

## **Interpreting the Manifold Intricacies of Time and Memory in Julian Barnes' *The Sense of an Ending***

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### **Abstract**

This paper is an attempt to instigate the intricate estimations that memory brings forth while constructing history and narratives of life, its complexities and paradoxes and manifold extensions which co-exist and blend with the intricate and often perplexing psychodynamics of a character and how memory unties itself throughout the narrative of Barnes' *The Sense of an Ending* and changes the shape of life and history altogether, thereby pushing the boundaries of identity to an extent where the consequences become replete with despair, distrust and grief. This unravelling of memory and its fallible nature has been the most significant part that has been dealt with a categorical exploration of Kermode's theory of fiction and disparate modes of psychoanalysis.

**Keywords:** Memory, Fallible, Psychoanalysis, Time, Malleability.

This paper is an attempt to study how different types of memory form a narrative. It seeks to explore how Julian Barnes has employed Frank Kermode's theory of fiction as a critique to his own work. As a work dealing with the psychodynamics of an individual, how we interpret it in terms of prevalent studies of Psychoanalysis, forms another aspect of this paper. Barnes' analysis of the text being a domain of memory and how memory in time becomes fallible, has been taken up as a substantial portion to be explored. This paper will hence be an endeavour

to comprehend the complex theories of memory, its application and manifold extensions leading us to a better understanding of the novel.

Memory has been defined through ages as predominant and prevalent in constructing narratives. It not only dominates the process of recollecting history but also helps to remember and reconfigure the reservoir of events that have happened long ago. It has been a way of moulding and reshaping personal or private history as well as the cultural or public history of an individual, a nation or an ethnic community. Memory is not restricted therefore to a montage or record of bits and pieces but it has ‘emerged as a richly textured, multivocal text, as personally relevant to the literary critic or the cultural historian as to the psychologist.’ (Freeman)

Many literary texts have dealt with the functions of memory not just as a mere tool in the hands of the author to create fictional accounts of the characters; but also to help the reader delve into the intrinsic dynamics of how memory works. Thereby it gives the readers a look into the psycho-operatives of a character’s personal conscious or unconscious.

Eminent postmodern writers like Michael Ondaatje, V. S. Naipaul, Julian Barnes, Margaret Drabble, John Spurling and various others have dealt with memory in their fiction and shown the readers how memory not only helps in creating and building one’s past, identity and meaning in life but most importantly how it gives into falsifiability and dissipates and destroys the very structure of that constructed life history; thereby deconstructs one’s whole idea of identity and existence. As Tom Wilhelmus in one of his articles suggests that “we both are our memories and also their victim... they shape and ratify our self-conceptions, and how, when we investigate them, they easily betray us” (Memory Reconstructed).

British novelist Julian Barnes appears to be one of the prime figures dealing with this genre which engages itself in a continuous crisscross of time and memory. His *The Sense of an Ending* (2011), winner of Booker Prize 2011, deals with the theme of time, memory,

history and their dexterous elasticity. Even to a further extent works like *Flaubert's Parrot* (1984), *The History of the World in 10½ Chapters* (1989) have somewhat dealt with this aspect from different perspectives. Barnes in an interview to National Public Radio remarked that *The Sense of an Ending* is a book about memory and time. What time does to memory and what memory does to time, how they interact. And it's also about what happens to someone in later years when they discover that some of the certainties they've always relied on, certainties in their mind and memory ... are beginning to be undermined. (Wertheimer)

The novel of merely 150 odd pages, told in first person narration, describes the life of Tony Webster, a retired historian in his 60s. He begins his narrative reminiscing about his school life that he spent with his friends Alex and Colin, but everything took a sudden turn when a brilliant Adrian entered school and subsequently joined their group. Adrian soon became a popular figure among his friends as well as teachers. “Sex-hungry and book-hungry, they would navigate the girl-less sixth, trading in affectations, in-jokes, rumour and wit” (Barnes 155). At the end of their schooldays, they decided to move to different universities for higher studies. While Tony went to study history at Bristol and Adrian chose philosophy at Cambridge, they kept spending time together during their university days as well. Veronica, a student of literature at Bristol, came into Tony's life and they started going out. He went to see her family and spent a weekend in their country house. In spite of the usual polite chitchats and initial getting to know each other, their behaviour somewhat vexed him as it seemed to him that they had been watching over his actions. Though the overall experience was not as pleasant as he would have liked, he liked her mother who was quite friendly and fond of him. Having returned, he soon introduced Veronica to his friends. He remembered his friends meeting her and feeling jealous when he saw Veronica finding Adrian interesting and attractive, but soon their relationship came to an end. During these post-break-up days, he got a letter from Adrian informing him that he was going out with

