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Postmodernism in Selected Contemporary British Novels

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Abstract

This article critically examines the continuing influence of postmodernism on contemporary British fiction through an analysis of selected novels by Julian Barnes, Salman Rushdie, Jeanette Winterson, and Peter Ackroyd. It investigates how these writers employ postmodern strategies—fragmentation, metafiction, magic realism, non-linear narrative, and intertextuality—to interrogate the constructed nature of history, identity, and reality in a globalized, plural world. Drawing on postmodern literary theory, the study analyses how these texts foreground uncertainty, ambiguity, and cultural fragmentation as defining conditions of late modernity. Barnes's *England, England* satirizes the commodification of national identity through the hyperreal reconstruction of Britain's past; Rushdie's *Two Years, Eight Months and Twenty-Eight Nights* fuses myth and history to question the binaries of reason and faith; Winterson's *The Stone Gods* reconfigures gender and environmental consciousness through a cyclical, non-linear narrative; and Ackroyd's *The Last Testament of Oscar Wilde* exemplifies historiographic metafiction to expose the instability of historical truth. The article concludes that postmodernism remains a vital critical framework for understanding how contemporary British fiction reimagines the relationship among culture, identity, and narrative in the twenty-

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first century, offering alternative epistemologies for an increasingly fragmented and interconnected world.

Keywords: Postmodernism, British Novels, Satire, Magic Realism, Historiographic Metafiction, Fragmentation, Identity

Introduction

Postmodernism is a cultural/intellectual/artistic movement that developed in the mid-20th century to mark a break from the ideas inherent to modernism (Kessi, Shose 1). In contrast to modernism, which valued rationality, progress, and general narratives, postmodernism looked to disrupt these notions, placing a value on ambiguity, multiplicity, and the destruction of traditional boundaries. This literary movement is often regarded as a reaction to the horrors and disillusionment caused by World War II, and the cultural, social, and technological shifts of the time. Postmodernism, therefore, denotes a fundamental skepticism toward the notions of absolute truths, universal narratives, or unidirectional progress, which modernist thinkers prioritized and held as ideals.

Postmodernism in literature is often marked by fragmented narratives, self-referentiality, intertextuality, and blurry distinctions being drawn between fiction and reality (Aryan 3). Another major tenet of postmodernism is its relationship to identity, culture, and history. In contrast to modernist literature, which tends to point toward universal truths and progress, postmodern literature tends to look for and consider the contingency and fluidity of identity, the fractured narratives of culture, and the complexities of historical truth. In this sense, literature is a space through which authors can deconstruct and re-imagine reality by encouraging readers to re-consider what is presented as “truth,” or “reality.” This is especially pertinent when discussing British literature, as postmodern authors wrestle with the changes to national identity in a post-colonial context, as well as global pressures, and the dismantling of traditional political/cultural systems (ISAAC 3).

Research Problem

The importance of analyzing postmodernism in relation to British Literature is in the ability to use postmodern illustrations to expose the multiplicities and contradictions of the very act of constructing a national identity (with a focus on national identity, history and cultural representation). At the generative moment in the postmodern era, British identity was ultimately heralded into a catastrophic collapse based on global events that led to a shift in culture, identity and representation, including (though not limited to) the fall of the British Empire, the emergence of the global citizen, and the use of new technologies. This change has had far-reaching effects on the way British authors address the issues of identity, history, and cultural legacy. British postmodern authors are uniquely suited to tackle these questions, as much of their writing examines how history is produced, how national identities emerge, and

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how these identities are reformulated constantly by social, political, and cultural conditions. By engaging critically with the relationship among reality, fiction, history, and a cultural sense of memory, writers such as Barnes, Rushdie, Winterson, and Ackroyd challenge the reader to reconsider the dependability and production of historical narratives; the fluidness of personal and national identities; and the impact of cultural and political realities on individual subjectivities.

