

TRIBHUVAN UNIVERSITY  
Central Department of English  
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Edge of Irony in Martin Amis's Fiction

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for the degree of Master of Philosophy in English

By

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**Letter of Recommendation**

This thesis titled “Edge of Irony in Martin Amis’s Fiction” has been conducted by Ajay Kumar Das under my supervision and guidance. I hereby recommend the dissertation for *viva voce*.

.....

Prof. Dr. Beerendra Pandey

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**Letter of Approval**

This thesis conducted by Ajay Kumar Das titled “Edge of Irony in Martin Amis’s Fiction” has been accepted and approved as a partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Philosophy in English.

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## **Abstract**

This thesis examines the tenets of postmodern irony in Martin Amis's three key novels – *Money: A Suicide Note*, *Time's Arrow* and *London Fields*. The study begins with a premise that Amis is a postmodern writer who portrays low-life characters in all their physical grossness and emotional barrenness but with biting irony. For Frederick Jameson, postmodern irony is weak and has degenerated in pastiche. Opposed to this view is Linda Hutcheon's postmodernist understanding of irony implies that there is positive motivation in postmodern irony approximates to corrective function of satiric irony. She strongly believes that irony still has the edge and can be used as weapon to correct human follies. Based on Hutcheon's theoretical model this thesis analyses the inherent edge of Amis's irony which is intended for social reconstruction.

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## Chapter I

### Introduction: Martin Amis as Ironist

Born in 1949, son of novelist Kingsley Amis, Martin Amis has been a force on the modern literary scene since his first novel *The Rachel Papers* (1973). Raised in the household of writers, writing has always been a passion to Amis all through his working lifetime. In his literary works, Amis criticizes the ills of contemporary society. Amis's oeuvre accommodates nasty characters in both high and low-brow forms, ranging from the morally bankrupt and the self-serving to the violent, mindless and often criminals. The viciousness is not just limited to his characters; even his novels are plotted around nasty events and he is fond of using nasty language as he asserts in an interview to John Haffenden: "In my writing, yes I am fascinated by what I deplore, or I deplore what fascinates me; it's hard to get it the right way round" (Haffenden 3). The emptiness and corruption inherent in a materialistic culture are recurring themes of Amis's works. Nuclear apocalypse of our time, which could wipe out the human race, is one of the grim premises of his fictions. Amis has been known for dealing with the absurdity of the postmodern condition and superfluity of late capitalist Western society with its bizarre caricature.

Amis's *tour de force* lies in his depiction of low-life characters in all their physical grossness and emotional aridity. Profanity is one of the most striking features while in some cases the explicit sexual descriptions touch on the pornography that the readers are surrounded with the feel of apprehension and uneasiness. Neil Powell's article "What Life Is: The Novels of Martin Amis", reflects the same apprehension but with a tinge of ambivalent appreciation. He claims that Amis's writing contain "patches of brilliance (Powell 45), yet he charges that "there are passages where the ironist's or satirist's distancing fails entirely" (Powell 44). The question of

“distancing” is central to the controversy as Amis’s fictions openly challenge existing theories of irony as well as institutionalized concepts of satire, satirist and parodist. Despite the fact that his fictional strategy deploys the elements of satire, irony and parody, it is tricky to singularly fit Amis as a satirist, ironist or parodist. In his works he criticizes the social forces – commodity-capitalism, nuclear anxiety and mass media – that have shaped the subject in postmodernity

Illustrating the genre of satire Dustin Griffin differentiates between traditional satiric theory and contemporary positions. He writes, “The old Augustan scheme of a Part A in which the satirist lashes a vice, and a Part B in which he commends the opposite virtue” (Griffin 28). In *A Poetics of Postmodernism* Linda Hutcheon defines this Augustan “Part B” as satire’s “corrective element” (Hutcheon 46). She observes that there is a “positive motivation . . . that lies in the corrective function of satiric irony, where there is set of values that you are correcting toward” (*Edge* 50). There are other critics such as Fredrick Jameson who simply disagree with this stance. He argues that irony has lost its critical and ameliorative edge by trivializing the historical representation.

As noted above, the regimented polarized notions of irony simply do not work in Amis’s fictions as he vaguely offers clearly marked “corrective elements” in his works. In one of his interviews Amis stated, “I don’t offer alternatives to what I deplore. I am clear about the moral transgression . . . of my characters, but I don’t ever feel the need to point them out” (Haffenden 14). Despite his assertion the content of his novels is so powerful that they are bound to invite moral engagement from the reader. Amis’s implied irony is perceptible in his fictions. According to James Diedrick his novels resonate with what he calls “contingent” irony (Diedrick 15). The irony is contingent because the novels consistently blur the moral boundaries. Calling



Amis a “postmodern Jonathan Swift” (15), Diedrick opines that “Amis does not employ one clear ironic voice” therefore his irony is “contingent” (15).

Taking cue from the critiques of the Amis’s works this dissertation undertakes the intricacies of moral consciousness in Amis’s selected fictions. Drawing upon Linda Hutcheon and Frederick Jameson’s notion of postmodern irony this project focuses Amis’s much acclaimed novels *Money: A Suicide Note*, *Time’s Arrow* and *London Fields*. The meticulous study of Amis’s major works will bring to light his perspectives on disparaging degeneracy of the late twentieth century and underlying tinges of sanguinity in his artistic accomplishment. Amis, this thesis argues, writes about low events in an ironic style. The irony carries tinges of satire. The satirical potency of the irony comes from an underlying conservatism that holds at political arm’s length the more radical relativism and pessimism of postmodernist literature. Although the content of Amis’s novels is sordid, the atmosphere of pessimism is underlined by an undertone of appeal to the relevance of traditional cultural values, giving Amis’s irony the much-needed edge for social reconstruction. Amis’s irony situates the readers uncannily and uncomfortably between the tragic and comic poles of inherently moral experience. The primary aim of this project is to participate in the debate between Jameson and Hutcheon about the ability of the postmodern irony to bring about social reconstruction. The dissertation will show that Amis’s use of irony validates Hutcheon’s standpoint and, conversely, invalidates Jameson’s contention regarding the degeneration of the postmodern irony into pastiche.

Amis’s advent in the literary world was that of a star. *The Rachel Papers*, published in 1973 when Amis was 23, signalled the arrival of a formidable new author. The self-consciously precocious account of teenager Charles Highway’s pursuit and seduction of an older, Rachel, set the tone for Amis’s fiction for the next

decade. In 1974 the novel won the prestigious Somerset Maugham Award for the best first novel by a writer under the age of 35. *Dead Babies* (1975), Amis's second novel, discard the light comic tone of *The Rachel Papers* and uses his mordant wit to explore self-absorption amidst lovingly described decadence while following the progress of its characters' weekend-long descent into a maelstrom of sex, drugs and drink. *Success* (1977) depicts the story of two foster-brothers and their rising and falling fortunes.

Amis's most ambitious and successful novels belong to the 1980s. After *Other People* (1981), a disorienting narrative of a woman waking in some kind of an institution and endeavouring to reconstruct the narrative of her life and events which led her there, Amis was at the peak of his powers in *Money: A Suicide Note* (1984) and *London Fields* (1989). *Money* is a first-person narrative by John Self, advertising man turned into alcoholic self-abuser, looms as an obese figure of comic pathos. *London Fields*, Amis's longest novel, describes the encounters between three main characters in London in 1999, as a climate of nuclear disaster approaches. At the centre of *Time's Arrow* (1991) are the terrors of Holocaust. Watching present move into past, like a film reel winding backwards, the soul of a German-born American doctor misreads the events at Auschwitz and he sees himself as a creator restoring life to the gassed Jews. By invoking plagiarism *The Information* (1995) raises questions about the production and consumption of literature and addresses the relationship between value and intertextuality. *The Night Train* (1997), an account of a police procedural about a mysterious suicide, is arguably a manifestation of the Amis's views on America.

This research will not attempt to fix the continually moving borders of postmodern irony. In order to establish a theoretical framework the second chapter of

this thesis will conduct a discursive analysis of the theory of postmodern irony with special attention to Hutcheon and Jameson. The chapter will be an attempt to participate in the debate between Hutcheon and Jameson and will illuminate how the cutting edge of postmodern irony contributes to the social redemption. The debate on postmodernism varies as per the variation in the zeitgeist so the wide-ranging scrutiny of the postmodern theory will remain outside the scope of this project. The third chapter will investigate into the postmodern tenets in Martin Amis's novels as well as briefly discuss about his thematic leaning and satirical impulse. Given the nature of the research, the study will conduct a diagnostic assessment of Amis's most three acclaimed novels in the fourth chapter. It will exhibit how Amis blends reverence with irreverence and humour to create irony. Although Amis has raised various issues related to social decadency and change, this thesis will only offer how his works dig deeper into his concept of irony aimed at augmentation of contemporary cultural values. Accordingly, the concluding fifth chapter will consolidate the findings of the study.

## Chapter II

### Postmodern Irony: Debate about its Potency

*As a true science is impossible without a doubt, a truly humane life is impossible without irony.*

Soren Kierkegaard<sup>1</sup>

#### Introduction to Irony

Unintentionally or being on purpose people use irony in everyday life hence this rhetorical approach is presumed to have a key role in human society. Irony enfolds our everyday life and it is exercised not just by general public but also by mainstream culture of television and film. In the twenty-first century postmodern world one usually does not mean what he or she says which leads to questioning the fundamental function of language, the implication of the utterance as well as sincerity of those who use the language to express something.

The word irony has its origins in the Greek term *eironeia* which first appear in the dialogues of Plato (428-347 BC), with reference to Socrates. According to Claire Colebrooks “the word *eironeia* was first used to refer to artful double meaning in the Socratic dialogues of Plato, where the word is used . . . to refer to Socrates’ capacity to conceal what he really means” (1). Initially the word meant sneakily concealing the actual meaning of what one means to say. The rhetoric tool was formulated to pretend to be ignorant and expose one’s opponent by challenging him on his received knowledge and wisdom. Aristotle mentioned about irony in his *Ethics* and *Rhetoric*. For him irony was neither virtuous nor malicious. Socratic and Platonic use of the word supported the initial concept which entailed later reflection on the concept of

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<sup>1</sup> Soren Kierkegaard, *The Concept of Irony*; with Continual Reference to Socrates, trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989), p. 272.

irony. However Socratic irony evolved in such a way that it implies an ability to be divergent from what is said in general. There was a time when disproportionate and undue eulogistic statements were regarded as ironic.

In the post-Romantic nineteenth century, nihilistic or tragic irony remained the prevailing concept while relativistic and non-committal was the salient feature of the twentieth century irony. Recapitulating the notion of irony Claire Colebrook writes:

The history of irony's elitism goes back to its emergence in Greek thought. Not only was irony defined as an art in keeping with an urbane and elevated personality, it was also recognised as practised primarily in sites of political power. Irony, as a trope, is a means of effective persuasion in speeches and therefore already relies on the established speaking position and force of the orator. (19)

'Meaning one thing and saying something else' and 'blame through praise' were deemed the predominant conventional definitions of irony. The various forms of irony have been applied to create certain effects. Rhetoricians have particularly noticed an asymmetry in the use of irony. They remarked that irony is more often used to criticize than to praise. Generally speaking irony is perceived as a means of passing covert criticisms or negative evaluations and to victimization. Irony is the term today that is constantly misconstrued and confused with other terms. There are many debates around the definitions of irony as the same term entails different meanings for different authors. The difficulty is to arrive at a clear definition of the concept and the various ways in which the trope is utilized in the postmodern literary works.

