**False Testimony: Briony’s Misrecognition of Identity in Ian McEwan’s *Atonement***

**Introduction**

In *Atonement*, Ian McEwan writes about the psychological trauma and inner struggle that an individual suffers as a witness, victimizer and victim of a traumatic event. Briony travels back to the place and time of the traumatic event through writing, gives testimony of it with a different perspective, and liberates her mental world which is tormented by self-blame and regret. In *Atonement*, the author’s focused plots are the countless traumatic episodes that Briony has experienced in childhood and adolescence, the confusion and depression of her sexual instinct, and the miserable family relationship.

Ian McEwan’s works focus on the problems of childhood and adolescence, especially their growing environment, family relationship and childhood traumatic experience. Most of the underage characters are troubled teenagers, and the protagonist of *Atonement*, Briony, is one of them. However, Ian McEwan does not condemn them but blame their parents, family and the British society which results in the trauma and the post-traumatic effects that have lasted for years. Family Tallis is the background of illustrating Briony’s psychological world. In the novel, the personal trauma and the theme of growing up set each other off. The collapse of human nature, the decay of traditional ethics, and the cruelty of modern society are intertwined in the face of atonement, but more is due to the individual’s condition: a pitiful family and suppressed sexual instinct which exacerbate Briony’s misrecognition of her identity. In accordance with Lacan, the identity is built by the misrecognition. The subject in which the subject connect him or herself with their images reflected from others or in the mirror. The virtual subsumes the visual and language conditions of the identity and forms the ego. Lacan’s theory of mirror stage is a thorough analysis of human development. *Atonement*, to some extent, can be considered as a bildungsroman of Briony. The “crime” she commits and the misrecognition of identity demonstrate that she is struggling to develop to a human. Lacan also notes that “to be a particular case of the function of imagos, which is to establish a relationship between an organism and its reality, or as they say, between the *Innenwelt* and the *Umwelt*.” (Lacan 78) The cause of trauma is the incomprehensibility and misunderstanding of the moment when the traumatic event happens, for example, what Briony watches by the window when Cecilia and Robbie fighting with each other by the fountain and the library scene. In this paper, it is analyzed that how Briony goes through trauma and gives a false testimony by the misrecognition of her identity. She misrecognizes her real identity by people around her such as her family of origin shapes her as a girl longing for authority of speech and she deals with her adolescent sexual instincts in a wrong way.

**Misrecognition of Identity**

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| --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | mirror | the other | the Other |
| the reflected (the virtual) | images | imageslanguages | imageslanguagespositions |
| identification | imaginaryidentification | imaginaryidentification | symbolicidentification |
| I | mirror stage-I | ideal ego | ego ideal |

**(**정경훈, 74)

**Self-Reflection From Other People**

The core of Lacan’s mirror image theory states an unconscious self-deception phenomenon. Lacan states that the ego is not centered on perception-consciousness, but rather on the function of misrecognition. It is shown in Freud’s theory of identity that the identity is formed by perception-consciousness of the outside world, which, as we have seen, is not objective to the indicators, but different from or without indications. Similarly, Lacan points out that the image reflected in the mirror and the identity created by the unifying perception of the self are due to the error of perception. So what is Briony’s false recognition of identity? Briony is a silent and introverted girl who is ignored but longs for approves from others. In the Tallis mansion, Briony always feels nervous like a trapped animal in a cage: the gaze of male adults is everywhere, but the attention she wishes to acquire from others is always out of reach. Her fear and agitation are driven by the adults around her and the disappointing absence of her father and elder brother stimulate her imitation and pursuit of the male authority. She does not feel secured. Watching others in the corner is the only way for Briony, who has no authority to speak, to establish her autonomy.

The “mirror” in Lacan’s theory of mirror stage can also be explicated as the image of others, or an individual’s imagination or fantasy of others. This image of others comprises primary identification which is the awareness of the difference between “self” and others, and secondary identification which is forming “self” with the help of the other. The two stages of identification ultimately build an identity. In other words, both the image in the mirror and the people around us structure our identities and form an imaginary illusion of ourselves. When we watch others, we are not merely looking at them, but also reconstructing ourselves the same time (La Capra 25). “No matter how successful the dialectical syntheses by which he must resolve, as I, his discordance with his own reality.” (Lacan 76) The plays that Briony writes reflect the real life scenes she has experienced, forming two opposing discourses, and at the same time superimposing the traumatic scenes. “How can a novelist achieve atonement when with her absolute power of deciding outcomes, she is also god?” (34) Therefore, Briony writes down her misrecognized identity as the protagonist in the play, in a way of how she wants the things to happen.

