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# Miscibility of Narrative Heterogeneity: Ian McEwan's *Sweet Tooth* as a Hybrid Postmodernist Metafiction

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## Abstract

Delving into the narration of Ian McEwan's *Sweet Tooth* (2012), this enquiry unravels the threads of conventional realistic narrative and avant-garde postmodernist one in the tapestry of the novel, arguing that through the miscibility of these two heterogeneous modes of narration McEwan constructs a narrative meta-design that innovatively adds an enigmatic dimension to the spy novel genre. In his dual narrative that depends on verisimilitude as well as self-conscious reflexivity, he once again, a decade after his *Atonement* (2002), demonstrates his literary taste for bridging the "past" and "present." Marinating his narrative in Cold War events, and adding a dash of what Linda Hutcheon calls "historiographic metafiction," he makes a postmodern signature dish that sustains its paradoxical hybridity: a representational self-reflexivity or an anti-representational reflexivity. Aligned with Monica Cojocaru's detection of a "metafictional twist" in the novel as a part of her comparative investigation, this study discusses that *Sweet Tooth*'s dual narrative makes it eligible to wear the postmodern badge.

**Keywords**

Metafiction; Metanarrative; Self-representation; Hybrid Postmodernism; Anti-representation; Self-conscious Narration.

## 1. Introduction: Postmodern Hybridity

Dissecting the narrative architecture of *Sweet Tooth* for more than a decade, many incisive critics and reviewers—the likes of Monica Cojocaru , Charles Cornelius Pastoor, and Naomi Adam have attempted to align the novel with McEwan's *Atonement* rather than carving out a distinctive niche for the novel. By and large, the major focuses of these studies were "authorial manipulation", "narrative duplicity" or "metatextual narrative techniques" in *Sweet Tooth*; these critics attempted to substantiate

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contradictory doubleness of thought, speech, or action in the novel. The focal points of the said studies can be incorporated to other issues traced in McEwan's oeuvre from1980s including intertextuality, parody, unreliable narrators, and narrative indeterminacy, across various genres including war narrative, the gothic tale, spy thriller, the Victorian realism, satire, dystopian fantasy, modern parables, and postmodern romance.

Applying a neuropsychiatric framework on these two novels, Adam borrowed Marie-Laure Ryan's conceptualization of the theory of "possible worlds" which results in "duplicitous point of view." As Adam argued, such point of view leads to destabilising stylistic effects and the reader's disorientation in these novels. The duality that Adam accentuated in his study was identified in Pastoor's "Authorial Atonement in Ian McEwan's *Atonement* and *Sweet Tooth*," as well as in Cojocaru's "Metafictional Twist Endings in Ian McEwan's *Atonement* and *Sweet Tooth*." These investigations similarly highlight "dual narrative" as a salient characteristic of McEwan's fiction: a heresy to be avoided since McEwan's *Saturday*, *The Black Dogs*, and *The Cement Garden* are exceptions to this claim. What these studies, however, subtly imply is the postmodern aspect of *Sweet Tooth* that is concentrated heavily in this study.

*Sweet Tooth* does not exhibit exactly what Barry Lewis regards as the typical symptoms of postmodernist fiction. He diagnoses a narrative fiction with the syndrome of postmodernism, if it has a trace of "temporal disorder [as in Ishmael Reed's *Flight to Canada*]; involuntary impersonation of other voices (or pastiche) [as in Umberto Eco's *The Name of the Rose*]; fragmentation [as in B. S. Johnson's *The Unfortunates* ]; looseness of association[as in William Gass' *Willie Masters' Lonesome Wife*]; paranoia [as Yossarian in Joseph Heller's *Catch-22*] and the creation of vicious circles[as in Ronald Sukenick's *The Death of the Novel and Other Stories*]" (179).However, the healthy narrative, and linguistic structure of *Sweet Tooth* does not allow the "clinical" readers to send *Sweet Tooth* to Berry Lewis's ward. Moreover, the narrative normality of *Sweet Tooth* does not make the novel an exemplum of Jean-François Lyotard's view of postmodernity, the condition emerged out of "incredulity towards metanarratives" elaborated in his famous book*, The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*. Interestingly enough, no trace of Baudrillardian "hyperreality" is detected in pathological analysis of *Sweet Tooth*'s blood test.

