



Making Sense of Memory in *The Sense of an Ending*

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ABSTRACT: *In postmodern complications artificiality of fiction rules all over the world. Defamiliarization of narrative has coloured each and every aspect of outer realities whether they arise from outer social panorama or the individual psyche. Keeping this sense in mind Julian Barnes created his masterpiece *The Sense of an Ending* (2011) which rigidly conforms to the postmodern conditions. *The Sense of an Ending*, Julian Barnes's Booker-prize winning novel, earns much critical acclaim today. The novel is a fine exploration on two major themes of time and memory representing the past and truth through the lens of memory and its introspection. The novel penetrates deeper and deeper into the psyche of its characters to find something true and accurate of the past in relation to the present. Memory itself becomes a crucial part of main narrative line with the assistance of time. The protagonist draws upon his memory claiming to have remembered only part of his past. Barnes's main consideration of relocating memory in *The Sense of an Ending* challenges the traditional concept of memory in the light of postmodern sense. The novel rigidly questions the authenticity of narrating memory and accuracy of narration of the past and truth. In this way novel proves to be a superior illustration in the postmodern craft of writing fiction.*

Key words: *Postmodern, Defamiliarization, Narrative, Psyche, Memory, Fiction.*

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I. INTRODUCTION

The Sense of an Ending has a title identical to that of a celebrated work of narrative theory and literary criticism published by the late Frank Kermode in 1967. The title signifies that we human beings need to make sense of our lives in relation to time. When an event happens before us it has an instant impact upon our consciousness and we are unable to scan all the aspects of the event. As time passes, that particular event bears a new image and we perceive that event in different colours. They keep on acquiring new meanings and values with the passing of time that had been ignored and unknown to the psyche.

Memory is simply defined as a collection of past events yet the Oxford English Dictionary defines memory as "one's ability to remember things or a thought of something that one remembers from the past." David Gallo in his article claims, "memory is not simply recording of the past but it is a deliberate piecing together of retrieved information and other relevant information in an effort to make sense of the past". ("Associations and Errors through History" 13). The activity of relocating memory becomes problematic because individuals consciously or unconsciously play with them and distort them to give it a preferential shape. So all the memories are not genuine and authentic but constructed and reconstructed entities. Claiming memory as constructed entity Oakes and Hyman in their article note that "Memory is always constructed. What people remember will be constructed from remaining materials and from general schematic knowledge structures. The Fact that memory is constructed also means that history is constructed" ("The Changing Face of Memory and Self: False Memories, False Self" 62). When one takes into consideration all the aspects of memory the unreliability and unauthenticity of memory, history and narrative emerges out of the surface. The novel is all about memory and its dicing and relocating of the past to come up with a sense of self. It challenges the conventions of telling a story and narrating the past.

The protagonist Tony Webster attempts to retell the story of his own life. The novel, divided into two parts, is narrated in the first person point of view from Tony's perspective. M.H Abrahms defines the first person point of view as "the narrator speaks as 'I' and is to a greater or lesser degree a participant in the story, or else is the protagonist of the story" (301). There appears some contradictory facts and points in the two parts of the novel. Whatever has been told in the first part is attested by the records or proofs in the second part. He

starts narrating events from his life chronologically, from his school days and then his college and university life followed by his married life and finally his present retired life.

From the very beginning the narrator captures the attention of the reader with his narrative assurance. He confesses to his readers that whatever he is narrating emerges from his memory that might not be as authentic and true as what one might have perceived. He begins by saying that “I remember in no particular order” (1), and keeps on counting the images which spring from his conscious memory: “a shiny inner wrist.. steam rising from a wet sink.. gouts of sperm circling a plughole..a river rushing nonsensically upstream..another river broad and gray.. bathwater long gone cold” (3). All these random and dispersed details show the gaps and dots in the sequence of his memory. He remembers different and distant details which happened not in one instant but in distant periods of time. In this way he is quite helpless in his efforts to identify his first and last memory. He is unable to differentiate which event happened before and which one after. Hence he goes on listing different images randomly in an illogical way. He closes his details by stating: “This last is not something I actually saw but what you end up remembering is not always the same as what you have witnessed” (3). Hence Tony acknowledges that he admits that he did not see the last one, but according to him remembering and witnessing are two separate things.

