

ERASED AND DISPLACED IDENTITIES IN S.J WATSON'S***BEFORE I GO TO SLEEP*****Arockia Jessy Sephin S.**

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Watson's *Before I Go to Sleep* is a psychological thriller that examines the theme of erased and displaced identities, primarily through its protagonist, Christine. Due to anterograde amnesia, she wakes up each day with no recollection of her past, making her sense of identity unstable and vulnerable to external influence. She is trapped in a cycle of forgetting and relearning, forced to reconstruct herself based on the fragmented memories she gathers. The theme of identity displacement is central to the novel, as she is not only erased from her own past but also assigned a false identity. This paper explores the erasure of Christine's identity due to amnesia and Mike's deliberate displacement of her real identity with a false one. Her eventual resistance and effort to reconstruct her true self by analysing these aspects, this paper highlights how *Before I Go to Sleep* represents identity as something both fragile and resilient, capable of being erased but also reclaimed through persistence and self-awareness.

Keywords: Anterograde amnesia, identity, displacement, reconstruction.

Identity is an essential part of human existence, shaped by experiences, memories, and personal relationships. It gives individuals a sense of self-continuity, allowing them to understand who they are in relation to their past and present. S.J. Watson's *Before I Go to Sleep* presents an unsettling answer to these questions. Christine, the novel's protagonist, suffers from a severe form of amnesia that erases her memories each night, leaving her waking up every morning without any knowledge of her past. This condition renders her identity unstable, as she is unable to maintain a coherent sense of self over time. As a result, she must rely on others to tell her who she is, making her highly susceptible to deception. This makes her a prime target for manipulation and identity displacement. Her supposed husband, Mike, fabricates a false version of Christine's identity, controlling the information she receives. By doing so, he ensures that she remains trapped in a carefully constructed illusion, unable to challenge the narrative he imposes on her.

The novel's central conflict revolves around Christine's attempt to reclaim her lost identity, uncover the truth, and break free from the cycle of deception. This paper explores the theme of erased and displaced identities in the novel, focusing on three key elements — the erasure of Christine's identity due to memory loss, the displacement of her true self by an imposed, fabricated identity, her eventual resistance and effort to reconstruct her past and reclaim her autonomy. Through this analysis, *Before I Go to Sleep* offers a chilling examination of identity as something that can be stolen, reshaped, and ultimately reclaimed.

S. J. Watson, the author of the award-winning novel *Before I Go to Sleep*, takes the memory out of Christine's life to point out how an individual would be without remembering. Besides losing memories, an individual loses their independence, self-control and even their real families. It is underlined in the novel that having memory makes people independent; without memory, people do not have identity and life, and they have no control over themselves; lastly, without memory, people have no goals and no meaning in life. The story emphasises that remembering and having a memory is gaining independence.

Christine suffers from amnesia and she endeavours to reconstruct her identity by recording a journal of her memories. As a literary device, amnesia can blur time and memory, thereby expanding the scope of the unreliable narrator. Christine cannot reconcile who she was before the accident and who she is now because of her amnesia, which forces her to redefine who she is all the time. While exploring memory and identity, the story aids individuals in understanding themselves, as Christine does. She begins questioning her sanity as she wonders about her memories and their reasons.

People with anterograde amnesia suffer from loss of personal identity, which causes problems about self and authentic identity, and it is seen in the novel *Before I Go to Sleep*. As a storytelling device, it is technically anterograde amnesia that permits the creation of new memories but erases the previous ones every night. Amnesia is also a highly valued plot device used in literature worldwide, and it is a fiction novel of postmodern sensibility. As Melley suggests:

Narratives about amnesia seem to reflect the postmodern condition: the fragmentation of the self into parts not available to consciousness or memory; the inability to distinguish between authentic memories and

simulations; and the difficulty of finding sound correspondences between past events and narratives that purport to describe those events. (107)

This is what Christine experiences. She has some moments as records, but they all must be justified. The reader tries to combine the pieces to understand the whole story and experiences the same hesitation until the end. Christine and the reader have to rely on individual memory as a record, but it is not easy to believe in it.

As a plot device, amnesia disrupts the story's linear progression and the lives of its characters. Memory loss and its fractured nature aligns with postmodern trends, challenging established hierarchies. However, it is essential to note that amnesia fiction is not always postmodern. Amnesia is a flexible literary device that can be used outside of postmodern literature in various genres. A piece of art does not automatically become postmodern simply because it employs amnesia; rather, it depends on how the theme is investigated, dissected, or incorporated into the larger story and thematic concerns of the piece.

