



## Reconstructed Memory of Love in Julian Barnes's *The Only Story*

### Julian Barnes'ın *Biricik Hikâye*'sinde Yeniden Kurulmuş Aşk Angısı

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#### Abstract

Julian Barnes's novel *The Only Story* (2018) can be read as a monograph on the complications of love. By focalising the narrative situations and events through the consistently transforming perspective of a failed lover, Barnes shows how digging into the past events through the awakening lens of memory can lead to previously censored self-realizations. Set in three interconnected parts, *The Only Story* increasingly changes into a disintegrating process of an unconventional love affair between a late adolescent and a middle-aged married woman. Considering this, the present article has two goals. By relying on Jacques Lacan's theory of love, the paper shows how in *The Only Story* Barnes presents an ever-changing, or illusory definition/experience of love. Besides that, and by drawing on Julia Kristeva's definition of the concept shared singularity, the paper argues how by setting the main part of narrative in the revolutionary decade of 1960s, Barnes presents the difficulty of any cohabitation, combination, dialogue, or sharing between the two opposing egos and discourses. The primary aim of this paper, therefore, is to show how the narrator and his partner fail in maintaining their love affair through building a shared singularity between themselves.

**Keywords:** Love, Jacques Lacan, shared singularity, Julia Kristeva, memory, *The Only Story*, Julian Barnes.

#### Öz

Julian Barnes'ın *Biricik Hikâye* (2018) adlı romanı, aşkın karmaşaları üzerine yazılan bir monografi roman olarak değerlendirilebilir. Başarısız bir sevgilinin sürekli değişen perspektifi aracılığıyla anlatı durumlarına ve olaylara odaklanarak, Barnes yeniden canlanan anıların objektifinden, geçmiş anıları kurcalamanın nasıl daha önce sansürlenmiş bireysel farkındalıklara yol açabileceğini göstermektedir. Birbirine bağlı üç bölümden oluşan *Biricik Hikâye*, genç bir erkek ve orta yaşlı evli bir kadın arasında geçen alışılmadık aşk ilişkisinin nasıl gittikçe parçalandığını ele almaktadır. Romandaki söz konusu aşk ilişkisi göz önüne alındığında, mevcut makalenin iki amacı vardır. Makale Barnes'ın *Biricik Hikâye*'de aşkın sürekli değişen ya da yanıltıcı tanımını/deneyimini nasıl gözler önüne serdiğini Jacques Lacan'ın aşk teorisi bağlamında göstermektedir. Bunun yanı sıra, Julia Kristeva'nın paylaşılan bireyselcilik tanımından da yararlanılarak, makale Barnes anlatısının ana bölümünü devrimci 1960'larda oluşturarak nasıl iki zıt ego ve söylem arasındaki birlikte yaşamın, uyumun, diyalogun ve paylaşmanın zorluğunu gösterdiğini ileri sürmektedir. Bu nedenle, bu makalenin asıl amacı *Biricik Hikâye*'sinde aralarında kendi bireyselliklerini paylaşamadıklarından dolayı anlatıcının ve partnerinin aşk ilişkilerini sürdürmekte başarısız olduklarını göstermektir. **Anahtar sözcükler:** Aşk, Jacques Lacan, paylaşılan bireyselcilik, Julia Kristeva, angı, *Biricik Hikayesi*, Julian Barnes.

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## Introduction

Memory sorts and sifts according to the demands made on it by the rememberer. Do we have access to the algorithm of its priorities? Probably not. But I would guess that memory prioritises whatever is most useful to help keep the bearer of those memories going. So there would be a self-interest in bringing happier memories to the surface first. (Barnes, 2018, p. 34)

Julian Barnes, according to Groes and Childs, “is perhaps the most idiosyncratic and innovative of contemporary British authors; a writer who with each fictional departure does not just make it new for himself ‘but for the entire history of the novel’” (2011, p. 10). In other words, “with each novel,” as Childs asserts, Barnes “aims to write not just fiction that seems fresh to him but fiction which reinvents the novel itself” (2011, p. 9). Barnes’s *The Only Story* (2018) should be considered as one of his most recent *departures* and *reinventions*.

Barnes’s “literary tastes,” as Childs asserts, “are broad” (2011, p. 4). *The Only Story* is about the known Barnesian themes, “some underlying themes” in Barnes’s works, according to Guignery, “can be identified, such as obsession, love, the relationship between fact and fiction, or the irretrievability of the past” (2006, p. 1). While exploration of an extended and a sustainable definition of love is the primary narrative concern in *The Only Story*, finding an appropriate contextual situation for the realization of love is another important issue.

