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Literary Theories

The Unstable Self: Memory, Displacement, and Identity Reconstruction in Contemporary Postcolonial English Fiction

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Abstract: This article explores the complex, fluctuating nature of identity as a process of ongoing reconstruction in the context of the English-language fiction of the present day postcolonial world. Influenced by cultural identity theory (Hall, 2021), the concepts of hybridity and the “third space” (Bhandari, 2022), and post memory (Hirsch, 2008), the study proposes that memory and displacement are the twin forces that forge a subjectivity for a postcolonial protagonist whose identity is pieced together, provisionally, from fragments of personal memory, inherited trauma, and geographic displacement. Through a qualitative, theory-informed close reading approach to a representative sample of postcolonial English fiction, the article outlines three narrative strategies through which authors perform identity reconstruction: fragmentary and non-linear temporalities, intergenerational and “post memorial” transmission of trauma and spatial in-betweenness created by migration and diaspora. Previous scholarship has tended to focus on memory, displacement, and hybridity as distinct themes, but the main argument of this paper is that these three are not parallel themes, but that they are a single, reinforcing mechanism of identity construction in postcolonial fiction that I call the “recursive self-assembly” model. By comparative analysis of texts by Salman Rushdie, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, Amitav Ghosh, Kiran Desai, and J. M. Coetzee, the discussion demonstrates this model, and the postcolonial self is not broken and needing to be fixed, but structurally provisional, reassembled a new with each act of narration. Finally, the article discusses implications for postcolonial literary theory and further research, such as the need for comparative studies between non-English postcolonial traditions and an increased focus on digital and diasporic memory transfers.

Keywords: postcolonial fiction, memory, displacement, identity reconstruction, hybridity, post memory, diaspora.

Introduction

This question of who the self is when the certainties of home, nation, and inherited history have been displaced is preeminent in contemporary postcolonial English fiction, obsessive. The postcolonial protagonist seldom finds the sense of self in the postcolonial nation they were born into, as in Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Americanah*, Kiran Desai's *The Inheritance of Loss*, and J. M. Coetzee's *Jesus* trilogy. Rather, identity in these novels is constantly performatively constructed from “half-recalled” pasts, “legacy” traumas that are not “original” to the characters, and “disorientations” of migration and exile, a pattern consistent with Hall's (2021) argument that cultural identity is a matter of “becoming” as well as “being,” continually repositioned by history, culture, and power rather than fixed and pre-given. It is not accidental that this condition is a part of postcolonial fiction; it is actually part of it. In postcolonial societies, the sense of a crisis of memory is often audible in the institutionalized amnesia and in the elusiveness of archival evidence produced by the aftermath of colonial and post-Independence conflict (Werner, 1998). In this sense fiction is one of the only technologies available for a viable reconstruction of a past.

In diasporic texts, the genre of narrative has been depicted to work with a combination of both personal and collective memory, as a way to challenge dominant historical narratives and as a way to create the space in which silenced histories are recovered and retold through fragmented narration and intertextuality (Parui, 2004). How, specifically, do the contemporary postcolonial English novels recount the construction of identity and what is the exact relation of memory (as an object of psychological and cultural analysis) and displacement (as a condition of space and society) in the process? (Chaudhary, 2020). There has been a significant amount of criticism that has focused on memory in postcolonial writing (Parui, 2004), a large amount of criticism that has focused on diaspora and hybridity (Hall, 2021; Bhandari, 2022), but not many studies that have integrated the two somehow into a single description and explanation of how the postcolonial self is constituted, narratively, through temporal and spatial instability. This is the gap in research that this article tries to fill and the model of “recursive self-assembly” proposed below is this article's main contribution.

Research Gap:

This study is motivated by three gaps in the literature. In the first place, memory studies of postcolonial fiction have tended to concern themselves with the temporal dynamics of remembering and forgetting, often within a particular regional or national context like the Partition of South Asia or civil war in Africa (Parui, 2024; Sharrad, 1990). Secondly, diaspora and hybridity criticism, inspired by Hall (2021) and Bhabha (Bhandari, 2022), has tended to be more concerned with the spatial and cultural skewering of in-betweenness than with memory, viewing it as a secondary or ancillary topic. Thirdly, a generalisable model that could be applied to the larger body of contemporary postcolonial texts beyond Coetzee's work has not been offered, and, even when this is attempted, as in recent research on postmemory and migrant identity in Coetzee (Goswami, 2025), these studies tend to be single-author case studies. In essence, what is missing is an integrated account of memory and displacement, rather than two side-by-side themes, as a single recursive mechanism.