This paper will be focused on how these authors use postmodern literary strategies to dissect and reposition British history and identity. Barnes' *England, England* examines the commodification of history; Rushdie's *Two Years, Eight Months and Twenty-Eight Nights* blends magical realism with historical narrative; Winterson's *The Stone Gods* interrogates environmental devastation in its fragmented, non-linear narrative; and Ackroyd's *The Last Testament of Oscar Wilde* uses historiographic metafiction to explore the fluidness of historical truths. These examples of postmodern literature demonstrate a kind of postmodernism encompassing many of the stylistic devices of postmodernism including fragmentation, irony, satire, metafiction, and magical realism in order to shift reader perspectives or challenge typical definitions of what constitutes reality and truth. As this paper examines how these examples use postmodern strategies to interrogate history and identity, I contend that this will demonstrate some of the affective dimensions of postmodernism in British writing. By doing this, it will illustrate how postmodernism in British literature operates as a literary modality, and as a mechanism through which writers can critique the socio-political landscape of postcolonial Britain and the complex and fluid nature of British national identity.

The purpose of the study

The study will examine the theoretical implications of postmodernism in the works of Julian Barnes, Salman Rushdie, Jeanette Winterson, and Peter Ackroyd. In particular, the study will:

1. Investigate the technique of postmodernism from the selected authors analysis, specifically fragmentation, metafiction, irony, parody and magic realism.
2. Critique authority narrative assumptions through the technique of postmodernism to engage with questions of identity, history, and culture in postcolonial Britain.
3. Explore how the selected novels offer a critique of a unified national identity while engaging with questions of historical representation and commodification of history and cultural memory.
4. Examine how the selected authors engage and critique the socio-political realities of postmodern Britain through common aspects of postmodernism, in particular the decline of the British Empire, multiculturalisation and globalisation.

Contribute to the discourse on postmodernism in British literature by further analysing postmodern techniques. The aim of this research is to perform a close textual analysis of the novels: *England, England*, *Two Years, Eight months and Twenty-Eight Nights*, *The Stone Gods*, and *The Last Testament of Oscar Wilde*, considering the postmodern techniques employed by the authors to investigate the concept of British identity and the representation of history. This

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study will then provide an understanding of how postmodernism has transformed British literature in a contemporary context.

Research Methodology

The research methodology for this project will be predominantly qualitative and use a textual analysis of a particular four postmodern novels. This methodology will be based on a close reading of the texts, which involves focusing on the identification and analysis of the different postmodern techniques such as fragmentation, metafiction, intertextuality, magic realism, and irony.

The analysis will consist of three sections:

The first part of the analysis will involve the identification of the different postmodern techniques utilized by the authors. In this analysis, the postmodern techniques will relate to the key themes of identity, history and cultural representation (Ziani and Abbes 5). For instance, in Barnes' *England, England*, the use of satire and parody will be identified and analyzed for its use as a critique of the commodification/ commercialization of national identity. In Rushdie's *Two Years, Eight Months and Twenty-Eight Nights*, the novel's implementation of magic realism and its intertextual references will be analyzed within its relation to the events of history

The second stage will place these techniques into a broader context of British postmodern literature. Not only will the novels need to be positioned within post-colonial and socio-political realities linked to a postmodern Britain, but also learning of contemporary dilemmas such as the destruction of the formerly established national identities tied to globalization and other multicultural concerns.

In the third stage there will be a comparative analysis of the four novels with clear indication of how each author is exhibiting postmodern techniques in connection to similarly themed subjects. Each text will receive considerable attention to its discrepancies, particularities and similarities in deconstructing identity and history, along with an appropriate overarching assessment of the contribution of the texts to the readers' understanding of the postmodern period in British literature.

The methodology will include a significant survey of secondary literature on postmodern works, British literature and the particular authors selected. The secondary literature will serve to provide context for the theoretical framework of the analysis and overall study, while getting up to date considerations regarding the academic discussion surrounding each author.

Literature Review

British postmodernism became a powerful voice in literature in the late 20th century, as the British figure out the past of empire, the threat of a unified national identity, and the rhythm imposed by multiculturalism and globalization (Gasparyan and Nvard 5). In response to British authors needing to represent their experiences during the changing socio-political situation, the postmodern techniques allowed authors to flip and rethink the national narrative. British postmodernism therefore often reimagines and deconstructs identities of the past (i.e., colonialism), national identity, and cultural fragmentation (Ziani et al., 4).

