aggressive. They have inexhaustible energy to explore the Truth of the universe, establishing relationships with other people in the process of their self–development. Toni believes in the decadent of aesthetics and is mesmerized by the "art for art's sake" philosophy. He is motivated by the values of independence, self-determination, and responsibility in life. He believes in the burgeoning principles of youthful rebellion. It was the year 1963 when Philip Larkin wrote his poem *Annus Mirabili*s and declared that sex began, but they had been rootless in the principalities of life. Toni and Chris discuss the theme of the poem of Larkin and talks of "fug you up" but were soon "fugged up in their turn" (39). The novel's three parts are the three aspects of Chris's life. The plot is circular as the novel ends with *Metroland,* where Chris returns with his

wife from where he had started in his teenage. The plot is replete with scenes of excitement and erotic in London and Paris. The three-part structure of the novel takes the action from *Metroland* to Paris and back, reflecting the progression of Chris's consciousness and the growth of his self. Barnes's primary concern is the central theme of snobbery. Christopher is thirty years old, and he is a young man when he reaches suburbia, along with his young and beautiful wife, Marion. They had high hopes of a new married life and high aspirations and dreams. Toni proves faithful to them and appreciates their passion for life, art and truth. Soon, the relationships start disintegrating as Chris's return is taken as controversial. Barnes presents the non-linear structure of the novel thus: 'I was concerned about to know the nature of people. My structure is focused on the development of a structure, an arc to show how people can change" (Barnes, *Metroland* 12). *Metroland, Paris*, and *Metroland II* are three interesting sections dealing with various stages of growth. Each section highlights new episodes and describes new challenges and new situations, and these events are integrated into a fabric of interconnection. Christopher Lloyd and Toni Barbarowski hold similar views about love, life and sex at the novel's outset. But their ideas and opinions change with the passage of time and the result is the difference and separation; break up of relationships. Barnes believes it is not easy to keep lifelong relationships because human beings are suspicious, greedy and uncertain in their commitments. They have divergent opinions about life, art, and society. Toni grows rebellious and takes the job of a university scientist. In his revolting spirit, he refuses to marry. *Metroland* deals with the challenges of the youth living in harsh postmodern British middle-class society. Matthew Pateman observes thus: Barnes has depicted the heartrending journey of the life of Chris in the novel. He has narrated only the personal history of his protagonist highlighting his struggles and challenges. His love relationship is the main center of the plot; the loss of his self and virginity is the main concern of Barnes. (Pateman 123) In the novel's third part, Bishop Butler describes the importance and relevance of Truth in life. In the last section, Chris is back in the suburbs of London, and we learn about his wife, child, and life. He is confronted with the dilemma and often thinks of deserting his wife and child. He had become what he despised in his early life, so the guilty consciousness doesn't give him peace and rest. Moseley observes that "each part of the novel ends with a recurrent statement of "Object Relations" as Barnes examines the evolution and the process of deflation of self' (Moseley 16). In the novel's first section, Christopher, who is self-conscious about his struggle in life, is introduced. He is mature, looking back on his past and telling how he looked once when he was a young teenager. He has "narrated the ironic ways of his life, his problems and the eventual sufferings" (30). In the novel's beginning, the two main characters, Chris and Toni, hold the same views on life, art and sex. However, both the protagonists differ in their opinions as the plot progresses. Chris is critical of the middle-class sensibility. Toni revolts and joins the science department at the University. He refuses to marry and decides to lead a lonely and carefree life. No wonder Chris assumes multiple identities. He travels, and his passion for the art and culture of London and Paris symbolizes his revolutionary fervour. The French part of the novel is revealing and structured to depict the challenges the modern youth faces in surviving in the postmodern cities of London and Paris. Barnes depicts the fractured identity of Chris realistically; he despises bourgeois mentality. In his revolutionary style, Chris expresses" his revolt by describing the barren and unsophisticated nature of *Metroland"* (41). Barnes employs the postmodern techniques of metafiction, narrating the historical episodes of the Beatles of 1963, the protest of students in Paris in 1968, and the famous Park Movement of 1977. Chris is depicted as an angry young man of John Osborne. Chris feels alienated and rootless as his life is full of painful experiences. Barnes depicts the new self of Chris in the chapter "Object Relations" highlighting the memories and awareness of his self as he admits: "I remember things" (71). His room is filled with the stuff which hate; the whole room is filled with unwanted things, and each thing is revolting and dissatisfying" (72), articulating a sense of hope and frustration. Barnes depicted Chris as a teenager exploring the mysteries of truth: "I went to Paris with passion to learn love, art and life and to learn new language and culture. I was determined to get lost in the new culture and explore the street life of Paris" (105). In Paris, he begins to dream of "himself as an autonomous being" (85). His passion for research is meaningless compared to his exploration of truths about life and its existence. His stay in Paris transforms his thoughts and opinions. The large city Paris "reveals new life, new history, new culture and new spirit of revolution. I was immersed in new history and art ijnd got new awareness of life and art" (93). When he begins flirting with a French girl, Annick, Chris experiences a fusion of art and life. When he leaves Paris, the questions about his connection with art and its relation with life haunt him, and he feels mentally disturbed. He leaves the apartment in Paris before leaving the room where he "stayed for long and enjoyed the theatre programmes that were all there" (130). As a teenager, he fails to forge his identity in Paris, but he is guilty of knowing that he had no relevance to art. His life in *Metroland* was different from the