The novel *Before I Go to Sleep* presents postmodern elements such as fragmentation, deconstruction, identity constructed by society and hyper-reality. The story includes fragmented narratives because amnesia disrupts the linear flow of Christine's life and memories. Besides, as in other postmodern works, the novel emphasises that the protagonist, Christine, must rebuild her identity with the help of other people around her since she does not know herself. As the society itself, they have the opportunity to shape her identity.

Christine's amnesiac situation contributes to the deconstruction of her narration. Also, the novel explores the reconstruction of the realities of Christine's past and her life. As is seen in postmodern stories, amnesia creates the opportunity for unexpected story turns that blur the realities even at the end of the story. Watson succeeds in making this effect in the story because, in the end, the reader questions Christine's happy ending, which can be an invented story for her. The surprising endings or mysterious events are not the only reasons that attract attention.

Saliba Salman states that “amnesia has a de-centring drive and can shift emphasis to the social periphery” (2). When someone loses their identity, they must be reshaped and reconstructed by society and other external forces. It is the same for both personal identity and national identity. The novel that is the subject of this study deals with personal identity, and it highlights that amnesia is a weakness because remembering gives people the power to shape and save their identity. As Bartkevicius claims, since we live in an age of information (222), forgetfulness is a sign of weakness, and it is seen as vulnerability and remembering is to overcome death and grief.

However, it is also possible to see amnesia as a gift in other literature, especially when the characters have deep griefs and traumas hidden in their past. According to this, the characters who can overcome amnesia in the end prove themselves, and amnesia contributes to their character development. After regaining their identity, they become aware of what they have and who they are. In this way, they may be grateful for their life.

As cited by Tougaw, “memory and identity are entangled with each other” (3). Watson reveals it in his novel by creating an amnesiac character who has no memories and does not know who she is. Memory is the most crucial factor that constructs the most significant part of the identity. Judgements, decisions, behaviours, and thoughts are all related to identity. As a literary device, amnesia can create tension and transform a story into a quest. The amnesic character queries, questions, and assesses evidence to regain their sense of self. A person experiences changes because of a lost identity, including the chance to reflect on and evaluate their previous life. Buñuel, a famous filmmaker famous for his films about his patients, claims that:

You have to begin to lose your memory if only in bits and pieces, to realise that memory is what makes our lives. Life without memory is no life at all . . . Our memory is our coherence, our reason, our feeling, even our action. Without it, we are nothing.... (4)

The novel *Before I Go to Sleep* supports his claim, which exemplifies and offers a detailed exploration of elements of identity such as age, gender, physical attributes, personality, beliefs, and profession that remain when memory is lost. A new world is built around the amnesiac people. It tells the story of a woman who loses her identity and tries to rebuild it with the help of a partner, a doctor, and a journal she records daily. All

of them are constructed by others. Christine, wakes up with no memories every day, and what she records in her journal starts with what the man who claims to be her husband tells her, and she is called by her doctor every day to remind her she's keeping a journal and tells her where she can find it.

People with amnesia have to rely on others to construct their identity. In this novel, Christine has two different identities. One is built by the man who claims to be her husband, Ben. He is the man with whom she cheated on her real husband and then tried to break up. Because of her amnesia, she is not aware of this fact. On the other hand, Dr Nesh wants her to remember everything and gain independence by recording her memories and feelings.

According to the identity her partner tries to construct, Christine is a woman who lives happily with her husband, Ben. He is passionate and caring towards her. Before the car accident, she was working as a secretary, and years after the accident, her son, whom she does not remember now, was killed in the war in Afghanistan. After she lost her memory, her best friend moved to New Zealand, so she has no friends. A lot of evidence and photographs of her past were destroyed in a fire in the house they used to live in. When she asks why she has not seen a doctor, her husband tells her that they have tried everything, but her condition will not improve. Thus, this man is the only person in her life and, therefore, the only source of information about her past.

According to the second identity she is reconstructing by recording a journal, Christine is an amnesiac who strives to rebuild her identity with the help of the man who claims to be her husband. This man is not her husband, but her ex-boyfriend with whom she has cheated on her husband, and this man attacked her and caused amnesia when she wanted to break up. Thanks to Christine's diary, she regains her memory and learns that she is a novelist. She was writing her second novel just before the attack. She also knows she has a son who lives in another city due to his job. As she is told, she is not alone. She has a very close friend who lives in the same town. This friend reveals that the man she lives with is not her husband, Ben. She has been deceived.