This article brings three contributions. First, it presents a single analytical model: the model of recursive self-assembly, which combines memory-studies (Hirsch, 2008; Pauri, 2024) and diaspora/hybridity scholarship (Hall, 2021; Bhandari, 2022) as conceptual materials out of which to assemble a provisional self, triggered by the opportunities to engage with identity crisis provided by spatial displacement. Second, it uses this model comparatively across five major contemporary postcolonial novelists, rather than focussing just on one writer or one country, which would have meant a very limited perspective; the comparative approach would have been able to show up patterns that would not have been captured by single case studies such as Goswami's (2025). Thirdly, it takes the "unstable self" of postcolonial fiction not as a failure or a wound in need of healing but as a productive structure of the self that remains despite its being "unstable" an idea that has implications for any theorization of postcolonial identity beyond literature (Chaudhary, S., & Roy, O. (2024)).

Methodology

In this study, the method is qualitative and interpretative, relying on close textual analysis, theory-based thematic analysis, and extensive close reading of the texts, with detailed annotation and coding of the common narrative patterns and identity markers, which include language use, cultural memory, historical allusions, and power relations, all of which are established in postcolonial literary studies where texts are selected for their thematic focus on identity, displacement, hybridity, and cultural negotiation (as in comparable corpus based approaches; e.g., Pauri, 2024).

The main body of texts consists of five contemporary (post-colonial) novels in the English language selected for their genre, geographical and formal variety: Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* (South Asia and the allegory of independence); Amitav Ghosh's *The Shadow Lines* (Partition and transnational memory); Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Americanah* (West Africa diaspora and transatlantic migration); Kiran Desai's *The Inheritance of Loss* (insurgency, migration and class); and J. M. Coetzee's *Jesus trilogy* (allegorical migrant amnesia; Goswami, 2025). The selection follows the convention found in the field of privileging texts that were published since the late twentieth century, so as to ensure contemporary relevance while providing enough historical depth to see the memory displacement dynamic repeat in different postcolonial geographies and to exclude non-literary texts like autobiography or travel writing, to keep the analysis limited to the specifically narrative construction of identity (Chaudhary & Arora, 2025).

The reading is organized around three lenses of approach: The first is the process of cultural identity. This shift in perspective, from 'being' to 'becoming' cultural identity, is one that Hall (2021) builds upon, rather than something that exists beyond place, time, history and culture. On this score, diaspora identities are constantly [re]creating themselves anew, not as essential or pure, but as an essential heterogeneity and diversity that is recognized (Hall, 2021). Second is hybridity and the third space. Through Bhabha's lens, the scenes of code switching in language, double consciousness in culture, and liminality in society are examined in the corpus, as they have the potential to subvert colonialism by challenging the essentialist conceptualization of identity and the binary opposition of colonizer/colonized. Trauma and passing trauma on. The study takes account of episodes in which characters relate to a past that they did not experience themselves, but which was passed on to them so much that it becomes their very own memory, especially through intergenerational transmission. Following Hirsch's (2008) idea of post memory, episodes are attended to in which characters relate to a past that was not lived by themselves, but rather experienced so intensely that it has become their own memory, especially across generations. Coding procedure. The three repeated structural elements hypothesized a priori (based on the literature review) to co-construct identity reconstruction in each text were: (a) disruptions of linear temporality (flashback, analepsis, fragmented chronology); (b) explicit or implicit intergenerational transmission of memory or trauma (Hirsch, 2008); and (c) scenes of geographic displacement (migration, exile, return, forced relocation) that destabilize the protagonist's previous self-understanding.

The occurrences of every feature were recorded and passages in which two or more features occurred in the same narrative sequence were marked for closer scrutiny so that the empirical basis for the recursive self-assembly model proposed in Section 4 could be evaluated. The method is a single-language corpus study and does not allow for any generalization by means of statistics, while the corpus is regionally varied but limited to Anglophone fiction which is discussed further in Section 5.