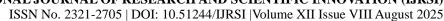
passionate life that he led in Paris. Barnes completes the circle as the novel moves from all art and no life. All his childhood ideals vanish as the real challenges of his adult life threaten him. However, his friend Toni still clings to "half-truths, meta-communication as wonderful theory, but unreliable practice" (140). Chris wants to enjoy sexual pleasures with a French girl. He is shocked to know that the French girl is unresponsive as she denies sex. But soon, he learns the lesson of honesty from Annick. She teaches him the lesson of "honesty of intention" (155) and opens his eyes, imparting him the real knowledge of life, which is far from art.Chris feels guilty because he is also leading a bourgeois lifestyle that the stranger on the train had been living. He thinks of Mallarme "when he cuts the lawn on his Sunday afternoon" (174). Barnes imitates the novels of Charles Dickens in depicting the challenges of teenagers. He inspires the readers to contemplate life and art.

Julian Barnes's novel *The Sense of an Ending* (2011) depicts the self-reflective journey of the protagonist, Tony Webster, a retired person. Barnes has employed the metaphor of memory to structure the novel's plot. He has experienced life and has accumulated all the experiences of the world. Webster is leading a contented life, but he gets a letter from the mother of a girlfriend and is forced to go down into the memory lanes and recollect all the events of the past. The narrator, Webster, raises many questions relating to memory and its function and role in life in shaping the sensibility of an individual. Imagination and emotional outbursts play vital roles in the novel as he is forced to revisit his past life to continue his self–reflexive journey of life. Barnes believes that the self of a man is mainly responsible for shaping and constructing human relations. No human being can lead a life of isolation.The plot of the novel *The Sense of an Ending* deals with the themes of youth and age, innocence and experience. Barnes gives the message in the plot that life can be awful. Tony Webster is the main narrator in the novel. The plot challenges this commitment to ethics in his commentary on the instability of memory. But Barnes demonstrates that Tony's real problem is his inability to make sense of himself, a failure of self-knowledge. Tony's past is tangled up with others, whom he can scarcely see as people. Tony's inner world is revealed. He is an alienated, dissolute self trapped in the abyss of darkness and ignorance. His experiments with life proved counter-productive. Tony nevertheless feels that he has finally found some purpose in his life. In the novel's first section, Tony is depicted enjoying his carefree life. He has no interest in the serious activities of life. He talks of his school life experiences, which are romantic and dreamy, far away from reality. In the second section, Tony is presented as an older adult of sixty leading a lonely life because of his fractured identity and harrowing experiences. In this period of life, he receives a letter that compels him to recall the old information. The letter is a source of psychological torment to him as he is not in a mood to recollect the past. Barnes depicts Tony as a product of postmodern forces. He is not very concerned about human values and thinks that life is about enjoying sexual pleasures. He has no convictions as he emerges as a shifty character. Barnes has pointed out the stages of his growth from teenage to adulthood. His fractured relationships are pointed out thus: I had no doubt that she was not a woman of tastes as she had read many books lying in my shelf. Her mind was grown up and she looked sensible but passionate. I tried to observe her activities and found her in dilemma. She had two sides of personality; she thought something else and did something else. This disparity threw me into a panic. (24) Tony was not a genius and lacked cultural intelligence. He had poor intellectual acumen and remained on the surface of life, struggling for higher success. Veronica knew her frailties, and Barnes gave us a comparative analysis of Tony and Veronica, who emerge as superior ladies dominating all. Tony talks of his relationship with Veronica thus: Once I went to meet the daughter of Mrs. Sara Ford. She was the mother of Veronica; a lady of bourgeois family. Her husband was a civil servant so he patronized her. Her son scrutinized her activities and her daughter had learnt the art of manipulation. I needed the relationship of Veronica all the time but she was indifferent. She toyed with my heart and loved to betray others. (122). Adrian is another character in the novel who dominates others by his social superiority. He imposes his cultural norms on others, but he is a big hoax. He proudly says: "I hate English people who are not serious about life and art" (33). Veronica comes under his magical influence and follows what he says. No wonder she breaks up with Tony and develops sexual relations with Adrian. She had been under his influence right from the beginning of the novel, but she betrayed and employed her sexual charms to bewitch Toni. Adrian treats Toni as his rival.Tony's letter in The Sense of an Ending exposes everything and unmasks the villainy of each character. Toni suffers because of Veronica's betrayal, but Adrian pays for his villainy and double standard. His victory in love is short, and the pains he has given Toni are immense. Adrian and Veronica enjoy for a brief period, but duplicity and treachery remain only for a short time in life. Veronica, proud of her cultural superiority, suffers at the end of the novel as she fails to achieve permanent domestic happiness. Adrian commits suicide, and she is punished for her betrayal. Tony, Veronica

