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## The Emergence of Lacanian Ideal Ego in the Light of Ego Ideal in *Atonement*

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### ABSTRACT

The study investigated Ian McEwan's *Atonement* (2001) in terms of the Lacanian concepts of Subjectivity, Desire and the Symbolic. The novel depicts the need to atone for the really horrific thing Briony Tallis, the thirteen-year old protagonist, did when she was a kid that is accusing her sister's lover, Robbie, of rape and ruining their lives. Therefore, the central objective of this research is to demonstrate the affinity between the Symbolic Order, in which the Briony and Cecilia are positioned, and their subjectivity. In this regard psychological growth of them is elucidated via Lacanian triplet orders. The paper goes through the exploring the process of ego formation toward the issue of the subject formation. Using the concepts of the ideal ego and the ego ideal, this study strives to reveal the original reasons of Cecilia and Briony's narcissism and their craving for controlling the lives of the others. The analysis of the case study showed that the subjectivity of the characters of *Atonement* is in the process of ever changing and becoming. This relational aspect of subjectivity suggests that the characters have little or no influence in determining their identity. In other words, they are not the creators but rather they have been created. Although Briony, Robbie and Cecilia are frequently due to change, they are not the decision makers, but rather they are decided for.

**Keywords:** *Lacanian Triplet Orders, Subjectivity, Desire, The Symbolic, Lacan, Ian McEwan*

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### 1. Introduction

Ian McEwan (1948) known as the author of *Atonement*, is a very prominent British writer. His novels cover common issues of the modern time such as love, gender, politics, war, morality, science, politics, social discrimination, limitations of rationality and religion. *Atonement* (2001) is one of his greatest achievements; it received the WH Smith Literary Award (2002), National Book Critics' Circle Fiction Award (2003), Los Angeles Times Prize for Fiction (2003), and the Santiago Prize for the European Novel (2004) (Roberts and McEwan, 2010: 71). After publishing this grandiose novel, he was known as the author of *Atonement*. The novel, splendid in its meticulous depiction of childhood, love and war, explores the need to atone for the really horrific thing Briony Tallis, the thirteen-year old protagonist, did when she was a kid and accused her sister's lover, Robbie, of rape. Briony, a precocious in literature, makes a false comprehension of adult motives and

this brings about a fundamental change in their lives. Robbie and Cecilia are the victims of the younger girl's imagination. Having committed a crime, Briony, will spend the rest of her life trying to atone.

Through reading of Ian McEwan's works the reader comes across this feeling that McEwan is familiar with writings of Freud, Hegel, Darwin, Marx. Ian McEwan's conspicuous skill in using language and his penetration into characters' state of mind is admiring. Dominic Head in his outstanding work *Ian McEwan* asserts that "he writes in a period in which the problem of identity – conceived as a problem of moral being – has become more acute... There is certainly an emphasis on self-understanding, a quest for identity, in many of McEwan's novels" (Head, 11-14). The affinity between psychoanalysis and literature is undeniable, since the psychoanalytic studies of literature have had a significant growth in recent years. Exploring Lacan's key concepts, the

present paper attempts to demonstrate them in McEwan's novel, *Atonement*.

Lacan, a "psychoanalyst and a theorist in France" (Fendler, 2014: 21), historian of ideas, and a philosopher, is also best known for his activities in psychiatry, human sciences, and other sorts of studies. As Sean Homer puts it, Lacan is the "most important psychoanalyst since Sigmund Freud (1856–1939), the originator and founding father of psychoanalysis" (2005: 1). On the basis of what Roudinesco says Lacan is also "the originator of a system of thought. Based on both Freudianism and Hegelian philosophy. Lacan's work provided the French psychoanalytic movement with an alternative to searching for an impossible identity" (2007: 99). Lacan's thoughts and theories could best be applied to various works and studies.

Accompanied by the introduction and the conclusion, this essay consists of a section entitled "*Atonement* with Respect to Lacanian Triplet Orders" which is allocated to the elucidating the psychological growth of the characters. It is divided into three subsections that is "Retrospection of Briony and Cecilia to the Imaginary Order", the "Trap of Subjection to the Symbolic Order" and "Beyond Representation, the Trauma of the Real". These subsections are devoted to the explanation of the ego formation, the subject formation and the characters' speechlessness respectively.