Theoretical Framework

Three Prior Models of the Postcolonial Self It is useful to summarize the three dominant models which this article builds on and from, before presenting the discussion. The essentialist-recovery model can be seen as a search for an “imaginary fullness or plenitude” of a pre-colonial or ancestral wholeness which is countered by the fractured fragments of a colonized past, as Hall (2021) discusses in much of the discussion of postcolonial identity in fiction and cultural practice. The hybridity model, after Bhabha (as discussed in Bhandari, 2022), does not restore the narrative of recovery but rather, a productive and generative narrative of cultural mixture in which identity is not destroyed by hybridity but rather constituted in it, formed from an ambivalent, in-between space of enunciation in which all cultural statements are enunciated in a contradictory space, where any claim to the purity of cultures is rendered impossible (Bhandari, 2022). Based on Hirsch (2008) and the later development of the memory/trauma studies scholarship, the postmemory/trauma model emphasizes the transgenerational transmission of trauma and the non-linear, interwoven nature of postcolonial narratives, which represent the past in a way that often doesn't include words.

This model provides a useful glimpse into how memory works in postcolonial fiction as a dynamic, fragmented, and contested process that reconstructs the past and negotiates present identities (Parui, 2024) but leaves the spatial and social conditions that render particular memories newly urgent or newly inaccessible at particular moments of narrative under-specified. These three models, each in isolation, reflect aspects of what this article looks at. The discussion that follows suggests that contemporary postcolonial fiction typically weaves all three into a single strand (Hall, 2021; Bhandari, 2022; Hirsch, 2008; Parui, 2024) and suggests a fourth model that might articulate the braiding of these three.

Discussion

1. Fragmented Temporality as the Formal Signature of the Unstable Self

Fragmented Temporality as the Formal Signature of the Unstable Self In the corpus, non-linear structure in the narrative is not a stylistic embellishment but is the main technical device used to express the authors' and characters' sense of unfinishedness (Chaudhary, 2024). But the reliability of personal memory is on the same shaky ground as the national history, since the *Midnight's Children's* narrator tells his own story out of sequence, apologizing for mistakes and corrections along the way. Similarly, Ghosh's *The Shadow Lines* does not follow its own timeline, jumping back and forth between London, Calcutta, Dhaka and across generations, making the sense of one event (the riots that followed violence during Partition) only apparent when the bits and pieces are pieced together. The formal fragmentation performs, what Parui (2024) describes as the entanglement of remembering and forgetting: the two are not ontological oppositions but structural and functional entanglements; and acts of reconstruction are closely related to acts of anticipation and future orientation (Parui, 2024).

2. Post memory and Intergenerational Inheritance

Post memory and Intergenerational Inheritance: Another similar pattern occurs when the memory gets passed down to the next generation without it being a direct experience of the trauma. In Coetzee's *Jesus* trilogy, migrants lose, by allegorical design, all memory of their previous lives, and then seek to find a new one in what Goswami (2025) calls a “pathogenic,” amnesiac society that collectively erases memory. As Goswami (2025) argues, postmemorial identity work in postcolonial fiction is generative, not restorative. In fiction that explicitly addresses Partition and its consequences, trauma is not only a psychological state but becomes the responsibility of a collective, spanning generations and handed down through embodied memory, objects, and the shards of family memory: the silence of a parent, the unexplained anger of a grandparent, the unexplained move of a family: the collective responsibility bestowed on the protagonist to reconstruct a usable past, one that re-imagines and redraws the lines of Partition (“Trauma, Memory, and Violence in Postcolonial Indian Literature,” 2026).

3. Displacement as the Spatial Trigger for Reconstruction

Displacement as the Spatial Trigger for Reconstruction: The third recurrent pattern is that the identity crisis is always motivated by geographical displacement and not in a static context. Adichie's *Americanah* stages this most clearly: It shows how the Nigeria that Ifemelu has known comes into view now markedly different and now fiercely challenged as she becomes an American resident in the United States, where racial and belonging categories that had been largely unnoticed at home become social facts. This depicts the experience of being “in-between”- not fully here and not fully there- described by recent diaspora scholarship as “otherness,” and a constant feeling of not being at home with the “here” and “there” that will require characters to negotiate inherited cultural legacies against the demands of the “here” and “there” of the adopted environment (“Intersections of Black Diasporic Identities in African and Caribbean Literature,” 2024). In Desai's work, the political upheaval is central, and at the same time that the identity is being moved onto a new ground, the question of belonging is being broken apart, and the novel's reconstruction of the identity is revealing that the “old” identity was not as solid as it seemed.