However, the postmodern infertility of *Sweet Tooth* does not guarantee its untouchability in the community of contemporary literary theories. What makes *Sweet Tooth* a postmodernist fiction is its crossbreed narrative that pushes it towards the "middle ground" of Richard Bradford's adumbration of the current literary ambiance. According to Bradford, "the battle between realism and modernism/postmodernism is now, in the early twenty-first century, effectively over. Neither side is victorious but the middle ground of fiction is shared by hybridized versions of both" (78). The Bradfordian centre that is a hybridized offshoot of tria juncta in uno (i.e. realism-modernism and postmodernism) becomes a dwelling place for McEwan to satisfy all types of reader: from

those who, in line with realistic conventions, identify themselves with Serena Frome, to those readers who adore stylistic fiction of postmodernist "league." In this sense, hybridity moves from the context to the text and eventually infects readers too.

Along with many attributes of postmodernism including plurality, hyperreality, flattened subjectivity, aesthetic-cognitive reflexivity, decentering and deterritorializing, anti-essentialism or anti-foundationalism, hybridity has been unanimously associated with it; in his famous schematic list of differences between modernism and postmodernism, Ihab Hassan refers to hybridity as the opposite of modern "selection"(268). Stoddard and Cornwell underline the recent relevance of hybridity to postmodern ideological and aesthetic perspective when, it came to imply "flexibility, openness, adaptation, ambiguity, contradiction and irony" (338). For Hans Bertens, hybridity can only expand postmodern artefact into a special kind in which a self-reflexive, anti-representational postmodern work of art paradoxically makes "a return to narrative and representation with reflexivity" (73). According to Bertens, the first critic who convincingly theorized such a hybrid postmodernism is Alan Wilde, who called fiction generated out of this hybrid postmodernism "mid-fiction" (73). This kind of fiction has a representational narrative and simultaneously it is self-representational/self-reflexive.

Despite the fact that mere trace of hybridity in a literary work does not necessarily transubstantiate it to a postmodernist one, this feature works the contrary in *Sweet Tooth*. Hybridisation in *Sweet Tooth* is capable of producing the same effects that Stallybrass and White attribute to it: "hybridization produces new combinations and strange instabilities in a given semiotic system. It therefore generates the possibility of shifting *the very terms of the system itself*, by erasing and interrogating the relationships which constitute it" (58). Although McEwan in *Atonement* and *Enduring Love* has made use of this technique for his metafictional purpose, in *Sweet Tooth* he attempts to verify the hybridisation of representational and self-reflexive narrative for other end. In this novel, he creates a heterocosmic fictional world whose essential trope, according to the postmodern novelist Ronald Sukenick, is "hypothesis, provisional supposition, a technique that requires suspension of belief as well as of disbelief" (80). The hybridity of *Sweet Tooth*'s narrative makes the novel "instable," and this instability is to some extent structural; readers keep oscillating between the representability and self-representability in a story about MI5 and the Security Service, a topic that intensifies the narrative unsteadiness. Indeed, the structural uncertainty built by narrative hybridity, eventually, leaves readers in a nail-biting suspense. The novelty of McEwan in *Sweet Tooth* as compared with other espionage novelists is his success in injecting a genuine suspense to the concept of mimesis by a narrative vacillation between representation of external reality and self- representation.

## 2. Narrative Hybridity of *Sweet Tooth*

In the light of postmodern hybridity, *Sweet Tooth* appears to occupy Bradford's "middle ground" where realism, modernism and postmodernism cross each other; however, it is to substantiate that the accumulation of realism (in the form of a representative narrative) and postmodernism (in the form of a self-representative narrative) in this novel is more a an consequence of his postmodern mindset than what has been acknowledged through the critical reception of *Atonement* and *Enduring Love* as his reconciliation with distinctive literary styles of realism, modernism and postmodernism. To establish the postmodern hybridity in *Sweet Tooth*, the approach of this study relies much on both Brian McHale's and Linda Hutcheon's observations on postmodernist fiction, despite the fact that these two salient critics look at the issue differently.

According to Bertens, metafiction for McHale is the dominant form of postmodernist fiction, which has a hybrid nature and "negotiates the tension between self-reflexivity and representation by abandoning the modernist emphasis on epistemology—which leads inevitably towards reflexivity—for an emphasis on ontology" (75). In line with McHale's confession of the hybrid nature of postmodernist fiction, Hutcheon from another perspective obliquely emphasizes on this characteristic: "what would characterize postmodernism in fiction would be what I here call 'historiographic metafiction' " (ix). Besides, in her remark that: "[p]ostmodernism is a contradictory phenomenon, one that uses and abuses, installs and then subverts, the very concepts it challenges"(3), she implies the "compoundness" of postmodernist fiction. In sum, these two postmodern mapmakers indirectly emphasize the hybridity of postmodernist fiction.