### **The Importance of Context in Irony**

In the pre-modern era irony was utilized within texts and utterances for specific reasons that a reader or a listener was expected to ascertain the authorial

intentions. The context in which an ironic utterance is produced is assumed to trigger the rejection of the literal meaning. However, use of irony, in its latest sense, changed many routes that authenticity of the meaning of a text and utterance could not be established. The prevailing view of irony involves the substitution of the literal meaning of the ironical remark by its opposite. If someone says, “What a beautiful day for picnic!” when it is raining heavily, the contextual inadequacy of that remark is supposed to trigger its replacement by its opposite, its negation (“What an awful day for picnic!”). Understanding irony would thus involve understanding just the opposite of what the speaker/writer wanted to communicate. A second reason why irony may cause comprehension problem is that irony introduces an element of contradiction in texts. Indeed, if both the ironical comment and the rest of the text are taken literally, the reader is left with a sentence (the ironical comment) that does not fit the context.

Hence the questions arise: “How do we know when an author or speaker is being ironic? How do we recognize an author’s or a speaker’s ironic intentions? While diagnosing these questions it would be better to look at the contextual nature of irony. In order to recognize irony one should be aware of the context in which it has been stated. Since the context does not remain stable and is not independent of its socio-political exchange, we need to have shared norm and values so as to dissect irony and sincerity. Observing the relation between text and context vis-à-vis irony Claire Colebrook writes:

We cannot decide the meaning of a text on the basis of some context, for we would still have to decide *which* context we were using *and* just what that context itself meant. Far from irony being special case of meaning that departs from stable contextual recognition, we would

have to say that all language must mean more than it says, must always exceed the simple determinations of context. (105)

In the postmodern era the readers are more alert to irony than to its opposite, sincerity. Take a case of a desperate wife who shot her husband's mistress and then send him a text message which reads, 'I have shot your lover and this is not a joke'. The first thing that comes in one's mind when one reads the message is that it is a joke. In order to make it understood the message as a sincere one she has to emphasize that the act was not simply a joke.

According to Paul de Man irony is really complicated to define. In *Aesthetic Ideology* he examines irony from deconstructive point of view. The problem he identifies is that he sees irony to incorporate all tropes, but at the same time it is very tricky to define it as a trope. If we look at the meaning of the word 'trope' which mean 'to turn', it would be possible to define irony as a trope according to Northrop Frye who defines irony as "a pattern of words that turns away from direct statement or its own obvious meaning" (164).

As such one may agree with this definition, but while 'meaning one thing and saying something else' or 'blame by praise' are considered conventional definition of irony, de Man argues that this turning away in irony involves a more fundamental negation that one would have in an ordinary trope, such as metaphor or metonymy. de Man championed the deconstructive view of irony. For him irony destabilizes text's internal structures and reduces the meaning to the sceptical relativization of the message and in this perspective a text is either ironical or sincere.

This argument has been upheld by Linda Hutcheon who notes that "irony will mean different things to different players". She maintains that irony should be seen from the perspective of the interpreter of the text. For Hutcheon irony is:

an interpretive and intentional move. It is the making or inferring of **meaning** in addition to and different from what is stated, together with an **attitude** toward both the said and unsaid. The move is usually triggered (and then directed) by conflictual textual or contextual evidence or by markers which are socially agreed upon. . . irony is the intentional transmission of both information and evaluative attitude other than what is explicitly presented. (1995, 11) (Emphasis in original)

Wyane Booth takes different approach in dealing with irony. He eschews definitions or tropes and starts off from a question in a practical criticism – how do we recognize the ironic context of the text? In his acclaimed *A Rhetoric of Irony*, Booth illuminates that “every good reader must be, among other things, sensitive in detecting and reconstructing ironic meanings” (76). He argues that there are clues in texts that can help readers to spot irony. In verbal ironies, particularly in conversations, people are accustomed to catching a number of clues that are not in themselves ironic. The same kind of clues can be found in written texts, where the author provides clues of ironic meaning. Such clues are indeed essential in order to identify an author’s intentions and thereby understand an ironic work. Sometimes these clues help readers to decode irony that go beyond authorial intent. Irony is normative, and the response to irony in a text is similar to solving a puzzle and thus capturing the stable, knowable and intended meaning. For Booth irony in the text is wholly of the author and depends “not on the ingenuity of the reader but on the intentions that constitute the creative act” (78).

Interpretation of a text is not just limited to an act of dissecting its structure, content, conflict, system, values or norms. According to Colebrook, “it would look to



all those moments that exceed all organization or active intent” (103). Quoting Derrida she maintains that “texts have a force beyond their intent. Beyond what they want to represent, mean or communicate – the constative – texts also produce effects or ‘perform’, and this is due to their textual condition” (103).

In relations to various arguments about interpretation of literary texts, the recent literary practice has made increasing use of the devices to indicate the disjunction between statement and meaning. The plethora of such literary devices as – satire, sarcasm, mockery, irony, parody, pastiche – is the evidence of the pervasiveness of this trend. While skimming through the literary history one can easily notice the tradition of narratives that combine generic conventions, breaking one-to-one relation between ‘statement’ and ‘meaning’. They breach the literary conventions. Roughly speaking the *modus operandi* of such narratives can be arranged into two categories in which they diverge from the generally accepted conventions of the traditional literary practice. The first contains those techniques that challenge literary conventions through ‘irony’, ‘parody’ and ‘satire’. The second category includes techniques associated with ‘metafiction’.

The distinction between ‘irony’, ‘parody’ and ‘satire’ are easy to explain but they tend to have intrinsic nuances thus the line sometimes blurs. Parody is fundamentally a stylistic phenomenon which refers to exaggerated imitation of the formal characteristics of a writer or genre signalled by verbal, structure or thematic disparities. Margaret Rose nearly summed up in the formula: “two codes, one message” (52-3, 61). According to Rose irony conveys two messages through one code. Traditionally the readers distinguish two kinds of irony: ‘verbal’ and ‘dramatic’ (also known as ‘irony of situation/fate’). Occasionally parody is argued to belong to the genre of satire. The more a reader scrutinizes and finds one of them - irony,

parody and satire - in a narrative, the more they appear to have traits in common. Metafiction suspends normally accepted meaning in another way. Like irony and parody, the prefix 'meta' designates phenomena found in non-literary uses of language. When a writer talks about a narrative within that narrative, he or she puts it in quotation marks, stepping beyond the framework of the narrative where the story, its audience, even narrative theory could be subjects of discussion. It puts the whole system of traditional distinction between 'reality' and 'fiction' in jeopardy on the one hand and 'truth' and falsity' on the other.

Given a range of diverse definitions and shifts, the question comes how a reader can remain consistent in approaching wide variety of ironies. By and large the current critical concepts of irony are polarised around two paradigms: the classical and the postmodern. The conventional concept focus on the notion of the present signifier referring to an absent signified. The poststructuralist model views it as a symbolic deferral, identical with the Derridean *écriture*. The figurative resemblance of these extreme perspectives can be traced back to Socrates. As interpreted by Kierkegaard, Socrates takes two kind of ironic stances. One relies on the traditional Platonic categories, by virtue of which there is a distinction between a 'hidden' valid content and a 'deceptive' appearance. The other stance is an 'incessant questioning', a 'non-dialectical negation' of existing modes of thought without positive content and concrete result (Kierkegaard 86).

### **Postmodern Irony**

The most recent implication of irony refers to the style of writing that leaves open the curiosity of what the literal meaning could indicate. In other words the authentic meaning of an utterance or text is called into question. Questioning the authorial agency the ironologists argue that the utterance and situation are never fixed

at one meaning rather invoke multiple layers of subtexts and thus the authentic meaning of those utterance and situation perpetually remains elusive. Claire Colebrook resonates the thought by saying:

If irony demands some idea or point of view above language, contexts or received voices, postmodernity acknowledges that all we have are competing contexts and that any implied ‘other’ position would itself be a context. Postmodernity would be a society of simulation and immanence with no privileged point from which competing voices could be judged. (161)

Irony, in this context, has been manipulated to echo postmodernism. The postmodern – be it literature, art, architecture, sociology or philosophy – understood to be exclusively self-referential which means art has been used up to such an extent that it relentlessly recycles and quotes itself. Its self-conscious posture excludes authenticity, sentiment, emotive aspect, and thus has to reject the existence of ultimate truth or moral certainty. Irony has been brought into play candidly as an overriding trope exemplifying postmodernism. For Alan Wilde “irony is a pre-eminently a way of perceiving the world”. He argues:

If the defining feature of modernism is its ironic vision of disconnection and disjunction, postmodernism, more radical in its perceptions, derives instead from a vision of randomness, multiplicity, and contingency: in short, a world in need of mending is superseded by one beyond repair. (9)

From the historical, critical and theoretical lenses the discourse on irony saw multitude of uses and theories since its origin. In his analysis Wilde, using the historical lens, put forward three paradigms of irony: (a) premodernist or ‘mediate’;

(b) modernist or ‘disjunctive’; (c) postmodernist or ‘suspensive’. ‘Premodernist irony’ covered a fundamentally satiric vision largely prevailing from the 16<sup>th</sup> to the early 18<sup>th</sup> century. The satiric irony resulted from the mediating the distance between the author’s determination to recover an ideal harmony and the incongruity he or she underwent. The ‘modernist irony’ referred to the crisis of consciousness when confronting a detached and fragmented world. The author would perceive disjunction between his need of harmony and the disorder of reality. Irony would become his way out of controlling the puzzling disjunctions by self-consciously shaping his own aesthetic delight. Wilde argues that postmodernist irony is ‘suspensive’. Typical to postmodernist irony is the phenomenological unpredictability and absurdity which is perceived as even more radical, yet the ironist ‘suspends’ reality by means of ‘meaning-creating’ fiction practices. For Wilde all postmodernist irony “proclaims itself in its rejection of the metaphysical and psychological abysses of modernist depth” (24).

Richard Rorty, on the other hand, strongly believes that irony is ‘inherently a private matter’ (87) and not a prominent literary technique. Irony for him operates in politics and culture. Rorty consents to the assertion that self is produced in language although at the same time he maintains that subjects produce language: ‘vocabularies are made by human being’ (21). For Rorty:

An ironist cannot get along without the contrast between the final vocabulary she inherited and the one she is trying to create for herself. Irony is, if not intrinsically resentful, at least reactive. Ironists have to have something to have doubts about, something from which to be alienated. (88)

Irony for Rorty is associated with scepticism, with continuing fundamental doubts about one's final vocabulary, the set of words that everyone uses to tell story of his or her life. He makes a point that beliefs and desires framed in our final vocabularies are not real in the sense of having a privileged access to a universal objective truth i.e. a common political vocabulary stem from Western values. Rorty's postmodern irony reflects the postmodernist sceptic where wide array of conflicting versions of reality is offered to us within a remarkably liberal and pluralist society. Such ironists have doubts about the truth of any 'final vocabulary', and realize that others have different ones; they don't see their vocabulary as closer to reality than others. It results in their anxiety that they may be 'playing the wrong language game' (75) and so the wrong kind of human being. An ironist for Rorty is someone who doubts his or her own final vocabulary while realising that he or she cannot use it to adequately express those doubts, nor sufficiently substantiate or dissolve them.

Along with parody and pastiche, the use of irony is a significant aspect of postmodern literary work. Theorizing postmodern parody and irony Linda Hutcheon emerged in the literary scene as an influential literary figure. Of the several theorists of postmodernism, Hutcheon's highly persuasive work appeared in 1988 under the title of *A Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction*. She begins with a claim that "postmodernism [is] a concept which is often under-theorized by both its supporters and detractors." To this end, she reveals her primary argument, that "postmodernism is a contradictory phenomenon, one that uses and abuses, installs and then subverts, the very concepts it challenges" (3). Based on this core idea Hutcheon propounds that postmodernism is not a total or transcendent rejection of the past, nor is it an uncritical acceptance of the present – postmodernism is a provisional,

contingent, complex, and even playful way of viewing past and present from a wholly immanent position. Hutcheon argues:

Postmodernism is fundamentally contradictory enterprise: its art forms (and its theory) at once use and abuse, install and then destabilize convention in parodic ways, self-consciously pointing both to their own inherent paradoxes and provisionally and, of course, to their critical or ironic re-reading of the art of the past. (*Poetics* 23)

The transcendental position – the notion that one can critique a system without at the same time being implicated in that system – has been overthrown and is no longer the most sophisticated way of understanding the world. Therefore, the only way in which one can critique the present order is from within its logic, to “use and abuse” the concepts that the present order offers.