*The Only Story* is primarily about the nature of love, and its impact on the people involved in it. The novel begins with a quotation from the eighteenth-century poet, essayist, and literary critic Dr. Samuel Johnson. In *A Dictionary of the English Language* (1755), Dr. Johnson defines the newly arising genre of the novel as “[a] small tale, generally of love” (qtd. in Barnes, 2018, p. 9). Unlike Dr. Johnson’s irony, Barnes’s quotation does not tend to challenge either the novel as a genre or love as its main theme. Instead, as Barnes proves in his novel, the only story of the so-called “small tale” is, or should be, love. By focusing on the complexities of the concept of love from a continuously transforming perspective, Barnes encourages us to interrogate our conventionalised understanding of love. In this regard, the narrator begins his act of narration with a general statement. He enters into an imaginary conversation with his ideal hypothetical audience on the opening page. By addressing his implied reader, he foreshadows the central theme in his own act of storytelling:

Would you rather love the more, and suffer the more; or love the less, and suffer the less?  
That is, I think, finally, the only real question.

You may point out – correctly – that it isn’t a real question. Because we don’t have the choice. If we had the choice, then there would be a question. But we don’t, so there isn’t. Who can control how much they love? If you can control it, then it isn’t love. I don’t know what you call it instead, but it isn’t love. (Barnes, 2018, p. 11)

Through a chain of rhetorical questions and the possible answers to them, the narrator tries to persuade the readers into believing the fact that the most fundamental question of being and existence should be a question related to love. Hence, in the opening page the narrator tries to justify the central point of his narration which turns out to be a narration totally dedicated to love: “Most of us have only one story to tell. I don’t mean that only one thing happens to us in our lives: there are countless events, which we turn into countless stories. But there’s only one that matters, only one finally worth telling. This is mine” (Barnes, 2018, p. 11). The narrator does not mind admitting that he has been telling his story of love for a long time despite the fact that its reiteration has not brought him any certainty about either the nature of love or its impact on his life. In other words, he does not know whether this time his storytelling, which is mostly based on his act of remembering, will finally reveal to him the “truth” about love and the love affair he experienced

five decades ago, “The question then is: do all these retellings bring you closer to the truth of what happened, or move you further away? I’m not sure” (Barnes, 2018, p. 11).

*The Only Story* thus presents a dynamic definition/experience of love which in this paper is analysed based on Jacques Lacan’s (re)definitions of the term. The narrator can be read as a Lacanian character in terms of his protracted and distorted perspective toward Love. Similarly, the context in which the love affair between the narrator’s younger self and his beloved happens, and the ensuing situations that lead to the failure of their relationship are examined by referring to Kristeva’s definition of shared singularity. Barnes’s novel mainly presents the difficulty of any cohabitation, combination, dialogue, or sharing between the two opposing egos and discourses. Kristeva’s concept can help us to unveil the true nature of the represented dichotomy between an established, institutionalized, and widely accepted order and a modern, unconventional structure. Thus, this paper tries to show how the narrator and his partner fail in maintaining their relationship through building a shared singularity between themselves.

*The Only Story* is a three-part-bildungsroman. “Three,” according to Michael Greaney, “occup[ies] a special place in Barnes’s imagination ... three-part model of the self is reflected in the threefold patterns that occur so frequently in Barnesian narrative. ... Three parts, the third returning somehow to the first” (2014, pp. 226-27). The novel is primarily a monograph on love. By applying a three-part-model, Barnes’s narrative revolves around a first-hand experience of love. In other words, it is about both a particular experience of love and the analysis of this emotion in the central character’s three important spots in life. The narrative is more specifically about: a. the nature of a (failed) romantic relationship which lasts for about eleven years, b. the qualia or what’s it like aspect of being in love and living with love, c. the impact of first love on one’s mind and life, and d. the definition (or theory) of love.

*The Only Story* is a courtly tale experienced and narrated by its central character-narrator called Paul Roberts. He is a typical Barnesian character. In Greaney’s words, Barnes “is more interested in the quirky lives of unattached persons” (2014, p. 227). While the unconnected narrator is still haunted with a cardinal experience in his far past life, he shares with us the tale of his maturity cycles. Through reviewing his experience of love, he tells us about the impact of his experience on his emotional and cognitive development. He recounts both his experience of first love and its life-long impact on his life and thoughts afterwards. As it is the shared characteristic of all retrospective narratives, Paul’s tale finally changes into a long recollection and reflection process on the nature and definition of love itself. The narrator’s sophisticated understanding of love is based on the constantly transforming perspective of his own developing self at different time periods.

The narrative events and situations in *The Only Story* are presented in an achronological order. Part One is narrated in first person, Part Two mostly in second person, and Part Three in third person. By choosing such a mode of narration, the author presents the nature and definition of love according to different perspectives. Part one of the narrative is about the birth of love, part two is about the death or test of love, and part three is about the aftermath or effect of love. Similarly, the different parts of the novel, in accordance with their content, are narrated in different modes, and different forms.