As it has been noted, the hybridity in *Sweet Tooth* is unique in McEwan's oeuvre. The bifurcation between reflexive and self-reflexive realms is easily identifiable as distinct separate chapters are allocated to them in the novel. Unlike in *Atonement* where McEwan frequently attracts the reader's attention to its fictionality, in *Sweet Tooth* he does not expose the "metafictionality" in the first twenty-one chapters, which are predominantly representational and historical; actually, these chapters deal with Serena's narrative of her life, career, lovers, family, etc. It is in the last chapter containing a letter appended by Tom Haley, Serena's case-cum-lover that the novel becomes self-reflexive and anti-representational in unmasking Tom as the author of the very novel we finished reading.

### 2.1. The Reflexivity of Sweet Tooth

Sweet Tooth is indeed a product of contemporary culture that tends to represent reality, even if only contingently or partially. This hegemonic phenomenon even extends to unrepresentable things, situations and issues, giving rise to oxymoronic expressions such as "representation of the unrepresentable": a philosophical speculation at the centre of Jean-François Lyotard's system of thought. The word "representation" has three denotations, though there has been considerable overlap between them. In the first sense,

representation indicates the visual, verbal or aural embodiments of things, situations or issues; in short, presentation here implies the act of presenting to the eye or the mind. Presentation in this sense is not naïve mimesis but it proves functional in much of literary criticism. In his Poetics, Aristotle builds his view of mimesis on this implication of representation; even Dr Johnson's positive criticism of Shakespeare is based on the same sense: "holds up to his readers a faithful mirror of manners and of life" (62). Representation in this sense, actually constitutes the building block of both realism and naturalism, where the accuracy of representation is crucial.

Serena in the preliminary part of her narrative confesses her inclination toward representation in this sense: "I craved a form of naive realism. I paid special attention; I craned my readerly neck whenever a London street I knew was mentioned, or a style of frock, a real public person, even a make of car" (McEwan 79). Even later Serena remarks how her perceived reality is the criterion for her writing: "Then, I thought, I had a measure, I could gauge the quality of the writing by its accuracy, by the extent to which it aligned with my own impressions, or improved upon them" (79). Even the author's disclaimer on the copyright page of *Sweet Tooth* is a paradoxical emphasis on the realistic dimension of the novel: "This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places and incidents either are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, events or locales is entirely coincidental" (McEwan iii). As a registered novelist, McEwan through "Disclaimer" emphasizes on fictional verisimilitude and warns readers to keep aesthetic distance; nevertheless sends out unmistakable signal that *Sweet Tooth* is capable of being confused with real "names, characters, places and incidents." Warning the reader to keep aesthetic distance, McEwan right from the initial page of the novel stimulates the reader's appetite for the reality outside the text. This possible blurring of fact and fiction is interwoven in the very structure of the novel; that is why some pages later Serena cautions against conflating life with art, when she remarks "I wasn't impressed by those writers[…] who infiltrated their own pages as part of the cast, determined to remind the poor reader that all the characters and even they themselves were pure inventions and that there was a difference between fiction and life" (79). From Serena's perspective, fiction-life is not a one-way road, when she continues "to the contrary, to insist that life was a fiction anyway. Only writers, I thought, were ever in danger of confusing the two. (79)

In fact, like any other literary fiction, *Sweet Tooth* has a complete, self-sufficient world populated by people, shops, parks and streets. Its world has a resemblance to daily life; hence, it is probable and plausible in Aristotelian sense. McEwan names numerous real novelists (including Kinsley Amis, Martin Amis, Charles Dickens, Joseph Conrad, Jane Austen, Kipling, Doris Lessing, Margaret Drabble, Iris Murdoch and A.S. Byatt) and real places such as London Tube and Cambridge. He, moreover, refers to literary works like Dickens' *Dombey and Son*, Byatt's *The Game* as well as the leading newspapers such as *New York Times*. However, it does not mean is that the novel evolves out the classical

view of representation. As Prendergast (2000) believes, representation even in this sense is a modern invention. According to him, despite its ancient lineage, representation is "an essentially modern invention, one of the master concepts of modernity underpinning the emergence of what Heidegger called the Age of the World Picture, based on the epistemological subject/object split of the scientific outlook"(2). Borrowing the term 'enframes' from Heidegger, Prendergast refers to "the knowing subject who observes the world-out-there in order to make it over into an object of representation" (2).