Elaborating on what she considers postmodern is, Hutcheon relies profoundly upon literary texts as manifestations of postmodernity. According to Hutcheon, the study of postmodernism is directed at either literature, history, or theory and is narrative in all three. The most agreeable literary genre for this task is what she calls “historiographic metafiction” which includes novels that “are both intensely self-reflexive and yet paradoxically lay claim to historical events and personages” (5). For Hutcheon, “historiographic metafiction” both installs and subverts what it installs to problematize our notions of history and its truth-value. Historiographic metafiction, therefore, is the preeminent source for understanding postmodernism because it “incorporates all three of these domains. . . its theoretical self-awareness of history and fiction as human constructs. . . is made the grounds for its rethinking and reworking of the forms and contents of the past” (5). Some theorists (such as Fredric Jameson) have misinterpreted this focus on the past “as a negative. . . imprisoning of

the text in the past through pastiche” (11), but Hutcheon counters this criticism by characterizing the explicit revisiting of history as “liberating” in its challenging of “a definition of subjectivity and creativity that has for too long ignored the role of history in art and thought” (11).

Hutcheon stresses the double-codedness of postmodernism and its self-consciously contradictory nature to distinguish it from modernism. Postmodernism, she insists “takes the form of self-conscious, self-contradictory, self-undermining statement” (*Politics* 51). One of the most successful strategies to create a contradictory stance on any statement is the use of parody. The use of parody in literature is an old school thought but the term has all long been perceived as ridiculing imitation of a previous work of art. In her *Theory of Parody* (1985), Hutcheon had argued that the concept of parody needs to be freed from the constraint of the traditional definition. Parody, according to her, is a much profound literary concept than is ordinarily understood. She states, “the kind of parody I wish to focus is an integrated structural modelling process of revisiting, replaying, inventing and trans-contextualizing previous work of art (*Theory of Parody* 1985 p 11). She regards parody as an apt postmodern form because of its potential to critique the traditional humanist ideas about art and its relation to reality. Hutcheon alludes to the postmodern technique of parody as a means of incorporating the past into the present (118). She also discusses the use of intertextuality, as a means in which to “close the gap between past and present or the reader and a desire to rewrite the past in a new context” (118).

As it was mentioned above, differentiating it from traditional parody, the main aim of postmodern parody is not to mock the parodied author or style for its own sake, but this parody lacks the mocking and ridiculing aspect and by using irony it

emphasizes a difference between the past forms of art and sensibilities, a distance between the past and present. This critical aspect, in Hutcheon's view, manifests itself especially in the use of irony. It is often difficult to identify irony within parody in postmodern literary texts since they are often closely connected and in some cases even inseparable.

For Hutcheon postmodern parody is "both deconstructively critical and constructively creative, paradoxically making us aware of both the limits and the powers of representation – in any medium" (*Politics* 98). Hutcheon, however, further adds that "as a form of ironic representation, parody is doubly coded in political terms: it both legitimizes and subverts that which it parodies . . . Parody can be used as self-reflexive technique that points to art as art, but also art as inescapably bound to its aesthetic and even social part" (*Politics* 101). By referring to the older forms of art Hutcheon means – traditional and popular literary genres and styles such as detective fiction, love stories, pulp fiction, pornography, science fiction as well as traditional myths (ancient myths, religious books). By re-writing them and putting in mostly contemporary or unexpected contexts, postmodern parody does not simply refer to these works of art, authors and styles, or simply give a critique of them and this kind of linguistic representation, but is also creatively reconstructs them to show, often in ironic style, a difference between the past (traditional) and contemporary forms of art and sensibility. Hutcheon argues:

Postmodern parody does not disregard the context of the past representations it cites, but uses irony to acknowledge the fact that we are inevitably separated from the past today – by time and by the subsequent history of those representation. There is continuum, but



there is also ironic difference, difference induced by that very history.

(*Politics* 94)

Postmodern parody thus becomes self-reflexive because it draws readers' attention not only to the parodied works of art, but implicitly also to the whole process of depiction of reality through the literary works, that is a process of linguistic representation. By re-writing, transforming and changing the motifs and styles from the parodied literary works, postmodern parody gives an alternative vision of reality, history and a position of different social, ethnic and other minority groups which forms a playful and creative alternative to the official version of history or reality as depicted in traditional literary works or through traditional narrative techniques and styles. This alternative means of expression is not aimed to be an official alternative to real history, but a playful and artistic reconsideration and relativization of it. That is also the reason why postmodern authors often parody histories, religious books, biographies of authors, myths, works of traditional and popular literature (pulp fictions, detective novels, thrillers, crime fiction, pornography and horrors, etc.).

In addition to offering an alternative and creative reconsideration of history and reality, creation of an awareness of the process of representation, the postmodern parody also show a difference between the past and the present sensibility and can give a critique of various aspects of what is believed to be a typical aspect of some national identity. For Hutcheon the parodies text is not a target but a weapon, underscoring that the scope of parody is much broader than merely ridiculing some other works. While Hutcheon states that, "parody often called ironic quotation, pastiche, appropriation, or intertextuality – is usually considered central to postmodernism, both by its detractors and its defenders" (*Politics* 93), she departs from the prevailing interpretation that postmodern parody is ultimately value-free and

devoid of any critical potential. Hutcheon argues that “parody works to foreground the *politics* of representation” (*Politics* 94). She writes:

What I mean by “parody” is *not* the ridiculing imitation of the standard theories and definitions that are rooted in eighteen-century theories of wit. The collective weight of parodic *practice* suggests a redefinition of parody as a repetition with critical distance that allows ironic signalling of difference at the very heart of similarity. In historiographic metafiction, in film, in painting, in music and in architecture, this parody paradoxically enacts both change and cultural continuity.

(*Poetics* 26)

In a postmodern literary work, postmodern parody is closely connected with pastiche. Pastiche comes from the Italian word *pasticcio* which means mixture various ingredients. This implies a similarity with a postmodern literary work consisting of different styles, genres, narrative voices and devices each of which has its important role in the composition of the literary work. But the original meaning of pastiche as used in arts was rather derogatory. The artists referred to as *pasticheurs* were perceived as the authors uncreative and mechanically imitating other works of art, styles, or ways of writing. In postmodern literature and its interpretation, however, this term has rather positive meaning since the older works of art, styles and authors are first imitated but, at the same time, through the use of parody and irony further transformed, re-written and put in a different linguistic context and thus pastiche can be loosely called a blank parody as Frederic Jameson suggests. Although Jameson’s understanding of pastiche is close to Linda Hutcheon’s understanding of postmodern parody, he himself defines pastiche as a kind of parody. Postmodernism rejects strict definitions and especially in a postmodern but also other works of art it is difficult to

delineate strictly parody and pastiche since they often overlap and are rather inseparable in some cases.

Parody, pastiche, imitation and intertextuality are closely connected with irony. Irony is one of the important literary techniques, along with self-reflexivity, that is used to critique the rationalist historical view. This is what Hutcheon calls a “perfect postmodern form” because “it paradoxically both incorporates and challenges that which it parodies” (*Poetics* 11). Irony does not necessarily manifest itself on the verbal level, but also on the level of text as a whole, in the juxtaposition of different styles creating an ironic effect.

Hutcheon notes in her essay “Theorizing the Postmodern: Toward a Poetics” that postmodern work is “not a nostalgic return; it is a critical revisiting, an ironic dialogue with the past of both art and society” (*Poetics* 4). Hutcheon suggests “critical revisiting and not nostalgia” and “ironic dialogue” are two important aspects of postmodernity that Fredrick Jameson is quick to label modern (*Postmodernism and Consumer Society* 4). Irony as an element of postmodernity contradicts Jameson’s view. Hutcheon perceives irony as the thread that holds postmodernity together because irony is a postmodern way of rethinking history through parodic references. She cites the film *Brazil* and its parody of *A Clockwork Orange*, *Star Wars*, and *Battleship Potemkin*, among others, as an example of a postmodern work that relies exclusively on parody (and not pastiche) for its success (*Poetics* 4). Jameson, on the other hand, fails to acknowledge Hutcheon’s “ironic rethinking” of history as parody because parody, for him, is “blank” (1963). Modern society has fragmented and privatized modern literature, a move that “foreshadows deeper and more general tendencies in social life as a whole” to the extent that postmodern society can no longer function (Jameson 1963). Parody for Hutcheon is what Jameson calls “pastiche

– the imitation of a peculiar or unique, idiosyncratic style, the wearing of a linguistics mask, speech in a dead language” (11).

Jameson suggests that what Hutcheon calls “historographic metafiction”—or self-reflexive and paradoxical texts that “lay claim to historical events and personages”—which is neither self-reflexive nor paradoxical, cannot exist in postmodernity since parody in the postmodern world desperately lacks irony (*Poetics* 4). Apparently he “insinuates that the on-going postmodern historiographic metafiction possibly suffers from false consciousness” (Pandey 84). Jameson believes postmodernism actually erases depth. He says “depth is replaced by surface or by multiple surfaces” (12). He faults postmodernism and maintains that postmodern artists rely on pastiche for survival. He launched attack on postmodern parody calling it “essentially depthless trivial kitsch” (Jameson from Hutcheon 24). Jameson argues that postmodernity has transformed the historical texture into a series of empty stylizations what he calls pastiche. For him parody in postmodern age has been surrogated by pastiche and irony has “trivialized historical representation” (Duvall 200). According to Jameson, pastiche is similar to parody (130), but without the latter’s “satirical impulse”, making it a neutral and dead alternative. For Jameson pastiche is “without parody’s ulterior motive, without the satirical impulse, without laughter, without that still latent that there exists something normal compared to which what is being imitated” (131). Pastiche marks an obsessive preoccupation with surface appearance, a stylish jumble characterize not only as “an expression of a consumer culture, but as normless or ‘blank’ form of parody” (Rose 28). Jameson paints a subverted picture of present, which he associates with loss of our connection to history. Postmodern irony for Jameson is a weak and relegated expression of historic situation and therefore lacks bite.

Hutcheon deviates from the theoretical understanding of irony as strictly substitutive, that is, a clearly defined logical opposition between the false literal meaning of what is said and the true tacit meaning of what is left unsaid. She argues that irony functions in a relational and additive way much as metaphor does, with a crucial distinction: where metaphor signifies and establishes connection through the construction of similarity, irony signifies and establishes connection through the construction of difference. The rejection of the literal meaning and substitution of an ironic (often opposite) meaning as well as ‘single disparity between said and unsaid, between sign and meaning limits the scope and impact of irony’ (*Edge* 59). The dialectical relationship and the diminutive space between the said and the unsaid creates a ‘third’ meaning, and it is this third meaning, which not simply the implied opposite of the false literal meaning, that is properly understood as the ironic meaning.

For the specific purpose of this research, no definition of irony is meaningful that does not deal with the intrinsic ethical messages and dig deeper into the link between the said and the unsaid. As Hutcheon pointed out: irony is not a simple “antiphrastic substitution of the unsaid (called the ‘ironic’ meaning) for its opposite, the said (called the ‘literal’ meaning) (11). Rather irony:

happens in the space between (including) the said and the unsaid; it needs both to happen. What I want to call the ‘ironic’ meaning is inclusive and relational: the said and the unsaid coexist for the interpreter, and each has no meaning in relation to the other because they literally ‘interact’ to create the real ‘ironic meaning. (*Edge* 12)

In medieval age irony was considered as a weapon for negating and was very little to do with the philosophical argument. It was in the eighteenth century literature

when irony was deployed as a rhetorical tool to affirm dominant power. The rhetorical tool was basically used by high-class people or dominant authority to undermine the people at the low stratum of the society. The noted authors of the time such as Jonathan Swift, Alexander Pope, and Daniel Defoe were distinguished ironists. However their use of irony, with a tinge of satire, was more didactic. The conventional function of irony was limited to what Bakhtin says, “the dogmatic and authoritarian cultures that are one-sidedly serious” (qtd. in Hutcheon’s *Edge* 26).

