RESEARCH PAPER

Fragmented Narratives and Identity Formation: Memory, Voice, and Power in Contemporary English Literature

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Abstract

This paper examines how contemporary English-language fiction uses narrative fragmentation to represent identity formation along three axes: memory (how the self is reconstructed from the past), voice (who is allowed to narrate), and power (who is published, rewarded, and read). It reads three Booker-recognised novels closely: *Midnight's Children* (1981, winner), *Never Let Me Go* (2005, shortlisted) and *Girl, Woman, Other* (2019, joint winner). Each is set against empirical benchmarks. These include experimental findings on memory distortion (a 32% false-report rate for non-existent broken glass under a leading question), Spread the Word's survey of 203 UK novelists, the CLPE's annual representation counts (4% of 9,115 children's books in 2017 versus 24% in 2024), and sales data around the 2019 Booker. The analysis finds that the three novels fragment form for different identity work. Rushdie fragments chronology, Ishiguro fragments disclosure, and Evaristo fragments the point of view. Market data shows that the fragmented voices of minoritised writers gain visibility mainly after institutional consecration. The paper concludes that fragmentation is both an aesthetic strategy and a measurable marker of unequal access to narration.

Keywords: Fragmented narrative, identity formation, memory, postmemory, polyphony, postcolonial literature, publishing diversity, Booker Prize.

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I. Introduction

Narrative identity theory holds that a person's sense of self is not a fixed possession. It is an ongoing story assembled from remembered events [1]–[3]. If that is correct, then narrative form is a model of selfhood and not only a vehicle for it. A coherent, chronological, single-voiced narrative implies a coherent, stable self. A narrative that breaks, doubles back, withholds or splits among many speakers implies a self that is contingent, contested or incomplete.

Contemporary English literature, meaning fiction written in English in Britain and by writers connected to its former empire, has produced a large body of such fragmented narratives. Three concerns recur in it. The first is memory: whether the past can be recovered, and who controls its telling. The second is voice: who narrates and from what position. The third is power: the institutions that decide which narrations are printed, marketed and honoured. These concerns are usually treated separately. Memory studies discuss trauma and postmemory [1], [2]. Postcolonial theory discusses voice and subalternity [4]–[6]. Sociology of publishing discusses access [15], [16]. This paper reads them together.

The paper asks three questions.

- **RQ1.** How does each of the three selected novels use fragmentation to represent the formation of identity through memory?
- **RQ2.** How does the shift from a single unreliable narrator to a polyphonic structure change the representation of identity?
- **RQ3.** What does quantitative evidence about publishing and reception show about the conditions under which fragmented, minoritised voices become visible?

The argument is that fragmentation is not one device with one meaning. In the three novels it operates on three different levels, and the level on which it operates corresponds to the kind of identity problem each author addresses.

II. Theoretical Framework

A. Memory, trauma and postmemory

Caruth's account of trauma describes an experience that is not fully registered when it happens and returns belatedly in repetitive, fragmentary forms [1]. For literary analysis the consequence is that a text which circles, interrupts or withholds can be read as enacting the structure of the experience it reports. Hirsch extended this to the generation that did not live through the events. She defines postmemory as the relation of the second generation to experiences that preceded their births but were transmitted so powerfully, through stories, images and behaviour, that they seem to constitute memories in their own right [2]. Nora's distinction between lived memory and the institutional "sites of memory" that replace it once lived memory declines is a useful complement. It points to the role of archives, prizes and canons in deciding what is retained [3]. Ricoeur adds an ethical dimension: remembering, forgetting and testimony are tied to the question of who has the right and the capacity to narrate [7].

B. Cognitive evidence that memory is reconstructive

Literary representations of unreliable memory are consistent with experimental findings. Bartlett showed in 1932 that recalled stories drift toward the rememberer's schemas [25]. Loftus and Palmer demonstrated that the verb used in a question alters remembered events [8]. In their first experiment, 45 students watched film clips of traffic accidents. Those asked how fast the cars were going when they "smashed" gave a mean estimate of about 40.8 mph, while those asked about cars that "contacted" gave about 31.8 mph. In the second experiment, 150 students returned a week later and were asked whether they had seen broken glass, although there was none. In the "smashed" condition 32% (16 of 50) said yes, against 14% (7 of 50) in the "hit" condition and 12% (6 of 50) among controls [8]. Schacter's taxonomy of memory's "seven sins" (transience, absent-mindedness, blocking, misattribution, suggestibility, bias and persistence) provides a vocabulary for the specific failures that literary narrators dramatise [9]. McAdams's work on life stories shows that adults organise their identity through narrative accounts that are selectively edited [26].