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The unmaking of the British Empire in the mid-20th century shaped a growing discussion of ideas about national identity and history. Authors such as Salman Rushdie, Jeanette Winterson, and Julian Barnes employ postmodern strategies to analyse the ways that colonialism, immigration, and shifting constructions of cultural belonging have shaped ideas about British identity. British postmodern writing frequently represents the complexities of constructing belonging in a postcolonial, global environment characterized by ever-more porous national borders and transitioning identities that blend and shift.

British postmodernism, then, critiques the myth of a coherent national identity in writing. For example, in Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* (1981), he writes about the intersections between Indian and British identities in the wake of partition and, does so using some elements of magic realism and interrupted narrative forms, comprising the fragmented, multi-ethnic nature of postcolonial India and Britain. The novel frames postcolonial identity as historically marked events, experiences of those events, and autobiographical memory, which perhaps develops the postmodern denial of monocultural national narrative in an even broader sense.

Likewise, in *The Stone Gods* (2007), Winterson writes of the consequences of environmental collapse, technology, and the future in history, undoing some of the more traditional thinking about time / identity / culture and challenges a linear notion of progress (Soares 7). In a framework of life and historicism within a postmodern construct, Winterson examines the instability of cultural, historical, and natural processes by resisting tradition and navigating across futures, natures and technologies.

Barnes is writing about this similarly by critiquing the commercialization of history and commodification of the national identity of England within *England, England* (1998). He also critiques an amusement park, where the entire theme is of "England" with a pledge to recreate British history, stories that are nonetheless very marketable at a contemporary moment. Much like Winterson, Barnes uses a postmodern convention of pastiche, parody, Netflix Docudrama, and metafictionalism to critique memorization and how they have, or the possibilities of the ways, our memories and history, have been hijacked in this notion of consumption and less about national identity in a postmodern and global economy (Valentini 5).

Peter Ackroyd's *The Last Testament of Oscar Wilde* (1983) offers metafictional explanation for the author's revision of the author's final moments of life, engages in both fact and fictionalizing constructions of historical truth and memory (PODROUŽKOVÁ et al., 6). The unreliable narrator, remembrances of Wilde ultimately pushes against historical accounts, through the author's witness methodology, a capacity of rethinking reliability of historicity as the narrative has been recounted.

The take away here is that British postmodernism is critical not only in the historical unravelling of fixed national narratives, but can also offer truly alternative and critical thinking around identity, history, and culture (Kowalik 7). Heller, Morgan and Harvey lay out understandings of complicity and ideas of destiny, yet, British postmodernism contemplates and challenges post-colonialism, globalization and postmodern multi-culturalism, where we

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are at the same time invited to engage in assumptions about who and how cultural memory and knowledge of history comes to our knowing.

Critical Approaches

Applying postmodern theory in British literature has sparked considerable critical discourse in relation to authors such as Julian Barnes, Salman Rushdie, Jeanette Winterson and Peter Ackroyd. Critics have examined how these postmodern authors use various postmodern techniques to challenge established discourses of British identity, history and culture (Fokkema, 9). Due to the complexity and diversity of postmodernism as a literary movement, critics have arrived at different assessments of postmodernism, highlighting differing features, recognizing the slippery and animated nature of the term itself.

In relation to England, England, scholars have focused on Barnes' use of satire, metafiction and irony, to critique the commodification of national identity. Barnes' playful disassembly of Englishness by creating the fictional theme park has consequently commented on the postmodern blending of reality and fiction (Shayanpoor 6). Several critics have drawn on Jean Baudrillard's notion of simulacra, especially his concept of the 'hyperreal,' to understand the novel's reworking of history and national identity. In Baudrillard's influential text, *Simulacra and Simulation* published in 1981, he asserts that in the postmodern world, the separation between the real and simulated has become indistinguishable, as the simulated occasionally appears to be real (Stafford, Andrew 8). In *England, England*, Barnes creates a version of Englishness that is circulated not just as the wrong kind of history, but is marketed to be consumed. In this sense, his depiction of hyperreality is consistent with Baudrillard's theory.