In the second, though subtly related sense, representation means standing for something that is not present. High modernists like Joyce in *Ulysse*s, Woolf in *To the Lighthouse* or Faulkner in *The Sound and the Fury* extensively represented both their characters' external worlds as well as their veiled subconscious universes. Stream of consciousness came into use for exposing the content of the consciousness and subconsiousness of the characters. This kind of representation facilitates the expression of the unsayable impressions, thoughts and feelings of characters as part of their consciousness in a specific discourse, context or occasion. In addition to the first sense of representation, *Sweet Tooth* relies apparently on this second sense of representation in Tom Haley's representation of the inner worlds of Serena, Max, and other characters after their acquaintance. Introducing himself in the last part of the novel as the author of what Serena narrated, Tom represents the buried subconsciousness of Serena which respectively brings about Tom's self-reconstruction: "my task was to reconstruct myself through the prism of your consciousness" (McEwan 365).

In postmodernist fiction, particularly those literary works labeled as "metafiction", representation in its third sense is employed. In this type of representation, called "metafictional representation." the narrative reminds readers that what they read is not a mirror reflection of the world but a fiction: "a combination of words on a page that we [readers] must make sense of by relating them to other texts, not the external world" (Bran 16). In *Sweet Tooth*, obviously, metafictional representation has a contradictory nature since it both enfolds the two previous senses, and paradoxically unfolds them. The metafictional representation in *Sweet Tooth* begins with a gloomy image of the Cold War era and the novel gives a graphic picture of the English society of 1970s. Simultaneously the novel represents the consciousness of characters whose occupational and personal lives are interwoven with this "cold fire." Representation in these two senses raises two parallel worlds in *Sweet Tooth* in order to demonstrate both the external reality of 1970s and the internal perceptions and interactions of the characters. The convergence of these two parallel worlds throughout the novel is subverted in the last part of the novel where Tom's letter projects the narrative's reliance on representation in its metafictional sense. Representation in this new sense concerns with mise-en-abyme or self-reflexivity. What is achieved in *Sweet Tooth,* therefore, seems to be a hybridity unanimously attributed to postmodern resort to metafictional representation.

### 2.2. The Self-Reflexivity of *Sweet Tooth*

Despite its seemingly realistic veneer, *Sweet Tooth* pokes the conscious reader not to be drown in the world of make-believe. In the very opening lines of the novel, where Serena Frome attempts to teach the correct pronunciation of her surname to the eager readers, who are imagining her "plume", one encounters a first-person narrative in which Serena is self-consciousness of her act of story-telling: "My name is Serena Frome (rhymes with plume) and almost forty years ago I was sent on a secret mission for the British security service" (McEwan 3). She even cares about the tempo of her narration: "I won't waste much time on my childhood and teenage years. I'm the daughter of an Anglican bishop and grew up with a sister in the cathedral precinct of a charming small city in the east of England" (McEwan 3). This direct exposition of Serena brings to mind Italo Calvino's prototypical opening passage of his novel *If on a winter's night a traveller*. Calvino's narrator in a state of total self-consciousness surprises the reader: "You are about to begin reading Italo Calvino's new novel, *If on a winter's night a traveller*. Relax. Concentrate. Dispel every other thought. Let the world around you fade. Best to close the door; the TV is always on in the next room" (3). However, this alarming degree of self-consciousness is avoided in Serena's narration in which she prefers to preserve some of the narrative elements for her readers to discover.

Serena's abortive narration, in which she is more like a narrator in an "unconscious narrative" than a self-conscious storyteller, resonates Edward Said's standpoint in *The World, the Text, the Critic*. According to Said, "all texts are worldly, even when they appear to deny it, they are nevertheless a part of the social world, human life, and of course the historical moments in which they are located and interpreted" (4). Mingling the narrative with the elements of self-reflexivity, what McEwan achieves in *Sweet Tooth* is the dilution of its "worldliness." Indeed, the novel projects all the building blocks of the textual structure, that is, the author, the reader, the critic and more conspicuously the text whose process of composition and formation gets thoroughly portrayed in the course of the narrative. In fact, the novel is a literary club in itself where the author, the narrator and the critic sit around the round table of text and together bring about a fictional narrative. Such a generic self-representation in *Sweet Tooth* converts the novel to a metafiction that is defined by Waugh as a "fictional writing which self-consciously and systematically draws attention to its status as an artefact in order to pose questions about the relationship between fiction and reality" (12). The blurred boundary between fact and fiction in metafictional novels sheds doubt on the objectivity and validity of reality. Such blurriness is the inevitable part of the world of intelligent services; "in this work," explains Mark, "the line between what people imagine and what's actually the case can get very blurred. In fact, that line is a big grey space, big enough to get lost in. You imagine things – and you can make them come true. The ghosts become real" (159). In fact, the indistinctness makes metafiction an ideal narrative form in an espionage novel.