Hutcheon departs from the traditional characterization of irony. For her irony “functions in the service of a broad range of political positions, legitimating or undercutting a wide variety of interests, offering affective extremes of pleasure and pain, delight and irritation” (Hutcheon ‘The complex function of irony’ 231). The postmodern society comprises complex fabric of nuanced political interests. The advent of internet has made people from different walks of life and various racial, ethnic, gender, caste, creed and cultural background as well as political ideology aware of their right and position. With these complexities of social structure and increasing political consciousness, the meaning and function of irony have also become multifarious. In recent times irony has become a weapon for the marginalized group to challenge and fight against the dominant authorities. The weapon is being used to resist the authoritarian discourse and redefine the power balance. Beerendra Pandey argues that

the ironic undercutting of the typical protagonist makes the irony take on the political edge, thereby, enabling the marginalized to be heard by the centre, while at the same time maintaining the critical distance. Political irony deconstructs establishment discourse vis-à-vis the counter discourse offered by the marginalized. (84)

Hence the politics of irony reflects its oppositional and progressive function that problematizes the authority and builds alternative discourse to change the power relation.

Seen from the sociolinguistic lens, irony is a communicative act. The ironist as a speaker and the interpreter as a respondent participate in decoding and communicating irony. It should be stipulated that a postmodern view of irony, one that regards the concept as a political and communicative act, takes the position that there are valid reasons for discounting intentions of an author as an assurance of irony. Hutcheon's analysis of irony does not treat it in terms of poetics, criticism or philosophy, nor as a way of life, personal characteristics or mode of consciousness, but as a discursive political strategy that open power relations in communication. Hutcheon argues that the readers make sense of the irony as she writes:

To call something ironic is to frame or contextualize it in such a way that, in fact, an intentionalist statement has already been made – either by the ironist or by the interpreter (or by both). In other words, intentional/non-intentional may be a false distinction: all irony happens intentionally, whether the attribution be made by the encoder or the decoder. Interpretation is, in a sense, an intentional act on the part of the reader. (*Edge* 112-13)

Hutcheon's concept of irony therefore has a certain tinge of egalitarianism. Irony involves communities and the relationship between ironist and interpreter is dependent on mutual comprehension pertaining to historical and cultural framework "because irony happens in something called discourse, its semantic and syntactic dimensions cannot be considered separately from the social, historical and cultural aspects of its contexts of deployment and attribution"(*Edge* 17).

Satire and irony are often closely related, but there are important distinctions between the two. As a form of criticism, satire uses humor to accomplish its goals. One technique that a satirist uses is irony. Irony focuses on the discrepancies between what is said or seen and what is actually meant. Simply, satire and irony differ largely because one, satire, often uses the other, irony. Although satire and irony are arguably linked, they are not exclusive to each other. Irony occurs not just in satire but in dramatic and comedic art as well. Likewise, satire also uses many other rhetorical and comedic techniques, such as ridicule, to accomplish its goal. Satire is a form of comedic criticism. Although it sometimes uses seemingly harsh techniques, its aim is not cruelty but rather to point out faults in government, society, individuals or the human condition. Satire is an attempt to draw attention to these faults and therefore to encourage a change. Reflecting on the function of satirist Joseph Brooker writes:

If satirists expend their energies to make a corrosive laughter happen, perhaps they hope that their corroded foes will be replaced by a better order. The satirist seems to be on the side of change, of progress or at least of correction. (327)

It is on this basis that we can differentiate between irony and satire. Irony is for artists—if they can really achieve it. If they cannot it becomes self-pity which interests no one. On the other hand, satire is for social critics. We satirize those who have gained power over us, playfully ridiculing them until such time as we can regain power over them. Satire gives us pleasure because it is demeaning and humorous. But unlike satire, irony is wilful and forward-looking—which is to say, it is more political than aesthetic. Irony thus contains significant social reconstruction potential.

There is a tendency to include satire and parody into the greater category of irony. But we should note that not all the irony is satirical. In other words, the



function of irony is obviously more than use in a satire. While observing through the lens on which they operate one can notice that both satire and parody function on different levels than irony. Hence this creates a difference in their explication. Verbal irony is considered as a trope, making it different from parody, which is a genre. Satire differs from parody only with regard to the target. Parody mimics other literary texts with the intent to mock them, while satire exposes human vices and other foolish behaviour, and consequently subjects them to ridicule.

There are, as a result, three different competences needed for the decoding of each of irony, parody, and satire: linguistic competence for irony; knowledge of genre and literary convention for parody and ideological competence for satire. The successful communication of any of these three, according to Hutcheon, depends on a degree of institutional homogeneity within each of the competences. Hutcheon considers irony to be a communicative act between author and reader hence her focus is of course on both its production and reception. Irony can in fact be regarded as a template and for Hutcheon “irony has often been the rhetorical vehicle of satire” (*Politics* 114). By using irony an author can create a satire. Irony can thus achieve its sharp edge from its inherent satire. Irony usually implies the use of satire for censorious or critical purposes and is often directed at public figures or institutions, conventional behavior, political situations, and the like. Irony often emphasizes the weakness more than the weak person and usually implies moral judgment and corrective purpose. Constructive satire thus becomes the essential feature of irony, indirectly presenting a contradiction between an action or expression and the context in which it occurs.

The most distinctive aspects of postmodern literature are clearly irony, black humour, and playfulness. In irony emphasis is placed on the opposition between the

literal and intended meaning of a statement. Ironic literature exploits, in addition to the rhetorical figure, such devices as character development, situation, and plot to stress the paradoxical nature of reality or the contrast between an ideal and actual condition, set of circumstances, and so on frequently in such a way as to stress the absurdity present in the contradiction between substance and form. That is to say, many postmodern works attempt to treat serious subjects in a playful and humorous way often with the purpose of attacking something and making the audience aware of which the person behind strongly disapproves.

Irony as a mode of literary expression occurs in postmodern fiction, for instance, in the form of silly wordplays within a serious context. Sometimes authors also play with the ambiguity between the audience's expectations and what actually happens. Irony, playfulness, parody and pastiche are thus often used along with metafictional elements in order to draw attention to ambiguity and bring to light the possibility of various interpretations. The concept of 'play' is closely related to the ambiguous character of irony. As a result of the playful nature, postmodern irony has been blamed for being unserious and ineffective. Despite being criticized as impotent irony always has what Hutcheon calls an "edge" and "it sometimes has sting" (M. Gutwirth qtd. in Hutcheon's *Edge* 14). The edge, which irony gets from its inherent satiric tinge, can be traced between the said and unsaid. Illustrating the edge Hutcheon writes:

Unlike metaphor or metonymy, irony has an edge; unlike incongruity or juxtaposition, irony can put people on edge; unlike paradox, irony is decidedly edgy. While it may come into being through the semantic playing off of the stated against the unstated, irony is a "weighted"

mode of discourse in the sense that it is asymmetrical, unbalanced in favour of the silent and the unsaid. (*Edge* 35)

Deployment of irony is not just limited to derision; it also has remedial function. Ironic tools are used by writers as a technique to critique what the establishment intends not to be revealed. By uncovering the ironic undertone it appeals the readers to consider its curative potency. Hutcheon remarks:

Arguably all irony can have a corrective function (Muecke 1970/1982: 4), but since satire is, by most definitions, ameliorative in intent (Highet 1962: 56), it is satire in particular that frequently turns to irony as a means of ridiculing—and implicitly correcting—the vices and follies of humankind. There is, however, a very wide tonal range possible within this corrective function, from the playfully teasing to the scornful and disdainful. (*Edge* 50)

To sum up, the satirical potency of the irony employed in the postmodern literature is rooted in its remedial function. “Irony can be used as weapon” (*Edge* 9) says Hutcheon so it naturally has the “cutting” edge. Tinted with irony the postmodern fictions reflect the irony’s defining and political edge. Although the edge is abrasive, it provokes emotional response and eventually constructs leverage for social reconstruction. Hutcheon’s works, therefore, directly touches upon the central concerns of this study. Hutcheon’s works, from which this dissertation derives important methodological insights, is a seminal study on postmodern irony.

## Chapter III

### Martin Amis as a Postmodern Novelist

*It is a cliché by now to say that we live in a postmodern world, and indeed “postmodern” has become one of the most used, and abused, words in the language. Who has not heard the phrase “that’s postmodern” applied to some occurrence in everyday life? And doubtless replied with a knowing look, smile or laugh. Yet it is striking that few people can say with any sense of assurance what the term “postmodern” actually means or involves. (vii)*

Stuart Sim<sup>2</sup>

To begin with, as the aforementioned citation suggests there is little consensus on the subject of what postmodernity really is. In general, the complex and wide-ranging term “postmodern” has been applied to a broad variety of recent or rather contemporary phenomena across the world. Postmodernity is “inextricably related” to the expression postmodernism. (Hutcheon *Politics* 26) Scholars sometimes even use these terms in interchangeable ways. Both have been applied to various disciplines and allude to various aspects of contemporary culture, economics and society that are the result of the unique characteristics of the late 20<sup>th</sup> and early 21<sup>st</sup> century life.

Postmodernity and postmodernism are tricky to characterize and differentiate from each other. They have been applied to various areas and thus mean something slightly different to different disciplines. Exact meaning of postmodern is highly debated even among postmodernists themselves. This indicates a major characteristic of postmodern critical thinking i.e. the belief that there are no universal truths. Thus,

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<sup>2</sup> Sim, Stuart, ed. *The Routledge Companion to Postmodernism*. London: Routledge, 2001.

any attempt to provide a precise or exhaustive definition of postmodernity or postmodernism would be against the nature of postmodern thought itself.

Postmodern literature can probably be best explained by regarding it as a “continuation or rather expansion of the experimentation launched by writers of the modernist period and, at the same time, as a reaction against Enlightenment values implicit in modernist literature” (Connor 117). Thus, while postmodern literature seems very much like modern fiction in some ways, it differs from its precursors in its attitudes towards a lot of trends.

As is typical of postmodern writers, they tend to reject realist traditions of the novel by flouting nearly all literary conventions; i.e. a deviation from former accepted rules of narration was detected. From a literary perspective, postmodern art rejects totality and instead favours fragmentation. This is often related to the idea that “no one can grasp what is going on in a society as a whole. [...] Rejecting totality, [...] postmodernists stress fragmentation – of language games, of time, of the human subject, of society itself” (Sarup 147). This tendency towards discontinuity can be realized in a variety of ways. For example, it is common for postmodern literature to employ a non-linear form of narrative and in doing so stressing the idea of temporal disorder, loss of chronology and erosion of any sense of time in general. Linear narrative is one of the structural conventions of the realist novel. It is based on the assumption that events occur one after the other in a logical order and that each event has some causal relationship with the events that precede and follow it. “Postmodern narrative techniques have often upset this framework by using non-linear structures, thus problematizing the logical relationship between events that you might expect to find in the realist mode” (Bentley 209).

Another identifiable aspect of postmodern fiction rejecting the idea of totality is the employment of unreliable narrators. The employment of a questionable narrator allows a strategic unfolding of the story insofar as our responses as readers are being manipulated all the time and we are often left with the choice of either believing everything the narrator is telling us or doubting everything. The fact that narrators are no longer trustworthy also stresses the idea that there is no such thing as one true version of what is going on. Hence, “the use of fragmentation as a literary device celebrates postmodernity due to its highlighting of confusion and chaos instead of order and harmony” (Gregson 41).

Since postmodernity desires to remain open to interpretation and several styles co-exist, there is no such thing as the prototypical postmodern novel. Nevertheless, despite the complexity and multiplicity of forms and subject matter, it is still viable to determine distinctive themes and techniques typically employed within this new era of literary production. In an attempt to explore Martin Amis’s novels this section of the thesis will focus on the postmodern tenets which are reflected in his select novels.