In addition to the postcolonial readings, *Two Years, Eight Months and Twenty-Eight Nights* has also been interpreted as postmodern skepticism of grand narratives and inevitable historical progress. Scholars have pointed out Rushdie's philosophizing, with reason and faith, as a major characteristic of the postmodern disposition of the novel (Fokkema 9). The key conflict in the novel between the rationalist Ibn Rushd (Averroes) and the religiously fundamentalist Ghazali reflects postmodern critiques of totalizing worldviews, as it also illustrates the complexities of rationality and faith. Critics also noted the intertextuality in the novel, pointing out how Rushdie cites a variety of literary, historical, and philosophical materials in order to produce a fragmented and complex narrative. By tapping into so many different traditions, Rushdie is calling into question a cohesive view of the world, an aspect of postmodernism; while, ultimately, rejecting an image of grand universal truth. Jeanette Winterson's *The Stone Gods* has attracted its own level of interest for its examination of environmental themes, gender fluidity, and circularity of history (Fokkema 9).

Critics identified Winterson's use of non-linear narrative structures, which they identify as especially postmodern, to reflect a fragmented, disjointed way to consider contemporary existence. The apocalyptic condition and setting of the novel, in which Earth is uninhabitable, and humanity must go to new planets, indicates a critique of human civilization's hubris and unsustainable practices (Kaplan, 2022). Scholars have engaged with Winterson's critique of

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technological development and environmental destruction with a postmodern stance, looking at how the novel undermines considered practices of human progress and development. Also, Winterson's treatment of gender, especially her gender-fluid character of Billie Crusoe, has sustained feminist and queer critics of the novel (Majoul, 5). These interrogations mark postmodernism's rejection of fixed identity and identity categories, as well as the novel's challenge against gender and sexuality as binary categories.

Ackroyd's use of the unreliable narrator has also excited further critical interest because Wilde's journal is a subjective recounting of the author's emotionally charged life. Critics have pointed out that the novel's subversion of Wilde's subjectivity as an unreliable narrator allows readers to engage with the question of the reliability and representative form all historical accounts take -which, consistent with the idea of postmodernism that truth is always something that is mediated in relation to subjectivity and interpretation. In this way, Ackroyd's novel participates in a larger postmodern critique of historical representation, being working towards how history never is but rather always becomes subjective in relation to who is writing it.

Gaps and Areas for Further Exploration

While there has been substantial critical engagement with the postmodern components of each of these novels, there are some areas for further exploration. First, we need to have more comparative studies between the authors on their engagement with the central postmodern themes related to identity, history, and representation of culture. Studies have investigated each author's unique work but perhaps we can do more to integrate the themes of how Barnes, Rushdie, Winterson, and Ackroyd tackle postmodernism when examining British identity and history.

Second, there has been little to no work being done to explore the environmental and gender considerations of postmodernism in Winterson's *The Stone Gods* and there are many entries still being conceptualized in postcolonial studies of Rushdie's work. Future research can elaborate on the intersection of Winterson's critique of ecological collapse with postmodern fragmentation and multiplicities as well as the resultant critique of narrative linearity.

Finally, as presented in Ackroyd's historiographic metafiction, there are many more gaps when it comes to a further investigation of Wilde's life in relationship to the nature of queer identity and historical truth. Future work might consider how Ackroyd and Wilde's sexual identity clash with the critique in postmodernism of identity construction, memory and plurality of historical narrative.

Research Methodology

The study employs qualitative analysis of literature to investigate how British authors utilize postmodern characteristics, such as fragmentation, metafiction, irony, pastiche, and magic realism, to explore identity, history, and culture. This research is grounded in three significant theories: Postmodern Literary Theory, Narratology, and Cultural Studies. Postmodern Literary Theory is significant in illuminating how contemporary authors associated with postmodernism reject previous or antiquated fixed definitions of truth and

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identity. The philosophers Lyotard, Jameson, and Hutcheon all assert that postmodern literature distinguishes between grand narratives and personal narratives, complicating reality for the reader. These ideas will guide the examination of how British authors portray the uncertainty and plurality of identity in the contemporary globalized world.

Narratology focuses more on how an author tells the story. This study will focus on how authors employ unreliable narration, non-linear time, and amplified dialogue to create confusion and compel readers to question what is real. The concepts of unreliable narration and non-linear time can shed light on how narrative strategies reflect the complexity of identity and history; these narrative strategies also signify what it means to be a contemporary global citizen.

Cultural Studies attempts to connect literature and society. Cultural Studies can illuminate how some stories speak to social and political social issues in a post-colonial British context multiculturalism as it intersects with national identity and the legacy of the empire. These insights can help to illuminate how literature has responded to contemporary social problems.