## 2. Literature Review

Generally speaking, in psychoanalytic criticism the emphasis is on the writer's or the reader's state of mind. The aim of this sort of criticism is scrutinizing the ways in which the meaning blossoms out of the text. With the advent of Lacanian and Žižekian criticism, the focus moved from the author and the reader to the characters in the story. In this new trend of psychoanalytic criticism each character is regarded as a subject whose action and behavior must be studied to penetrate the hidden cause of his/her behavior. To clarify the process of subject formation, *Atonement* as a literary work has gone through various psychoanalytic reading.

Unlike Lacan, who considers subjectivity as a result of child's entering the realm of the symbolic, for Žižek subjectivity is a process that a subject undergoes. For him "the subject has no substantial actuality, it comes second, it emerges only through the process of separation, of overcoming its presuppositions and these presuppositions are also just a retroactive effect of the same

process of their overcoming" (Žižek, 2010: 232). Amir Barati, taking Žižek's idea for granted, asserts that Briony undertakes Žižekian process of separation and also that of overcoming its presuppositions. To him the "process of atonement caused Briony overcome its presuppositions" (Barati, 2015: 121). To him Briony "goes through the process of subjectivity" and "does her best a processual subjectivity through the very abandoning of *naturality* and freeing themselves from their status quos to gain their selves." (ibid, 121). To him Briony is not a subject until she loses herself and tries to "express herself in a signifying chain" (ibid, 122). Though Žižekian "failure of signifying representation" resembles Lacanian object petit a, since both aim at locating something missed, it deserves mentioning that Briony upon entering the realm of the symbolic is bereft of her identity and turns to a subject rather than through undergoing the process of separation.

Tomasz Dobrogoszcz in "Narrative as Expiative Fantasy in Ian McEwan's *Atonement*" focusing on Briony as the main character of the novel strives to explore subjectivity through Lacanian desire and fantasy. To him "The ultimate aim of fantasy is not to grant us access to the object of our desire, but to set the specific *mise-en-scène* for this desire ... Briony assiduously constructs her world of fantasy through writing, endeavouring to ascertain the "coordinates" of her desire" (Dobrogoszcz, 2015: 124-125). Briony attempts to achieve what seems unattainable in the real world in the realm of fantasy. During the process of fantasizing her desire, she turns to a subject because each time she is left frustrated.

A great number of reasons have been posed for Briony's composition of the novel. Psychoanalytic critics have related it to a lack felt by her which has put her in an interminable quest. Huw Marsh has linked it to the matter of the unreliability in narration. Confirming Bruno Zerweck's ideas, Marsh asserts:

"unreliability has become naturalised in contemporary fiction, even contemporary realist fiction, because 'subjectivity and unreliability are accepted as realities, and reliability is regarded as an impossibility', to the extent that apparent reliability is suspect, 'whereas a narrator who exposes his [sic] cognitive or epistemological limitations is arguably much more in tune with our notions of 'normality' and of the possibilities of its fictional representation'" (10).



His commentary on the novel is not far from Lacanian analysis. Because Briony as the subject of the symbolic order cannot access to the domain of the real she is the subject of her desire and also of the other's desire. It is for this reason that what she says is unreliable and this unreliability is natural to the nature of the human being.

Adi Brata Wisnu Yudha in his research, focusing on the main character of the novel, has read the novel through Lacanian point of view. According to his opinion, Briony by writing her autobiographical novel reveals her true identity: "the existence of *Atonement* is not just to atone the past mistaken of Briony Tallis, but also to reveal her real identity" (Yudha, 2017: 4). Based on Lacanian ideas, the real is unattainable, although the subject can experience it for a while. There is a great discrepancy between real and Lacanian the real. The researcher has mistaken the real as the Lacanian the real "Identity term in here does not mean as *the multiple identities* or *mask personality* that famously understood in our reality principle, Lacan assumes it as *the Real / agalma / a precious hidden object / a surplus jouissance / objet a petite*" (ibid, 4). It seems that, by "the real identity", the author means the true identity or the hidden identity.

Dr. Erin Maree O'Dwyer in her doctoral thesis alluding to Lacan's analysis of Edgar Allan Poe's *The Purloined Letter*, takes the whole novel, *Atonement*, as an epistolary novel in that:

"Though the narrative is not written in letter format, we find all the same themes – loneliness, exile, lament for lost love, a rallying call against the existing social structure. The correspondent Briony writes in the absence of the beloved and stages revolt against the events of the past" (107).

