

I. Unearthing the Historicity in Ian McEwan's *Atonement*

This research project focuses on Ian McEwan's *Atonement*, a novel that discusses about human history and human life. Mac Ewan, through the character of Briony Tallis who is intelligent, thoughtful, and philosophical person, argues upon the fixity/ truth of history, through the vast references of incidents happened over 69 years of her life. She also discusses about the pre-established legal and formal general principles, which are thought to be the causes behind any human condition such as death, marriage, separation etc. She has vast reading of official history, as she states in the novel, but quiet discontent with it due to its falsity and analyzes the generalizations about history and human conditions. She memorizes and examines various incidents of her own personal life by analyzing her self-history but of which she herself cannot speak for sure because of lack of evidences. She applies pre-established general principles about sexual relationship of her sister but these principles also fail to find out cause of suicide. So, she critiques generalizations about history and human conditions, questions such pattern and deconstructs them. On this basis, the research aims to prove the notion of critiquing generalizations and about history and human conditions inside the text.

The purpose of the research is to investigate how historical generalizations and claims become unable to carry fixity and truth behind any occurrences. At the same time, the study's focus is on how a predetermined principle behind various human conditions fails to be applied in each individual condition thoroughly. Since antiquity, some rationalists, historians and politicians have created the fixed knowledge, ideologies, truths and principles but such canonical boundaries are being questioned and demolished in the course of time. So, this research aims to create

radical thought and action to question and break such monolithic and canonical boundaries Briony, does throughout the novel.

Atonement ends the existence of the contemporary grand narrative inside the story of Briony, which enables the hypothesizing that once created generalization about history and human condition are unable to be fixed and to be applied in each and every cases due to changeability of time and its power to mould truth, various ideological characteristics, incomprehensible nature of human phenomena, impossibility of certainty and legalization and changeable nature of memories.

The study dramatizes the logic of historical truth and generalizations of principles about human condition. Briony, a character of the novel, travels over her 69 year's history and life to find truth or conclusion. She memorizes and examines the time and events in her life such as school days, marriage, sex, separation, re-meeting, job and makes her own history but without any proofs. She finds no historical fixity and true general principles behind the human conditions. She finally comes to question and deconstruct the notion of historicity and certain principles behind the phenomena of human life. Such issues in the novel examine the problem in historicity and generalization on human conditions and raise the issue of historicism and new historicism and authoritative general principle about human life. How do the so-called rationalists, historians and authoritative institutions create false history? How are fixed canonical boundaries created by the certain person in the power? Why historical truth cannot be created? How generalizations about history and human conditions fail to speak the truths? Why and how such canonical boundaries are questioned and demolished in the course of time? How pre-determined fixed general knowledge and principles cannot be applied in each time and each particular case? These are some of the questions, this research raises to solve.

The novel is the story of Briony Tallis who travels long course of her with several ups and downs. Briony claims Robbie's sexual assault to Celia at the beginning of the novel. Briony miscalculates the situation and concludes that Robbie is acting forcefully toward Cecilia. Robbie, meanwhile, realizes he is attracted to Cecilia, whom he has not seen in some time, and writes several drafts of a love letter to her, giving a copy to Briony to deliver. However, he unintentionally gives her a version he had meant to discard, which contains coarse and vulgar ideas. Briony reads the letter and becomes disturbed as to Robbie's intentions. Later she walks in on Robbie and Cecilia making love in the library. Briony misinterprets the sexual act as rape and believes Robbie to be a manic. Her charge towards Robbie turns out to be false in the course of the time. Many critics have given different criticisms in this novel. A critic named Donald Cromwell puts:

In addressing these questions, McEwan's voice is potentially enigmatic when objective details are purposely left out. He spares on physical details as if to shy away from the hard facts that memory can't provide. The only physical detail we get about any of Briony's statement is the way they wear their hair. Dialogue and gossip instead form the basis of what Briony remembers, which makes nearly every conversation doubly interpreted. As Briony says later in life, all my 'conclusions' are reversible. (21)

Here's a particularly troublesome scene: in the novel, Briony asks Celia why they have sex until after they broke up. She responds, "I don't have to answer your questions anymore" (45). Yet Briony miscalculates the response of Celia and she presents the relationship between Celia and Robbie as the forceful relationship. For Mitchel Wilson "Briony's memories of steamy sensual fumbling that took place while

they were mostly clothed...if this is not grand a word" (4). Wilson questions the legacy of Briony's memory as a narrator to reveal truth. Later on Remorseful Briony has refused her place at Cambridge and instead becomes a trainee nurse in London.

Daniel Hartman has analyzed the novel from the perspective of the memory. Memory, individual rather than collective, accounts for who we are and what we have become. And early memory is particularly valuable, though it can be misconstrued. Its influence can persist throughout adult life, though what is cause and what effect may be difficult to judge. In this short but compelling novel Ian McEwan tracks the origin of one particular memory through a long and apparently uneventful life towards an explanation that leaves traces of unease that are difficult to dismiss. In this connection he puts:

The facts are quite simple. Three school-friends, of whom the narrator, Briony, is one, are joined by a fourth, Adrian Finn, who is much cleverer than any of them. Nor can he understand why Briony's mother should leave her a small legacy and the news that she possesses... Briony's diary, which was the virtual gallery of incidents of her own life.(52)

These facts throw into relief her inability to reconstruct her relations with either Robbie or Celia. What remains in his memory is the discomfort he felt on that weekend, a discomfort he cannot explain even at an advanced age. The clue might lie in the diary, but attempts to get hold of it are unavailing. She is up against an initial misalliance to which others are being added, containing the same characters but no further explanation. However the present research does not go against the abovementioned criticisms, rather it seeks to find out the dialectics of the present grand narrative in every respect.