C. Voice, hybridity and subalternity

Hall describes cultural identity as a matter of "becoming" as much as "being", continually produced through difference and representation [5]. Bhabha's concept of hybridity and the "third space" frames the postcolonial subject as constituted in between cultures [6]. Spivak's question about whether the subaltern can speak concerns the structural conditions under which speech from marginal positions is heard at all [4]. Rushdie's own account of migrant writing treats the fragmentary, partial nature of remembered homelands as a resource and not a deficiency [11]. Taken together, these positions imply that a text's formal handling of voice is also a statement about who has been able to claim the right to narrate.

III. Methodology

The study uses a qualitative, comparative close-reading design supplemented by secondary quantitative data. Three novels were selected on four criteria: (1) written in English and centrally concerned with identity formation; (2) built on a formally fragmented narrative; (3) recognised by the Booker Prize, so that all three can be compared against the same institutional benchmark; and (4) separated in time (1981, 2005, 2019), to allow comparison across four decades.

Each novel was analysed on four dimensions: narrative structure, the memory mode represented (reconstruction, withholding or collective inheritance), the identity axis at stake (national, institutional or intersectional), and the institutional reception. Secondary data was drawn from three kinds of source: experimental psychology [8], industry and sector reports [15]–[17], and press reports of prize and sales outcomes [18]–[23].

The method has limits. A three-text corpus supports analytic claims, not generalisations about "contemporary English literature" as a whole. Sales figures from different outlets are not strictly comparable. The CLPE data covers children's books (ages 3–11), so it is an indicator of the pipeline for representation and not a direct measure of adult literary fiction. The paper uses it with that restriction in mind.

IV. Results and Discussion

A. Memory-distortion benchmarks and their literary counterparts

Table 1 sets the experimental findings alongside the literary mechanism they most closely resemble.

Table 1. Empirical memory findings and corresponding narrative mechanisms

Finding	Source	Data	Literary analogue
Wording of a question alters speed estimates	[8]	"Smashed" ≈ 40.8 mph vs "contacted" ≈ 31.8 mph (n = 45)	Narrator's diction shapes the reader's picture of events
Leading question induces a false memory	[8]	32% vs 14% vs 12% reporting non-existent glass (n = 150)	Saleem's incorrect "facts" that become part of his history

Recall drifts toward schemas	[25]	Qualitative (serial reproduction)	Stevens's self-justifying account of service
Seven categories of memory failure	[9]	Taxonomy	Kathy H.'s selective recall and blocking
Identity organised as edited life story	[26]	Narrative-identity framework	Polyphonic life stories in *Girl, Woman, Other*

The point of the comparison is not that novelists apply psychological findings. It is that the literary narrators in the corpus display the same kinds of distortion that the experiments quantify, and that they do so with a specific identity function.

B. *Midnight's Children*: fragmenting chronology to narrate a nation

Saleem Sinai, born at the moment of Indian independence, narrates his life and that of the nation as intertwined, addressing a listener (Padma) while his body literally cracks [10]. The novel is organised in three books and thirty chapters, but its chronology is deliberately unstable. Saleem acknowledges his own errors, including his misplacement of historical events, and then continues without correcting the telling. This is a clear case of what Table 1 identifies as reconstructive memory. Errors are not removed from the record. They become part of the identity being narrated.

Rushdie's essay on "imaginary homelands" supplies the interpretive key. For the migrant, memory is necessarily partial, and the text that results is a reconstruction of a lost place, not a restoration [11]. Saleem's fragmentation operates on the national axis: the body and the nation both fracture, and the fractures are the evidence of their formation. The relation to postmemory [2] is indirect but important, since the novel's cohort of "midnight's children" inherit a historical event as a personal destiny.

Institutional reception shows how completely the novel was consecrated. It won the Booker Prize in 1981, the special "Booker of Bookers" in 1993, and the public-vote "Best of the Booker" in 2008. In the last, it took 36% of the votes from roughly 7,800 to 8,000 participants, choosing among six former winners [20], [21]. By the standard of Nora's sites of memory [3], a novel about a contested national memory has itself become a site of memory.