Integrating fact-fiction miscibility in its very essence, *Sweet Tooth* is in alignment with *Enduring Love* and specifically with *Atonement*. In *Enduring Love*, *the meta-level is added a*fter twenty-four chapters when McEwan supplements the text with two appendices in which he introduces Joe Rose as the author of what has so far been narrated. In *Atonement*, similarly, the adventurous life of Briony is narrated in the three preliminary parts and then a coda titled "London 1999" breaks all the established frames (i.e. temporal, narrative, etc.) in the initial part of the text by unmasking Briony as the author and narrator of the very previous story. This recurrent technique outraged critics such as Julie Ellam to condemn McEwan of disappointing the reader: "Some readers have felt cheated by" the exposition of Briony as the author (56). However, this technique of sudden transmutation of fiction into metafiction is actually what helps McEwan to articulate his propensity for postmodern representaiton.

Accordingly, in *Sweet Tooth*, Serena Frome introduces herself as the narrator even teaches the reader to pronounce her last name properly right from the opening paragraph of the novel. She then goes forward to give all the necessary information that the reader needs to make sense of her life: her several fallings in love which end in her desertion by her lovers; her employment by the British Security Service, MI5, which is terminated eighteen months after her promotion. All these are narrated in the first twenty-one chapters. Surprisingly in chapter 22 that finalizes the text, the reader reads a letter, which reveals that what he has followed until then was a novel by Tom Haley, whom Serena spied when she was at the service of MI5. The letter is actually Tom's attempt to get Serena's consent to publish his novel entitled after MI5's project named "Sweet Tooth." In the letter, Tom elaborates how he excruciatingly rehearsed what Serena had verbalized about her family, work, lovers, friends, etc. during their acquaintance to fabricate a novel out of them.

### 2.2.1 The Self-conscious Narration in *Sweet Tooth*

Condemning self-conscious or self-referential narratives as "masturbatory revelling in self-scrutiny" (218), Robert Scholes in *Fabulation and Metafiction* expresses his dissatisfaction with this type of "experimental" novel. Commenting on the ontology of fiction, Scholes declares "we need to be able to perceive the cosmos itself as an intricate, symmetrical, cunningly contrived, imaginative entity in which we can be as much at home as a character in a work of fiction, we must see man as himself imagined and being re-imagined, and now able to play a role in the re-imagination of himself" (217). For him, the narrative self-reflection shrugs the "great task" of fiction, hence is incompatible with the human project of turning "civilization in the direction of integration and away from alienation, to bring human life back into harmony with the universe" (217).

The narration in *Sweet Tooth* is of such a stance that is able to satisfy both the conventionalist critics such as Scholes and the radical experimentalists who get orgasm through challenging the established conventions of the novel proper. This feat is possible as the major portion of the narrative, to Robert Scholes' satisfaction, is in line with reflectional conventions of the novel; while its closing section is complemented with a dash of self-reflexivity to satisfy the anti-conventionalists.

Tom's explanation of the process in which he has composed *Sweet Tooth* is compatible with Waugh's definition of the self-conscious fiction. Waugh stresses that metafictional novels are generally constructed on a fundamental contradiction: "the construction of a fictional illusion (as in traditional realism) and the laying bare of that illusion"(6). In other words, "metafiction is simultaneously to create a fiction and to make a statement about the creation of that fiction" (ibid). Waugh accentuates that "any text that draws the reader's attention to its process of construction by frustrating his or her conventional expectations of meaning and closure problematizes more or less explicitly the ways in which narrative codes – whether 'literary' or 'social' – artificially construct apparently 'real' and imaginary worlds in the terms of particular ideologies while presenting these as transparently 'natural' and 'eternal'" (22). in *Sweet Tooth*, Tom Haley's disclosure of his procedure of getting the necessary information about Serena's life highlights the artificiality of ideology-propelled reality; by explaining how he has spied on her as she has appointed to spy on him, it reveals the fabrication of reality in the very free-play of fact/fiction binary opposition.