Ian McEwan is a popular English novelist and short story writer. In his early writing career, McEwan wrote melodramatic fiction adopting the themes of evils and taboos. In his early short stories *First Love Last Rites* (1975) and in his short story collection *In Between the Sheets and Other Stories* (1978) he raises the issues about broken families, loneliness and a dim existence involving in violence and neurotic sexuality. His writing collection includes a play for television, a film script, and most recently script for radio drama too. His novels *The Cement Garden* (1979) and *The Comfort of Strangers* (1981) show his concern towards broader social and environmental issues such as nuclear threat and the oppression of women. Likewise, his growing literary concern captures a new common thematic concern, in particular, the force of anxiety and trauma on individuals. His latest fictions such as: *A Child in Time* (1997), *The Innocent* (1990), *Black Dogs* (1992), *En-during Love* (1998) and *Amsterdam* (1999) develop this theme with delicate cleverness and psychological insight into the characters' minds and actions. War, disease and psychological complexities infuse his novels with unique force to balance violence with potential humanism. McEwan's comment that the linking thread of his fiction and short stories is an involvement in a long-term investigation of human nature takes on a specific focus of moral consciousness in *Atonement*. The protagonist in the novel evolves an awareness of the fragility of happiness and a greater acknowledgement of moral responsibility. The humanistic recognition that moral values are found not only on human nature but also on human experience becomes the character's means of calculating history and facts. McEwan's novels are characterized by the way that carries regret, emotional conflict, nostalgia and yearning for freedom. Once McEwan has given, own comment about *Atonement* giving interview to Maya Jaggi. McEwan says to Jaggi:

You start to wonder why you write novels – sitting alone in your study, giving up your free time. People are prepared to wreck their relationships. For many creative people . . . the drive comes from something that's out of line, equilibrium that's been lost . . . when you're talking about things that go fundamentally wrong, it's usually to do with the family early on – emotional bereavement or deprivation – or simply childhood coming to an end. It's not an overtly psychoanalytic view – I'm not a great subscriber to Freud – but it's based on observation of myself and people around me. (28)

McEwan's growing popularity has resulted in a substantial and wide-ranging body of critical responses to his novels, primarily in the form of interviews and reviews in the press and popular media. McEwan was thus for a time widely regarded as a writer of "popular" rather than "serious" fiction (Jaggi 32). Despite public acknowledgement of his literary prowess he has won the Mann-Booker Prize twice. A body of academic or scholarly criticism has been slow to emerge. Peter Childs confirms McEwan's emergence as a serious writer in his sensitivity to exploring issues facing contemporary humanism and liberalism such as the challenges of living in a changing world, the ability to create a balance between individual freedom and moral responsibility" (02). He regards him as one of the key figures of contemporary English fiction. There are an increasing number of critical commentaries, some of which have been referred to in this study, that demonstrate the range of McEwan's talent, particularly in his later, more mature fiction to move away from the disturbing and disruptive, sensationalized themes which typified his early writings. Critical evaluations of his later work concur that his fiction has become a discussion point for social and cultural commentary. One thinks, for example, of Ray Bradbury's

comment that McEwan “opens the novel to a psychological realm in which the sense of crisis was felt focuses on a detailed discussion on the binary of Darwinism and literature in *Atonement*” (25). Braudbary briefly draws parallels between historical accuracy in representations of World War II and the events of 9/11 in both McEwan texts drawing comparisons to other historical texts and news media clippings. He convincingly shows how Ian McEwan reflects human consciousness of moral being in which we seek to find unity out of randomness, order out of chaos, and to pursue ‘truth’ in the process. For Braudbary, the novel should emulate this dynamic moral thought.

The proposed thesis is library based research. It will use a close, discursive argumentative style which will draw on concept of critiquing and deconstructing the notion of Historicism, New Historicism along with pre-established legal and formal principles behind any specific human conditions as the novel is question upon such agenda. Authentic cites, guidance from the lectures and professors will be supportive tools for research. Stephen Greenblatt’s ideas of New Historism are applied to make the thesis prove the hypothesis. Different extracts from novel related to the notion of inadequacy of history and principles on human condition will be brought to prove inadequacy of generalization about history and human life. Foucault, and Derrida are some of the leading thinkers to challenge the hitherto grand narrative whose insights are brought to prove the fictionalization of history in the novel *Atonement*.

There are similarities between new histoticism and cultural materialism, especially a British group of critics making up a school usually referred to as Cultural Materialism. Both New Historicists and Cultural Materialists are interested in recovering lost histories and in exploring mechanisms of repression and subjugation. The major difference is that New Historicists tend to concentrate on

those at the top of the social hierarchy (i.e. the church, the monarchy, the upper-classes) while Cultural Materialists tend to concentrate on those at the bottom of the social hierarchy (the lower-classes, women, and other marginalized peoples). Also, though each of the schools practices different kinds of history, New Historicists tend to draw on the disciplines of political science and anthropology given their interest in governments, institutions, and culture, while Cultural Materialists tend to rely on economics and sociology given their interest in class, economics, and commodification. New Historicists are, like the Cultural Materialists, interested in questions of circulation, negotiation, profit and exchange, i.e. how activities that purport to be above the market (including literature) are in fact informed by the values of that market. However, New Historicists take this position further by then claiming that all cultural activities may be considered as equally important texts for historical analysis: contemporary trials of hermaphrodites or the intricacies of map-making may inform a Shakespeare play as much as, say, Shakespeare's literary precursors. New Historicism is also more specifically concerned with questions of power and culture.

Michael Foucault is quite possibly the most influential critic of the last quarter-century. His interest in issues of power, epistemology, subjectivity, and ideology have influenced critics not only in literary studies but also political science, history, and anthropology. His willingness to analyze and discuss disparate disciplines as well as his questioning of the very principle of disciplinarity and specialization have inspired a host of subsequent critics to explore interdisciplinary connections between areas that had rarely been examined together. Foucault also had the ability to pick up common terms and give them new meaning, thus changing

the way critics addressed such pervasive issues as "power," "discourse," "discipline," "subjectivity," "sexuality," and "government."