Considering the act of writing as "the presence of another gaze in the scene", she concludes "McEwan exploits the epistolary mode, using it to afford an investigation into the split subject– Briony as little girl/older woman, as innocent child/wicked teenager, and as subjective player/objective (though ultimately unreliable) narrator" (ibid, 111).

Since 9/11 terrorist attacks, fear of destruction encompassed most of the British novelists and aroused them to reflect this fear in their writings. McEwan is not an exception. Among his published works *Atonement* and *Saturday* are highly related to the matter of fear and destruction, although the former is not directly akin to 9/11 attacks. Daniela Pitt in his thesis,

utilizing the theories of Capra and Blachot says "The world that is presented by McEwan is a world where structure and order is threatened and often broken down. When this disjuncture occurs, man feels anxious and confused" (68). Pitt takes "*Atonement*" and "*Saturday*" as traumatic novels. Emphasizing the usefulness of the traumatic event, he stipulates that the traumatic event is one of the causes of desire for knowledge and quest.

Peter Mathews in "The Impression of a Deeper Darkness: Ian McEwan's *Atonement*" argues the matter of multiple layers of meaning and focuses on how the text can sway the reader's perceptions. According to Mathews it is the reader who seeks atone not Briony. He "turns this logic of shame back onto the reader, so that the book's conclusion leaves us, as witnesses, to ponder our own ability to testify about the story that Briony has just described" (Mathews 148). He counts several techniques which disrupt the text of its objectivity. Mathews based on the premise of 'the secret as the promise of knowledge' says it is an empty promise that maintains the reader forever in the search of truth (meaning). To him "*Atonement* is built on this basic formal structure: if there *appears* to be a secret, even if it is entirely illusory, the result of an authorial fabrication, the reader is nonetheless drawn compulsively to know, to judge, and, above all, to moralize" (ibid: 149). Just as Mathews argues, the existence of a secret, even the illusory one, incites the people in pursuit of knowledge. It can be claimed that the knowledge acts as a kind of empty signifier, which is unattainable. It is this elusiveness of knowledge that makes the circle going.

The concentration of the recent studies has been on Briony, the protagonist of the novel. The researchers have analyzed her subjectivity and the reason of her inclination to concoct a novel. The psychoanalytical reading of the other characters of the novel has been omitted. With too much respect for what they have done, the present study, taking the symbolic order as the prime source of misjudgment, attempts to locate the reason of Briony's enthusiasm in controlling the life of the others; besides, it follows her psychological growth and tries to explain the reason of her narcissism. Furthermore, it strives to summon the other characters, that is Cecilia and Robbie, to be scrutinized with a psychoanalytical eye.

### 3. Analysis and Discussion: Atonement in Terms of Lacanian Triplet Orders

#### 3.1 Retrospection of Briony and Cecilia to the Imaginary Order

Lacan, represents the subject in the signifying chain consisting of the Imaginary, the Symbolic, and the Real. The infant in the early stages of his psychological development perceives both the environment and its body as fragmented shapeless entities. It is in the Mirror Stage, as Lacan calls it, between six and eight months, that the infant for the first time recognizes itself in the actual mirror and as a result regards itself as a unified whole and identifies with it. According to Wolfreys, the subject's recognition of himself "is a misrecognition of an image, not a fact" (2003: 111). Having not acquainted with language, the preverbal infant sees the world through the images.

In the course of the novel, Briony, the protagonist, aspiring to acquire the full unity with her mother and locating the ultimate object of desire to fill the existing gap, goes through the three Lacanian orders. There are some traces that are emblematic of Briony's delving into the Imaginary Order:

She wanted the inspector to embrace her and comfort her and forgive her, however guiltless she was. But he would only look at her and listen. *It was him. I saw him.* Her tears were further proof of the truth she felt and spoke, and when her mother's hand caressed her nape, she broke down completely and was led toward the drawing room ... Briony was next to her mother on the sofa. (163-165)