C. *Never Let Me Go*: fragmenting disclosure to narrate institutional identity

Ishiguro's novel is narrated in three parts by Kathy H., a former pupil of an English boarding school, Hailsham, who recalls her childhood and early adulthood [12]. The fragmentation here is not chronological in Rushdie's flamboyant manner. It is a fragmentation of disclosure. Kathy tells us things at the pace she can bear to, circling around the fact that she and her friends are clones raised to provide organs. In Schacter's terms, her narration shows blocking and bias [9]. The reader assembles the truth from implication, and this assembly replicates the way the characters themselves half-know their situation.

The identity problem is institutional. The characters' selves are formed by Hailsham's curriculum, its rules and the narrative it gives them about themselves. The fragmented memory is therefore an ethical statement: it dramatises how a person can know and not know the conditions of her own existence. Ishiguro has said that he is drawn to memory because a remembered scene is blurred at the edges, layered with emotion and open to manipulation [23]. *The Remains of the Day* (1989), which won the Booker and is described in press reports as a million-seller, uses the same device with the butler Stevens, whose account of his service justifies his past [13], [23]. *Never Let Me Go* was shortlisted for the Booker in 2005, and Ishiguro received the 2017 Nobel Prize in Literature, with the Swedish Academy citing his uncovering of the illusory sense of connection with the world beneath everyday experience [23].

D. *Girl, Woman, Other*: fragmenting the point of view to narrate intersectional identity

Evaristo's novel distributes narration among twelve central characters, mostly Black British women, whose ages run from their teens to their nineties [14]. It runs to roughly 450 pages and uses a distinctive form that Evaristo has called fusion fiction, with minimal conventional punctuation and prose that is poetic in rhythm. The fragmentation here operates on voice. No single narrator controls the account, and the characters' lives intersect in ways they only partly know themselves.

Where Saleem's incompleteness is the failing of one narrator and Kathy's is the limit of one narrator's candour, Evaristo's is structural. Identity is composed from many accounts, which fits Hall's view that identity is produced through difference and not given in advance [5]. It also responds to Spivak's question [4] in an unusual way. The novel does not speak for a subaltern group through a single representative. It gives the group many internally different speakers. The judges of the 2019 Booker described the book as a "strategy against invisibility" in the report of one commentator, and the formal choice supports that reading [19], [22].

The comparative summary is given in Table 2.

Table 2. Comparative summary of the three novels

Feature	*Midnight's Children* (1981)	*Never Let Me Go* (2005)	*Girl, Woman, Other* (2019)
Fragmentation level	Chronology	Disclosure	Point of view
Narrator structure	Single, openly fallible	Single, selectively candid	Twelve central characters
Memory mode	Reconstruction with admitted error	Blocking and bias	Intersecting life stories
Identity axis	National / postcolonial	Institutional / ethical	Intersectional / diasporic
Booker status	Winner (1981); Booker of Bookers (1993); Best of the Booker (2008)	Shortlisted	Joint winner
Key reference	[10], [11]	[12]	[14]

E. Power: the data on who is published and recognised

The close readings leave the question of power, which RQ3 addresses with quantitative evidence.

Industry access. *Writing the Future*, a 2015 report commissioned by Spread the Word, polled 203 UK-based published novelists. Thirty per cent were from Black, Asian or minority ethnic backgrounds. Among them, 53% of BAME authors were without a literary agent against 37% of white authors [15]. The report concluded that the industry's weak commitment to diversity risked making it culturally irrelevant. A later academic study based on more than 100 interviews with authors, agents, editors and marketers, *Rethinking 'Diversity' in Publishing*, argued that production processes themselves, and not only the composition of the workforce, can disadvantage writers of colour [16].

Representation in the pipeline. The CLPE's annual survey provides a time series. In 2017, of 9,115 children's books published in the UK, 391 (about 4%) featured a Black, Asian or minority ethnic character, and only 1% had one as the main character [17]. Table 3 shows subsequent figures from the reports available.

Table 3. Children's books with racially minoritised characters (UK, CLPE survey)

Year published	Books with a minoritised character	Books with a minoritised main character
2017	4%	1%
2018	7%	4%
2020	15%	8%
2021	20%	9%
2023	17%	7%
2024	24%	24%

Source: CLPE Reflecting Realities reports [17]. Figures for 2019 (10% any character) and 2022 (14% main character) are reported in the same series but omitted here where both columns were not available.

The series shows a sixfold rise in the share of books with a minoritised character between 2017 and 2024. It also shows non-linearity: the share fell from 20% (2021) to 17% (2023), and the main-character share dropped to 7% in 2023 before reaching 24% in 2024 [17]. The data supports the claim that representation can be reversed as well as advanced.