In Lacan’s view, identity is not a conscious entity organized by “principles of reality” that Freud claims but a fantasy beyond reality (Freud 37). “…the *I* formation is symbolized in dreams by a fortified camp, or even a stadium, disturbing, between the arena within its walls and its outer border of gravel…” (Lacan 78) Sinking in the depression of adolescence, Briony compulsively forms her identity by observation and imagination all day long. Lacan notes that ‘an image that is seemingly predestined to have an effect at this phase, at witnessed by the use in analytic theory of antiquity’s term, “imago”. (76) In psychology, “imago” is a term of image that is formed unconsciously with the impression on parents during childhood and has effect on the individual even in adulthood period. In no doubt that the imago of her parents is irresponsible and absent. Therefore, the effects of her parents render Briony staying in a false imagination. She imagines Robbie does hurt and damage her sister severely, and she spends her entire life going through atonement. The purpose of atonement is not only to make up for Robbie and Cecilia, but also to go back to her traumatic history and find truth to the traumatic event, so that she can live over the trauma, regain the autonomy and acquire healing. As how Ian McEwan says at the end of the novel, Briony, who possesses reputation and fame, is once again transformed into a child who was severely damaged in childhood but unable to return to the past and repair the time rift. She hopes to resurrect Robbie and Cecilia in the work and the two would still in love, sitting side by side in the library, and reading a book together. The scene switches instantly into childhood trauma memories, which fully illustrates that Briony is both the unintended victimizer of trauma and the most unwilling victim. When it comes to Briony’s reflection from her father, there is nothing due to the absence of her father. Her is basically a shadow attached to other male entities of which the construction has never been completed (Finney 67). Behind such a crippled identity is the father’s indifferent attitude in the letter, she receives a greeting of merely asking about her homework and physical condition. For a long time, she is used to this indifference, and never expects anything from her father.

**Intervening Other people’s Life**

Lacan refers to the ego as a recognition error, but we can describe it as virtual reality formed by the image and the reaction of the other person. In that virtual reality can be created differently from or without directions, the identity can be formed differently from the world as the subject of directions, from its own body, or without them. According to mirror stage, the roles of mirror is heterogeneous. The reactions of people around the child, such as parents, correspond to mirror images in which the child recognizes him or herself. However, hitters who play the role of winter reacts depending on their mood and conditions, regardless of the child’s characteristics. The absence of father and brother results in the lack of the patriarchal image in *Atonement*. Briony’s elder brother Leon is out all year round. His personality is mild and week and lacks personal opinions, obviously does not possess authority in the family. There is no authority of speech in the family and family members are disconnected to each other. All these lead to Briony’s desire to control and oppress on others.

Briony needs a strong father image to help her building the self-image. Subconsciously Robbie is the proxy of father’s image and her sister naturally is regarded as the image of her mother. Therefore, when Briony witnesses the intimacy between her sister and Robbie, her ambivalence towards Robbie is unabated and her cognition disables her to tell whether Robbie is a lover or a friend, a father or a brother. If she is confused about what she has seen by the fountain, she must have started to imagine Robbie as an enemy. Then after witnessing what happen in the library, Briony decides to completely expel this imaginary enemy from her misrecognized world. The desire to protect and control burst out at the same time and her image in the eyes of others has been revised. Lacan notes that, “overcomes, in a flutter of jubilant activity, the constraints of his prop in order to adopt a slightly learning-forward position and take in an instantaneous view of the image in order to fix it in his mind.” (76) Briony rejoices when giving the testimony. The testimony is a flutter of jubilant activity, through which, her identity “learns forward”. However, the sense of accomplishment does not help Briony to go through trauma and make a progress of getting mature psychologically. After she gives false testimony, Briony still fears that no one would come to see her and talk to her anymore.

**Misrecognition of Self Sexual Instincts**

Lacan suggests that human beings should never overlook their desires (Erin 125). The cause of the trauma is the misunderstanding and misrecognition of the trauma at the moment it happens. In *Atonement*, Briony’s traumatic experience is the moment she gives false testimony. The reason she accuses Robbie is the criminal is due to the traumatic moments when she sees what happens between Cecilia and Robbie by the fountain and in the library. She does not understand that it is a normal interaction between a man and a woman. Her sexual instincts are oppressed so she misrecognizes it as something evil and shameful, like a crime. In another word, she could have imagined that it should have been herself but not Cecilia doing all those with Robbie, because she has a crush on Robbie. She also feels the anger of being betrayed. Therefore, she accuses that all the evilness and crimes come from Robbie. Moreover, she spends her whole life regretting the false testimony: the trauma of which she cannot understand why she has done that. Her uncertainty about her own desires intertwine and aggravate while growing up. According to Lacan, “…but what limits it is the ‘scant reality’ surrealistic dissatisfaction denounces therein.” (Lacan 77) “...falling in love could be achieved in a single word—a glance.”(7) Briony loves Robbie and longs for possessing him. When she witnesses the intimacy between her sister and Robbie, her jealousy, sexual desire, and anger instantly gather. At such a moment, after seeing what happen by the fountain and in the library, Robbie enters Briony’s cognitive world as a targeted criminal. These two metaphorical scenes represent Briony’s subconscious anxiety at her sexual instinct. Briony is dependent on her sister and has a crush on Robbie so that witnessing what happens by the fountain has no less impact on her than the shock of witnessing the intimacy between her parents.