In terms of narrative modes, *The Only Story* is mostly presented by two kinds of utterance—mimesis (showing=direct presentation) and diegesis (telling=mediated presentation). In other words, the narrative discourse is a mixture of the experiencing-I’s and the narrating-I’s perceptions and accounts. Presenting the plot by a variety of modes is considered a Barnesian aspect in narration since, as Guignery points out, “in each novel Barnes aims to explore a new area of experience and experiments with different narrative modes” (2006, p. 1). On the other hand, *The Only Story* is made up of different narrative forms. The narrative includes different forms such as (fictional) biography, fantasy, and novel. Referring to such an aspect in his novels, Childs considers Barnes as “one of the foremost contemporary British writers to explore the variety of forms of writing that the novel can encompass” (2011, p. 7). While the fairy-tale-like atmosphere of the storyworld in the first part of *The Only Story* makes it closer to romance, the realistic nature of the represented life in its second part presents it as a classical example of the realist novel. In the last part, the main narrative concern is philosophical arguments by focusing on the constructed nature of memory and truth. All these make *The Only Story* a postmodernist writing which is generally accepted as a binding tie in Barnes’s fictional works. By referring to this aspect in the critical responses on Barnes’s work, Guignery

and Roberts point out that, “the ongoing critical debate classify... Barnes’s fiction as being representative of postmodernist writing, since his work both restores to and subverts realistic strategies, is essentially self-reflexive, and celebrates the literary past, but also considers it with irony” (2009, p. xii).

### **Love, Shared Singularity, and *The Only Story***

The storyline in *The Only Story* revolves around the narrator’s memory of a love affair. He went through his first experience of love in his late adolescence and early adulthood years. Through his narrative of remembering, the narrator finds out that at that time he did not understand the concept of love as he would do later in his life. His understanding of love and beloved at this stage is completely based on an imaginary relation. His beloved acts as a mirror symbolising the desired, ideal wholeness. The narrator presents his younger self as a subject of lack or emptiness and his beloved as a subject who can complete his lack. Such a concept of love which is based on an imaginary relation is similar to Lacan’s definition(s) of the term.

More than presenting love as a rational, controllable, or calculable human phenomenon, *The Only Story* portrays it as an illusory and indeterminate emotion. In his attempts to define love, Lacan’s perspective is close to the situation represented by Barnes. Lacan refers to love in his different works at different periods. He associates it with lack, destitution, poverty, aporia, and narcissism. Speaking about love or defining it was always a challenging problem for Lacan since, according to him, an unchanging definition of love is nearly impossible. In all his discourses/seminars about love, he finds it “not possible to say anything meaningful or sensible about love” (1991, p. 57). Lacan understands love as a signifier without a certain signified or object. Thus, he does not present a single unified theory of love because, in his own words, “the moment one begins to speak about love, one descends into imbecility” (1999, p. 17). However, despite his disappointment, Lacan tries to define love mostly by using metaphors and figurative language.

“Love,” according to Lacan, “is a phenomenon which takes place in the imaginary level” (1988, p. 142). One subject thinks that the other one is able to fill his lack since, as Lacan argues, “to love is, essentially, to wish to be loved” (1977, 253). So, the subject decides to give, or transfer her/his love/lack/emptiness to the other subject since “[l]ove, the love of person who desires to be loved, is essentially an attempt to capture the other in oneself, in oneself as object” (Lacan, 1988, p. 276). Thus, transference functions based on a “narcissistic relation by which the subject becomes an object worthy of love. From his reference to him who must love him, he tries to induce the Other into a mirage relation in which he convinces him of being worthy of love” (Lacan, 1977, p. 267). The inception of Paul’s and Susan’s attraction towards each other is based on an imaginary evaluation from both sides. They perceive each other as the primary object of their insatiable desire. When Paul finally realizes and accepts the fact that Susan cannot satisfy his fundamental need, the falling process of their affair becomes complete. In other words, as it is in the nature of love according to Lacan, they both “mutilate” each other, “I love you, but, because inexplicably I love in you something more than you [...] I mutilate you” (1977, p. 263).

Besides being about the complications of love, *The Only Story* is also about an unresolved conflict between two unlike generations. In other words, also the uncertain nature of the concept love itself is a formidable obstacle to interaction between the two central characters, their belonging to different epochs is another major obstacle. Without sharing their own individual characteristics, Paul and Susan fail to achieve a harmonious happiness. The narrator painfully remembers how his younger self in the past struggled for a long time in order to maintain the established unity between himself and his beloved as an attractive object of his desire. The purpose of his story is to achieve something in fiction that he could not in reality. However, when his illusions are shattered under the effect of his reconstructing memory, he finds it impossible to achieve a unity or sense of wholeness with his beloved. Thanks to his act of storytelling, he realizes that love should be something more than a solipsistic emotion as it is a socio-culturally determined behaviour. The uncompromising nature of a unique kind of what Kristeva terms as singularity helps us to explain the rigid dichotomy between the narrator and his beloved.