Stephen Greenblatt's brilliant studies of the Renaissance have established him as the major figure commonly associated with New Historicism. Indeed, his influence meant that New Historicism first gained popularity among Renaissance scholars, many of whom were directly inspired by Greenblatt's ideas and anecdotal approach. This fascination with history and the minute details of culture soon caught on among scholars working in other historical periods, leading to the increasing popularity of culturally- and historically-minded studies. This general trend is often referred to as Cultural Studies.

The Atonement is about the elusiveness of identity and the treachery of memory, regret and the hope of redemption. Though its atmosphere is dreamlike, it actually is hyper-realistic, portraying with enigmatic precision of a very high order "real" life as each of us actually experiences it. Thus, the novel is the first portion accounts about early teenage mysterious activities of Tallis in unnamed London city. She wants to account the historical truth and personal truth as real eyewitness. However her all efforts topple down like the house of cards. The research is divided into three chapters. The first chapter is introduction that examines the writer's concerns with history in his writings and other his themes, literature reviews as well as his biographical information. The second chapter is related with the textual analysis with theoretical modality in imbedded form. The final chapter summarizes the overall research squeezing its crux and kernel.

II. History and its Impact in *Atonement*

This research applies the tool of New Historicism to analyze the impact of the contemporary history in the textual and cultural products. *Atonement* is analysed in the present research to question the contemporary discourse. New Historicists, greatly influenced by Michel Foucault's concept of discursive analysis of Power relation, which gives another strategy of political reading of the texts. The power relations are reflected through discourses, which do not find overt manifestations but implicitly expressed in the text. Briony Tallis the protagonist of the novel is also a younger sister of Leon and Cecilia Tallis. Briony is an aspiring writer. She is a thirteen-year-old at the beginning of the novel and takes part in sending Robbie Turner to jail when she falsely claims that he assaulted her sister Celia. Briony is part narrator, part character and we see her transformation from child to woman as the novel progresses. At the end of the novel, Briony has realised her wrongdoing as a "child" and decides to write the novel to find atonement (47).

McEwan's *Atonement* depicts the narrative of Briony Tallis in her London city. Part one of the novel takes place in 1935 in England, where we are introduced to Briony the protagonist of the novel, who is at the age of thirteen and committed to be a writer. The events of the part one take place over the course of a single day and are narrated by all knowing omniscient narrator. At the end of part one, Briony misinterprets a situation causing her to interpret her sister Cecilia's love interest to Robbie blaming himself as "fanatic" (54). Eventually, this leads her to accuse him for the rape of her sister Celia. In part two of the novel, several years have passed and the story is now set in the London during World War II. Here we follow the points of view of Robbie and Cecilia. Robbie has just been released from prison under the condition that he enlists in the army. Cecilia is now a nurse and has cut off all contact

with her family. In part three, we follow Briony as a trainee nurse in a hospital in London, several years after the events in part one. She is still writing, but is now a more responsible writer, than when she was younger. She has realized that to accuse Robbie as the rapist was a mistake and she now knows that it was in fact Marshall, her brother's friend, whom she saw raping her cousin several years ago. After attending the wedding of Marshall and Lola, Briony meets up with Cecilia and Robbie and learns that they have not yet forgiven her. Whatever Briony narrates in the novel seems to be false and discursive only.

The concept of new historicism was developed from the concept of genealogy developed by Fredrich Nietzsche. Later Michael Foucault developed the concept of new historicism questioning the old archeological model of history. Historicists, greatly influenced by Michel Foucault's concept of discursive analysis of Power relation, come to give another strategy of political reading of the texts. The power relations get reflected through discourses which do not find overt manifestations but implicitly expressed in the text. Foucault further focused upon the intricately structured power relations in a given culture at a given time to demonstrate, how that society controls its member through constructing and defining what appears to be universal. It implies that New Historicists "aspired to a politics of culture" which is covertly manifested in a text because power structure is administered by the state. "The state's control of its citizenry was internal rather than external. The state subjected its people by creating them as subjects, devising fixed categories under which people could be described and thus controlled." This was the conjunction Foucault evoked as "Power Knowledge" (Foucault 86). Foucault observes History as the discourse between the social and the aesthetic circular. He further defines history as:

The final traits of history are its affirmation with knowledge
 asperspective. Historians take unusual pains to erase the element in
 their work that reveal their ground in a particular time and place, their
 preferences in a controversy the unavoidable obstacles of their passion.
 Nietzsche's version of historical sense is explicit in its perspective and
 acknowledge in its system of injustice.(90)

Foucault attempts to discover the system of particular discourse and relates it with the
 study of power and knowledge. He interprets it as essential historical discourse and
 textualization of history. He refuses history in terms of linearity and
 development. Rather he observes history in terms of power struggle. Historical
 continuity for Foucault is paradoxically discontinuity. Knowledge is not knowledge of
 self rather it is only perspective.

The very beginning of *Atonement* arouses feeble situation of the protagonist. It
 focuses on Briony Tallis, the thirteen-year-old youngest daughter of three, who aspires
 to be a writer. She has written a play to be performed at dinner for the homecoming of
 her brother, Leon, and put on by herself and her three cousins who are staying with
 the Tallises for the summer because of a divorce between their parents. Before the
 play can be properly rehearsed, Briony witnesses a scene between her older sister
 Cecilia and the son of the family office cleaner Robbie Turner. What is an innocent
 act is greatly misunderstood by the young imagination, and this sets off a series of
 events with eternal consequences. Her life seems sorted out, a chain of little victories
 and failures with no real unresolved past mysteries.

Briony fails to capture the reality and lost in the maze-like experiences., Briony
 intercepts a letter from Robbie to Cecilia and reads it. In it, she discovers perverse
 desires and sets out to protect her sister from this sexmonger maniac. Before she can

do so, she witnesses the couple making love and mistakes it for assault, further confirming her assumption that Robbie is out to harm Cecilia. *Atonement* provides a constant failure of Briony or various commitments that might divert the protagonist from her true vocation or from her great task she might have done.

