



Research Paper

The Non-linearity of Time, Memory and History in Julian Barnes' the Sense of an Ending

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ABSTRACT: This paper analyses how the non-linearity of time manifests itself in memories and histories. Julian Barnes' novel, *The Sense of an Ending* throws light on the complex nature of memory, time and history. This article explores the volatile nature of historical truths constructed out of an individual's memories. Memories can be created and are not testimonies of truth. But at the same time they are products of reality and history. This is a complex web which can be understood only when we go deep into the trauma that causes manipulations of memories and histories. Through Tony's narrative, Julian Barnes reveals the deep rooted psychic trauma that underlies the manipulation of memories and sometimes the amnesia related to it.

KEYWORDS: Non-linearity, time, memory, history, trauma, amnesia

Received 27 December, 2018; Accepted 11 January, 2019 © the Author(S) 2018.
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I. INTRODUCTION

There are innumerable mysteries in Nature; even so, rarely do we come across anything more mysterious than the workings of human mind. Despite all our efforts to rationalize and compartmentalize the human mind, it still remains the most elusive aspect of a human being. The *Sense of an Ending* delves deep into the almost incomprehensible progression of memory and time. Uncertainty is a dominant theme in the novel, with the narrator confessing every now and then, his own mistrust in his memories. The novel actively questions the realness of memories. The novel is told by Tony Webster, a man in his sixties; he talks about his past, or certain select events of his past. Through Tony's recollection of his past, Barnes makes his readers understand the uncertainty and incomprehensibility of memories. This article analyses an inherent paradox that memories present: they are often regarded as recollections of things in the past; but are they really things in the past-static and complete? Probably not. Memories are ever-changing. Their form depends on the reality of one's present and has implications on the future. Memories do not follow a linear timeline; they actively move between the past and the present.

Julian Barnes understands that our perception of time is mostly personal and internal and has got nothing to do with outside forces of physical time. This idea could be compared to Henri Bergson's concept of psychological time, which is discussed in the work *In Time and Free Will* (1888). Psychological time is a form of internalised time, the frequency of whose passage, depends entirely on the emotional intensity of a particular moment or memory. Elaine Showalter discussed this concept in her famous introduction to Virginia Woolf's *Mrs Dalloway*. Memories have their own time frame, completely independent of the physical time. Time is malleable in human mind. If time-travel is a possibility, then memories are the only time machines accessible to human race. Barnes begins *The Sense of an Ending* pondering on this kind of malleability of time. We read:

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 visions. 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. (*The Sense of an Ending* 3)

Tony's earliest memories of his friend Adrian Finn are from school. Adrian was the smartest of his class, quite different from other boys and became a part of Tony's best friend circle very soon. Most of Tony's recollections are centered on his relationship with Adrian and his ex-girlfriend Veronica Ford. Veronica assumes the image of a dominant, stoic and cruel girlfriend in Tony's memories; she broke up with him right after she took him to her parents' house and then started dating Adrian-his best friend from school. Both of them had caused Tony great pain and his memories are nothing but a reflection of his pain and hurt. But is it all that is

there to their past? Over the course of the novel, the readers are made aware of the slips in Tony's narrative, making them question the veracity of Tony's memories.

One of the major themes in the novel is the uncanny incidents that point to the future of the main characters of the story. Hence, there is an undeniable link between their past, their future and both of these are shaped by their present. Few of the discussions they had at school throw light on the future events of their lives that were to happen in due time. At school, one time, the boys indulged in a discussion about the suicide of one of their classmates- Robson. There was no official information on why he committed suicide. But there were many rumours floating around. It was said that Robson had got his girlfriend pregnant and had hence killed himself. He had left a suicide note that said "Sorry, Mum". According to Adrian, this piece of letter was their only access to Robson's past and the only document that could throw any light into his past. But if one were to write Robson's story fifty years from the year of his suicide, it would be an awfully difficult job. Past is difficult to document and understand if the person at the centre of it all is no longer alive and any possible attempt at documentation can only be achieved through fifty year old memories of Robson's friends and family. Adrian's understanding of history was this: "History is that certainty produced at the point where the imperfections of memory meet the inadequacies of documentation" (17). So memories may be inadequate, fragmented; but they are malleable and could be shaped into something that we call a certainty. Without certainties, human life has no purpose. A man needs a certainty to believe in, so that he could survive the hurt, the pain, the hopelessness and the trauma of existence.

Adrian's analysis of Robson's suicide is kind of a premonition for his own suicide a few years later. Adrian's own suicide remained undocumented. Somehow, forty years later, Tony tries to do the same thing that Adrian had hypothesized long back. Tony tries to build his shared history with Adrian and Veronica, through few available documents and from blurry fragments of memory. Tony is in search of a certainty, but that seems elusive. So, even though memories are supposed to be a recollection of certain events in the past, it in itself is uncertain, inadequate, and difficult to order. Human memories are unordered; so, they need some kind of organization for us to understand past. That is why individuals put memories into a linear framework. Memories are our ways to understand our past and human beings understand their life as a journey to the end, which is death. When Veronica's mother, Mrs. Ford, leaves him Adrian's diary and some money in her will for him, Tony is forced to revisit his past, open the can of memories he had not opened in a while. Up until then, he had made peace with his past, he had created a story that helped him move on from the hurt that Adrian and Veronica had caused him. In Tony's words:

It strikes me that this may be one of the differences between youth and age: when we are young, we invent different futures for ourselves; when we are old, we invent different pasts for others. (80)

The keywords here are "for others". Tony's mind had created a narrative in his head that portrayed him as the victim. He was the one who was hurt. He had created an elaborate story for their past, in which Adrian and Veronica were people who hurt him. He had convinced himself that he had treated them much nicely than he should have. But when Veronica hands Tony a letter that he had written to Adrian forty years ago after he had gotten into a relationship with Veronica, he realises how wrong he was. Tony had used unpardonable language and had wished unhappiness upon both of them. In forty years, Tony had forgotten all about this letter and was shocked to find such spite from his side towards Adrian and Veronica.