In terms of a self-conscious narrator, one of the key characteristics of metafictional novels, Serena does not seem to be aware totally that she is acting as a character in a novel. Being a narrator, she neither attempts to draw the reader's attention to the aesthetic construction of her narrative and the composition of the text nor comments on the story-telling process to highlight the gap between fiction and reality. In fact, she does not reveal to readers that the story is a fabrication. She is only a first-person narrator who tries to deliver straightforward those parts of her life story that have had a significant impact on her memory and present condition. The crisis of representation comes into being when she imagines that her narrative is a representation of what she has already done and she thinks that other represented characters are actually the personae in her narrative. Without foregrounding any fundamental components of narrative fiction that she is involved in, Serena reads Tom Haley's fictional works and comments on his techniques of characterization, but one never guesses that she herself is also "getting written" until the last part of the novel containing Tom's letter.

The reliability of Serena as a narrator is another element pertaining to its self-conscious narration. She is a first-person narrator acting in a self-conscious narration. Reliability in terms of Serena—an agent of the Security Office of Britain—has a subtle ironical implication since it is an integral part of her vocation. As far as her career is concerned, she is trustable to the core. She is able to indulge completely in Tom's life and even to excavate his unwritten status of consciousness to transfer to MI5. Her reliability and trustworthiness bring her promotion from registry floor (ground floor) in the beginning of her recruitment to the first floor of the MI5 headquarter building as a caseworker. Even she is sacked at the end of her duty not because of breaching the security but owing to her colleague-cum-former lover, Max, who exposes her identity and her mission to the public. This essential reliability makes her narrative so reliable

that the reader can hardly be sceptical about her first-person narration. There seems to be no gap, crack or contradictory elements throughout her narrative. This general evaluation of her narrative, nonetheless, would sound reasonable if the novel had closed at the end of the twenty-first chapter; indeed, the appendix of Tom's letter radically decreases the reliability of what depicted through Serena's narrative. By the end of the novel, readers realizes that what they have read so far is actually Tom's thought in Serena's mouth. The reader should get back again and reread the novel. That is why Daley, a reviewer of *USA Today*, shoots the first bullet and labels *Sweet Tooth* as "a postmodern hall of mirrors … with an unreliable narrator."

Rimmon-Kenan's outline of the main sources of narrative unreliability helps a lot to shed light on Serena's narration. Rimmon-Kenan believes that "the narrator's limited knowledge, his personal involvement, and his problematic value-scheme" make a narrator unreliable (103). The unreliability of a limited point of view can be traced, according to her, in the narratives with a young narrator, an idiot narrator or an adult and mentally normal narrator telling things he/she does not fully know. Serena's account fits to this category of narrative unreliability since, as a young character, she does not know that she is being spied by Tom and later she becomes just like a puppet in the hand of a mighty author like Tom. Besides, Serena's personal involvement in the various scenarios throughout the novel adds to her narrative unreliability. As a first-person narrator, she continuously personalizes all of her social relations, for instance, by falling in love with her classmate, with the professor of her boyfriend, with her colleagues, with her agent, etc. This inevitability of Serena's personal involvement in all her social activities is resonated in Max's rhetorical question that "are women really incapable of keeping their professional and private lives apart?" (158)

### 2.2.2 Frame-Breaking in Self-conscious Narration of *Sweet Tooth*

One idiosyncratic feature of a self-conscious narration is that the distinction between framed art and unframed reality is blurred. This blurred boundary brings about a confusion between fact and fiction and seems to be a hallmark of postmodern narratives when, for instance, the temporal framework is broken and the fictional past tense abruptly switches to the present tense (e.g. in *Atonement*) or vice versa. Along with tense shift, the narrative framework of a self-conscious narration gets shattered as the third-person narrative suddenly shifts into a first-person narration or vice versa. Occasionally there is a third alternative where abuttals of narrator/character narration are –trespassed by the author who suddenly interrupts to tell the rest of the story. Deliberate removal of the boundaries between readers, writers and narrators also leads to another type of frame-breaking in postmodernist fiction of which Calvino's *If on a winter's night a traveller* is the apotheosis.