In this way he is not quite sure about the authenticity of his memory of what he is narrating. He further emphasises the impact of time and subjective emotion on memory which make it somewhat distorted. Confirming this view he further notes:

I need to return briefly to a few incidents that have grown into anecdotes, to some approximate memories which time has deformed into certainty. If I can't be sure of the actual events any more, I can at least be true to the impressions those facts left. That's the best I can manage (4).

The protagonist Tony who is now sixty narrates sequences from his life which on the surface appear to be in linear form but actually they are in random order. He begins his narration from his school days where there are four friends: Tony, Colin, Alex, and Adrian. Adrian is the new boy who soon joins their “book hungry, sex hungry, meritocratic, anarchistic group”. He is the most intelligent and the most admired one in the whole group. The friends used to discuss various topics such as arts, history, philosophy, life and literature. They also discussed philosophical topics such as truth, time, fiction, life, death and suicide. Their discussions and musings on various topics help much more in the running of the narrative.

While retelling the narrator slips in his memory and he puts many gaps and dots before the conscious reader. At times the reader is left in suspense whether the story is being authentically represented or fictionalised. Tony further remembers that after sometime the boys have gone to different universities: Adrian goes to Cambridge University and Tony to Bristol University where he finds a girlfriend named Veronica and wants to have sex with her. Later on he spends a boring weekend with her family where he encounters her calmer, quieter and middle aged mother of artistic airs who turns out to be central to this story. Tony introduces Veronica to Adrian. Later on Adrian and Veronica become engaged in a love affair and Adrian wrote to Tony asking for permission to date Veronica. Later Tony comes to know that Adrian has committed suicide leaving behind no definite reason. While recollecting all these elements Tony misses the point and the sequence of events. He feels quite helpless in trying to manage all the events in their logical order. He narrates all these elements randomly without any definite order and conclusion. This lack of order and solution qualifies Tony as an unreliable narrator because of his orderless and random memory. Tony's only reliability is that he keeps reminding his reader that whatever he is narrating is the result of illogical and random recollections. Tony potentially undermines the validity and objectivity of the story he is about to tell. He acknowledges the faulty and random nature of memory and it makes him more honest, reliable and trustworthy. The specific and selective details are a reminder of the random and selective nature of memory.

Barnes successfully registers the imperfections and randomness of both memory and history from which fallible narratives emerge. Many expressions and statements from the narrator throws a brilliant light on the unreliability of his memory. While narrating his memory the narrator is obsessed with his past, sometimes qualifying him an unreliable and sometimes a reliable narrator too. M.H Abrahms defines fallible or unreliable narrator as “one whose perception, interpretation and evaluation of the matters he or she narrates do not coincide with the opinions and norms implied by the author, which the author expects the alert reader to share” (305). On one hand the narrative becomes too problematic to be believed because all the accounts are based on unreliable memory; on the other hand the narrator's act of assuring and reminding can convince the reader to believe in his narrative. Some of his expressions that cast doubt on his story are as follows:

Was this their exact exchange? Almost certainly not. Still, it is my best memory of their exchange (18). I couldn't at this distance testify (22). This is my principal factual memory. The rest consists of impressions and half-memories which may therefore be self-serving: (22-23). I don't think I can properly convey the effect that moment had on me (27). I wish I'd kept that letter, because it would have been proof, corroboration. Instead, the only evidence

comes from my memory (29). Actually, to be true to my own memory, as far as that's ever possible (29). As far as I remember (30). But I remember (31).

In the second part of the novel wherein Veronica provides some of the documents like letters, the unreliability of Tony's narrative is revealed to the reader. There appears, a slight discrepancy between the first and the second part of the novel, between what Tony recollects and what the evidences reveal. This unreliability is confirmed by the fact that Tony receives a letter from his friend Adrian asking for permission to date Veronica, Tony's ex-girlfriend. In Tony's memory he reacted by writing half-jokingly a short letter to Adrian claiming to have no interest in Veronica and their relationship. After this no piece of information is given about Adrian and Veronica. But in the second part of the novel the same letter, which Tony had written to Adrian in response to his letter, is produced to Tony by Veronica. The letter had been safeguarded by her and it is revealed, against his memory and narrative, that the letter was long and vehemently written. It was full of his anger, hatred, and disappointment against both Adrian and Veronica. He had warned Adrian of Veronica's domineering behaviour and uncontrollable character. Tony finds himself at the same place where he had stood forty years ago. Tony's frustration is represented thus:

At first, I thought mainly about me, and how-what-I'd been: chippy, jealous and malign. Also about my attempt to undermine their relationship. At least I'd failed in this, since Veronica's mother had assured me that the last months of Adrian's life had been happy. Not that this let me off the hook (98).