Martin Amis has been often portrayed as an author of postmodern novels. James Diedrick asserts “Amis is self-consciously postmodern writer, and every novel he has written is at one level a critique and modification of the subgenres it participates in” (13). Postmodernism is a term or set of ideas which emerged as a widely-recognized area of academic study in the mid-1980s. Some of the key traits the postmodernist fiction, as elucidate by Barry Lewis, include:

temporal disorder; the erosion of the sense of time; a pervasive and pointless use of pastiche; a foregrounding of words as fragmenting materials signs; the loose association of ideas; paranoia; and vicious

circles, or a loss of distinction between logically separate levels of discourse. (123)

The aforementioned features of the postmodern fiction are apparent as Amis's major underlying premises throughout his fictions.

Keeping in line with Amis's postmodern leanings much has been written. Some of these have concerned themselves to theorize about individual's relationship with society in a postmodern world. There are some illuminating references here and there dispersed within such works which show the way to study Martin Amis as a postmodern author. However we should note that "calling Amis's fiction postmodern involves far more than stylistic analysis, since his style is inseparable from, and embodies, his larger social outlook" (Diedrick 11). Generally speaking Amis tactfully employs tenets of postmodern condition in his novels.

Looking through the parameters which designate a fiction to be postmodern, Amis's characters reflect progressively more fluid, unstable nature of selfhood. He is fond of manipulating the narrative temporality as he did in *Time's Arrow*. The postmodern authors always have doubts about the wholeness and completion associated with traditional stories. They prefer to deal with other ways of structuring narrative. Same is true with Amis. His novels barely comprise reliable narrator. He tends to deploy first-person narrator who is part of the novel. In his celebrated novel *Money: A Suicide Note* Amis uses a distinctive feature of what Richard Todd calls "the intrusive author" (Todd 123). In *Money*, Amis places himself in the narrative as a character named "Martin Amis" and therefore blurs the boundaries between the author and his character. The fact that the author Martin Amis enters as a character into the narrative is undoubtedly the most noticeable metafictional element in *Money*.

In general, throughout the novel the reader is never to forget that they are reading a fictional text.

*Money* sets a key example of postmodern fiction. By presenting vulgar decadence and corruption as typical characteristics of the contemporary age the text critically reflects upon the greedy nature of Western capitalistic consumer society. In this way, *Money* brings to the reader's attention the horrifying and appalling state of the postmodern world where every ideology has been replaced by consumerism. To be more precise, *Money* deals with the inescapability of capitalism and satirically analyses its impact on human relationships and humanity in general. Furthermore, *Money* highlights the disappearing boundaries between high and low culture. It plays with the shifty nature of truth and reality, which is typical of postmodern literature, under the pervasive influence of mass media. Amis depicts a world where internal values have become secondary, i.e. social coldness prevails, where human beings indulge in a self-destructive lifestyle and are unable to distinguish between good and bad.

Similarly in *Money*, writes Jon Begley, "metafictional pattern emerges from the doubling of the narrative with Self's screenplay and its attendant problems with heroes, motivation, fights, and realism" (97). *Money's* John Self constantly bump into a writer called "Martin Amis" who has entered the story as a fellow character and assumes an ever-increasing importance in the novel. This intrusion of the author into the novel is seen "postmodern conceit to confuse the boundaries separating the author and his characters" (Strokes 303). Commenting on Amis's attempt to destabilize the authorial authority Elie A. Edmondson observes that "Amis employs the postmodern technique of involution, the inclusion of the author as a character within the text, as a method of distancing the reader and as tacit admission of the author's lack of control



over himself” (149). An additional point put forward by *Money*, is the emblematic postmodern notion of a fragmented self and unstable identity.

Commenting on Amis’s satirical notion Gavin Keulks opines that “even today, when Martin’s artistic reputation and significance are well established, one can hear echoes of this misperception in profiles or reviews that criticizes Martin’s satire for registering the dark underbelly of the postmodern condition” (150). Arguing that John Self, protagonist of *Money*, is Postmodern man Elie A. Edmondson affirms that “Martin Amis, in both the style and plot of *Money*, demonstrates that postmodern man is delusional if he invests himself in such a teleological world view” (148).

In *London Fields* Amis explores the ambiguous position that the narrator of postmodern fiction is attached to. The ambiguity arises from Amis’s attempt to inscribe himself in his narrative. The narrator of *London Fields* dies; so does Nicola Six, the (anti)heroine, who controls how the events unfold in the novel, and the third author figure in the text is a shadowy character, whose initials, M. A., invite identification with author Martin Amis. One by one the readers go through the narrative layers and point to the ambiguous effect obtained from exterminating a narrative voice. While such a maneuver suggests a relativisation of the author’s power, it also leads inevitably to the next and higher level of narrative authority.

Observing *London Fields* from authorial authority Peter Stokes comments:

In this way *London Fields* carries on the works begun by Amis in *Money* of problematizing the authority and fixity of the author figure.

In both novels Amis values that problematization positively – and thus, by transfiguring the author as a composite, the text is offered other means of finding its way into circulation, of being disseminated. The novel functions as a critique of the easy equation between personal

catastrophe and global catastrophe, between and apocalyptic mood and an apocalyptic catastrophe, between discursive agent and discourse as an agent. (310)

The setting of *London Fields* reflects the end of the twentieth century where Amis is able to explicitly pick characters and issues related to underlying tenets of contemporary life. As postmodern notion advocates the idea that world lacks any meaning so does Amis believes that the world lacks order including the names of the people fall short of represent them. The leading character in *London Fields* Nicola, a voluptuous lady, bears the implausible last name 'Six'. The fellow characters in the novel mishear her surname as 'sex'. However, the narrator informs the reader that the correct pronunciation of her name is 'seeks'. Nicola's name is an apposite signifier for a woman who is engaged in a search of a man who will kill her. She decides to end her life rather than enter middle age knowing that love is dead for her – and soon for everyone else.

In order to explore the strategies and implication of metafiction mode of writing in selected works of Amis, Dermot McCarthy comments, “the metafictional horror in *Time's Arrow* is the narrative equivalent of the visual conundrum of an Escher drawing, in which foreground-background distinctions are impossible to fix: the past seems to emerge from the present, the present to move into the past. There is no escape from history because it is always about to happen” (310). In *Time's Arrow* Amis experiments with a narratorial reversal of the scientific view of the direction of time to effectively portray a man's life lived in reverse. Amis creates difficult relationships with the past and future for his characters, leaving them to fend for themselves in the present, as well as to conclude that the present is all there really is. There are sometimes only the clues of the present to help characters relate to their

worlds with regards to memory and action, as Amis often creates for his characters incidents with violence, drugs or money that affect the way they relate to the duration of their own lives.

The narrator of *Time's Arrow* is initially as confused as the reader in trying to interpret the action of the novel. After his initial observational period he begins to ask questions, drawing on an innate grasp of common sense regarding cause and effect and the natural order of things. For example, he exclaims: "Wait a minute. Why am I walking backward into the house? Wait. Is it dusk coming, or is it dawn? What is the what is the sequence of the journey I'm on? What are its rules? Why are the birds singing so strangely? Where am I heading?" (*Times Arrow* 6). Both the narrator and the reader must seek to orient themselves in time as it is initially difficult to understand what seems to be a nonsensical way of carrying on with everyday activities. Brian Finney observes, "Paralleling Lyotard's description of the postmodern within the modern, *Time's Arrow* "searches for new presentations, not in order to enjoy them, but in order to impart a stronger sense of the unrepresentable" (107). In *Times Arrow* Amis has employed his full craftsmanship to blend postmodern use of narrative defamiliarization with his recent perseverance on the need for moral vision.

For Brian Crews Amis is a "satirist at heart and his works enclose a significant amount of references to the noted satirical writer Henry Fielding (658)". The reason for Amis's deliberate choice for flattening his characters - for which he is often criticized - is reflected in Fielding's vice: "in caricature we allow all licenses. Its aim is to exhibit monsters, not men; and all distortions and exaggerations whatever are within its proper province. In the fictions of Amis, where the grotesque parody has become the established norm, caricatures are a necessary good" (658).

Nick Bentley in *Contemporary British Fiction* discusses different issues related to modern and postmodern era like narrative forms, contemporary ethnicities, gender and sexuality, history, memory and writing. In chapter one, when he discusses narrative forms, he focuses on postmodernism and realism. Then he mentions Amis' *London Fields* as an example. He describes various techniques of narration and metafiction used in the novel. Sometimes things do not make sense at all in Amis's fictional world. One of key aims in Amis's fiction is to depict the meaninglessness of life. The basic concepts of existence such as money, time, social success, identity, sexual success are made up by his narrators who are more often not reliable. As was demonstrated, Amis employs broad variety techniques that can be identified as characteristically postmodern. Taking all this into consideration and keeping in mind that postmodern fiction favours ambiguity, irony, playfulness, parody and pastiche it might therefore make most sense to conclude that Martin Amis is a postmodern novelist. On the basis of the postmodern tenets inherent in Amis's fiction the next chapter will diagnose the intrinsic irony in Amis's fictional world.

## Chapter IV

### Edge of Amis's Postmodern Irony in *Money: A Suicide Note*, *Time's Arrow* and *London Fields*

*True, novelists don't normally write about what's going on; they write about what's not going on. Yet the worlds so created aspire to pattern and shape and moral point. A novel is a rational undertaking; it is reason at play, perhaps, but it is still reason. (13)*

Martin Amis<sup>3</sup>

Martin Amis is a postmodern writer who engages himself with the depiction of contemporary society and with what Fredrick Jameson defines 'the cultural logic of late capitalism'. Amis's novel requires its reader to be an active co-creator of meaning rather than a passive booklover. While reading the text, the readers have to simultaneously interpret it. Amis is largely seen as a stylist and a satirist. His novels are often more appreciated for the use of language and narrative style than for their themes. However, he has ascended to become one of the most powerful voices of contemporary British fiction. In the three novels under analysis here Amis has employs his artistic writing skills to expose the nonsensicality of contemporary life while navigating the readers to contemplate the humanist values. As discussed in the Chapter 1, in order to discern the irony in Amis's fiction we should be aware of the context and socio-political exchange as well as authorial intention and utterances that subvert the literal meanings.

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<sup>3</sup> Amis, Martin, "The Second Plane". September 11: 2001-2007, London: Jonathan Cape, 2008.

### **Money: A Suicide Note**

Amis's highly praised 1984 novel *Money: A Suicide Note* portrays twentieth century decadence. In the novel he links what Robert Martinez II calls "sexual debasement with late capitalism" (37). Amis places himself in the narrative of the novel as a character named "Martin Amis". The protagonist and the narrator of the novel John Self is a director of television advertisements who lives a life of vulgar excess. He is "200 pounds of yob genes, booze, snout and fast food", driven by desires: for the fast food, the booze, the snout for pornography" (31-32). Self's hobbies are "pornographic in tendency" (67). The term pornography in *Money* does not just mean erotic materials rather it has been used in its broader sense i.e. materialistic desire leading to Self's degeneracy. Amis characterizes John Self as an emblematic embodiment of the capitalistic systems of England and America in the late twentieth century where mass consumerism, materialism and pornography chained John Self in sexual, spiritual and intellectual poverty.

Self frequently travels between London and New York to produce his debut feature film. The film, loosely autobiographical drama, initially has a working title 'Good Money'. During his travels he extensively organizes consultative meetings with his producer, actors, cab drivers and hotel clerks, his girlfriend Selina Street, and his father Barry, owner of the Shakespeare pub. In London, Self meets with the writer named 'Martin Amis', whom he persuades to rewrite his movie script. In New York he meets Martina Twain, who persuades him to read a book. Assured by his American producer and 'moneymen', Fielding Goodney, that his film project is backed by generous investors, Self starts spending large portions of his pre-production budget engaging in his many personal vices: "fast food, sex shows, space games, slot machines, video nasties, nude mags, drink, pubs, fighting, television, handjobs"

(*Money* 19, 67). His extravagance is coupled with the demands of his quarrelsome cast members, the inconstancy of his jealous and unfaithful girlfriend, Selina, and a series of bizarre and disturbing anonymous telephone calls. Owing to his freak lifestyle he suffers the indignities. After undergoing numerous difficulties and disasters, his film ‘Good Money’ ultimately turns into ‘Bad Money’. Ultimately Self emerges as a combination of great success – money is drawn to him – and a terrible failure and humiliation.