Atonement is loaded with the Briony's past activities and her present responses. she looks back and tries to find truth about events which happened in the past not so much to her, but to people with whom she was once connected. She tries to find out what exactly happened and how he was personally involved in it. The novel is concerned almost exclusively with memories. For Briony, there is no evidence to support or disprove truthfulness of her memories in the first part of the book, apart from his own reflections of their reliability. In addition, Briony gives the reliability of his memories many thoughts. Through the whole novel, Briony challenges the exactness of memory, either by her own thinking, or through her recollections of discussions between his secondary school history teacher, his friend Adrian and the rest of the class. These discussions about the relationship of past, time and memory are described at the beginning of the book, and fragments of them are a leitmotiv through whole of the novel. However, even of these discussions there is no objective record. As Briony remarks, "Was this their exact exchange? Almost certainly not. Still, it is my best memory of their exchange" (McEwan 19).

Briony's constant questioning of truthfulness of his own memory makes the reader aware of her unreliability. Paradoxically, at the same time, it gives Briony an aura of frankness and honesty. Briony of course is an unreliable narrator, but her unreliability seems to result from fallibility of memory, not from a twisted personality and intentional lying. Briony seems to try to be as honest with the reader just as she is with himself. This appears as the problem, however, because it is often hard for her to

confess herself bad feelings or to recall unpleasant or shameful memories. This tendency can be observed, for example, when she reflects on her relationship with Robbie.

I get on well with Robbie. But the younger generation no longer feels the need, or even the obligation to keep in touch. Lola will do for Dad – pity she hasn't learnt to text. I do hope, he doesn't get Alzheimer's, that's my greatest worry, really because Mum's hardly going to have her back, is she? No: I exaggerate, I misrepresent. Robbie doesn't feel like that, I am sure. Robbie and I get on fine". (McEwan 62)

Problem in her relationship with Robbie, but her imagining of Robbie's thoughts clearly proves the opposite. Their relationship may be fairly good on the surface, but really, it is far from ideal. Briony's suppressing of the uncomfortable thoughts and memories are a psychological protective mechanism: she denies them as they may be too shameful for him or bring back bad feelings.

Briony sometimes turns to the reader in search of compassion or in an attempt to be emphatic. When Briony recalls her relationship with Cecilia, she remembers how she blames her having sexual relationship with sweeper's son, how she acted more mature and serious than her and, as the time passes, she starts to see her behaviour as a manipulation. With time, the neutral or bad memories of Briony prevail over the good ones. Briony decided to tell her that their relationship had no future, he remembers himself in the talk as being quite cynical. She is persuaded that she was the victim of Cecilia's calculating behaviour and that it gave her the right to be sarcastic and nasty during their second meet. As he says at the beginning of this chapter: "... she slept with Robbie. Yes, I know, I expect you're thinking: The poor sap, how did he not see that coming?" (McEwan 36). Not only is she sure Cecilia slept

with Robbie to manipulate her, her direct addressing of the reader suggests that the reader is supposed to see it too and should sympathize with Briony.

Briony does not manage to get the diary, though she gets two documents which help to throw new light on how the events in the past really happened. One of them is a copy of the letter Briony sent to Robbie after Robbie had let Briony know that he and Cecilia had become a couple. This letter is also briefly mentioned in the first part of the book and when it appears on the scene in uncensored version in the second part, it is a wakeup call for all readers, who ever had a tendency to believe Briony's memories. When in the first part of the novel Briony describes her reaction after she learned about Robbie's and Cecilia's relationship, she admits she felt bitter. She felt that the purpose of the letter was to "let me [her] know how she, Cecilia, had traded up:

To my [Briony's] cleverest friend and what's more, a Cambridge chap like brother Jack. Also, to warn me [Briony], that she would be hanging around if I [Briony] planned on seeing Robbie. (McEwan 41)

There is no record of the full version of Robbie's letter but there is not much reason to assume that Robbie's intention was to provoke such feelings. Robbie was always cleverer and more reflective than Briony, Cecilia's brother came from higher social class than Briony and they both went to a more prestigious university than him. Therefore, Briony always felt somehow insufficient compared to them and with the letter these feelings came up. Briony's first answer to Robbie is a postcard with an artificial, pretentious text about everything being fine, but later she decides to respond, as she says:

I didn't use any of that silly 'epistle' language. As far as I remember, I told him pretty much what I thought of their joint moral scruples. I also

advised him to be prudent, because in my opinion, Cecilia had suffered damage long way back. Then I wished him good luck”.(McEwan42)

Knowing this information about what Briony has written, it is not too difficult for the reader to sympathize with her. None of what Briony describes seems overtly harmful. It may be rather nasty to imply someone is “damaged” without evidence, but it is understandable because, of course, Briony felt hurt. Also, the matter of a friend going is commonly seen as rather controversial, so the sarcastic remark about morality seems justifiable too. Indeed, Briony’s confession about writing a genuine letter about his feelings is likely to gain him more sympathy with the reader than her sending of the pretentious postcard.

When the copy of Briony’s letter appears on the scene, the reader learns it contained much more than what Briony described. She does not only warn Robbie about Cecilia’s supposed “damage” – “I will leave the precise diagnoses to the headshrinkers [...] Even her own mother warned me against her”- she hopes that they “get so involved, that the mutual damage will be permanent” (102). She anticipates they will break up and after that, they will be “left with a lifetime of bitterness that will poison your [their] subsequent relationships”. The letter is full of insults, bleak prospects for their future. There are also many references on time’s showing them consequences of their decision. “I’m a great believer in time’s revenge”, “give her time and she will look down on you just as she looks down on me”, “I can’t do anything to you now, but time can. Time will. It always does” (McEwan 95-97).