and Adrian are in a struggle to develop human relationships but suffer depression and deflation of self because of their lack of conviction and commitment in life. The novelist has indicated the presence of cultural power used as a surgical means to control not only the social and sexual relationships but also expose the cultural disparity among various sections of society. Barnes has depicted the alienation of his characters thus in poignant language: We muddle along, we let life happen to us; we gradually build up a store of memories. There is the question of accumulation, but not in the sense that Adrian meant, just the simple adding up and adding on of life. And as the poet pointed out, there is difference between addition and increase. Had my life increased, or merely added to itself? This was the question Adrian's fragment set off in me. (97) He continues his self-condemnation thus: "Unfortunately, Toni had never seen things clearly; never acted decisively. He disregarded truer values of life and was not very serious about his settlement and life. In the last phase of life, he realized the meaning of happiness and contentment" (97). . He is interested in his ideas and prejudices about others and doesn't bother to think critically and review the situations. He says: "When we are young, we invent different future for ourselves; when we are old, we invent different past for others" (88). He reflects on Veronica's character and concludes that she is one of those girls who is ruthless and careless and takes sadistic pleasure in damaging others" (48). Tony contemplates the character development thus: life outstrips him; his smallness undoes him. He contemplates the development of a personality thus: How about the character development? In fiction character development takes a lot of time. I wonder sometimes otherwise there wouldn't be much of a story. What about life? No wonder, the attitudes and opinions and perceptions of an individual change over time. Human beings develop their habits and with the passage of time habits become rigid and each person looks lie a decorated painting which cannot change. Our whims and emotions and new habits begin to dominate us. And in the age of twenty and thirty we become that we are as we stuck in a place where there is no exit. We're on our own. (113) Barnes has employed the narrative technique to depict the impact of old memories of an aged protagonist. Barnes describes the complexities of human relations thus: I don't expect you to hand over Adrian's diary. If you have burnt it, there's an end to it. If you haven't, then obviously, as it was written by the father of your son, it belongs to you. I'm puzzled why your mother left it to me in the first place, but that's no matter. I'm sorry to have been so vexations. You were trying to show me something and I always was too crass to understand. (136) Jan-Erik Ruth and Gary Kenyon elaborated on the significance of old age and its impact on life. Ruth and Kenyon (1996) have expressed the role of memory and its dialectical relationship with old age thus in building human relations: "Many studies in gerontology reveal that ageing is a very crucial process as the health starts deteriorating and regeneration of the life cells is not possible in old age. Humans begin to forget the things in old age often memory is their main source of happiness" (1). Kenyon has explored the impact of the ageing process on the physical and biological aspects of human beings and their sociocultural importance. He described the understanding of the ageing process: "life is vital to each individual, the people struggle to explore the meaning of old age and the process of decay of organs" (2). Barnes is, of course, seriously interested in memory and its unreliability, a theme explored in many of his novels and perhaps especially vividly in his meditation memoir on aging and the fear of death, Nothing to Be Frightened Of, Barnes says: We lose hold of what happened, who we were, what it was like to be in a particular moment; and we supplement, build narratives from the materials we have to hand, accommodate sudden up welling by neatly assigning predetermined categories. From my casual survey of reviews of The Sense of an Ending, it seems that readers have generally taken Barnes to here be working out this same theme in a particularly vivid way. But that is, I think, to take Tony's schoolboy musings about memory and history, his own commentary on how he is unreliable, as we all are (one more feature of his dedication to being unremarkable), too much at face value. (Barnes, Frightened 90). The novel's plot poses a profound challenge to explore human tragedy. Tony Webster realized that he was old when he turned sixty-six. He had experienced everything in life; he had explored the mystery of human relations and found the real cause of human suffering and the need to understand the real meaning of life and truth notwithstanding the fact that his self- deception clouded his understanding of his past. Adrian's tragedy is traumatic, and this brings depression in the mind of Tony. Tony's reflection leads him to conclude that certain things may be regretted about how he has led his life. Being a victim of his own circumstance, Tony's actions profoundly impacted Adrian and Veronica, distorting his grasp of reality. His unresolved past keeps haunting him and challenges the key aspects of his identity and the sense of his self while he grapples with the long lasting impact of his youthful decisions on others.Tony's confrontation with his own identity leads him to reflect on the personal accountability of his actions and the complex nature of memory.

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