Money is everything to John Self. All of his relationships are determined by money. He sees no point in ‘friends’, pays his girlfriend to have sex, and his every other human interaction deals with a payment – a characteristic possibly inherited from his father, who invoices Self “for all the money he had spent on my upbringing” (*Money* 178). As Self says, ‘Money is always involved’ (*Money* 19); but what is more, his narrative implies that ‘good money’ and ‘bad money’ are now interchangeable (*Money* 106). The title of Self’s movie shifts between these two titles, ‘good money’ and ‘bad money’, such that the novel itself can get rid of any adjectives, because, as in economic theory, bad money drives out good. Self at one point says: “Me, I couldn’t even blame money. What is this state, seeing the difference between good and bad and choosing bad – or consenting to bad, okaying bad?” (*Money* 26). Amis portrays Self’s persona as “an addict of the twentieth century” (*Money* 91). One of the significances of this addiction is that it indicates to Self’s downfall. His producer, and nemesis, Goodney explains this to him: “Always endeavour, Slick, to keep an eye on the addiction industries: you can’t lose. The addicts can’t win. Dope, liquor, gambling, anything video – these have to be the deep money-veins” (*Money* 93). In an interview, Amis says “it is a state of corruption, moral unease without moral energy” (Haffenden 14). To some degree, Self knows

better, and yet he continues 'choosing bad'; he is split, watching himself, helplessly witnessing his own choices which leads him to the trail of prosperity to poverty, resulting in his fall from the organic state of innocence. For example, there is a recurrent reference to George Orwell's novels *Animal Farm* and *Nineteen Eighty-Four* which give new dimension to *Money*. While reading *Nineteen Eighty-Four* Self pleurably finds that the world in which Orwell's story is set seems to him "like [his] kind of town" (205). Ironically Self fails to recognize that he already lives in a version of Airstrip One and that he is not one of the persecutors, but a victim.

The names of the characters (John Self, Selina Street, Martina Twain, Fielding Goodney) in *Money* are heavily loaded with meanings. The surname of the protagonist John Self's indicates that the character might be in some respects a portrait of the artist. But more importantly it suggests the thrust towards individualism that characterizes the twentieth century from the lens of Freud's ego theory, highlighting the increasingly intense popular cults of celebrity and fame as well as the commercial greed of the 1980s. This is therefore taken to be especially true of John Self, a British-American whose narration is as candid as it is unreliable: his improbable monologue apparently takes place in the present as he even manages to tell his story while having sex (*Money* 275). His vices are all carnal indulgences: food, sex, intoxication, sleep, violence. All his desires turn against him. Early in the novel, for example, Self is shaken by the discovery that a prostitute he has picked up is visibly pregnant. He scolds her but he also feels affinity with her: "She was like me, myself. She knew she shouldn't do it, she knew she shouldn't go on doing it. But she went on doing it anyway" (*Money* 26). His manhood is being satirized.

For many readers John Self does have a human side that evokes sympathy, especially as he turns out to be only a ridiculous villain: the unaware victim of others,



from Goodney to 'Martin Amis'. When one of his ageing stars wants reassurance 'about the nature of his role' as well as his youthfulness, athleticism, and general popularity, Self thinks: "Me too, pal. Lorne, I sympathize" (*Money* 182). A couple of pages later Self reflects pathetically on his ignorance:

Oh Christ, the exhaustion of not knowing anything. It's so tiring and hard on the nerves. It really takes it out of you, not knowing anything. You're given comedy and miss all the jokes. Every hour, you get weaker. Sometimes as I sit alone in my flat in London and stare at the window, I think how dismal it is, how hard, how heavy, to watch the rain and not know why it falls. (*Money* 184)

Self is ruined financially and socially coupled with love lost. He is rejected by Selina and abhorred by the man he believed was his father. Even his attempt at suicide fails. For him now "money stinks" (*Money* 359). Though he fails to prevent himself from the self-destructive lifestyle he has chosen, Self does at least imagine another possibility: "Perhaps there are other bits of my life that would take on content, take on shadow, if only I read more and thought less about money" (*Money*, 223). This is where underlies Amis's efforts to edify the readers mind with a message of social reconstruction. Despite the despondent portrayal of John Self's character Amis emphasizes more on moral improvement and on eschewing money-culture. Using irony as a tool Amis deplores the vices of contemporary life. The readers are given little scope to explore the moral construction but the underlying message makes the reader feel the satirical impulse. James J. Miracky writes:

The final pages of the text suggest the moral growth has occurred, as John appears contrite and willing to give up fighting, infidelity, and the pursuit of money. Martin Amis himself describes the conclusion in an

optimistic fashion: “John self [...] ends up and tramp, and yet I feel that it’s my first happy ending”. (Haffenden 14) (Miracky 142)

In an anticipated denouement John Self gets to a moral comeuppance. James Diedrick makes a similar claim when he writes that Self is not “merely [...] a monster of wretched excess. He is so fully, triumphantly realized that most readers will warm to him in spite of themselves” (74). The readers feel sympathetic to Self because of his continuous failure to articulate his pathetic dividedness between his thoughts and deeds. He feels his split intensely, at one point describing ‘four distinct voices in his head: “money, pornography, ageing and weather” and a nagging, unlabelled voice that “has to do with quitting work and needing to think about things I never used to think about” (*Money* 107-108). He seems to be a man trapped between his voices, left helpless by his habits, his weak will, and his overpowering desires. The divided Self swings between “the conflict of his three passions: his physical lust for Selena Street, a professional call girl and would-be porn star; his emotional attraction to Martina Twain, an upper-class woman who tries to educate John in high culture; and his love of Self, fueled by numerous additions” (Miracky 138).

The subtitle of the novel is *A Suicide Note*. It can be taken to describe John Self’s entire narrative or simply to refer to his suicide message at the close of the novel. The ‘suicide note’ may also be read as Amis the author’s as much as Self the narrator’s, and this interpretation is sharpened by the fact that Self’s closing suicide note is addressed to someone of the same name as Amis’s then-wife, Antonia (*Money* 380). However, as with everything else in the novel, the first reference is to money, specifically to banknotes: “Dollar bills, pound notes, they’re suicide notes. Money is a suicide note” (*Money* 116). The suicide illustrated in the novel is therefore primarily that of a society overwhelmed by a money-culture. Amis recognizes the societal

decadence and sickness of the late twentieth century but at the same time he sees every possibility of repair and healing. At times Amis's narrative reflect his cynical vision of the world but the underlying meaning suggests that he digs in his claws deeply to expose the debauchery and its adverse impact in an ironic smile. Amis's masterpiece *Money*'s lasting values lies in its satirical corrective irony. His satirical intent resonates what Hutcheon calls "corrective element". As demonstrated in *Money* Amis portrays a grim picture of contemporary life with a pinch of satirical irony but his irony is no doubt edifying.

### **Time's Arrow**

Amis's apocalyptic anxiety is at the core of *Time's Arrow: or the Nature of the Offence*. It is a story of its main character Tod T. Friendly, a Nazi doctor, whose own life rewinds before his eyes. *Time's Arrow* allows the text to silently suggest the horrors of the Holocaust by explicitly stating its opposite. This is where Amis deploys irony. Understanding irony in *Time's Arrow* involves understanding just the opposite of what Amis intends to communicate. The horrors of the past, in a reversal narrative mode, presented in such a way that a Nazi doctor helps patients with medical treatment instead of experimenting medical killing.

The novel begins with Tod at his deathbed in America; returns to wartime work in Auschwitz and finally move towards his birth in Germany. Amis "presents a text where the protagonist's life is moving backward and all logic and normative reality is reversed" (Harris 489). The novel portrays the steps of Tod's life backwards, tragically unfolding his involvement in the terror of Auschwitz, where he worked in the medical section during the Second World War and from which he fled to America. Amis asks the readers to understand the inverted narrative of the novel

and its backward process. He invites us to take part in the narrator's reconstruction of the protagonist Tod's past.

The narrator, describing himself like a 'passenger' or a 'parasite', is not Tod himself but his double, probably his consciousness. It witnesses Tod's activities but has no power to influence his decisions. It remembers Tod's future and has only quick look in dreams of his past, because, after the war, the Nazi doctor attempted in many ways to erase his past. For his double experiencing his life backwards, it is tricky to reconstruct it because Tod moves from one country to another and assumes different names and identity, desperately trying not to be recognised. Ultimately, he wishes to die in anonymity, but Amis does not allow it. Hence to revisit the past at the moment of Tod's death, his "ghost conscience" (Harris 489) comes into existence in order to relive all his life in reverse i.e. from America to Europe, from old age to childhood, from death to birth. All through the narration it makes the readers witnesses. Amis maintains his objectivity as he makes the narrator ask all the questions on readers' behalf thus he tactfully "uses ironic detachment by narrating the history through the conscience of Odilo Unverdorben, with the effect that the facts and figures of Auschwitz are felt as well as known" (Vice 34).

The multiple names assumed by the protagonist are loaded with meaning. The doctor of torture has multiple names. He is born as 'Odilo Unverdorben' (the surname is a German word meaning innocent) in Germany. Ironically the innocent German turns into a cruel doctor. While residing in Portugal he becomes 'Hamilton de Souza'. He is 'John Young' in New York City and finally 'Tod Friendly' on his final days in New England. The last assumed name in the doctor's life is noteworthy. 'Tod' is a German word for death and when we read even the name in reverse it sounds like 'friendly death'. As his name suggests the Nazi doctor gives death instead of curing

and healing in the inverted world of *Time's Arrow*. But given the inverted plot Sue Vice suggests that “it presents altruistic Holocaust and it is the main purpose of the text’s irony” and she further argues “viewed backwards, doctors destroy, but doctors at Auschwitz create” (Vice 14).

In *Time's Arrow* the future is the past. Everything moves backward in the novel but when we reframe the Nazi doctor’s life in a chronological order the storyline starts with Odilo Unverdorben birth in 1961 in Germany. After completion of his studies in medicine he works at Scholos Hartheim where Nazi doctors experiments with various means of medical killing. He married a young secretary Herta but later separates because he remains fully devoted to his work. In 1942 he moves to Auschwitz where he works under uncle Pepi who kills inmates with injections. By 1944, Odilo assisted the mass slaughters, killing at “incredible rate, something like ten thousand a day.” After escaping from the Russians who liberated the camp, he flew to escape prosecution to Portugal in 1946, and finally to America in 1948. He worked for more than ten years as a surgeon in a New York hospital, and then was compelled to flee New York and change identity because of the accusations against him. He eventually worked at a health organization in an American suburb somewhere in New England, where he died from a car accident, old and contrite.

While dealing with the horrors of the Holocaust employing a reverse narrative *Time's Arrow* gives a remarkable example of a subtle irony. The narrator does not know history and thus fails to understand the irony of the replay of Tod’s life. His experience coincides with what he himself calls ‘a terrible journey, towards a terrible secret’ (*Time's Arrow* 12). He wonders what the sequence of his journey is and what its rules are; at some point, he realizes that chronology is reversed:

It goes like this. After October 2, you get October 1. After October 1, you get September 30. How do you figure that? [...] It just seems to me that the film is running backwards. (*Time's Arrow* 16)

Commenting on the different narrative treatment Dermot McCarthy writes, “A narrator in Amis’s *Einstein’s Monsters* describes the 20<sup>th</sup> century as the age when irony really came into its own and *Time’s Arrow* is an ironic tour-de-force if ever there was one” (294-320).