The frame-breaking technique is not radically practiced in *Sweet Tooth* since the author does not want to lose the representational and realistic aspects of his novel. In other words, the spatio-temporal dimension of the novel remain intact and the reader can hardly find a crack there. Besides, the concatenation of events flows smoothly. The only frame-breaking evidence is in very act of initially introducing Serena as the narrator and Tom as the focalizer and then taking a U-turn and unmasking Tom as the author of what has been narrated and Serena a character in it. Such a technique does not tilt the novel towards the total breakdown of linear organisation of the narrative. Unlike *Atonement*, where Briony in the last part of the novel tears the curtain of the third-person narrative and exposing her identity as the author terminates the novel, here Tom appends the letter in which he elaborates on his rehearsal for becoming Tom-the-author. The attached letter includes the ordeal undertaken by Tom for portraying and framing Serena's private and public life. By this indirect extensive explanation in a letter rather than a sharp authorial exposure Tom actually prevents a "short circuit" in the current of narrative. In his letter, Tom depicts how he followed all the stages and steps that Serena told him during their acquaintance. The final epistolary chapter is both an example of frame-breaking and a adumbration of the very process of frame-breaking in which the borderlines between the author, character or narrator are dissolved.

### 3. Representational Beginning and Self-Representational Ending of *Sweet Tooth*

The representational portion of *Sweet Tooth* (its first twenty-one chapters) follows a modified speculative diagram named "Freytag's pyramid" (qtd. in Guerin, et al. 7). Although Gustav Freytag had only ancient Greek and Shakespearean drama in his mind when he suggested the model, this speculation can be roughly assumed for the analysis of majority of narrative fiction, that is novels, novelettes or short stories:

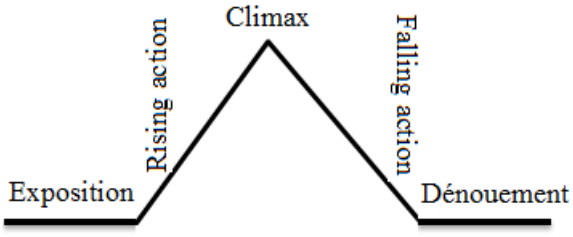


Fig. 1. Freytag's pyramid

The place of the components in Freytag's pyramid varies in different literary works. For instance, the ending or dénouement can be located right at the beginning of a novel. Tolstoy's "The Death of Ivan Ilych" is an apt example of transposing these two components to the outset of a narrative since right in the opening page the narrator announces that Ivan Ilych has died and the rest of the narrative deals with the events leading to his death. The opening paragraph of *Sweet Tooth* has such an "ending-in-beginning" format. Serena says, "My name is Serena Frome (rhymes with plume) and

almost forty years ago I was sent on a secret mission for the British security service. I didn't return safely. Within eighteen months of joining I was sacked, having disgraced myself and ruined my lover, though he certainly had a hand in his own undoing" (3). Within less than four lines, the narrator discloses the ending in the very beginning of the novel indicating that what the reader is going to read is the course of events that eventually ends in such catastrophes. The Freytag's speculative diagram can be modified to reflect the concatenation of events in *Sweet Tooth* as follows:

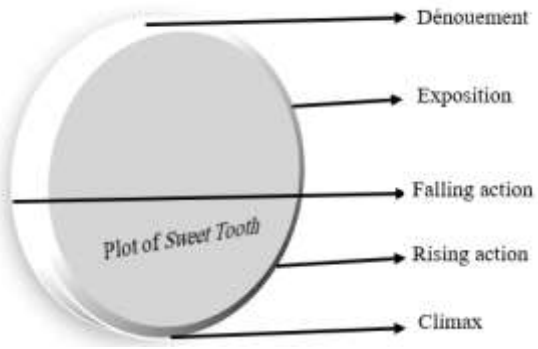


Fig 2. Plot diagram of *Sweet Tooth*

In this ending-in-beginning opening, Serena depicts her role as the narrator-character of the novel along with a quick picture of her life. Indeed, she breaks out her narrative in a typical realistic manner in which a protagonist with an established identity is introduced right at the beginning of the narrative. She is fairly conscious about her act of narrating, though she is totally ignorant that she is a character in Tom's narrative. This realistic beginning has reflexive significance and is in line with the reflexive portion of the postmodern hybridity assumed as the structural skeleton of the novel. After giving an overall picture of her narrative exposition, she interpolates the other major and minor characters and gradually proceeds with introducing the irreconcilable multi-conflicts embedded in *Sweet Tooth*. The narrative goes ahead toward its climax when Serena's identity as an MI5 agent leaks to the press and the consequential events including her misemployment and her separation from her lover bring about a radical peripeteia in her life.

If *Sweet Tooth* was ended by the chapter 21, the novel would have a conventional, realistic ending. According to this conventional dénouement, Serena's identity as an MI5 agent is revealed; she gets fired; her lover banishes her, etc. However, unlike the realistic, representational beginning of the novel, its ending is postmodern and self-representational. The novel terminates by Tom's formal written request asked at the end of his appended letter and the reader is waiting for Serena's response. If she concedes to Tom's request, Tom will be able to publish his novel (which is in fact *Sweet Tooth* itself). Affixing the novel with this letter, therefore, turns the ending and the opening into a cycle. According to this form of narrative, the very closing part of the novel is not its ending and the novel is obtrusively open-ended.