In her interview with the sociologist John Lechte, Kristeva tells how she developed the German philosopher Hannah Arendt’s concept of “extraordinary singularity”. According to Kristeva, “Life, that is *bios*, for Arendt is not *zoë*, is not simply a biological existence, but is a symbolic existence, that is to say, a

narration which is destined to be shared in the domain of politics” (Lechte, 2004, p. 157). In other words, “the concept of life is a synthesis between individual experience, a story [*recit*] of this individual experience, and the sharing of this story in the social world, perceived as the *polis* in Aristotle’s sense” (Lechte, 2004, p. 157). The individuals in a society, in a space of liberty, should find the possibility of sharing their individual, or private, tastes with the other individuals. This is the main challenge in Paul’s world. He wants to escape from the “programmed” form of life, the *zoë*. However, to pursue an *individual* sense of family and relationship is not allowed in his socio-cultural context. His village is a representative community “with a more or less homogeneous form of the family” (Lechte, 2004, p. 161). According to Kristeva’s definition of the term shared singularity, “each person has the right to become as singular as possible and to develop the maximum creativity for him or herself. At the same time, without stopping this creativity, we should try to build bridges and interfaces—that is to say, foster sharing” (Lechte, 2004, p. 163). As argued in this paper, the main reason why the narrator’s and his beloved’s close relationship breaks off is the fact that their love fails to enable them to *build bridges* and *interfaces* between themselves.

### **Part One: Love as a Catalyser of an Imaginary Relation**

The narrator’s experience of love in part one signifies both Lacan’s concept of love and Kristeva’s definition of shared singularity. In other words, the narrator recounts his experience of an imaginary, or unfulfilled, shared singularity. By highlighting his misperceptions about the romantic affair he had in past, he tries to figure out the true nature of love and its constituent parts. The narrator in this part is mostly concerned with his late adolescent experience of a love affair with a middle aged, married woman. The tone of his narration in this part is nostalgic. He presents his younger self as a disruptive and ego-centred young man who desires to impose his own truth on the external world, including his own object of love.

The narrator tells us how he perceived the world when he first fell in love. At the same time, he shares with us his experience of an unusual love affair with the forty-eight-year old Susan who was married and had two daughters older than him. In this regards, what Greaney said about *The Sense of an Ending* is true about the first part of *The Only Story* which is “studiously faithful to the Barnesian masternarrative of marital infidelity” (2014, p. 228). The narrative perspective in part one is in accordance with the perspective of the experiencing I rather than with that of the narrating I, or the adult Paul. In other words, his narration in part one is similar to a replication of his experience.

In part one, the narrator shares with the readers some background information about the context in which he was psychologically driven towards an affair. At the end of his first year at university, the narrator is “unrepentantly bored” at home from the “laboriousness of communication” (2018, p. 15) with his parents. Then, he decides to register in the local tennis club where he met Susan for the first time. They accidentally fall into one playing group and their interaction led to a kind of “complicity” between them, “a complicity which made me a little more me, and her a little more her” (2018, p. 25). The contextual realities are the most important reasons in their attraction towards each other. In a similar manner to Paul’s mental state during that time, Susan feels she belongs to a “played-out generation” (2018, p. 52). Accordingly, she mutually finds Paul satisfactory. She uplifts his spirit as, for the first time in his life, he finds a true companion who “laughs” (2018, p.55) at what he laughs, and understands him. Her behaviour enchants him. He represents her as a virgin and talks about his sexual experience with her. He describes her physical attractions like nose, ears, and teeth. The more he “explore[s]” (2018, p. 90) her body, the more he discovers desire there. At this stage, physical contact lies at the core of his understanding and definition of love.

Susan had an “unconsummated marriage” or “sex-free” marriage (2018, p. 50) for about twenty years and Paul has a troubled relationship with his family and an increasing sexual desire. Thus, sexual desire is the fundamental element in their love affair. Sexual relation is an integral part of their love. Sex plays an important role in their interest in each other. It is inseparable from their sense of love. They both feel in need of sex and their context provokes this need. Paul thinks that this experience is an expression of his independence, and an initiation of his growing up. Various sexual metaphors in part one are an indication of Paul’s sex-haunted adolescent mind. In other words, his 19-year-old understanding of love is entwined with sex. However, unlike Paul’s driving need, Susan’s expectation of their affair is beyond any sexual

need. First of all, she expects to find intimacy in their relationship. Her exposure to domestic violence, her wartime trauma, failed relationships, and unfortunate as well as unhappy marriage are the contextual realities of her life which act as the main motivations behind her inclination towards Paul. Compared to him, she is more experienced. While Paul pretends he really understood Susan's character, thoughts and feelings, his account shows how Susan was able to understand him better than he did her. When their relationship is known to the public, she changes into a "scarlet" (2018, p. 120) woman. They are both banned from the tennis club.