4. Toward a Recursive Self-Assembly Model

Toward a Recursive Self-Assembly Model: The co-occurrence, within a single narrative sequence, of fragmented temporality, intergenerational memory transmission, and geographic displacement is the main empirical finding of this analysis, and it is this co-occurrence that is not adequately captured by existing single-lens models (cf. Hall, 2021; Bhandari, 2022; Hirsch, 2008). In the corpus, the pattern is very similar: a pattern of dislocation (migration, exile, return, forced relocation) destabilizes a character's working sense of self; this destabilization generates an act of memory-work, which is often intergenerational, often incomplete and/or unreliable; and the narrative form itself fragments to represent that memory-work as ongoing rather than resolved. There is no restoration of a previous wholeness to this self, as the recovery model assumes (Hall, 2021), nor is it simply and permanently hybridized, as the third-space model's implicit endpoint (Bhandari, 2022). Rather it's provisionally reassembled, and its form will be destabilized once more by the next displacement or the next surfacing of the buried memory. We call this a recursive self-assembly model: identity in postmodern postcolonial fiction is not a condition but a process, and repeated dislocations provide repeated moments of crisis and recollection (personal, inheritable and post memorial (Hirsch, 2008) provide the materials for what we might call provisional self-assembly with no end point at which the self is finally stable. This model has implications that go beyond those of the essentialist-recovery, hybridity and post memory models, individually.

First, it accounts for the insurmountable difficulty of closure in many recent postcolonial novels, in that a 'final,' 'settled' identity would be formally at odds with the premises of the novel. Second, it is able to account for the fact that memory and displacement are often woven into the same story or even appear together in the same scene; the model does not view these concepts as thematically related only but also functionally related. Third, it reinterprets the often-used critical vocabulary of "broken" or "fractured" postcolonial identity: in this model, fragmentation is not a failure state, but the precondition for the recursive process to continue to work, as a self that is fully united and closed has no need for the further reconstruction that displacement and memory continually require.

5. Gendered and Embodied Dimensions

The gendered and embodied dimensions Evidence from the text of the corpus also suggests that this recursive process isn't gender neutral. The recursive self-assembly model should not be interpreted as gender-symmetrical, however, since the materials to be reassembled as well as the risks of being displaced are not evenly distributed along lines of gender, race, class, and generation; a fact that will be elaborated upon in the conclusion.

Conclusion

The argument in this article has been that the present-day postcolonial English novel invariably stands for identity not as something to be recovered or defended but as something that is continually re-engaged and re-constructed from the bits and pieces of memory, some of which may be inherited, to which it belongs. On the basis of Hall's notion of cultural identity as a process of becoming, Bhabha's notion of hybridity and the third space, and Hirsch's notion of postmemory, the article has presented a recursive model that conceives of memory and displacement as co-constitutive, thus avoiding the dichotomic division of themed-specific issues into memory and displacement. In the comparative reading of Rushdie, Ghosh, Adichie, Desai and Coetzee, what we see is the same play in action: displacement unsettles a stable sense of identity, memory labour (intergenerational and unreliable) provides the material for reconstruction, and fragmentary narrative structure is a means of representing that reconstruction as unfinished. There is a tradition that has tended to separate out memory-studies approaches from diaspora/hybridity approaches, or to meld memory-studies and diaspora/hybridity approaches in the individual-authored case studies. This article directly fills this gap by synthesizing in a corpus, which includes a comparison.

The recursive self-assembly model presented here offers a portable analytical tool for postcolonial literary criticism: It does not direct the focus of a given text, by asking either “how is memory represented?” or “how is hybridity represented?” but rather to the moments in the narrated text where the process of displacement and memory-work intersect, moments at which postcolonial fiction might do its most characteristic identity work. The limitations of this study are the qualitative, interpretive method used, which does not allow generalization beyond the texts analysed, and the limited Anglophone corpus. Comparing the recursive self-assembly model with postcolonial fiction in other languages and in translation, as well as paying more attention to the gendered and embodied aspects of memory transmission highlighted previously could be fruitful areas for future research that test the model's transnationality and its applicability beyond Anglophone contexts, as well as its ability to incorporate postcolonial perspectives into the research methodology. One thing is true about these possible extensions: the self is not destabilized by its inability to heal, but rather it is destabilized by the capacity to be displaced and reassembled again and again out of memory: in contemporary postcolonial fiction the self is unstable, not because it has not healed, but because it is not meant to heal, as instability is the mechanism by which postcolonial identity persists.

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