Veronica and asking if he had any problem. In reply, Tony wrote a letter to him and out of bitterness towards Veronica, he stated that he found Veronica somewhat mentally unstable and it would be better if Adrian once consulted her mother about this relationship. Tony then went for an adventure trip to the USA and returned only to find out that Adrian had committed suicide. He thought that the relationship with Veronica brought forth this disaster in Adrian's life and blamed her for this.

The second part of the novel begins and we find Tony in his 60s and that he had a long career as a historian, married Margaret and had a daughter named Susie. They are divorced but still have remained friends and share things with each other. These later years of his life have been rather uneventful and boring to a great extent until Tony receives a letter from a firm of solicitors and comes to know that Veronica's deceased mother has bequeathed him £500 and two documents. While consulting the lawyers, he learns that Veronica has one of those documents i.e. Adrian's diary and does not wish to give it away. Various questions unsettle him. How did Mrs. Ford get the diary? Why did she leave the legacy for him? Why is Veronica withholding the diary which is his possession now? His idea of the past is on the verge of losing its serenity and has destabilized the events which he had perceived as simple and straightforward. His thoughts were "my younger self-had come back to shock my older self with what that self-had been, or was, or was sometimes capable of being" (Barnes 97-98). In order to take control of the situation which had otherwise gone haywire, he decides to find answers and realizes that "history is that certainty produced at the point where the imperfections of memory meet the inadequacies of documentation" (Barnes 17). His memory simply does not have the answers he is looking for and that leads him to meet Veronica to find corroboration to the imperfections of his memory and deficient past.

Paul Ricoeur in his book *Time and Narrative* (2006), following the ancient Greek model, talks about two kinds of memory: *Mneme* which is memory as it appears, something

that passively comes into mind and remembered effortlessly, and *Anamnesis* which requires an effort to recall, involves a tiresome process, needs time and effort. Tony's narrative comprises both Mneme and Anamnesis (Antakyalıoğlu). In the first part of the novel, he draws incidents from his memory and presents the events as he has witnessed earlier. For instance, the novel begins with a series of vivid visual description of certain events in no particular order:

- a shiny inner wrist;
- steam rising from a wet sink as a hot frying pan is laughingly tossed into it;
- gouts of sperm circling a plughole, before being sluiced down the full length of a tall house;
- a river rushing nonsensically upstream, its wave and wash lit by half a dozen chasing torchbeams;
- another river, broad and grey, the direction of its flow disguised by a stiff wind exciting the surface;
- bathwater long gone cold behind a locked door. (Barnes 3)

Throughout the narrative, Tony recounts them following their order of occurrence. This he does with the help of Mneme. These events come to his mind in a straightforward way without much toil. They have been his humble evocations of past in its fragment and totality. Anamnesis comes into play when Tony receives Mrs. Ford's letter and recognizes the fact: "I had wanted life not to bother me too much, and had succeeded - and how pitiful that was" (Barnes 100). He comprehends life's simple equation that what one ends up remembering is not the same as he/she has witnessed (Barnes 3). In order to rectify, reorganize and renegotiate his past, he needs to go through a laborious recollection and needs people to testify them as truth. That's why he tries to get in contact with Veronica who otherwise has ceased to exist in his memory.

His biases and inaccuracies construct a dubious narrative and consequently bring forth a severe crisis for him. His otherwise peaceful memories differ from reality and in an instance prove to be fatal to his whole existence, identity and set of beliefs. After various unsuccessful attempts, he comes in contact with Veronica when he gets her email id from her brother and starts exchanging mails, which eventually leads him to learn that the money is 'blood-money', but it appears to him vague and meaningless. Tony insists on getting hold of Adrian's diary, and she finally decides to give him the letter that he had sent to Adrian in reply to his letter, asking his consent about his relationship with Veronica. On re-reading it he finds it difficult to grasp the fact that his letter was in fact too harsh to digest, which seemed to Tony a 'cool' one. The expression was vehemently hostile and spiteful and full of belligerent curses: "Well you certainly deserve one another... I hope you get much involved that the mutual damage will be permanent. I hope you regret the day I introduced you...Part of me hopes you'll have a child, because I am a great believer in time's revenge" (Barnes 95).