The analysis also draws upon key concepts associated with postmodern literature, such as intertextuality (the sense that one story mimics another), self-reflexivity (stories that are self-conscious or know they are a story), and pastiche (writing in the old style in a new way). These concepts illustrate how a writer approaches tension to play with meaning and interrogate truth and authorship.

Selected Novels:

- ***England, England* by Julian Barnes:** employs satire and metafiction to illustrate how English history and identity are commodified.
- ***Two Years, Eight Months and Twenty-Eight Nights* by Salman Rushdie:** addresses issues of faith, reason, and multicultural identity associated with magic realism.
- ***The Stone Gods* by Jeanette Winterson:** raises questions related to gender, technology, and the environment, as it employs a fragmented style of narrative.
- ***The Last Testament of Oscar Wilde* by Peter Ackroyd:** entails a mixing of fiction and history, which serves to interrogate truth and the making of myths.

Data Collection

The study employs close reading, which means the reading of the selected text for the purpose of understanding detail that is revealed in the language, characters, and structure of the selected text. The study also incorporates secondary material, or secondary sources, such as academic work about postmodernism and cultural theory to assist with presenting literary analysis.

Analysis Process

Each selected novel will then be examined for terminology and narrative style characteristic of postmodernism in order to identify the five literary components:

- ***Fragmentation:*** narratives that are inconsistent and broken, which demonstrate confusion and transitions in identity.

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- **Metafiction:** literature that presents or reminds the reader that they are consuming fiction.
- **Irony and Pastiche:** literature that attempts to humorously ridicule or provide commentary as a multi-vocal text to 'mimic' the aesthetics of historical periods.
- **Magic Realism:** literature that combines the real with the unreal or fantastic to question reason.
- **The Rejection of Grand Narratives:** literature that presents several small truths instead of a singular truth.

To summarize, the study employs postmodern theory to analyze how British authors illustrate identity and history in new forms through their creative writing abilities. The novels considered in this study reflect a contemporary Britain defined by the tensions between the imaginative and the real, the local and global, and the old and new.

Discussion and Analysis

The postmodern novel challenges conventional views of identity, history, and truth. In this literary tradition, grand narratives are questioned, following the postmodernist theorists, where truth is subjective and identity is flexible within a rapidly changing and multifaceted modern world. The questioning of identity can be clearly seen in writers such as Julian Barnes, Salman Rushdie, Jeanette Winterson, and Peter Ackroyd who engage with a variety of postmodern techniques of fiction, including fragmentation, metafiction, irony, magic realism, and non-linear narratives, to question and deconstruct British cultural and national identity.

In Julian Barnes' *England, England* (1998), Barnes critiques British national identity in imagining a place on the Isle of Wight that resembles a theme park with a commodified and idealized version of British history. This hyperreal backyard distills a complex history into simple attraction which then becomes consumable images of history in place of historical history. The site itself also parallels the possibilities of commodifying national identity. Barnes also engages with fragmentation in the text, with a disjointed narrative that speaks to the disjointed experience of daily life of contemporary Britons and arguably, its national identity. The text uses metafiction to construct history and identity. It shows that narratives constructed in different manners for different purposes, generally commercially. Satire and parody evoke distraught at reducing national identity, broadly speaking, to commodifiable spectacle in one manner or another.

In Salman Rushdie's *Two Years, Eight Months and Twenty-Eight Nights* (2015) Rushdie employs magic realism to interrogate the fine line between reality and imagination. In certain aspects, he advances concepts in the novel when he suggests the character of jinn is the sufficient vehicle will interrogate the boundaries of rational discourse and rationality. Rushdie can also be read to question the ideals of the Enlightenment signalled through rational discourse, specifically that not every human experience cannot be fully captured within the boundedness of our rational discourse and rational thought. The text presents a balanced presentation of fictional works that combine myth and history to reveal that all information,

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whether about reality or fantasy, is constructed by social conventions. The interplay between myth and history raises the question of the extent to which either of these concepts are fixed.