These incidents prove that time and personal emotion play a significant role in altering our memory to such extent that it loses its sequence and fact. Time meddles between the details and distorts the information giving them a new order and meaning. Tony struggles hard in understanding how malleable time is! He states:

We live in time – it holds us and moulds us – but I've never felt I understood it very well. And I'm not referring to theories about how it bends and doubles back, or may exist elsewhere in parallel versions. No, I mean ordinary, everyday time, which clocks and watches assure us passes regularly: tick-tock, click-clock. Is there anything more plausible than a second hand? And yet it takes only the smallest pleasure or pain to teach us time's malleability. Some emotions speed it up, others slow it down; occasionally, it seems to go missing- until the eventual point when it really does go missing, never to return (3).

In Tony's view Time is experienced subjectively. In this way it is similar to memory. He is fully conscious of the ellusiveness of time and memory:

How often do we tell our own life story? How often do we adjust, embellish, make sly cuts? And the longer life goes on, the fewer are those around to challenge our account, to remind us that our life is not our life, merely the story we have been told about our life. Told to others, but-mainly –to-ourselves (95).

Subjectivity of time is confirmed by the way that he used to wear his watch with its face on the inside of his wrist making time personal, secret and intimate.

The faulty memory of Tony leads to the questioning of the authenticity of the narrative and the past. Narration of history and the past are always subjected to personal distortion of memory and feeling. In this way reality is always confronted by this type of narrative of memory, history and the past. Similarly, Piqueras in his article "*Memory Revisited in Julian Barnes's The sense of an Ending*" observes:

The first step is to come to terms with the fact that memory and reality do not always match and that memory is strongly influenced by the feelings that invaded someone regarding a specific event. Secondly, the narrator has to admit and include the changes in his life narrative (93).

The same sense has been echoed in Barnes's novel *England England* where Martha is aware of the impossibility of providing a logical or authentic sequence to memories when she tries to remember and set them in logical order: "What is your first memory?". Someone would ask. And she would reply "I don't remember"(3). Finally she concludes that "no single memory would exist without having a lie in it being completely based on a lie". Thus, she lies too when she determines that her first memory of completing a puzzle while sitting on the kitchen floor: "Yes that was it, her first memory, her first artfully, innocently arranged lie"(5).

Gleaning into the above statements one can conclude that recounting memory, history and the past always take two aspects: "idealising some facts and omitting the others" based on personal emotion and subjective point of view. So in postmodern condition nothing can be taken for granted whether it is narrative of some realist fiction, history writing or the past. They all are subjected to distortion, conflation, manipulation and contrivance. Linear form and structure, logical sense of order, proper beginning, middle and end which were supposed to govern all forms of narrative in conventional writing gradually disappear in all forms of writing in the postmodern era. Representation of reality in novel, history or other documents has been questioned and no homogenising narrative governs the whole canvas of writing. While writing or narrating when one tries to grasp

the whole aspect of something, there are some elements which slip between the fingers when we try to capture them in our narrative. All realist writings are claimed to be fictional to a greater or lesser extent.

One can conclude that *The Sense of an Ending* to some extent confirms all these rigidities of postmodern fiction. If a particular narrator is not quite sure of his memory and narrative then can one be confident of other forms of writing or documentation when they are products of various sources and distortions, some authentic and some fictionalised creations. That is to say, here, Barnes strongly believes in the fundamental deficiency of memory and ability to seize the past.

In conclusion we can say that *The Sense of an Ending* successfully discloses the fictionality of narrating history and the past. Even in the opening lines of the novel suspicion towards memory is emphasised and the same thread of confusion runs throughout the novel. Memory is not something reliable source from which a solid narrative emerges out. Barnes is much more conscious of accessing the objective truth in all of his novels and the present novel is also a milestone in this direction. Narrator continuously struggles to access the objective truth of his past events. Some aspects are captured and some are left in his narration of story. In this way finding the objective truth and accessibility to some solid ground of accurate narration proves to a failure. There is no authentic validity of narration of memory and history.

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