### 3.1. Miscibility of Representational and Self-representational Narration in *Sweet Tooth*

Apart from the thematic connection between the representational portion of *Sweet Tooth* (chapter 1 to 21) and its self- representational section (chapter 22), there is a structural integration between these two sections which can be accentuated in the light of James O. Young's essay "Representation in Literature." Young asserts that "R is a representation of some object O if and only if R is intended by a subject S to stand for O and an audience A (where A is not identical to S) can recognise that R stands for O" (128). In Young's speculation, "a representation always has an object which it is about" (130) while there are many represented persons and objects in literature that are prominently fictional though similar persons or objects may exist in the real world. He calls generally this kind of representation in literature "type-representation" since there are resemblances (though this similarity may not be striking) between objects, people, events, places, etc. in the world of literature and those in the out-of-the-text world. This is Young's last point for the justification of representation of "fictional" things and people in literature.

According to Young's theory of literary representation, Serena, Tom, London, subway station and all the other entities portrayed in Sweet Tooth may or may not exist in the real world. Their believability derives out of their accordance to some available classes or types in the real world. This attribution of a class or type in the actual life to an object in literature is one way of fulfilling the need for referents. Instead of Young's assumption of type-representation in literature, the injection of mise en abîme and self-reflective world in literature can solve the problem of referentiality. In other words, the theory of the self-representationality of literature eradicates the void of referents for representing fictional people, things, places, etc. According to this speculation, the world of literature is a self-sufficient, complete one which does not need an separate external world of referents. Hence, to justify the representation of objects, people or places in literary works there is no need to trace their real equivalents to in the real world.

Coming to the last chapter of *Sweet Tooth*, the reader experiences what is generally known as the crisis of representation. This crisis is when postmodernist writers as well as deconstructionist critics dismiss the empirical premise of linguistic representability of reality. For them language constructs reality rather than representing reality. These thinkers believe that human knowledge, rather than a sole production of his direct sensory experience of reality, is invariably contaminated by language. They debunk the view that language is a transparent window to reality of the world. Instead of mirroring reality as it is, for them, language is the source of reality. Following Derrida's rejection of metaphysical premise of the transcendental signifier, postmodernists express that the world and the knowledge is always distorted by language and this reality according to historical circumstances and the environment alters. When such an uncertainty and suspicion about the reliability of the linguistic representation of the external reality enters the world of fiction, a fresh subgenre known as the metafictional novel comes into

being. This type of novels does not attempt to represent the external reality (as in realistic novels) and is not concerned with the accuracy of the represented images since it is self-representational.

## 4. Conclusion

Rene Magritte's painting entitled "The False Mirror" (Fig. 3) can be an appropriate finale for the current study on *Sweet Tooth* and it may confirm the regularity of the observation substantiated in this study. Magritte there depicts a state where an observer stands on a threshold between seeing from inside and seeing from outside:

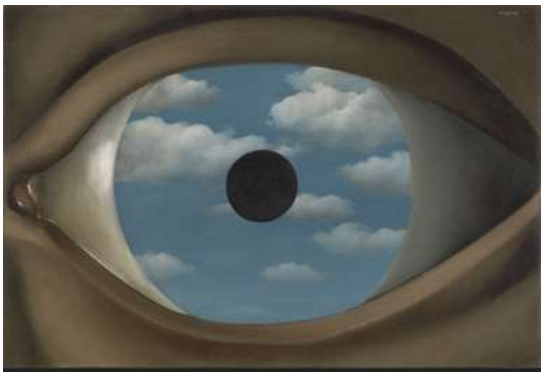

Fig. 3. Rene Magritte, "The False Mirror"

Similarly the reader of *Sweet Tooth* perceives both the external reality through the reflexive narrative and the internal matrix of fiction as a craft through the self-reflexive narrative. And Ian McEwan succeeds to represent the inside as well as the outside; the novel lays bare the long tradition of narrative fiction, while it keeps the major elements of narrative fiction when Serena the narrator-cum-character sets the scene for her readers to identify themselves with the represented people in the narrative and to indulge themselves in the incidents. In this way, *Sweet Tooth* is like a window through which the reader can behold the miscibility of the two heterogonous types of narrative: the representational and reflexive with the anti-representational and self-reflexive.

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