Pioneers of newhistoricist theory are Michel Foucault and Stephen Greenblatt. The New Historicists have drawn upon Foucaultian tenet of discursive nature of literature which is a cultural construct; however, a complete harmony in society is illusory because constant but repressed struggles keep on running parallel between

powerful and powerless in the society. In literature, the suppressive and marginalized voices against dominant power structure and stricture is heard implicitly, meaning thereby, text does not display the dominant and overt history, however hidden history or histories are intertwined in literature. William Shakespeare's famous play *King Lear* displays the covert histories of sixteenth century. Coke in the court of King James challenges his authority and replies that "the king cannot take any cause out of any of his court and give judgment upon it himself" (Ryan 129). James accused him of treason.

The event gets manifested in the play when King Lear divides the whole of his kingdom between his two daughters because of their false show of affection towards him and takes away her [Cordelia's] moiety of the realm" (Ryan 129). The Earl of Kent interposes on behalf of Cordelia and is banished from the kingdom on account of his disloyalty towards *King Lear*. On the basis of this discussion, it comes out that the repressed voices weaves the web of literary text and configures the discursive nature of text.

Stephen Greenblatt allows the strategy of speaking with the dead, as an ethnographer and writer speak with the living being while alive, so the reader / critic and New Historicist can speak with the writer through his text, thus positioning the new historicist as a second interpreter. Thus a New Historicist tries to read the text of a past author who was present in his own time as an ethnographer. Seturaman remarks that this condition does not allow a New Historicist to be objective in his study of the work composed in remote past: "The New Historicism, while trying to understand history cannot be objective and we can never recover the past without our own present self modifying what used to be considered objective and stable" (574). Likewise, Jackson too speaks with the same canon as he writes:

Nevertheless, as readers of past literature, we are demonstrably decayed because we do not bring to it the experience that it required for its imaginative and intellectual realization in its own time; instead we bring the experience that is required for the realization of literature in our time, an experience in which only fragments of the earlier experience survive. The consequence is in several respects analogous to the antique statue's loss of limbs. (38)

Just as an antique and broken image needs repair to come in its previous condition, similarly the text can be actualized by the reader with his present perception because through this he tries to reconstruct the past with his imaginative faculty, while at the same time maintaining a close nexus with the present too. The suggestion being that the New Historicists lay emphasis on the necessity of awareness of the critic while analyzing a text because he belongs to present but has to read the text written in the past and has to reconstruct the past with two sorts of historicity working parallel.

The letter shows the reader, and Briony as well, how those memories which did not fit into herself perception have altered or disappeared. Briony longs for a peaceable life, or as Cecilia once put it, he is cowardly. As he says, he has a "certain instinct of self preservation" (Barnes 64). This instinct has caused Briony's repression of bad feelings connected with Cecilia. She tried to forget the bitterness and humiliation he felt after he found out about Robbie's and Cecilia's relationship and he succeeded. The process of repressing bad memories is partly unintentional, but in Briony it was largely deliberate. As the history professor during the discussion at secondary school remarked, "mental states can often be inferred from actions" (McEwan 18). And when Briony recollects about the letter from Robbie, she says he

“burnt it in an empty grate and decided the two of them were now out of my [Briony’s] life forever” (McEwan 43).

Briony’s action of burning the letter shows her attempt to forget everything hurtful about his, Robbie’s and Cecilia’s relationship. From the letter, the reader can derive some information about Briony’s feelings, concerns and fears, as he projects these into his characteristics of Cecilia and Robbie and into their future prospects. He accuses Cecilia of “inability to imagine anyone else’s feelings or emotional life”. It is Briony, however, who always found it difficult to understand Cecilia and perceived it as an issue. Briony also fears, that it will be him, who will be “left with a lifetime of bitterness” - that is the reason, why she decided to suppress memories of Cecilia. In Briony’s present situation, concerning his present state of mind, it is ironic to see, what he wrote in the past. In the letter, he mentions great art - “you’re not great art, just a cartoonist’s doodle” (McEwan 95). When Briony was young, her friend’s fear was, that “life wouldn’t turn out to be like Literature”, that they will end up being “onlookers and bystanders, part of a social backdrop against which real, true, important things could happen” (McEwan 15). Yet in *Atonement*, if someone complies with the requirements of a great literature, it is Robbie and perhaps Cecilia, although we do not have sufficient record for that. And indeed, Briony’s character falls rather in the category of the “social backdrop”, or “cartoonist’s doodle” (136). The other document from the past which might enlighten what happened, why Robbie committed mistake and how was Briony involved in it is a photocopy of one page from Robbie’s diary. On this very theoretical page Robbie tries to describe human relationships with mathematical equations and tries to find out, how to apportion responsibility between people involved in an event. After that, she is probably going to set a practical example and writes: “So for instance if Briony”

(McEwan 86), and then the page ends. The ending of the book reveals rather a concrete and plausible interpretation of the fragment from Robbie's diary.

Atonement, is a frame story; a fact that readers learn late in the plot. Part one, two, and three describes a fictional realistic universe, which is shattered in the novel's epilogue where it is revealed that the novel's protagonist Briony is the author of the story. In the epilogue, she explains how she has manipulated events to fit into her narrative intended to make amends for the damage she caused as a child. The narrative, thus, entails a historical perspective, because it is self-consciously aware of its own status as fiction and automatically questions the relationship between fiction and reality. The novel questions what is considered the truth when fiction is presented as reality. Postmodern theory focuses on what history and literature share, rather than what separates them:

They have both been seen to derive their force more from verisimilitude than from any objective truth; they are both identified as linguistic construct, highly conventionalized in their narrative forms, and not at all transparent either in terms of language or structure; and they appear to be equally intertextual, deploying the texts of the past within their own complex textuality. (Hutcheon 105)

In postmodern theory, history is not considered obsolete, but is rethought as a human construct. In other words, history is a factual representation rather than a fact. It does not deny that the past existed, it only argues that history only will be accessible through text: "We cannot know the past except through its texts: its documents, its evidence, even its eye-witness accounts are texts" (16). Historical facts will only be accessible through a representation, made available in textual form. Linda Hutcheon has coined novels that combine history with a historical perspective as 'historiographic

fiction', because they implement a self-reflective perspective while claiming to portray historical events and personages. Hutcheon considers these novels not just metafictional, nor historical because they are both metafictionally self-reflexive while speaking about real historical realities (Hutcheon 5).