This section of the novel is one of the many cases when Briony reverts back to the Imaginary Order, to that state of unification with her mother. It is in such occasions that she feels she has been endowed with the power of controlling the world. This sense of having the world under control originates in the sense of wholeness in the Mirror Stage. By the same token, Imaginary Order "is a world of fullness, completeness, and delight because with the child's sense of itself as a whole comes the illusion of control over its environment" (Tyson, 2006: 28). She aspires to control rather than to be controlled which is the distinguished quality of the Symbolic Order. It should be kept in mind that "the child's preverbal feeling of complete union with its mother and, therefore, complete control over its world is illusory, but it is nonetheless very satisfying and very powerful" (ibid). That is why in the following pages of the novel Briony's self-confidence reaches its acme:

She had no doubt. She could describe him. There was nothing she could not describe. She knelt down beside her cousin ... If her poor cousin was not able to command the truth, then she would do it for her. *I can. And I will.* (155-158)

It is for this reason that Cecilia in a letter to Robbie emphasizes that Briony does not belong to the world of realities, or to what Lacan calls the Symbolic, and calls her a dreamer: "She might not mean what I think she does, or she might not be prepared to see it through. Remember what a dreamer she is" (McEwan, 2001: 199). The fact is that what exists in the Symbolic is regarded as real, as something definable. According to Salgó, "by taking seriously the Imaginary, the playful and the fabulous, we will embark on a journey in the domain of the fantastic in order to tell the story of democracy in a different way" (ibid: 2). Briony liberates herself from the pitfall of the Symbolic Order and has a fresh look to the events nearby.

The Imaginary Order is the source of creativity, in a sense that one's perception of the surrounding world differs from that of all others. To Christian De Cock et al, "The imaginary now has to be considered as a potential source of creativity and freedom" (2013: 155). It means that, a person who is in the Imaginary Order, lives beyond the restrictions brought about by the Symbolic Order. No one, except for Briony, sees the man in the pavement as "a giant chess piece" (McEwan, 2001: 303). She is creative in using the images.

The little other exists in the Mirror Stage. The preverbal infant, in the Mirror Stage, upon the feeling of being alienated, due to recognizing its image in the mirror, strives to identify its own image with whom it appreciates:

How could she tell them that Arabella was not a freckled person? Her skin was pale and her hair was black and her thoughts were Briony's thoughts. But how could she refuse a cousin so far from home whose family life was in ruins? (ibid, 13)

Briony has written a seven-page play, *The Trials of Arabella*. She is going to give the play to be acted by her cousins, Lola and the twins. Having thought Lola, neither physically nor mentally fitted for the role of Arabella, the main character of her play, she picked out that role for herself. As if she was in the Imaginary Order, she equates herself with Arabella who is a princess. Lola's stubbornness over playing the opening part of Arabella sent Briony into the state of misery and despair.



In the Mirror Stage the infant sees its reflection in the mirror and identifies with it. By the term “identification” Lacan means “the transformation that takes place in the subject when he assumes [assume] an image” (2006: 76). Namely, when a subject identifies, he assumes the characteristics of another subject and in his imagination turns to that person he adores. This leads to having a chimerical understanding of the self. Briony sees her own image in the character of Arabella. In other words, Arabella, for Briony is the little other with whom she identifies with. She is the desired object that has originated from the projection of the ego. As Lacan remarks the little other is “one’s fellow man, he who is given in the relationship that is half rooted in naturalness of the mirror stage” (Lacan, 1993: 229). Lola, acting the role of Arabella, turns to Briony’s rival. In other words, Lola vicariously has turned to Briony’s “rival image” or her little other to whom she aspires to identify with. It is for this reason that later on in the novel we read:

Forced by international rivalry to compete at the highest level among the world’s finest and to accept the challenges that came with preeminence in her field—her field of nettle slashing—driven to push beyond her limits to assuage the roaring crowd, and to be the best, and, most importantly, unique. (71)

Having attracted by the ideal image, Briony assumes a competitive relation with it. She even wants to surpass her and be unique. This has been affirmed by Lorenzo Chiesa where he says: “this relationship ends up in a permanent rivalry of the subject with himself, with the narcissistic image of himself that the lure of the mirror creates” (2007: 20). The combinations of these identifications- whom the infant chooses as its own models- culminates in formation of the ego. In other words, the child identifies with the others as it does with its own image. Lacan argues that “it is this image that becomes fixed—this is the ideal ego—from the point at which the subject fixates as ego-ideal. The ego is thus a function of mastery, a game of bearing, and constituted rivalry” (Lacan, 2006: 685). It must be mentioned that although the ideal ego predates the ego ideal, it is the ego ideal that controls the ideal ego.