The narrator's primary purpose in his narration is to understand the role of love in an enduring relationship in his life. He claims that they were "innocent" (2018, p. 25) or "inexperienced" (2018, p. 57) as neither he nor Susan quite understood what their mutual feelings were like. He ascribes this ignorance mostly to their contextual reality, "[o]ne of the things I thought about Susan and me – at the time, and now, again, all these years later – is that there often didn't seem words for our relationship; at least, none that fitted" (2018, p. 25). Referring to this stage in his life, Paul admits that he "submitted to ... absolutism" (2018, p. 94). He interprets the reaction of the public mind to his own behaviour a combination of approval and disapproval. He tells us how he consciously tries to seem unconventional, unique, or original in the eyes of the people. He interprets the unanimous rejection of his affair with Susan on the part of society "as an authentication of [their] love" (2018, p. 120). Paul, who "refused to be a cliché" (2018, p. 25), desired to declare his unique identity to others, including his parents, through his unusual relationship, "[i]t was a matter of some pride to me that I seemed to have landed on exactly the relationship of which my parents would most disapprove" (2018, p. 38).

The narrator comes to the conclusion that his younger self's sense of love was inseparable from his solipsistic ego. He was unable to experience a selfless love. Susan's definition of love could not persuade him: "Love's elastic. It's not a question of watering down. It adds on. It doesn't take away. So there's no need to worry about that" (2018, p. 97). He also finds out that he was a "tactically naive" (2018, p. 22) person who had "overconfidence" (2018, p. 115) and felt the uncontrollable need to be with her. He belonged, as did she, to nowhere. His adolescent mind did not have the capacity to understand the complex issue of love as he did not understand why Susan reacted differently to their exclusion from the tennis club. He represents himself as a source of sexual desire and ignorant about the concept of love. Furthermore, the narrator admits how he hated growing up into adulthood, or into the Symbolic Order, when he had to follow the established, social norms, or the adult order represented mostly by his own parents.

First part is mostly represented in a romance mode. The narrator tells us how he imagined his role as a lover whose beloved was Susan. This stage of his life is similar to Lacan's understanding of the Imaginary Order when the baby perceives the outside world as an extension of her own self. Paul's perception of love in this stage is inseparable from his own egocentrism. He finds out that he was confused about love since to (experience) love is the only justification of love itself. Accordingly, by focusing on the first stage of his life with Susan, he comes to the conclusion that the lack of durability in his relationship with Susan was mainly because of their, particularly his, inability to share their singularities and to understand love.

## **Part Two: The Uncertain Examination of Love**

During the second phase of his affair with Susan, Paul experiences the "adult world" (2018, p. 173) closely. As does the narrator, he gradually finds out that love is a complex issue as is sharing the two unlike egos. The narrator's discourse on a romantic relationship in part two reminds us of Lacan's definition of love and Kristeva's description of the requirements for shared singularity.

The narrator shifts the mode of narration in part two to mostly Second Person, You narration. We hear three different voices in this part: the experiencing I's voice, the suppressed or disappointed I's voice, and the narrating I's or the experienced Paul's voice. The primary addressee or narratee in this part is the narrator himself. He reiterates his story to himself so that he might understand his experience better. He is mostly remembering, and even fictionalising whenever his memory fails him, his past experiences when he was in his early twenties. In this part, Paul shares with us not only what he experienced but what he thinks about his experience. Thus, the narrator's long process of speculation on the nature of love and the

relationship he had with Susan begins in part two and continues until the end of narrative. He questions some aspects of his behaviour by readjusting some of his old thoughts about himself, Susan and their affair.

The plot line in part two mostly turns around Paul's and Susan's shared life in a new environment, London. Paul in his twenties lives with Susan in her fifties. In this stage of their relationship, they inevitably enter into a new structure which is part of the so called Symbolic Order, or the adult world. They both undertake some of the basic functions of the adult life. It is during this time that for the first time Paul begins thinking, not just feeling, about his relationship with Susan. The denouement of their love plot also begins at this stage.

The order of presented events in this part, as it is true about the other two parts, is achronological. In his narration, the narrator presents a mixed-up combination of experiences, feelings and thoughts in different phases of his shared life with Susan. He sometimes returns to the experiences he had at the Macleods' in order to talk about the felt animosity between himself and Mr Macleod on the one hand, and the domestic violence or the troubled relationship between Susan and her husband on the other. Besides that, he presents the events which finally led to their decision to move from their village to London. He tells the readers how he encouraged Susan to apply for divorce from her husband because of his mistreatment of her. At the same time, he talks about Susan's reluctance to do so and her gradual immersion in dishonesty and alcoholism. Finally, he describes the fundamental change of his own perspective towards love and Susan which mainly happens as a result of his long contemplations of his own and Susan's characters and conditions.

The more Paul matures with the development of the relationship with Susan, the more he begins to notice the real problems. Throughout this period, he gradually takes distance from his primarily passionate and absolutist perspective towards love. This becomes possible through the practical nature of his experience. He encounters the real hardships in his relationship with Susan. Unlike the imaginary nature of his courtship years, the partnership teaches him some of the norms of the symbolic order.