Consecration and sales. The sales data around *Girl, Woman, Other* shows the role of institutional recognition. Before the 2019 ceremony, the novel had been on sale for five months and had sold 4,391 copies. Five days after the win, its total reached 10,371, so roughly 5,980 copies were sold in that window, taking cumulative sales to about 2.4 times the pre-prize figure [19]. The Bookseller reported 21,050 hardback sales on Nielsen BookScan and translation rights sold in 21 territories shortly afterwards [18]. Later biographical sources state that it has sold over a million copies in English [24]. Evaristo, the first Black woman and first Black British person to win the prize, joined Margaret Atwood in the third shared award in the prize's history [22]. Her own comment, reported in the same profile, that the book is "only a Booker Prize book because it won the Booker" captures the mechanism [19].

Table 4. Selected reception data

Item	Figure	Source
Girl, Woman, Other sales before Booker (5 months)	4,391	[19]
Sales five days after Booker	10,371	[19]
Increase in total	≈ 2.4×	calculated from [19]

Translation rights sold shortly after win	21 territories	[18]
Midnight's Children vote share, Best of the Booker 2008	36% (≈ 7,800–8,000 voters)	[20], [21]
Spread the Word: BAME authors without agent	53% vs 37% (white)	[15]

V. Discussion

Three findings follow from the analysis.

First, fragmentation is level-specific. The three novels do not share a single technique. Rushdie's fragmenting of chronology suits a national identity that has a contested origin story. Ishiguro's fragmenting of disclosure suits an institutional identity whose limits the subject cannot fully see. Evaristo's fragmenting of the point of view suits an intersectional identity that no single voice could stand for. This answers RQ1 and RQ2: the movement from the single fallible narrator to the polyphonic structure changes the identity claim from "this is my incomplete memory" to "identity is plural and relational."

Second, the narrators' distortions are patterned, not random. Table 1 shows that the literary narrators exhibit the categories of error that experiments quantify. The key difference is function. In the laboratory, a distorted memory is a defect to be measured. In the novels, it is the means by which identity is constructed, since the narrators' errors reveal what they need the past to have been.

Third, visibility depends on institutions. The data in Section IV-E shows that the conditions for minoritised voices to reach readers are measurable and unevenly distributed. Fewer BAME authors have agents [15]. Representation in the publishing pipeline has risen but not monotonically [17]. A single prize can more than double a title's sales in five days [19]. This is consistent with Nora's argument that institutions select which memories persist [3], and with Spivak's argument that the ability to be heard depends on structural conditions and not on the quality of the speech [4].

The three findings connect. The polyphonic form of *Girl, Woman, Other* is partly a response to an earlier lack of access: a novel that gives voice to twelve women is also a corrective to a market in which such voices were less often published. The consecration data shows the corrective working, but also that it relied on an external event.

VI. Limitations and Future Research

The corpus is small and prize-selected, which biases it toward works the establishment already endorses. Works that were never published, or were published without recognition, cannot appear in such a study; this is the survivorship problem that Spivak's question implies [4]. The quantitative data is drawn from secondary reports and press accounts, and some figures (for instance, sales) differ in how and when they were measured. The CLPE series concerns children's books. Future work should do four things:

- extend the corpus to include non-prize-listed and independent-press fiction;
- use adult-fiction data (title counts by author background) in place of children's data;
- test whether prize-related sales effects are comparable across winners of different backgrounds;
- test the reader side directly, for example with comprehension and empathy measures for polyphonic versus single-narrator texts.

VII. Conclusion

This paper has argued that fragmented narrative in contemporary English fiction is a means of constructing identity, and that the level at which a text fragments corresponds to the kind of identity it constructs. Rushdie's fragmented chronology builds a national identity from admittedly unreliable memory. Ishiguro's fragmented disclosure shows an institutional identity that is known and not known at once. Evaristo's fragmented point of view builds an intersectional identity out of many speakers. The reconstructive-memory evidence of Loftus and Palmer (32% false reports of glass under a leading question, against 12% among controls) shows that such distortion is a normal property of memory, which the novels employ as a resource [8].

The market evidence adds a condition. The same fragmented, plural voices reach readers at scale mostly after institutional recognition: *Girl, Woman, Other* sold 4,391 copies in five months and 5,980 more in the five days after the Booker [19], and the share of UK children's books with minoritised main characters ranged between 1% and 24% across 2017–2024 [17]. Fragmentation in these novels is therefore an aesthetic strategy and also evidence of who has had access to narration.

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