His only purpose of writing the letter was to inflict pain and misery on his friends and bring forth disaster in their lives. He realizes that in a fit of anger he did a shameful act and effaced it from his memory and went on with his peaceful life. His version of the story is not at all sincere, and he rather embellished it, adjusted and made sly cuts and presented it to be the most truthful one.

During one of their meetings, Veronica takes him to see a group of mentally disabled men. Tony does not understand the significance of this event and later in the course of several weeks, he keeps visiting the group and finds a boy having similar facial features to Adrian. He thinks that Veronica might have had a son with Adrian, but at the end of the story, the caregiver of that group reveals it to Tony that the young boy is actually the son of Adrian and Mrs. Sarah Ford, which makes him the brother of Veronica. The ghost of his past returns to haunt Tony when he has least expected. He realizes that his spiteful letter to Adrian led him

to meet Mrs. Ford and things took an entirely different turn: "...the fact that the younger me who cursed and the old me who witnessed the curse's outcome had quite different feelings – this was monstrously irrelevant" (Barnes 138). His has been a discovery or peripeteia without any catharsis:

And no, it wasn't shame I now felt, or guilt, but something rarer in my life and stronger than both: remorse. A feeling which is more complicated, curdled, and primeval. Whose chief characteristic is that nothing can be done about it: too much time has passed, too much damage has been done, for amends to be made. (Barnes 99)

As Alford puts it:

What he discovers is that the story that he had told himself these many years, the story of his own life is etched throughout with delusions and deceptions, the consequences of which reach far beyond the scope of his own "peaceable" existence.

The title of the novel *The Sense of an Ending* perhaps signifies that an aged narrator has perceived that his life is soon going to come to an end and it is evident enough that he also has a sense of how it is going to end. Considering the source of the title it does not seem to have a simple ramification rather elicits critical estimations and demands a further precision by which we can comprehend its intricacies. As a matter of fact, Barnes has borrowed the title from Frank Kermode's radical work *The Sense of an Ending: Studies in the Theory of Fiction*. Kermode's work is an analytical work of theory of fiction and is concerned with manifold extensions of the dynamics of reality and fiction, time and memory, genesis and apocalypse. Kermode seeks to offer a coherent analogy between certain apocalyptic features and the modes of reading and writing fiction.

He suggests that we human beings seem to find ourselves ill at ease with the idea that our lives form only a short period in the history of the world. Much has happened before us and so much will happen afterwards. We look for a 'coherent pattern' to explain this fact, and believe in the idea that we find ourselves *in medias res*. In order to make sense of our lives, we tend to find some 'consonance' between the beginning, the middle, and the end. (Wikipedia)

Kermode explains that men rush “into the midst”, *in medias res*, when they are born; they also die in *mediis rebus*, and to make sense of their span they need fictive concords with origins and ends, such as give meaning to lives and to poems. The End they imagine will reflect their irreducibly intermediary preoccupations (Beltrán).

He brings into fore the instance of traditional Christian view of apocalypse and talks about two distinct apocalypses – *imminent* apocalypse where one anticipates endings and *immanent* apocalypse where an individual dwells in the ending itself. In the imminent ending, one invests in the idea that his/her prediction about future would turn out to be similar to that what s/he believes it to be. And the certainty of that future stems from a credible unadulterated past. But in the immanent apocalypse, the individual already dwells in the end as he/she finds out that his/her recorded past has been a deficient one which does not bear any credibility. That is the case of Tony here; he is already living in his end. He becomes vulnerable to his memory's inadequacies and therefore is unable to apprehend what his past actually is. The coherence between his past, present and future has already lost its existence when crisis replaces his end; where confusion and irresoluteness of his present becomes a chronic pattern in relation to his past and future. His present goes through a massive transformation and turns out to be a continuum of restlessness, a place of the perpetual plight and thus the imminent becomes immanent:



We live in time - it holds us and molds us - but I never felt I understood it very well.... 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. (Barnes 3)

Within the prevailing studies in history, it is believed that Public History is built upon such premises that are presumed to be formidable and its well-established documentation gives it an indisputable and self-evident presence in reality. On the other hand, Personal History is stored in the unconscious of an individual and often becomes vulnerable. It is accessible to the individual and under his/her influence is prone to change. The manipulation of memory tends to help the individual to fabricate things according to his/her own will and therefore raises the question of the validity of private history. Prejudices and biasness form the base of one's past, self, character and identity.