Under the effect of some unexpected events and situations, Paul discovers different aspects of Susan's character. He becomes more aware of the different and complicated character of his beloved the more he tries to understand her mental states. This process teaches him about the different aspects of her character and his own character. He becomes aware of the fact that, as a woman of his parents' generation, she is also a "conditioned" (2018, p. 189) woman who is hardly able to break away from her family, and from the established structures like marriage. He also learns that the marriage institution is so strong that even Susan, despite the fact that she has been experiencing intense aggression and domestic violence for long years, cannot break away from it. However, despite the difficulties produced by their open-to-public action in moving away from their village to London, he gives a promise to himself to "redouble" his "commitment" (2018, p. 203) to Susan as she gives herself to alcohol, cigarettes, and depression. Paul pretends to do so in the name of his love. In other words, he thinks that his decision to slowly move away from her is because of his true love for her. In comparing his life with those of his friends, Paul finds his new and unusual life more "interesting" although he is in love with a woman "being characterized as potentially mad" (2018, p. 233). He tries to justify his situation: "you are still ahead of them because your relationship is more fascinating, more complicated, and more insoluble" (2018, p. 233). Such a counterfactual behaviour, however, partly derives from his one-track mind.

The narrator finds out that he could not share his singularity with Susan since he basically had a one-directional mind as indicated in the first and second phases of his new life. He also had a long-time resistance against truth. His ego was so inflamed that it included the world around him. Despite the increasingly unpleasant reality of her life, his inflexible mind did not help him to change his previous thoughts, feelings, and assumptions about Susan. In other words, the narrator represents himself as a passive and inactive person during his life with Susan in part two. He was basically unable to take any actions as he did not want to change his previous thoughts about Susan. While in the first phase he mostly insisted on his unconventional relationship with her, in the second phase he was partly ashamed of admitting Susan's addiction because he did not want to be humiliated by people around him. Thus, the more he faced the reality in the Symbolic Order, the more he had to obey its rules. He increasingly became aware of the fact that society did not accept him as a lover. For example, he had to lie about Susan to the doctor at the hospital and to the police. Accordingly, he gradually succeeds in changing his mind about Susan and persuades

himself to leave her. As he accepts the reality of Susan's situation, Paul's behaviour towards her changes, "You tell her that her behaviour is destroying your love for her. You do not mention hers for you" (2018, p. 247). Therefore, he "decide[s] to let her go on destroying her life" (2018, p. 249). He gives himself to telling lies as she does so. He feels opposing emotions towards Susan, "You realize how sympathy and antagonism can coexist" (2018, p. 233). However, as the narrator of his own story, Paul tries to show that he did not keep his *madwoman* in the attic because he did whatever he could in order to save her. For example, he resorted to sex in order to save his love as he thought that having sex, even sad sex, could help him escape from the predicament, or could keep them connected. In this way, he discovered more about sex than he wanted (2018, p. 224).

Towards the end of part two, Paul does not talk about the cause of Susan's alcoholism as much as he talks about her inability to stop it. He presents his younger self in this stage as a devotee, and loyal lover who did not abstain from whatever he could do. It is painful to him to see that while as a lawyer he can solve the other people's problems, he is unable to solve his own problem. Finally, by taking out the "running-away fund" (2018, p. 279) that Susan gave him once and running away, he decides to leave Susan. He begins sleeping with prostitutes and tries to forget about Susan and her problems. At the same time, he continuously attempts to justify leaving her:

And so, by the end, you have tried soft love and tough love, feelings and reason, truth and lies, promises and threats, hope and stoicism. But you are not a machine, switching easily from one approach to another. Each strategy involves as much emotional strain on you as on her; perhaps more ... you find yourself thinking: she may be destroying herself in the long term, but in the short term, she's doing more damage to you. Helpless, frustrated anger overwhelms you; and, worst of all, righteous anger. You hate your own righteousness. (2018, pp. 279-82)

At the end of part two, Paul defends his decision in leaving Susan. He no longer cares about the people's, including the readers', judgement of him, "You do not care how anyone might judge you if they could see where you are and what you are doing. ... You do not reproach yourself; nor do you experience guilt, now or later" (2018, p. 282). Having left Susan, Paul begins the long and unending re-evaluation process of his affair with Susan.

Although the narrator ascribes the source of his inability to understand Susan to the cultural milieu, he finally accepts the fact that he should also be among the main causes of Susan's unfortunate life. Through reconstructing his experience with Susan, the narrator experiences new things in life. For example, he begins to recognize the fact that Susan had some family bonds and responsibilities. In other words, he becomes more sympathetic toward Susan as he begins to look at the world from her perspective. He gradually stops criticising her. Coincidentally, he begins keeping a diary (a notebook) in which he writes about his "isolation and turmoil" (2018, p. 238), his "observations and reflections" (2018, p. 240), and his definition of love. The more he writes things down in his Notes on Alcoholism, the more he changes his exegeses about love.

### **Part Three: Reconstructed Memory of Love**

As in the previous two parts, the narrator in part three is haunted with some particular moments of his unforgettable experience in the past. By reviewing some of the events that finally led to his separation with Susan, the narrator discloses his Lacanian perspective towards love and the fact that, as it was in the past, his singularity is not shareable. He tells us how in the last part of their relationship he gradually could replace his need for Susan with other satisfactions such as his job which provided him with the "sexual companionship, the social life, the daily warmth he needed" (2018, p. 315). More than in the two previous parts, the narrator in part three relies on the constructive role of memory in coming to terms with his traumatic past.