*Time’s Arrow* is not set in the future, but still deals with the apocalypse, with the past years of the Second World War and the Holocaust. It “presents the Holocaust through a veil of irony” (McCarthy 313). Amis adopts a retrospective approach to face a violent and troubled history. He is puzzled about how to represent the evil of the Holocaust and opts for an escape from the past’s wrongdoing, an attempt at redemption, by depicting the Holocaust in reverse. James Diedrick defines the novel “a poetic undoing of the Holocaust, all the more poignant for the reader’s knowledge that it can never be undone” (134).

Amis’s notion of redemption tallies with an undoing, with a return to zero. He writes on the assumption that the horror of the Holocaust would be undone only if the course of history could be inverted. The sequence of past, present and future does not make any sense; there is no progress, so Amis presents it by turning it round. In *Time’s Arrow* “the normal present-to-future progression becomes the movement from present to past” (McCarthy 294). History inscribes itself in the novel at the level of form as much as of theme. The novel offers an exploration of both history and chronology; the past is reworked as fiction. The dimension of time is shattered, its continuity is broken: throughout the novel, time is running backwards. “Amis has said

of the narrative perspective he employs in *Time's Arrow*, it was that kind of double-edged effect that I wanted" (Quoted in Diedrick 18).

Nazi ideology is the satirical target of *Time's Arrow*. The novel suggests that Odilo lacks both moral thread and individuality: "I've come to the conclusion that Odilo Unverdorben, as a moral being, is absolutely unexceptional, liable to do what everybody else does, good or bad, with no limit, once under cover of numbers" (*Time's Arrow* 37). Amis has tactfully made use of language which "reinforces the moral stance of the narrative" (Finney 65). He uses irony to expose the Nazi doctors' killing business. In the following paragraph Amis employs euphemism to expose the nonsensical way of carrying on with everyday activities of Auschwitz horror:

The main Ovenroom is called *Heavenblock*, its main approach road *Heavenstreet*. Chamber and Sprinklerroom are known, most mordantly, as *the central hospital*. *Sommerfrische* is our name for a tour of duty here, in any season: "summer air," suggesting a perennial vacation from an inadequate reality. When we mean *never* we say *tomorrow morning*—it's like the Spanish saying *mañana*. (*Time's Arrow* 30)

The irony in *Time's Arrow* is perceptible in Amis's use of giving multiple names to the protagonist. Reading it from backwards the Nazi doctor completes his journey of life as an icon of death at the beginning finally turns into an innocent old man. Odilo Unverdorben, Amis's mouthpiece, demonstrates his innocence as he finally enters his mother's womb. Brien Finney writes:

Tod Friendly (amicable death) with its association with death becomes John Young (as Jack he is a Jack of all trades and younger). John transforms into the gold-rich Hamilton de Souza, who finally assumes his German birth name of Odilo Unverdorben. His last name means

‘un-depraved’ or ‘un-corrupt’ in German. Thus he moves from being figure of death to one of innocence. (65)

Amis has allotted only twenty pages of the novel to portray protagonist’s time as a doctor in Auschwitz. Rest of the novel represents the ramifications of what he did during those years and have far-reaching impact on the text. For the narrator Odilo is the “worst man in the worst place at the worst time” (*Time’s Arrow* 1). The protagonist’s secret is revealed in the second part of the novel, which is the only one to make sense in the reversed account of facts:

He is traveling toward his secret. Parasite or passenger, I am traveling there with him. It will be bad. It will be bad, and not intelligible. But I will know one thing about it (and at least the certainty brings comfort): I *will* know *how* bad the secret is. I will know the nature of the offense. Already I know this. I know that it is to do with trash and shit, and that it is wrong in time. (*Time’s Arrow* 16)

Although Tod Friendly has spent the war years as a doctor of torture at Auschwitz, the Auschwitz section opens with the narrator’s paradoxical words: “the world is going to start making sense...” (*Time’s Arrow* 28). The journey backwards into history offers us the opportunity to experience the crazy logic of an upside-down world, where temporality, rationality and causality do not exist. This kind of world ironically starts making sense only in the Auschwitz section (Chapter 5) of the book. The novel inverts the relationship between good and evil by presenting events the wrong way round. Therefore, in a fictional world where the arrow of time does not fly point-first, the distorted logic of the death camp is described as the only one to make sense. Throughout the novel, doctors mutilate and destroy people’s bodies, but at Auschwitz they heal and create them, performing apparent acts of recovery. The Nazi



doctor is not a mass murderer but a healer, who in the past had to be cruel to be kind now. Patients are brought back to life and health. Amis ironically presents the Holocaust as altruistic: “Our preternatural purpose? To dream a race. To make a people from the weather. From thunder and lightning. With gas, with electricity, with shit, with fire” (*Time’s Arrow* 29).

In an initial reading of the novel it seems that Amis is magnifying the horror of Holocaust but in-depth reading compels the reader to think that he is actually dispelling it through the subtle and indirect social criticism. In *Time’s Arrow*, “what Amis’s technique recovers is a *moral* sensation; his method defamiliarizes a specific moment in modern history for us – the Holocaust – and in the process of re-sensitizes us to the magnitude of human evil manifested in it” (McCarthy 297). The terrible mass murder of a race is expressed in triumphant terms as the creation of a people. The Holocaust is the most insensible episode of the twentieth century. Amis takes it at the centre of his investigation on how to represent the past and deal with history. “Time’s arrow moves the other way” (*Time’s Arrow* 22), because only in a completely upside-down, backward world, Auschwitz facts become comprehensible. Amis’s manipulation of the events enables us to face the intolerable, to grapple the unthinkable.

In *Time’s Arrow* humour arises from the reversed sequence of events, which forces the reader to juxtapose what is being narrated to what really went on. But humour is not what one would expect from a piece of literature about the Holocaust. The humour of *Time’s Arrow*, then, is a rather extreme kind of irony. The irony depends on the absence of authorial comment. A historically uninformed reader would be unable to understand the novel. There is subdued moralizing in the novel and the author heavily relies on the readers ethic background.

Despite the cold attitude of the author, some passages are clearly aiming at compassion. In the episode where a group of thirty Jews in hiding is found by a group of Nazis led by the narrator (*Time's Arrow* 150), the details are arranged to appeal to the reader's emotions. The narrator personally replaces a panel of the wall behind which the Jews are hiding "with a softly spoken 'Guten Tag'" (*Time's Arrow* 150). Although it relies on the somewhat unnatural relation between the narrator and the protagonist, the effect of having the narrator so sadistically hand over the Jews to death is rather strong. There is no empathy involved on the part of the doctor. His diagnosis is nothing to do with compassion in a situation where a layman takes it for granted. The appeal to the reader's emotions is all the greater. Compassion and humour are not usually compatible. But Amis has yoked them together to provoke irony.

As noted above the narrator of the *Time's Arrow* hears reversed speech and conversations begin with the last uttered words and end with the first ones. His descriptions of eating, drinking, love-making are in reverse. His upside down account and perspective allow the writer to include horrific events, and to come to terms with misery. Amis's narrative technique is a way to expose absurdity and irrationality of the Holocaust, of a place where "there is no why, no when, now how, no where" (*Time's Arrow* 29). But at the same time it also implies the danger of ignoring, abandoning, or forgetting history. Far from being a playful parody of history, *Time's Arrow* aims at conveying a moral message. Amis attempts to make sense of a world that does not make any, conveying the message that the only way to 'comprehend' the Holocaust is by looking at it backwards. However, "Amis does not offer a totalizing panacea in place of the disasters of the past: instead he deconstructs such master narratives so as to reinforce our capacity to confront the modern world tainted by

contingency, irrationality and instability” (Finney 66). The novel deals with the theme of responsibility and the need for moral vision. Confronting the horror of the past, Amis claims his need as a writer for morals. It is indeed a challenge to deal with the Holocaust without risking to glorifying it. Therefore, he rejects a realistic representation of historical events - his postmodern solution is to revisit the past with bitter irony, using an unreliable narrator and employing the inverted narrative technique. Remembering Hutcheon’s statement that “postmodern is a particularly didactic art” and satire has “corrective elements” (Hutcheon 46) Amis intends to get moral message across to the world that repetition of the past atrocities and horrors can have apocalyptic impact on the modern civilization.

### **London Fields**

*London Fields* reflects Martin Amis’s postmodern ethical impulse whereby he persuades the readers to consider the liability people have over whom they have power. In the futuristic novel Amis obliges the readers to dwell on how the human civilization is on the brink of apocalypse caused by nuclear rivalry. Commenting on Amis’s sanguinity Nicolas Tredell writes, “. . . *London Fields*, for all its apocalyptic quality, finally implies, optimistically, that the future can be rewritten, that apocalypse can be avoided” (61). Amis draws round the whole story as the work of a novelist named Samson Young, who also serves as the narrator of the story. The readers observe as Sam constructs his love-and-murder triangle, but also as he negotiates with the publisher for an advance for *London Fields*. He portrays a picture of the literary life and at the same time grumbles about his rival author Mark Asprey. Sam is living in Asprey’s flat during the course of the novel. The letter at the end of the novel addressed to Mark shows that Sam has died by the time the novel ends and that he has bequeathed the novel to him. Amis has his surrogate author who steps into the

narrative, and mix with other key characters such as Keith Talent, Nicola Six and Guy Clinch. Hence it remains unknown that the content of what we are reading is really an account of Sam's firsthand experience or whether Mark has modified it to serve his ego. The power of narrative is thus removed at least one level from the narrator.

Another noteworthy point is Mark Asprey's initials are identical to Martin Amis, producing another narrative level to the novel. The 'Note' at the very beginning of the novel is signed by an 'M.A.', and naturally appears to be representing the real author Martin Amis. But as the narrative develops readers become suspicious whether these are Mark Asprey's initials. Later in the novel, Nicola, in her diaries, refers to an 'MA' which makes Sam to guess: "Nicola and MA? Nicola and Mark Asprey? I have to know" (*London Fields* 205). 'MA' remains a volatile signifier referring concurrently to Amis and Asprey, two levels of external author above Sam's narrative. Multiplicity of narrative voices in the novel indicate the existence of ironic traits i.e. one that says and one that means, triggering the rejection of the literal meaning.

*London Fields* is perhaps the most vivid example of how Amis employs humour to problematize reality and morality. Amis plays around the relationship between fiction and reality. The intrusive author is present from the very beginning of the novel. An unknown voice opens the narrative with the assertion "This is a true story . . . It's a murder story too", but in fact, there is no 'mystery' as such to be solved. The readers later come to know that narrator Sam is commenting on the real life situation in which he finds himself providing ideal material for a novel. All through the novel Amis remains occupied on the intrinsic ironic impulse linked to the opening expression 'a true story'. The 'true' signals that the narrator is going to

present an exact reflection of real life whereas ‘story’ suggests that something artifice and the author will keep control of the plot.

The author has pre-arranged the plot of the story (‘It hasn’t happened yet but it will’) hence it is destined to happen accordingly, as Samson Yong explains on the very first page:

I know the murderer, I know the murdere. I know the time. In know the place. I know the motive (her motive) and I know the means. I know who will be the foil, the fool, the poor foal, also utterly destroyed. And I couldn’t stop them, I don’t think, even if I wanted to. The girl will die. It’s what she always wanted. You can’t stop people, once they start creating. (*London Fields* 1)

The characters of the novel are reduced to the convention that the narrative places upon them. The narrator has imposed character types such as ‘the murderer’, ‘the murdere’, ‘the foil’ on individual people. They are designed to exist the way the narrative requires them to. The narrator explain this power-structure when he introduces *London Fields*’ most colourful character, Keith Talent, the thug “to be fair, it must be said that murder was not in his mind, not yet, except perhaps in some ghostly potentia that precedes all thought and action . . . Character is destiny” (*London Fields* 7). Evidently the narrator is anything but “fair” here; he knows that murder is in fact “in his [Keith’s] mind” because he is the one that put it there. Additionally he knows that the “potentia” that intended this character’s identity (his destiny: “Character is destiny”) comes from him, from the author, and from the demands of the narrative. As a matter of fact, Keith is the token thug, or rather, the caricature of the token thug. His favourite passions, for example, are darts (he dreams of being a professional dartsman), television – “television was all about everything he

did not have and full of all the people he did not know and could never be” (*London Fields* 8) – and , most of all, cheating people: “Keith worked as a cheat. On good days he rose early and put in long hours, going out into the world, into society, with the intention of cheating it” (*London Fields* 6).