As aforementioned, Mirror Stage marks the transition to the Imaginary Order. Cecilia, unconsciously attempting to look attractive, has trouble to choose a dress

before her brother’s arrival. Finally, she chooses her favorite dress:

Cecilia stepped out of her bedroom, caught sight of herself in the gilt-frame mirror at the top of the stairs and, immediately dissatisfied, returned to her wardrobe to reconsider...Cecilia followed at a slow pace, passing the critical mirror with a glance and completely satisfied with what she saw. (90-95)

The *Mirror Stage* refers to the narcissistic relationship with the body-image or as Lacan puts it, “for the subject caught up in the lure of spatial identification, turns out fantasies that proceed from a fragmented image of the body” (Lacan, 2006: 78). It is at this situation that the *ego* is born. There is a strong affinity between the concepts of the narcissism and aggressivity. At the beginning of this scene, Cecilia, upon seeing her own image in the mirror, shows a profound dissatisfaction, i.e., “immediately dissatisfied” (McEwan, 2001: 90). The word dissatisfaction does not imply that she is not satisfied with her reflection in the mirror but rather she urges more satisfaction. Relating dissatisfaction to demanding for more love, Wolf asserts “the dissatisfaction is experienced as a mortifying jouissance but refused as a gift of satisfaction for the other (2015: 151). Similarly, Cecilia wants to appear charming to elicit more love from Robbie.

Cecilia, although is partly satisfied with her reflection, she attempts to precede it in beauty. Such a rivalry turns back to the Mirror Stage. She becomes the image’s rival in that, the observed wholeness in the image has been missed in her fragmented body. As Chiesa puts it “Such a rivalry is already evident at the level of the dialectic between the subject’s perception of his fragmented body and his parallel vision of the completeness of the specular body” (Chiesa, 2007: 20). For Lacan the burgeoning of aggressivity is one of the signs of entering the Mirror Stage. As stated by him “the one you fight is the one you admire the most. The ego ideal is also, according to Hegel’s formula which says that coexistence is impossible, the one you have to kill” (Lacan, 1977a: 31). That is why Cecilia, simultaneously, lives in the state of love and hatred toward her reflection. Hesitation in selecting the dress is indicating of her unconscious will to surpass the image in beauty. Falling in love with her reflection, Cecilia commences her animosity with it. At the end she attains that level of satisfaction.

Unlike Freud, Lacan differentiates between two terms that is “ideal ego” and “ego ideal”. Relating the “ideal ego” to the realm of the Imaginary and the “ego ideal” to the Symbolic, Lacan considers the former as an “aspiration” the latter as a “model” (Lacan, 2006: 562). Furthermore, the subject regards his father as an “ego ideal” and tries to identify with him in order to move from the state of nature to culture. In other words, for Lacan, “ego ideal” means “the paternal identification” (ibid: 462). Žižek in this regard asserts that “the ideal ego will be what the subject once was, the ego ideal what it would like to be in order to retrieve what it was, this being achieved by the introjection of someone who was once part of itself” (2002: 15). Cecilia, similarly, in order to regain what she was once, attempts to assimilate herself to the image in the mirror in order that she turns back to that state of primordial unity with her mother, scilicet; her satisfaction with her reflection comes from the fact that it reminds her of the dyadic unity with her mother.

All through the novel, it is revealed that there are some other little others with whom Cecilia identifies. That is to say, she sees her own image in them. Among them is the scene in which Cecilia identifies with Shirley Temple Black (born 1928), American child movie star who later became a politician. She wished the mirror has shown her in that way. Temple is an ideal ego for her, someone whom Cecilia aspires to be. Comparing ideal ego with ego ideal, Mokros affirms “Although the ideal ego may appear to be an other that the ego ideal attempts to emulate, the ideal ego is in part a projection of the ego ideal itself” (1996: 302). Accordingly, Cecilia, as a subject, who is herself a copy of her father- that is, her desire is in line with that of her father- regards the ideal ego with wistful eyes. At the same time this ideal ego, Temple, is herself the projection of her father. That is why in Mokros’s opinion “the ego ideal and ideal ego are not two self-contained psychic tendencies” (ibid). Therefore, both ego ideal and ideal ego are inherently interrelated.