The ideal ego is formed by imaginary identification with the image presented to it, and the image provided at this time comes from the symbolic object that the child identifies with. The subject of symbolic identification is usually parents, but sometimes it may not be more than him or herself. The child may be repeatedly exposed to the whim of the surrounding person and the media bombs, identifying himself with the image they give. In the summer of eleven-year-old, her father is absent as usual. Her mother pretends having severe headache as an excuse to avoiding meeting people. Her brother invites the chocolate tycoon Marshall and cousins to stay. Her sister Cecilia naturally acts as the hostess of the family, while Briony welcome Leon and others in a way of how she perform in her imagined world. The life of the mother and daughter in the mansion of the Talis family is calm and closed before the arrival of the relatives, similar to a matrilineal clan. The male members of the family are either absent for a long time or do not possess masculine authority. When this calm is broken by the chocolate merchant Marshall and the servant’s son Robbie, the image of two invaders has since been established. Both Marshall and Robbie are outsiders, representing male authority invading the female paradise of equality and in harmony. The image of this intruder in Briony’s mind is the male’s sexual invasion to the female’s body in her imagination. If this is a result of Briony’s family environment and adolescent desires, the changes and how people around her act strengthen her sexual consciousness. The overly precocious cousin Lola is an alienated child, who is good at showing coquettishness, using female charm to seduce men, and being good at playing tricks to control others to get what she wants. Lola, who is older than Briony and manages to become the attention center, and brings another kind of invasion to Briony’s build of sex awareness and identity. Sexual attraction and restraint have been plaguing Briony, the girl’s sexual imagination is initially related to her elder brother. Everything is developed referring to Leon and transformed into “be found by a bearded woodsman one winter's dawn, curled up at the base of a giant oak,” (14) , and she is “beautiful and dead.” (14) Thick beard is obviously a metaphor for sexual charm, which shows that although Briony hates sex-related thoughts, her heart is full of longings for it. However, there is neither trustworthy female family member around her to give her a reasonable explanation, nor a mature and male family member to teach her that the sexual instinct is reasonable and normal.

“…every instinctual pressure constitutes a danger, even if it corresponds to a natural maturation process.” (Lacan 79) Lola is the latency of Briony’s pressure that obscured by Lola, she has no place to express herself and release her sexual instincts. Briony thinks Lola steals her position of director and obstructs her rehearsal of imagination. Briony is forced to become a bystander. Not only does she lose her position of director, her family’s focus also shifts to Lola and others, all of which points to the marginal position of Briony’s identity. Briony can only vent herself by whipping nettles, that in her imagination, she stands out among Lola and her twin sisters, holding her head up and planning vicious tricks.

**Conclusion**

The coda of *Atonement* is a happy ending in Briony’s imagination that her sister Cecilia and Robbie go back to the peaceful day, reading a book together in the library. She receives consolation rather than atonement because her testimony eventually leads to the collapse and death of Robbie. What is done cannot be undone and she is the sinner. Her trauma of the scenes of Cecilia and Robbie she sees is inflated in her mind and drives her to give a false testimony. As an adolescence, she is not able to cope with her sexual instincts. The suppression from family and the misrecognition of identity burst out at that moment when she claims Robbie sexually assaults Lola. In the process of facing the past and healing the wound, Briony writes to soothe her soul, and at the same time gains a deeper understanding of identity, humanity and society. She reconciliates with herself, and washes off most of the traumatic memories. Finally she is able to face the future life calmly. In accordance with Lacan, “Thus, the shattering of the *Innenwelt* to *Umwelt* circle gives rise to an inexhaustible squaring of the ego’s audits.” (Lacan 78) The veritable identity of Briony is shattered to a misrecognition of identity which manipulates her to give a testimony and go through the trauma.

In *Atonement*, Ian McEwan shows us how a young girl misrecognizes her identity by reflecting herself from others. in society and calls on the society to pay attention to children and adolescence. Only by being aware of the existence of a trauma and speaking about the traumatic experience can people be freed and learn a post-traumatic lesson. Only tolerance and love can eliminate evilness and help to overcome fear.

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