Atonement is a historical novel because of its setting, which takes place in the past. It begins in 1935 in England, then moves on to World War II, and ends in contemporary time. Jie Han and Zhenli Wang argue that the novel is historical because of how the fates of individuals are intermingled with the verisimilitude of history and society. And history, fact and fiction are knitted into the narrative framework" (136). What makes *Atonement* different from the classic understanding of a historical novel is that McEwan offers more information than the historian. McEwan combines historical facts with fiction, therefore, automatically blurring the lines between fact and fiction. The effect is that he creates a new version of the whole by narrating the past in a new manner. As a result of this, McEwan provides a number of possibilities that would have been ignored by the historian, as these are not part of the historical truth. However, Han and Wang argue that these possibilities are no less real than historical facts: "Those possibilities, whether they are a real history of the past or not, are no less real in his fictionalized world" (137). McEwan, especially, blurs the lines between fact and fiction in the scenes where he depicts Robbie's retreat to Dunkirk. Here, he combines the historical event with his storytelling. In their article, Han and Wang count that many of McEwan's depictions of war are influenced by his father's experiences during the Second World War, which makes his methods similar to that of the historian. While the historical facts may not be depicted mimetically, they are still historical facts because "[...] in his fictional world, history becomes fictionalized. The writer's design of plot and structure reflects his attitude towards

history” (137). In that way, *Atonement* becomes a historical novel with a postmodern perspective, because the intention is not to depict real life events mimetically, but to depict a representation, or a revision, rather, of the past in a new context (137).

The historical aspect that is added to the narrative in *Atonement* creates a parallel between the storyline of Briony’s novel and the construction of her novel. In the construction of her novel, Briony implements historical facts (particularly her aspect of World War II) in order to underline the love story between Robbie and Cecilia. Additionally, the historical aspect is added in the met fictional frame, because Briony here makes the reader aware of the choices she has made in the process of rewriting her own historical past. Briony’s presentation of World War II will never be factual and will always be a reconstruction of a factual event from the perspective of the present. The constructed nature of the depiction of World War II, therefore, serves as a parallel to Briony’s plot construction. Briony can never factually represent her own historical past, but will again be a particular construction seeking to achieve a particular effect. The relationship between history as an objective, external set of events and individual experience as subjective and fallible is an interesting tension. The historical novel uses both the individual experience of the character with the historical context in order to create a multidimensional narrative as Manzoni explains “The historical novelist is required to give not just the bare bones of history, but something richer, more complete. In a way you want him to put the flesh back on the skeleton that is history” (3). The individual experience is the breathing flesh whilst the history is the sturdy skeleton and both novelists bring this metaphor alive in their novels.

Foucault considers history in the model of discursive knowledge. In *The Archaeology of Knowledge* he rejects the traditional historian's tendency to read straightforward narratives of progress in the historical record: "For many years now,"

he writes, "historians have preferred to turn their attention to long periods, as if, beneath the shifts and changes of political events, they were trying to reveal the stable, almost indestructible system of checks and balances, the irreversible processes, the constant readjustments, the underlying tendencies that gather force, and are then suddenly reversed after centuries of continuity, the movements of accumulation and slow saturation, the great silent, motionless bases that traditional history has covered with a thick layer of events" (3). Foucault, by contrast, argues that one should seek to reconstitute not large "periods" or "centuries" but "phenomena of rupture, of discontinuity" (4). The problem, he argues, "is no longer one of tradition, of tracing a line, but one of division, of limits" (5). Instead of presenting a monolithic version of a given period, Foucault argues that we must reveal how any given period reveals "several pasts, several forms of connexion, several hierarchies of importance, several networks of determination, several teleologies, for one and the same science, as its present undergoes change: thus historical descriptions are necessarily ordered by the present state of knowledge, they increase with every transformation and never cease, in turn, to break with themselves" (5). Foucault adopts the term "archaeology" to designate his historical method and he articulates what he means by that term by specifying how his method differs from both traditional history and the traditional history of ideas.

In *Atonement*, Briony uses narrative in order to account the history, as an external set of events, to reshape it using her story. Throughout the novel, the third person narration gives the readers a false sense of reassurance where at the end of the novel, it is revealed that it is in fact Briony's perspective. Barnes argues "How are we, as readers, to believe in the validity of the innermost thoughts and motivations of these characters when, as it turns out, they are told from the perspective of someone

who has a clear interest in how we judge the story.” The diverse narrative perspective gives the reader a chance to experience history in different perspective based on the characters individual experience. However Briony believed that unlike objective sense of history, her stories was “under no obligation to the truth, she had promised no-one a chronicle”(280). She blurs the link between history and stories and it appears that neither is telling the truth but they both work together in order to create meaning. History is created because someone has to give their account what has happened, how else one would know about the suffering of soldiers in World War 2 or the French Revolution and it is the person’s individual experience is that account is from. The account of a German in the Holocaust and a Jew would be distinctly different but it is in literature that “the only place [Briony] could be free” (280). To create what she wishes, whatever ending she wanted, it was a place she could reshape history. However, she discovers that “in later years, she regretted not being more factual, not providing herself with a store of raw material. I would have been useful to know what happened, what it looked like, who was there, what was said” (280) Her memory, her individual experience of history does not compare to the objective and factual idea of history, it is that “raw material” (280).