Interestingly all of this information is presented at the beginning of the novel, in an early chapter that introduces Keith Talent. The key function of such an introduction is to lay down a number of boundaries that not only define Keith but more importantly contain and confine him as a caricature. The confinement is evident in the chapter’s very title, “The Murderer” (*London Fields* 4). As a result, Keith Talent, like the rest of the characters, is self-consciously exploited as a character, as a construction within a construction, wholly subordinate to the author’s sadistic impulses as well as reflecting dominance of the narrator/author figure.

Despite all these Amis reverses the power relationship between the narrator and the characters. Noticeably few characters go out of the control of the narrator. The controlling power of the narrator is weakened and the events are seen to be playing themselves out without the work of manipulation of the narrator: “You can’t stop people, once they start creating” (*London Fields* 1). This is also true to the structure of the novel. The headings of the chapters are meant to signify the novel that Sam will eventually produce. He intermingles the reflections of his meetings with Keith, Nicola and Guy with the narrative of his novel. The first twelve of the twenty-four chapters are arranged in a blocks of three each related to Keith, Nicola and Guy respectively. From chapter thirteen onwards the interaction between these three key characters becomes more complicated. As a result structural and narrative pattern begin to disintegrate, clearly indicating that Sam is losing control of the narrative. This signifies Amis’s one of the most worrying thematic concern i.e. the late twentieth

century world is beginning to spiral out of control. He is referring to the world where the foundation of grand narratives of religion and ethics are gradually falling apart.

*London Fields* is set ten years after it was published, in 1999. Amis has situated the novel at the end of the twentieth century whereby he highlights the underlying elements of contemporary life that contribute to the collapse of the modern civilization. Here Amis's concerns are also linked with the threat of nuclear apocalypse. In *London Fields* he employs various references to the outburst of nuclear apocalypse. One can notice Nicola's imaginary childhood friend Enola Gay is named after the B-52 bomber which delivered the atom bomb to Hiroshima as well as Sam is suffering from a nameless disease which refers to radiation poisoning leaked from nuclear power station. Nicola "representative of self-destructive century, will her own death" (Tredell 50). As noted, Martin Amis problematizes reality. His "characters are grotesque caricatures, rarely realistic, and descriptions are vague and ambiguous" (Kerr 6). *London Fields* depicts number of stereotypes such as Keith as white, working class Londoner; Guy as English upper-middle-class gentleman; and Nicola represents misogynist view of women. The characters are exaggerated to the extent that they appear to be parodies of stereotypes. The parodies contain Amis's satirical impulse with ironic tinge.

Nicola Six, whose surname is misheard as 'sex', plays number of roles fine-tuned to reflect the sexual fantasy image each of the male character project on to her. She is "all things for all men" (Tredell 49). For Keith she plays the role of high-class porn star whereas for Guy she is the seductive virgin. Similarly she is the '*femme fatale*' (*London Fields* 260) for Samson. Nicola has been portrayed as a character with no fixed identity. She has number of masks with nothing behind those masks. At times she appears as the most powerful character of the novel but then her fluid

personality leaves her as “nothing, just a hole . . . dropped out of time and space” (*London Fields* 45). She is the mysterious murderess. Around her the fabrics of the narrative are woven. However ultimately she becomes the most obvious victim which signifies the paradox in terms of power. Nicola has been portrayed as a vulnerable female character who, like in the traditional detective novel, invites violence against her. This is another stereotype that Amis foregrounds to satirize. Thus Amis in *London Fields* also parodies the traditional detective novel while ironically satirizing traditional ways of constructing femininity and power balance. Brian Finney observes:

Amis has commented elsewhere that “given that the guys in my novels are either victims or predators,” the women “have got to be equivalent figures.” Amis is covertly offering an ironic defense within the novel of his penchant for female characters like Selina and Nicola. (13)

Being duped by Nicola it is obvious that Sam, the narrator, misreads the characters and by implication the readers also misconstrue the narrative which is ambiguous in many ways. *London Fields* is closely connected with postmodern ethics – a variety of critique without necessarily having a fixed moral stance against which to launch that critique. The underlying aim of the critique is to engage the reader in a conviction that fictional world help shape the societal redemption through moral stance. In a filmed interview with Ian McEwan, Amis maintains that when an author creates a character, there is an ethical responsibility to the humanity of that fictional reality. When authors, therefore, cause things to happen to fictional characters they are, in part, entering into an ethical relationship with humanity. In *London Fields* this is related to the pleasure the reader gets by seeing characters in desperate situations and it becomes intense when they want them to get out of that desperate situation.



This is where lies the irony of contemporary life that Amis intends to render. The edifying irony in *London Fields* has what Hutcheon calls “an evaluative edge and manages to provoke emotional responses” (*Edge* 2). *London Fields* is therefore far from a light comedy although it provokes laughter. But behind the laughter is Amis’s concern about the social degradation and “cultural erosion of values” (Keulks 83).

## **Chapter V**

### **Conclusion**

Martin Amis's three novels, as noted above, are creative exploration of utilizing satirical irony for redemptive purpose. He has painted a grim picture of twentieth century decadence but with an aim to alert the contemporary society on the impending doom. On the surface Amis seems to be presenting highly charged decadent vision of the future of the world. Nevertheless a deeper diagnostic study of his astringent comic novels reflects the potent force of satirical irony. Amis's novels sometimes lapse into cynicism but they are meaningful in a sense that they are entertaining and never complaisant because they contain human consciousness. Amis's detractors criticize him for excessive use of the characters with misogynist and misanthropic traits. But digging deeper into his novels readers can sense his key concern i.e. the late twentieth century debauchery. In Robert Martinez II's word he maintains comic tone to "lubricate the violence that he sees in the world" (Martinez 49). Amis's characters are more often treated as comic irony. He continues to satirize human vices as Joseph Brooker writes: "Amis's writing is not solemn enough [. . .] it is a by-product of his comic instinct. But the passages are still implicitly powered by debunking mockery of a foolish, over-indulged tranche of society" (Brooker 328). The paradox he sees is manifested in his writing either by his unique style or weird characters.

The world has seen a sea change in the field of technologies in the last century resulting in vast changes in public attitude towards moralism. The ethic development of mankind has been unable to keep pace with the economic and technological revolutions of the past century. At the same time artists have failed to create aesthetic forms that are appropriate to the new conditions. In a postmodern world the works of

art have become commodities and the process of reception has been altered beyond recognition by the new technologies. Art's very identity has become as problematic as the identity of the protagonists that we saw in Amis's novels. In such a situation cynical writing as employed by Amis is an appropriate form of expression. Amis's literary works are reunion between aesthetics and ethics because it gives him a free hand to overcome the contradiction between ethics and aesthetics. In order to give world a coherence which it has lost and to encourage the readers to make sense of the incoherence Amis is trying to reunite ethics and aesthetics that cynicism allows for. For him cynicism is subversive and consoling at the same time.

Linda Hutcheon regards parody as an apt postmodern form because of its potential to critique the traditional humanist ideas about art and its relation to reality. Amis deploys the technique of parody in *Money: A Suicide Note* where he playfully portrays disintegrated cultural values while satirizing and celebrating the junk culture. John Self, the protagonist of *Money*, is the parodied epitome of a modern man, consumed and saturated by the vices of the postmodern enterprise. His downfall characterizes the satirical portrayal of contemporary society. The novel shows money as the root cause of the decline in morals as well as corrupting the human relationships in the dying contemporary society. The implicit motivational message is aimed at Amis's satirical target. However he is not lamenting the decadence. He is playfully celebrating the debauchery in balancing the pungent satire with a postmodern mode of irony as "weapon" to provoke emotional response and eventually construct the leverage for social reconstruction.

Utilizing the technique of inverted narrative Amis has subtly presented the unrepresentable awful reality of the Holocaust in *Time's Arrow*. The mass murder and genocide of the past have been presented as everyday events. Nonetheless the success

of the novel lies in the dignity it gives to the victims i.e. the dignity of silence. The silence is facilitated by the non-linear narrative technique of temporal reversal which is ironic considering the similar effect that the Holocaust normally has on other literary form. Amis mocks the idea of chronological and historical progress in his most unconventional novel *Time's Arrow* where he demonstrates that only way to find a meaning and purpose in history would be to turn its tide. In a playful manipulation of reversal narrative set up Amis rejects a realistic representation of historical events which is his postmodern solution to revisit the dark segment of the history with bitter irony. He invites the readers to participate in the moral direction inherent in the narrative. Similarly, *London Fields* is Amis's postmodernist apocalyptic take on the millennium's finale. Inundated with death and war, attended by constant rain and images of ecological disaster, the novel laments for the long-lost field of London. In *London Fields* Amis's use of humour to express concerns about the nuclear horror day is aimed at problematizing reality and morality. By rejecting the modernist path of reality Amis attempts to what Alan Wilde calls 'suspend' reality by means of 'meaning-creating' fiction practice (9). Like many postmodern works Amis's *London Fields* attempts to treat serious subject of nuclear threat in a playful and humorous way with the purpose of attacking something and sensitizing the audience of which the person behind strongly disapproves.

Linda Hutcheon noted that "irony will mean different things to different players and should be seen from the perspective of the interpreter of the text" (*Edge* 11). This argument is applicable to Amis. In his works, as we saw in the previous chapter, the moralism is implicit as it exists in the act of reception and not in the narrative itself. Amis's uses vile narrators whose voices sometime tend to mix with the author's. His texts have what Claire Colebrook says "a force beyond their intent"

(103). Decline, decadence, sloth, debauchery are conventional targets of Amis's moralism. Using playful tone and by exposing the human vices and follies (sex, drugs, suicide, power, money, lost identity and vanished meaning) of the twentieth century Amis expresses his concern over postmodern condition. However, Amis believes that they are correctible vices. Of the postmodern enterprise Hutcheon strongly believes that the satirical strength of irony employed in the postmodern literature is rooted in its remedial function or what she calls "corrective elements". To her "irony can be used as weapon" (*Edge* 9) and have "cutting edge" to provoke emotional response and eventually constructs leverage for social reconstruction. The tone of Amis's novels is comic and his use of playful irony lies in his cynical humour. His writing is deeply self-conscious and self-ironic and their closeness to life is convincing.

Amis's works contain strong doses of irony. The intrinsic ethical message lies when the readers dig deeper into the link between the said and the unsaid which is the ironic meaning for Hutcheon. In his novels the readers can "hear the musings of the social commentator and satirists" (Campanon 87). Amis's irony implies the use of constructive satire for censorious or critical purposes. Ironic overtones in Amis's work with satirical itch are too potent to be diluted by perceived satire or by limiting it to despairing comedy. The use of playfulness is at the core of postmodern irony. Consequently postmodern irony is often criticized for being non-serious or unproductive. Although being blamed as impotent Amis's irony has what Hutcheon calls an "edge" and it as we saw it "sting". Amis's irony gets this edge from the inherent satiric tinge found between what he says and what he leaves unsaid. As a ventriloquist Amis employs biting edge of irony as opposed to Fredrick Jameson's view that postmodern irony lacks bite. It will be injustice if his fictions are just limited to grand vision of twentieth century decay resulting in derision and if the

readers fail to grasp the space between the said and the unsaid. Tinted with the implicit and subtle irony Amis's fictions corroborate Hutcheon's standpoint concerning curative function of satiric irony.

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