The other critical point that is highlighted in the novel is amnesiac people's paranoia and anxiety. Not being aware of the reality of their own identity and the life they had before causes paranoia. At the novel's beginning, Christine and the reader know that she is a married woman who spends her time at home with no responsibilities

or duties. Christine says she lives as animals do: “...an animal. Living from moment to moment, day to day, trying to make sense of the world” (316). As Christine assembles her facts, readers can relate to her confused and uncertain point of view. The reader experiences the same anxiety and paranoia as the narrator does. When memory cannot be linked to present and future life, it is no different from brain death. “It’s not life, it’s just an existence, jumping from one moment to the next with no idea of the past and no plan for the future. its how I imagine animals must be.” (116). Ross Poole argues that memory has a “role of transmitting responsibilities and commitments from the past” (263). He draws attention to a significant facet of memory’s role in human societies.

Memory is not only a storehouse of personal experiences but also of cultural norms, traditions, and societal values. Individuals inherit not only a legacy of events through the transmission of shared memories but also a set of obligations and commitments that shape their identities and direct their future actions. Christine has a deep and realistic feeling that people dealing with amnesia or memory loss frequently feel. In the face of uncertainty and disorientation, it elicits a sense of urgency, frustration, and a need for agency. “But for how long can I be a visitor in my own life? Passive? I need to take control.” (132).

A person suffering from amnesia may feel deeply detached and alienated from their own identity and experiences due to losing personal memories. With no clear storyline or sense of continuity, they could feel as if they are only guests or spectators in their own lives. This may cause them to feel helpless and want to take back control of who they are and where they wish to go in the future. It is a fundamental need for humans to have autonomy and self-determination. To regain their self-control, they long for their memories.

Meanwhile, the process of recovery is open to external intervention. Although amnesiacs can overcome amnesia and regain their memories, the data they have cannot be reliable because people are picky about what they remember. Wilson and Ross claim that “Individuals’ current self-views, beliefs, and goals influence their recollections and appraisals of former selves. In turn, people’s current self-views are influenced by what they remember about their pasts and how they recall earlier selves (137). People might ignore some of the details from their past or modify them through deliberate forgetting according to their present desires and thoughts. However, it might

cause significant differences between their past and present selves.

Identity is constructed with memory; every detail can be crucial to a real identity. Identity can be defined as a lifeline, and memories are the building blocks of identity, so identity is affected when some of these blocks are missing. The gap can be filled through external sources, which can be unreliable. Therefore, the continuity of the lifeline is enabled thanks to remembering everything. It is underlined that philosophers like John Locke and Paul Ricoeur argue that continuity is imperative for existence to have meaning. In most fiction, the individual searches for a lifetime. This ontological principle depends on sound memories of one's previous self and a steady sense of one's future development (286).

Amnesia breaks this continuity and the ties between the past and future; the individual cannot continue their life as if they were the same person. In amnesia fiction, it is tried to be proven that forgetting the past causes the loss of identity, so the characters with amnesia are always in search of their own identity. In *Before I Go to Sleep*, the reader discovers that Christine has a different life and person from Ben. Except her name, almost everything she was told was fake.

Christine's inability to form lasting memories makes her vulnerable to manipulations, and she must question the honesty of those around her. Christine learns about herself from others and external sources, making it possible to receive unreal information. Once an individual experiences amnesia, they become both vulnerable and sceptical because the memories relayed to them are not deemed anymore.

Christine occasionally recalls something abruptly and tries to connect it to what Ben has told her. However, the images in her mind and the stories told her are very different. There is not a coherence of her moments. When she shares these images with Ben, he fabricates a new story to bridge the gaps between her pictures and Ben's fake stories. Christine feels as if she is watching a movie, and she is watching her own life as an outsider. She feels confused. Neither the protagonist nor the reader is sure about the reality until the novel's end. However, even at the novel's end, the truth of their existence remains in question.

The reader is convinced to believe in it by being presented with official documents from the police and detective, her ex and husband and the photographs. Lastly, since Christine has memories only before she goes to sleep, she has one day to

build an identity and understand the situation. The novel aims to reveal that identity is a construction that requires a sound foundation of memory. Using amnesia as a tool, the author emphasises how life would be without memories.

Before I Go to Sleep presents identity as both fragile and powerful. Christine's amnesia shows how memory loss can erase selfhood, leaving her vulnerable to manipulation. However, her journey also demonstrates that identity, even when displaced, is not entirely lost. Through persistence, she reclaims her past and ultimately reclaims her true self. The novel's exploration of erased and displaced identities raises critical questions about how selfhood is formed, maintained, and manipulated. Watson's portrayal of Christine suggests that while identity can be taken away, it is also something that can be fought for and rebuilt, making it both a vulnerable and a resilient force.

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