Ego ideal is in fact what the society, better to say, the Symbolic Order and the big Other expects the subject to be and the ideal ego is what the subject aspires to be. Robert Samuels asserts that “ego ideal is the place from which the subject wants to be loved, while the ideal ego represents the object that is loved” (2012: 16). Cecilia, on that account, in order to be loved and be accepted by the Other, throughout her life

intends to identify with the ego ideal. It is the ego ideal upon which the subject criticizes himself. This can be linked to Lacan’s famous sentence ‘desire is always the desire of the other’. Cecilia’s urge to look attractive is the result of the Other’s expectation. Unconsciously she knows that if she have a slovenly appearance she would not be loved by the others. Lacan posits the matter in this way: “the [visual] capture involved in the ideal ego—drag the subject into the field where he hypostasizes himself in the ego-ideal” (2006: 569). Taking the loved image as her beloved, Robbie, Cecilia, haunted by the image, tries to be what the big Other approves.

Easthope concerning the loving if a perfect woman stipulates that “the man loves himself in his ideal ego ... he installs her figure in the place of his ego ideal, using it to see himself at his best and as he hopes others see him, the perfect lover” (1989: 71). Now that Cecilia is in love with Robbie, substituting their roles, she is in fact in love with herself. Cecilia stands Robbie’s image in the place of ego ideal and from his view point regards herself in a way she likes to be seen. For Lacan, as Chiesa argues, “the ego-ideal provides the ideal ego with a “form” (2007: 23). It means that the ego ideal controls the projections of the ideal ego, although the ideal ego comes to existence prior to the ego ideal. According to him “if the ideal ego is a projection of the ego’s ideal image onto the external world, the ego-ideal is the subject’s introjection of another external image that has a new (de)formative effect on his psyche” (ibid). Additionally, if Cecilia wants to be Temple, it is in fact the result of the influence of the ego ideal. That is, as Lacan’s schema L demonstrates, the ego is simultaneously formed by both ideal ego and the ego ideal. That is why Lacan says “the ego is constructed like an onion” (Lacan, 1988a: 171). It is for this reason that Chiesa concludes: “it is therefore correct to maintain that love ultimately superimposes a new ego-ideal onto a preexisting ideal ego” (2007: 23). It is the love of Cecilia to Robbie that compels Cecilia to assume each time a new ego ideal.

### *3.2 The Trap of Subjection to the Symbolic Order*

The Symbolic Order is a domain into which the subject is born. It determines subject’s identity, gender and ideology. Žižek respecting subject’s ideology remarks that “ideology is the place of the insertion of the subject in those realms or orders - the Symbolic and the Real” (2003: 38). But the



point is that how this ideology forms the unconscious of the subject. Hughes posits that “for Lacan, meaning, and the symbolic order as a whole, is fixed in relation to a primary transcendental signifier which Lacan calls the phallus, the signifier of sexual difference” (2002: 72). Consequently, no unconscious can be imagined out of the domination of Symbolic Order in which the phallus is in its center.

The preverbal infant is introduced to the preexisting world of Symbolic Order via the law of the father, or as Lacan puts it the-Name-of-the-Father. It demolishes the mother-child unity of the Imaginary Order in the Oedipus complex. There are so many ways by which the child thinks of himself as a separate being who has been alienated. The first of which is when the child recognizes his reflection in the mirror during the Mirror Stage. The second is when the pre-linguistic child enters the realm of language acquisition in the Symbolic Order. Lacan in his second seminar affirms “If it’s you, I’m not. If it’s me, it’s you who isn’t. That’s where the symbolic element comes into play” (169). From now on, the feeling of lack or loss overpowers the infant, and later on the subject. Language for Lacan, as Elliott puts it, “is the fundamental medium that structures the Oedipal process. The child enters the symbolic via language ... it is in and through language that the subject attempts a reconstruction of lost, imagined unities” (2013: 144). However, this lack, according to Rivkin and Ryan, “can never be filled, and all human desire circulates around it, yearning to hark back to the lost unity” (2004: 441). There is no outlet to evade the influence of the Symbolic Order, that is to say, “I emphasize the register of the symbolic order because we must never lose sight of it” (Lacan, 1988a: 179). Barker and Galasinski in this respect argue that “for Lacan outside of the symbolic order, i.e. the overreaching structure and received social meanings, lies only psychosis” (2001: 32). Unlike her sister, Briony’s life is in direct relation with the Symbolic Order. The order has been taught to her. Her mind has been structured from her childhood. Namely, “her wish for a harmonious, organized world denied her the reckless possibilities of wrongdoing” (McEwan, 2001: 5). Her submission to Law and to the Symbolic Order permeates other fields of her life including marriage, death and even housekeeping, videlicet, or as the reader is told “a love of order also shaped the principles of justice, with death and