Throughout his narrative, Tony exhibits something that a psychologist calls- motivated forgetting.. Sigmund Freud in *Psychopathology of Everyday Life* states that, "The forgetting... is proved to be founded on a principle of displeasure" (137). Freud believed that every act of forgetting can be traced to some trauma in the past. In the introduction to *Trauma and Life Stories*, the authors talk about the various symptoms exhibited by victims of trauma:

According to psychoanalysis, the traumatic effects of a shocking event or circumstance upon the psyche are manifested unconsciously in a range of bodily symptoms and disturbances, in neurotic behaviours, in nightmares and hallucinations, and in amnesia. These can all be read as symbolic expressions of an experience which is difficult or impossible to make sense of, assimilate, or integrate with the 'ordinary' sense of one's self. (2)

In psychology, there are two types of motivated forgetting- conscious and unconscious. Conscious forgetting is associated with psychological suppression of memories whereas unconscious forgetting is associated with psychological repression. It is very difficult to discern what kind of forgetting is displayed by Tony in the novel. There are times when Tony seems to be aware in some way that he might have manipulated his own memories to prevent his mind from falling to chaos. We see Tony say, "If I can't be sure of the actual events anymore, I can at least be true to the impressions those facts left." (4). When Tony met his wife Margaret, whom he later divorced, he had erased Veronica out of his life, and it was a conscious decision. He pretended that Veronica never existed. Tony says:

The odder part was that it was easy to give this version of my history because that's what I'd been telling myself anyway. I viewed my time with Veronica as a failure-her contempt, my humiliation- and

expunged it from the record. I had kept no letters, and only a single photograph, which I hadn't looked at in ages. (69)

Tony's motivated forgetting is a way to get over the trauma that he experienced as a result of his relationship with Veronica. In addition to that, Tony also wants to rewrite his past as if it is a story. Being the author of his own past, gives Tony an irrational sense of power over his own life, which he had rarely experienced in the actuality of his life. Having the power to create a story for himself, memories, for Tony, are nothing but narratives. But like every narrative, once it comes to existence, these memory narratives achieve independence from its author. The memories go out of Tony's grasp, as bit by bit, certain pieces of written documents from his past make their way into his life, many years after the events in his memories.

After these revelations, Tony even recalls a particular moment with Veronica, in which he was incandescently happy. This can be called a recovered memory. Recovered memory is a term used to refer to memories of trauma that have been therapeutically rediscovered after a lengthy period of amnesia. According to Barnes, recovered memories shatter the linearity of time, taking us into a reverse mode of time, questioning the certainty of time which is often regarded as certain by people. We read:

The time-deniers say: forty's nothing, at fifty you're in your prime, sixty's the new forty, and so on. I know this much: that there is objective time, but also subjective time, the kind you wear on the inside of your wrist, next to where the pulse lies. And this personal time, which is the true time, is measured in your relationship to memory. So when this strange thing happened- when these new memories suddenly came upon me-it was as if, for that moment, time had been placed in reverse. As if, for that moment, the river ran upstream. (122)

In most cases, recovered memories are traumatic. But in Tony's case, the recovered memory is a happy one. So, it is important to analyse the nature of Tony's trauma. Though not given explicitly in the novel, Tony's trauma is revealed to be something related to Tony's relationship with Mrs. Ford. It is suggested that Tony may have had an affair with Mrs. Ford while he visited Veronica's house when he was dating her. Adrian, too, had an affair with Mrs. Ford and a child was born out of that relationship. At the end, Barnes even raises questions as to whether Tony is the actual father of the child. This illicit relationship with Mrs. Ford could have been the source of Tony's trauma. So, Tony's manipulative memories and amnesia is the result of what we may call the victim complex.

In clinical psychology, victim complex is a state of mind in which a person believes that he is constantly the victim of harmful actions by others. It is also called the victim mentality. Tony had to remember Veronica as a negative person, in order to survive the guilt of having had an affair with her mother. He had repressed all of his good memories with Veronica. But when history starts to uncover itself, Tony recovers his memories and his recovered memories are about the good times he had with Veronica. Tony's mind had repressed them because of his victim complex. Tony exhibits victim complex in all his recollections about Veronica. Most of his recollections describe how he was always disrespected and mistreated by Veronica. Only that could have helped him survive the guilt of having cheated Veronica in the most hurtful way.

Tony is unconsciously aware of his own tactics to survive this traumatic guilt that has been haunting him forever. In the novel, we see Tony ruminating on the way in which people deal with damage:

And then there is the question, on which so much depends, of how we react to the damage: whether we admit it or repress it, and how this affects our dealings with others. Some admit the damage, and try to mitigate it; some spend their lives trying to help others who are damaged; and then there are those whose main concern is to avoid further damage to themselves, at whatever cost. And those are the ones who are ruthless, and the ones to be careful of. (44)

The latter group of people that Tony refers to is ironically the category to which he himself belongs. Tony wanted to avoid any damage to his own sense of self because of the guilt of his past and for that he had to consciously forget certain memories, so that he could survive and hold on. But time, instead of being a linear progress from past to present, forces Tony to go back into his past and confront his own guilt. As Tony says, time is not a fixative; it is a solvent. It dissolves every possible certainty. Memory and history exist in time. When time is something that is flexible and volatile, so are memories and histories. *The Sense of an Ending* shows us how the conflux of memory, history and time involves in a continuous process of meaning making and shatters all sense of linearity.

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