Jeanette Winterson's *The Stone Gods* (2007) introduces a gender-fluid character, Billie Crusoe, as part of the creation of a transgender identity out of rigid conventional designs that impose limits on possibilities. Specifically, Billie's fluidity functions as a manifestation of the postmodern understanding of identity, or selfhood, which will always be fluctuating and never a settled concept. In the companion novels, the cyclic view of history implies that humans will repeat their destructive consequences because of civilization's failure to learn from the past. The skillful criticism of history in this novel implies a repudiation toward a linear, progressive view of history and adequately represents the critique of historical notions of progress by showing how the human inability to learn from their mistakes will lead the planet into another environmental disaster.

Peter Ackroyd's *The Last Testament of Oscar Wilde* (1983) employs historiographic metafiction that blends a close approximation of historical facts with a fictionalized recounting of the events. By composing a fictionalized journal of Oscar Wilde's decline in years, there is an implicit challenge to the truth-values of history, as Ackroyd chronicles events as told by figures of history. The memoir departs from accepted stories of history, as it postures a subjective retelling of an engagement as fact, but which accurately describes early biography as unreliable evidence of history, per standard history's rejection of its unreliable distillation of human events. This phenomenon advances the view that history is destined to be misleading and unreliable due to ways in which people have created it as biased and misrepresented throughout history.

Nonetheless, it should also be mentioned that despite some of their differences, all four authors proposed engagement through some interpretive process or lens that attempts to disassemble existing traditional narratives of identity and history. These novels present disassembling identity or history that is fragmented, and often employed techniques associated with metafiction or magic realism. The reality of thinking through a postmodern lens that denies any grand narrative exposes the multifaceted trajectories of human experience and the quest for identity. Postmodernism engages with perspectives of the fluid nature of inquiry and respect for subjectivity with history and culture as contracts built by members of every culture. These fictional narratives serve to display instability of national identity and history within the alternative modernity of colonialism, globalization, and postcolonial elements of identity and history that are in constant flux.

The relevance of postmodernism continues to express loud, distinctive voice in the modern era; therefore, writers have the tools to walk through the maze of identity, history, and reality or truth in a fragmented world. From postmodern theorists, reality or truth is presented as nonexistent, rather a people construct their very own version through some expressed subjectivity. Postmodern discourse recognizes the subjectivity to humanity, the culture, history, identity, and language. Contemporary literature continues to avow the application of

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postmodernism as a productive lens to understand and capture the shifting fringes of culture, identity, and power within the constructs of globalization.

Conclusion

In conclusion, postmodernism, a literary and cultural movement beginning in the mid-twentieth century, has greatly influenced British literature in the twenty-first century. Julian Barnes, Salman Rushdie, Jeanette Winterson, and Peter Ackroyd exemplify some of the ways postmodernism engages with, critiques, and ultimately questions the construction of national identity, history, and reality. These authors (along with numerous others) rely on metafiction, fragmentation, magic realism, and non-linear narrative sequences to demonstrate the manufactured nature of culture, fluidity of identity, and pliable nature of historical truths. This research has shown just how far these authors are willing to deconstruct cultural, social, and historical texts to offer readers alternative means of engaging with the fabricated nature of identity, and the unpredictable, malleable identity of the fragmented world we, as readers, occupy.

Julian Barnes, Salman Rushdie, Jeanette Winterson, and Peter Ackroyd have all moved British literature into the postmodern tradition, and all writers have moved in their own way. Each is a contributor to postmodernism through their respective narrative techniques, using fragmentation, metafiction, magic realism, and non-linear narratives to variously critique traditional narratives of national identity, historical truth, and reality. By critiquing various cultural and historical narratives collectively, these writers are providing readers with new vistas of understanding to consider in relation to the fluidity of identity, the issue of subjectivity in history and multiplicity of perspectives, and the emotional complexities of living in a fractured world. The academic literary community may move through a series of literary theories, but the provisional nature of postmodernism remains significant to our understanding of identity, culture, and history as it operates in the world and in a globalized and increasingly connected world.

The study of this text too has shown the continuing relevance of postmodernism today and how it offers continual new insights into the fractured nature of reality, identity, and truth. Future inquiries into authors, the digital age, and intersecting postmodernism to themes of environment and politics will continue to ascertain the value of postmodernism and contextualize how it operates in the totality of literary and cultural discourse in the 21st century.

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