marriage the main engines of housekeeping” (ibid: 7). During the process of play writing, she applies a high level of fastidiousness; in other words, she aims not only to give order to the unruly world of the real people but also to that of the fictional characters. That is to say, “her passion for tidiness was also satisfied, for an unruly world could be made just so” (ibid). Accordingly, it can be inferred that Briony’s behavior, likewise, is organized in the Symbolic Order; that is why her cousins’ failure in rehearsal, ruins her sense of order and decorum.

To intensify this register as the domain of law and rule Lacan says “when you go to work, there are rules, hours - we enter into the domain of the symbolic” (Lacan, 1988a: 223). Law is articulated via language; it is here that the signification of language comes in. There should be nothing out of the sovereignty of language. No Symbolic Order could be thought of without language. Lacan in his second seminar remarks “everything is tied to the symbolic order, since there are men in the world and they speak” (322). Therefore, it can be claimed that the Symbolic Order is a linguistic realm. According to Elliott “Lacan views subjectivity itself as constituted to its roots in language” (2001: 144). In the novel the rules that are legislated by Betty for the twins have been existed even before their birth. Surprisingly, though Betty acts as a big Other for the twins, she is not the real lawmaker. In fact, she is a subject herself. The only thing she is its proprietor is just speech.

Lacan’s famous slogan is ‘desire is desire of the Other’. Lacanian Other is located in the Symbolic Order, it is a locus from which the speech of the subject originates. It determines both the content of the unconscious and the process of signification. This Other is barred, that is, like any other subjects has a lack. The subject is supposed to fill the lack embodied in the Other and exactly desire what the Other desires. Therefore, the pressure felt by the twins results from the Lack existed in Betty. They must act as she wishes; there is no way to disobey. The matter of the Other should not be taken superficially, since considering the Other as an actual Other is one of its distant significations. Its widely used meaning is the locus of Law which surrounds the subject before its birth until after his death that manifests itself through the real Others. Betty is not the only big Other that attempts to structure the kids. Their sister, Lola, is another example. Lola,

scrambling to alleviate her brothers, the twins, who have begun to feel homesickness, tells them that “we will be going home soon”. To her surprise, tearful Jackson, her brother, says “It won’t be soon. You’re just saying that. We can’t go home anyway . . . It’s a divorce!”. He has uttered the obscene word, divorce:

Pierrot and Lola froze. The word had never been used in front of the children, and never uttered by them. The soft consonants suggested an unthinkable obscenity, the sibilant ending whispered the family’s shame. (54)

Being a subject to the dominant rules of the society, Lola tries to transfer the Law to the kids. It should be mentioned that the kids, having not been structured yet, still live in the Imaginary Order. Consequently, they feel free to say whatever they please. Not knowing that “saying it out loud was as great a crime as the act itself, whatever that was” (ibid: 54). It is related to the power of the language or of the word. That is why even uttering the forbidden word, i.e. divorce, is a crime.

Law permeates the unconscious of the subjects to the extent that the subject unconsciously is obedient to the Law. It is for this reason that we read in the novel “None of them, including Lola, quite knew” (ibid). The word “divorce” has been forbidden by the big Other, unconsciously they know that the word must not be articulated without knowing the reason. As Lacan confirms the desires of the child “initially pass via the specular other. That is where they are approved or reprovved, accepted or refused. And that is how the child serves his apprenticeship in the symbolic order and accedes to its foundation, which is the law” (Lacan, 1988a: 179). Likewise, it is the society, or the big Other, that determines the kids’ desire.