Atonement maps the unreliability of truth and knowledge through the protagonist Briony. In an interview with Ian McEwan, Adam Begley notices that McEwan has been inclined to write from a child’s point of view, which has been evident in some of his previous novels, such as *First Love, Last Rites* (1975) and *The Daydreamer* (1995). McEwan responds that to write from a child’s point of view, in *Atonement*, was not a way for him to shock or indulge the grotesque, but to portray a child’s mind while drawing on all the resources of a complex adult language. I didn’t want the limitations of a childlike vocabulary” (Begley, 2002). Instead, he chose to

make Briony the 'author' "and let her describe her childhood self from the inside, but in the language of the mature novelist" (Begley, 2002). Thus, McEwan gave Briony the profession as an author because he wanted to avoid the problems that come with narrating a child, e.g. a restricted viewpoint. The result is that he could portray a young girl through the eyes of an adult, rather than that of a child, thereby, avoiding a limited perspective. McEwan also discloses that the scene at the fountain between Robbie and Cecilia was the scene that was written first. After writing the scene, he pondered over whom these people were and their backgrounds. He, thus, came up with the idea that Briony should narrate the events in the form of chapters that would function as a series of drafts, which would be her form of atonement to make amends for a terrible error she had caused (Begley, 2002).

As we are told in the interview, McEwan came up with the story before he came up with the plot. His choice to portray Briony as an author was for him to illustrate two of the novel's themes: writing and atonement. In other words, he wanted to illustrate how fiction is about the order of things – how a plot structure is constructed by an author. Finney argues that this is illustrated in the novel by having the writer in Briony identify Robbie as Lola's attacker, and not Briony herself: "Forcing life to conform to the aesthetic orderliness of art can have actual tragic consequences" (80). Finney's point is that Briony is essentially portrayed as a writer rather than a young girl and this aspect serves to underline how McEwan fundamentally wanted his novel to be about the making of fiction and the limitations and opportunities that come with this:

The fairy stories were behind her, and in the space of a few hours, she had witnessed mysteries, seen an unspeakable word, interrupted brutal behaviour, and by incurring the hatred of an adult whom

everyone had trusted, she had become a participant in the drama of life beyond the nursery. All she had to do now was discover the stories, not just the subjects, but a way of unfolding them, that would do justice to her new knowledge. (160)

The authorial control McEwan has over Briony is illustrated in his choice to portray Briony as a writer, because he, then, can illustrate the constructed nature of a narrative. He has chosen to let Briony be the author of part one, two, and three of the novel, because he, then, can implement a fictional perspective on the story to question the reliability of truth. Discursive nature of truth can be further explored through Briony's character. Briony is characterized as a young girl, who cannot distinguish between the fictive world and real life, we must remember how that presentation of Briony derives from herself. In other words, she has chosen to represent herself this way because it will give a particular effect. Finney characterizes Briony as a girl who lets art shape her life just as much as she shapes that life into her art: "Her observation of life around her is conditioned by the fictive world that holds her in its grip" (78). Books shape Briony's life, and writing intrudes on her life in every moment. For instance, when Briony opens the shocking letter from Robbie, her interpretation involves exchanging one genre with another instead of interpreting it realistically "No more princesses! With the letter, something elemental, brutal, perhaps even criminal had been introduced, some principle of darkness, and even in her excitement over the possibilities, she did not doubt that her sister was in some way threatened and would need her help" (McEwan).

Briony perceives both the letter and the scene later in the library, where she stumbles upon Robbie and Cecilia making love, as scenes from one of her books. Briony's life is shaped around the books she reads and she only understands the world

through familiar narratives. In the library, her first reaction is to understand the scene from a point of view she is already familiar with:

Though they were immobile, her immediate understanding was that she had interrupted an attack, hand-to-hand fight. The scene was so entirely a realisation of her worst fears that she sensed that her over-anxious imagination had projected the figures onto the packed spines of books. This illusion, or hope of one, was dispelled as her eyes adjusted to the gloom. (McEwan 34)

The misinterpretations of events that make her notice Robbie looking “so huge and wild” and her previous mention of him as “a maniac” are indications that “Briony is shaped by a melodramatic imagination that originates in the books she has read” (Finney 79). Briony draws on literature in all shapes of her life, which makes her able to disentangle her life from the things she reads in her books. Literature is intervened in every decision she makes and everything she perceives, causing her to misinterpret particular events.

Text does not have enough information to decide whether to believe Briony and whether to stand on his side or not. For instance, Briony did not say how and why exactly they broke up for the first time. He only foreshadowed their nearing breakup and then later in one sentence simply stated that it happened. More importantly, we only have Briony’s version of the relationship and the breakup, no objective record, not at least also Cecilia’s version of their shared past. The plot of the first part of the novel is constituted by Briony’s memories from the secondary school to the present and most of its story takes place in the distant past. The plot of the second part is about events which happened in Briony’s present or near past, and which make Briony re-examine his memories described in the first part of the book. At the time

when Briony learns, that he inherited the money and Robbie's diary from Cecilia's mother, Briony's view of his past is challenged only by his own thoughts about unreliability of memory. He does not have any other sources of information about his past than his memories - no tangible records, and with people who could remember the same events as him he is either no longer in contact, or they are dead. So he does not expect to find out much about his past anymore. Yet, with the strange inheritance, new questions arise. He does not understand how he deserved the inheritance in the first place, how Cecilia's mother was involved in Robbie's life that she was in possession of his diary. However, at the time Briony receives it, he does not know anything about the situational context in which it was written, he does not know what precedes and what follows. Yet he tries for its interpretation, especially of the last, unfinished sentence.