Barnes' novel puts forward in a fictionalized form the process in which a personal historian chronicles his life-story, realizing the intrinsic complicacy of private history. Through the enthralling narrative of Tony Webster, the author shows the evolution of a self and its surroundings, in his own distinct and exquisite way of storytelling.

Barnes's interest in history is precisely like a psychoanalyst rather than a historian. Though the protagonist of *The Sense of an Ending* is himself a retired historian and has been occupied with bits and dust of Public history in his entire career, the predilection of the author lies in the private history of the protagonist. The narrator at one stage describes:

I still read a lot of history, and of course I've followed all the official history that's happened in my own lifetime - the fall of Communism, Mrs Thatcher, 9/11, global warming - with the normal mixture of fear, anxiety and cautious optimism. But I've never felt the same about it - I've never quite trusted it - as I

do events in Greece and Rome, or the British Empire, or the Russian Revolution. Perhaps I just feel safer with the history that's been more or less agreed upon. Or perhaps it's that same paradox again: the history that happens underneath our noses ought to be the clearest and yet it's the most deliquescent. (Barnes 59)

It is evident enough that the narrator knows it very well that history can sometimes prove to be fallible. Therefore what we understand or perceive to be the truest representation of our memory can also prove at some point of time as deceptive and incomplete:

...the text of Barnes' novel succinctly suggests through the narrative of Anthony Webster, how volatile, deceptive, (un-)controlled, and therefore how unreliable, inadequate and imperfect memory is as an agent of constructing personal history. The ways of functioning of memory have not yet been authoritatively or comprehensively deciphered by neuroscientists and neuropsychiatrists, and we are far from understanding its mysteries and intricacies. (Chatterjee 5)

This version of history helps him escape humiliation and disrespect. He maintains his integrity, his idea of self and keeps his guilty conscience at bay. Most importantly it presents him with a way of life which is well at ease and saves him the struggle of coping with further difficulties by distorting that version of reality and crisis gets replaced with conviction. It outweighs the possibility of further derangement and potential damage that time can thrust on one's self. This replacement, reorder, reorganization of past events happens in various ways.

Within the general framework of Psychoanalysis, these occurrences bear immense significance. An extensive study of *The Sense of an Ending* in terms of Psychoanalysis will lead us to a better understanding of Tony's perplexities and their outcomes. According to Harold Blum,

Reconstruction is a complementary agent of change, which integrates genetic interpretations and restores the continuity of the self the patient's childish traits, features, fixations, and irrational childish fantasies and behavior point to the necessity for reconstruction. Reconstruction organizes dissociated, fragmented memories, potentiating the further retrieval of repressed memories. Reconstruction is essential to the working through and attenuation of early traumatic experience. Recapture of the past is necessary to demonstrate and diminish the persistent influence of the past in the present, and to meaningfully connect past and present. (Psychoanalytic Reconstruction and Reintegration)

But as we primarily focus on the reconstruction of the past in regard to personal or shared traumatic experience, we often ignore that reconstruction does not necessarily happen based on trauma, it can also happen when an individual manipulates and controls strings of his past as much as he desires, resulting in another dimension of alternate reality. This reconstruction and its malleable nature need to be discussed from psychoanalytical perspective. Tony in the novel is prone to *false memory syndrome*. It denotes that to make ourselves at ease with our past we invent false memories. Throughout the narrative, Tony forgets certain events. Sometimes he vaguely remembers them but at the next moment, he cannot recall them precisely. For instance in his trip with Veronica, in the quest of Severn Bore, he cannot remember accurately what happened. This memory which was otherwise erased from his memory comes into being when he renews his contact with Veronica towards the end of the novel. He retrieves this memory which had long been suppressed. It leads him to distort the memory as he could only remember fragments of it thereby lacking authenticity. He even admits his inability:

At least, that's how I remember it now. Though if you were to put me in a court of law, I doubt I'd stand up to cross-examination very well. "And yet you claim this memory was suppressed for forty years?" "Yes." "And only surfaced just recently?" "Yes." "Are you able to account for why it surfaced?" "Not really." "Then let me put it to you, Mr. Webster, that this supposed incident is an entire figment of your imagination.... (Barnes 119)

This process of renegotiating past is described as *imagination inflation* in terms of Psychoanalysis. In an interview to National Public Radio, he says,

I have a brother who's a philosopher. He maintains that almost all memories are false, all fallible, and that memory is the act of imagination, rather than the act of a lucid remembering machine somewhere up in our brains. I have a more sort of old-fashioned, pragmatic view of memory. But I certainly increasingly think that it's not only faulty but sometimes over-reliant on the imagination. (Wertheimer)

Another way the memory gets distorted is when Tony creates a façade of *choice-supportive bias*. It implies that the individual has manipulated the memories in order to look to his past decisions as good in retrospect. That is the case when he kept a wrong impression buried that he wrote a pleasant and friendly reply to Adrian regarding his courtship with Veronica. In fact, Tony wrote a vicious letter full of curses. He created a different past altogether to pacify the heart of a jilted lover that he was, who could not tolerate that his ex-girlfriend was going out with his best friend. His memory of this goes through a shocking transformation when the corroboration comes in the form of the actual letter that he receives from Veronica. This *choice-supportive bias* serves as a kind of defence mechanism which offers him a comfortable and unassuming position.

*Mood dependent memory* is something that occurs when we recall specific events and experiences depending on our present mood. Thus when we feel happy we hold on to our happy memories. As Tony suggests, "...you can infer past actions from current mental state" (Barnes 44). That is why Tony sometimes remembers certain incidents about Veronica, which vexes him as he nurtures an infuriating annoyance at present. But towards the end of the novel, when he learns about the fateful and tragic consequences of his letter he feels somewhat sympathetic towards Veronica and he remembers the happy moments that he and Veronica shared. His evocation of memories is a complex process and comprises subtle nuances. The concoctions behind the evocation entail a far deeper understanding. He evokes them according to his present state of mind. In another instance, when he needed Veronica to hand over the document which was supposed to be in his possession now, he started corresponding with her brother Jack and formally greeted him and made him believe that they spent a good time together in that weekend in their country-house, which was not the actual scenario. He recollects that memory to be a happier one or at least pretends so: "I pretended to happier memories of Chislehurst than was the case" (Barnes 72).

He says when we are young we predict what might happen in future but as we age we find it difficult to remember the events as exactly as they happened:

Also, when you are young, you think you can predict the likely pains and bleaknesses that age might bring. You imagine yourself being lonely, divorced, widowed; children growing away from you, friends dying. You imagine the loss of status, the loss of desire – and desirability. You may go further and consider your own approaching death... Discovering, for example, that as the witnesses to your life diminish, there is less corroboration, and therefore less certainty, as to what you are or have been. Even if you have

assiduously kept records – in words, sound, pictures – you may find that you have attended to the wrong kind of record-keeping. (Barnes 59)

Though we ascribe these aforementioned ways not so much voluntary status sometimes it is possible that one consciously manipulates one's past to subvert the very nature of one's own memory only to depict the story of his/her life. The version he/she tells himself/herself, the account that stands up (Barnes 116). Even at one point of time, he realizes that he cannot further access his memories and realizes, "There seems no way of accessing anything else; the case is closed. Which is why you seek corroboration, even if it turns out to be contradiction" (Barnes 120).

To conclude, we retrieve memories each day and as much as we retrieve, it gets changed and moulded. Every memory thus appears to be fallible, therefore vulnerable to time's malleability and is in a constant flux, but moulding of memories does not always have disastrous consequences. In certain circumstances, human beings shape and even forget traumatic experiences to avoid any psychological mess and choose a healthy life devoid of chaos. In all probability, it is not possible to have a life bereft of memories. What we can do is that we should try to preserve it in its truest form and only Art and History have the intimacy to hold it in a valuable position which will bear immense significance in future beyond the sphere of private and public, time and consequences.

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