Part Three in *The Only Story* can be read as an independent part from the two previous parts. Compared to them, part three fairly represents Barnes's taste and interest. In Cornelia Stott's words, Barnes is "very interested in answering questions concerning memory, finding ways of making the past accessible,



and dealing with the tendency of wanting to change the view of the past to fit the present” (2010, p. 12). Part three is the most experimental part of the novel. According to Child’s argument, Barnes’s “novels can sometimes seem like conversational forays that develop a line of thought about society and culture into all kinds of fictional avenues but they are also often formally unusual and almost perversely experimental” (2011, p. 5). In this part, Paul outlines his recollections on his *only story* as the most effective event in his entire life. Five decades after their meeting, the narrator recounts his third person contemplation on his unforgettable experience as he believes it will help him to “assess” his life “more accurately” (2018, p. 286). Barnes’s narrative in part three represents Paul as a sagacious old man in his seventies. What Pateman says about all novels by Barnes is also true for part three in *The Only Story* since it is made up of “subdued melancholic meditations” (2002, p. 3). The tone of this part is more tragic and sad. Of all the three parts, the last part is the most reflective one.

Part three begins with a note on Paul’s notebook. Finding a definition of love has now been an unhealthy obsession for him. After a long time of reflecting on the meaning of love, he has found out that love is an elusive and illusory concept which is constantly under erasure. He finds truth as a “temporary” and multiple concept (2018, p. 284). However, he has perceived that love, even a bad one, never disappears, “Bad love still contained the remnant, the memory, of good love – somewhere, deep down, where neither of them any longer wanted to dig” (2018, p. 341). He revises many of his rigid thoughts about concepts and people but he cannot forget his experience with Susan. It remains his only story.

Part Three is a fictional construction of the narrator’s past life by the help of his memory. Of all the three parts, this part shares most with the general characteristics of Barnes’s novels. The “key issues developed in his [Barnes’s] previous novels,” in Guignery’s words, are “in particular the evasiveness of truth, the construction of history, and the elusive nature of memory” (2006, p. 105). Paul in this part takes refuge in his own memory. Although he is aware of the unreliable nature of memory, Paul endeavours to reconstruct his life with Susan correctly. According to Childes:

Ironic comedy and false memory are two of the poles around which Julian Barnes’s work revolves ... If the past is alive for us in the present because we remember it, Barnes’s fiction would suggest that it is not necessarily the past that we remember. The versions and details that inhabit memories are mutable and changeable. Recollections fashion a current sense of identity and arguably vice versa, but for Barnes the most important aspect to memory is that it is imaginative. (2011, p. 6)

Paul in part three reconstructs his memory through his imagination. This enables him to transfigure his memories into what he desired to have. He experiences a different kind of love which is based on shared singularity. He finally accepts the differences between himself and Susan. Thus, he tries to remember Susan’s happy time: “Susan happy, Susan optimistic ...” (2018, p. 289). It helps him to imagine the other possibilities, “[c]urious, he pursued this untaken path” (2018, p. 304). In reviewing his memories, he begins to realize his own shortcomings and ignorance in terms of love, sex, and his relationship with Susan. Besides that, he ascribes the root of his unfulfilled life to the structure of communal life in the village. Nobody recognised his complication. As a result of his memories, Paul tries to reorder his thoughts about love, and his life in early twenties. In other words, the older he grows, the more flexible he becomes.

During the last five decades, he has learned to be more realistic and has recovered from the emotional turmoil he experienced in his twenties. He is now more concerned with his duty to himself. Compared to his younger self during different times, now he has more “understanding” (2018, p. 377) about his personality, and love. His new self is dynamic as he believes in both “inevitability” (2018, pp. 245 and 294), and “free will” (2018, p. 307). He has learned to take the other people’s perspectives and respect their different truths as well.

Paul’s deep contemplation helps him to discover new aspects of his own character. For example, he finds out that he has been a coward for most part of his life. He admits that although he had no “obligations” caused by the “religious, patriarchal, hierarchical” structure in the village, still his “liberation” (2018, p. 297) has had some consequences. He also begins to understand the importance of time and place during his

further interrogation of love. He has found out that love is the only justification, the only criterion towards which the other emotions sway, it is at the same time a “sophisticated” emotion, “but neither he nor Susan had been sophisticated enough for that. He had never known sophistication of the emotional life” (2018, p. 367). However, he has revised his understanding of love as he has seen that his profound love of Susan “had gone, had been driven out, month by month, year by year” (2018, p. 307). For a long time now, Susan is “resolved in his mind” (2018, p. 372). He revises his emotional life and lives as a nomad. In Susan’s prolonged absence, he chooses to remain as an outsider, eccentric, and authentic. He has some imbalanced relationships. He has also revised his other emotions. For example, “[s]omewhere in this sequence, he had stopped hating Macleod” (2018, p. 302). He has found an internal peace and happiness as he has learned that to be happy, he should lower his expectations and control his feelings. Overfeeling does not necessarily end in happiness. He is at ease with the world, “[s]o there was a kind of posthumous reconciliation, even if one based on a certain rewriting of his parents; more understanding, and with it, belated grief” (2018, p. 377). Under the pretext of “self-protection” (2018, pp. 312, 338, and 364), he persuades himself to give Susan back to her daughters and go abroad. Afterwards, he stops examining and justifying the past to himself. After a long time, he has justified his own decision in “handing back” Susan:

Did he feel regret at what he always thought of as his ‘handing back’ of Susan? No: the proper word for that might be guilt; or its sharper colleague, remorse. But there was also an inevitability to it, which lent the action a different moral colouring. He found that he simply couldn’t go on. He couldn’t save her, and so he had to save himself. It was as simple as that. (2018, p. 307)

The last segment of part three presents the narrator’s deep philosophical contemplation on love. He is now mostly concerned with the plausible definition of love and the nature of his own experience of it. He comes to the conclusion that love is a painful experience as nobody can experience love without being hurt. Among his many other definitions, he likes this definition of love: “‘In my opinion, every love, happy or unhappy, is a real disaster once you give yourself over to it entirely’” (2018, p. 367). He finally accepts that his love “had been a complete disaster for him ... Perhaps he had always been wasting his time. Perhaps love could never be captured in a definition; it could only ever be captured in a story” (2018, p. 370). Despite the change in his perspective towards his own character, Susan, and love, the narrator still regrets as he wishes he could have behaved differently:

He knew there was always a pull, sometimes amounting to an oscillation, between complacency on one side and regret on the other. He tried to favour regret, as being the less damaging.

But he certainly never regretted his love for Susan. What he did regret was that he had been too young, too ignorant, too absolutist, too confident of what he imagined love’s nature and workings to be. (2018, p. 364)

Despite his cognitive and emotional growth, the narrator does not seek any forgiveness, or redemption. He merely decides to come to terms with the realities of his own past life the minimalistic version of which quickly passes through his transforming consciousness. As a result of the dramatic change in his perspective towards his past life and experience, it is the prospect of his future life that mainly concerns him at the end:

I looked at her profile, and thought back to some moments from my own private cinema. ... But after a few minutes of this, my mind began to wander. I couldn’t keep it on love and loss, on fun and grief. ... I didn’t feel guilty about any of this; indeed, I think I am now probably done with guilt. But the rest of my life, such as it was, and subsequently would be, was calling me back. (2018, p. 383)

Paul finally finds a way out of a long and constant inner conflict which has been torturing his soul for about five decades. Considering human relationships and emotions, he understands the determining function of the extra-personal factors such as time, social institutions, individual differences, and the illusive and constructed nature of memory. He at last manages to subdue his interrogating, judgemental, and boringly repetitive perspective on his experience of love and the ensuing perceptions about it later in his life. Such a perspectival change leads him to a different phase in his life.

## Conclusion

*The Only Story* unveils the illusion of love and shared singularity through the reconstructed nature of memory. His storytelling enables the narrator to perceive the fact that his love affair with his beloved was primarily based on some mutual, and unfulfilled, expectations. They could hardly comply with the egoistic demands of each other. Their relationship broke off since their love, in an agreement with Lacan's understanding of this concept, did not deliver themselves from their profound sense of lack. The narrator presents his experience of love as an unusual event which occurred during the decade of 1960s in European culture. Paul was born into the sexual revolution that happened in this decade. He was a forerunner of the modern generation in his society. He was an individual with a maximum sense of egoism. Unlike Kristeva's definition of shared singularity, the represented fictional society in the village does not allow its people to pursue their own individuality, and foster the sharing between them at the same time. The inhabitants, therefore, fail to recognize each other's singularities, let alone share them. Thus, their uncompromising private realities set up an important part of the major barrier between them. Having failed to overcome the dominance of their own subjectivities, they are unable to build a shared singularity which could guarantee the unproblematic continuation of their romantic companionship. Besides the importance of the two characters' increasingly opposing traits, their contextual realities make a harmonious and long-standing relationship impossible for them. Though for different reasons, Paul and Susan fail to share their singularities with each other. However, later in life he comes to the belated understanding that his own ego-centred character and unwillingness to share with Susan should have been among the primary causes of his problems. All in all, he represents himself as a symbol of individualism. In his twenties, he hardly could make a connection between his values and those of the others, including Susan's and his own family's. Even in his act of storytelling, there is hardly a sense of sharing between his world and the represented world of the other characters. Thus, as an effect of being an outcast in his own society, he lives like a nomad for most part of his life since he does not feel a sense of belonging to any community which mostly functions based on mutual sharing. Through sharing his beloved's perspective, thoughts, and feelings in his act of storytelling, Paul can find the true sense of love at the end.

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