At the point Briony starts to think, whether his settling for a content, peaceable life was a good option. "Yes indeed if Briony had seen more clearly, acted more decisively, held to truer moral values, settled less easily for a passive peaceableness which he first called happiness and later contentment. If Briony hadn't been fearful, hadn't counted on the approval of others for his own self-approval" (Barnes 89). As Briony searches for tangible evidence of his past, his old feelings start to reappear and with them, long buried suppressed memories. "Just when you think, everything is a matter of decrease, of subtraction and division, your brain; your memory may surprise you. As if it's saying: Don't imagine you can rely on some comforting process of gradual decline - life's much more complicated than that" (Barnes 112). When his old feelings for Cecilia renew, the old memories connected with her come up. All these memories are strongly connected with emotions, which he forgot thanks to his "instinct for self preservation". And so suddenly he remembers Cecilia's dancing in

his room and the feeling of intimacy between them, although earlier he mentioned Cecilia never danced. He remembers the intimate moments of their infra – sex:

“How attracted to one another we had been; how light she felt on my lap; how, even though we weren’t having ‘full sex’, all the elements of it – the lust, the tenderness, the candour, the trust – were there anyway. And how part of me hadn’t minded not ‘going the whole way” (Barnes 117).

Again, apart from political reading of the text, New Historicists also suggest that since literary text embodies numerous voices and is discursive in nature, hence, an innovative process of reading is but a quintessential methodology to be adopted and that best method is of dismantling the text which is the prominent feature of deconstruction.

This validates that fact that after dismantling the texts the multiplicity of meaning be put forth “to present a number of independent and often conflicting voices. In the same way New Historicist contends that a work is not an autonomous body of fixed meanings, but represents a diversity of dissonant voices and unresolved conflicts in a specific culture” (Hartman 22-33). This is because “the textuality of the text leads to its textuality is closer to deconstructive method of studying the text through its ‘polysemy’ and expanding traces” (Finney 223). Since text is the product of society and embodies it and hence contains multiple meanings as Mikhail Bakhtin’s concept of ‘dialogic’ nature of text overlaps with this. Roger Webster says that language for Bakhtin has the potentiality of multiplicity because language “for Bakhtin is not in any sense fixed and stable but always in a state of flux; meaning is never singular and uncontested but rather plural and contested” (40). According to Bakhtin language is dialogic and the text displays ‘many voiced’ and ‘heteroglossia.’

At the end of the novel Briony finds out why Cecilia's mother left him Robbie's diary, he learns more about the circumstances of Robbie's suicide and which role did he play in it. Yet "once all the questions are answered, the reader is left in the same state that Briony is in the book's final pages floored at life's essential mysteries, and frustrated that they cannot be relived" (Hartman 12). Briony's searching for answers about his past caused reappearance of his repressed emotions and memories: it induced Briony to revise his past actions and his way of thinking. It removed Briony's protective shield of self-deception and brought a strong feelings of remorse and unrest.

III: History as Fabrication in *Atonement*

The theme of History in the novels discussed occurs on two levels – on the level of the narration and on the level of the plotline. In the narration the theme of memory is implemented by the unreliable narrator Briony Tallis who tells story depending largely or exclusively on her subjective recollections of the past. McEwan essentially creates a plot with the purpose of presenting how narratives are constructed by plot structures. He does this by creating a character like Briony, who is an author herself. Briony's story is autobiographical, however, with her manipulations of events we learn that she has essentially created a plot structure, which has the purpose of achieving particular effects. Additionally, it is evident that she lets the plot actually produce events that never happened, again, emphasising the constructed nature of her narrative. The different ontological levels of control in the story serve to understand how all narratives are plot structures, which has the purpose of creating particular effects. McEwan has, for example, chosen to let Briony end up with vascular dementia, which lets him have an ethical dimension to his narrative. As readers, we are again confronted with the notion that what seemed like a realistic storyline is not at all realistic, because we never know whether Briony has forgotten certain events.

Memory in the plot is covered by the interconnection with other themes and by the importance of the theme for the story. As Tallis searches for tangible evidence of her past, her old feelings start to reappear and with them, long buried, suppressed memories. “Just when you think, everything is a matter of decrease, of subtraction and division, your brain; your memory may surprise you. As if it's saying: Don't imagine you can rely on some comforting process of gradual decline – life's much more complicated than that” (Barnes 112). When her old feelings for Celia renew, the old memories connected with her come up. All these memories are strongly connected with emotions, which he forgot thanks to Her “instinct for self preservation”. Therefore, suddenly he remembers Celia's

dancing in her room and the feeling of intimacy between them, although earlier he mentioned Celia never danced. She remembers the intimate moments of their infra – sex. How attracted to one another we had been; how light she felt on mylap; how, even though we were not having ‘full sex’, all the elements of it – the lust, the tenderness, the candour, the trust – were there anyway. And how part of me hadn’t minded not ‘going the whole way.’ (McEwan 117)

At the end of the novel Tallies finds out why Celia’s mother left her Celia’s diary, she learns more about the circumstances of Celia’s suicide and which role did he play in it. Yet “once all the questions are answered, the reader is left in the same state that Tallies is in the book’s final pages—floored at life’s essential mysteries, and frustrated that they cannot be relived” (McEwan 76). Tallies’s searching for answers about her past caused reappearance of her repressed emotions and memories: it induced Tallies to revise her past actions and her way of thinking. It removed Tallies’s protective shield of self-deception and brought a strong feelings of remorse and unrest.

In *Atonement*, the retired narrator Tallies resumes her content and rather uninteresting life. She came to a point, when she accepted her life as it was, non-special and average, but as she says, peaceable, with no reason to feel regrets about her past. As a narrator, she tries to be honest, but she herself is aware of the unreliability of her memories and admits that she has no evidence to ground her story. For the reader, the clues for Tallies’s unreliability are her unwillingness to recall unpleasant memories or her searching for the reader’s compassion while recalling controversial matter. When a mysterious bequest from Celia’s mother, and with it a corroboration of her past actions, appears on the scene, Tallies is induced to revise her notion of her past. Her feelings and memories from the past which he deliberately forgot reappear. As her self-preserving shell breaks, Tallies is left with feeling of loneliness, remorse, and unrest at the end of the novel.

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