Although Lacanian concept of the big Other signifies Law, language, that is inscribed in the Symbolic Order, it also means another subject. In a sense that each subject can take the position of being the Other for another subject, or as Lacan puts it “the Other and for the Other” (Lacan, 1998: 150). Accordingly, the subject will be endowed with the power of subjectivating another subject without being felt, provided that the subject be in a place that “is valid for another subject” or possesses the “most radical point” (ibid: 231). The twins do respect their sister, Lola, otherwise they could not obey her. The twins are

simultaneously controlled by the big Other as the Symbolic Order and the big Other as another subject, unconsciously and consciously respectively.

It is the Other which enables the subject to acquire some level of self-consciousness. As stated before, Lola, a big Other, was a yardstick for Briony to be compared with. The first big Other that the child encounters with is the mother. As Rabaté remarks “Lacan’s big Other, [is] mostly embodied by the Mother” (2003: 22). The child realizes that her mother is not a complete Other and includes lack, because her desire is directed toward its father. That is why Lacan in his fourteenth seminar says “This Other does not exist”, and talks about “the fall of the big Other” (47). Lacan in his seventh seminar remarks that “man is in the process of splitting apart” (Lacan, 1992: 274), it comes to mean that in moving from the Imaginary to the Symbolic the feeling of lack and loss overcomes the subject due to the primordial separation from his mother. To illuminate Lacan’s dictum that “there is no Other of the Symbolic Other”, Chiesa asserts that for Lacan the primordial One equals with zero; “the zero equates with the always already lost mythical jouissance of the real Real: the fake one needs the fake jouissance of the object a in order to make one” (2007: 184). Although zero as a number cannot be used in counting but it is zero that makes the one to come into being. Likewise, Briony’s identity is consisted of nothing, in other words, she is endowed with a Zero, that is Lola, by whom she can create the Symbolic Order based on which language is established. It is the absence of the subject that brings language into life. Without being aware of Lola’s lack, Briony, a divided subject, takes her as an object a to fill her lack with. It is the lack that causes Briony to choose Lola as her object cause of desire. This statement “The witnesses were guilty too” demonstrates the shock that upon recognizing the fact that Lola like any other subjects is barred, overcomes her.

### *3.3 Beyond Representation: the Trauma of the Real*

Lacanian concept of the Real is a convoluted one that is hard to grasp. The Real “is that which resists symbolization” (Homer, 2005: 83). It is something that exists beyond any ideologies and meaning making systems. As Lacan says “everything that is rejected in the symbolic reappears in the real” (Lacan, 1966: 53). All subjects experience the Real, even for a short moment. It is when the subject realizes that



“it is ideology that has made the world as [he] knows it” and “what govern the society are hoaxes and mistakes” (Tyson, 2006: 32). Lacan points to the traumatic nature of the Real and says it is when the subject is incapable of putting in words what he has witnessed. In the second chapter of the novel the reader is introduced to some mind-boggling scenes:

The convoy had entered a bombed village, or perhaps the suburb of a small town—the place was rubble and it was impossible to tell. Who would care? Who could ever describe this confusion, and come up with the village names and the dates for the history books? And take the reasonable view and begin to assign the blame? No one would ever know what it was like to be here. Without the details there could be no larger picture. (214)

Speculating about the situation, Robbie wonders if he can recount what just has happened and says “it was impossible to tell” and “Who could ever describe this confusion”. Due to the fact that, the observed scene belongs to the domain of the Real, Robbie ebbs to the state of speechlessness. Lacan in his famous seminar, eleventh seminar, specifies that the term real is an adjective “to describe that which is lacking in the symbolic order, the ineliminable residue of all articulation, the foreclosed element, which may be approached, but never grasped: the umbilical cord of the symbolic” (Lacan, 1995: 280). It is for this reason that Robbie, shocked by the scene, is speechless.

When a “Stuka carrying a single thousand-pound bomb” approximates, Robbie runs away from the road and attempts to rescue a mother and a six-year-old boy who are beside him. Shoving them to the ground, he succeeds to rescue them. On account of the second attack the mother and the child are obliterated. Catastrophic and macabre nature of the war incapacitates both the child and the mother. As it is observed in the novel, “the mother seemed incapable of running” (McEwan, 2001: 222) and “the boy had gone silent with shock” (ibid: 223). It is the traumatic nature of the Real; the trauma of the Real refers to a state in which the subject knows nothing about, he knows something is there, but does not know what it is. Here it seems that it is their first encounter with war. That is why no word no sentences could be uttered except for crying.

According to Lacan, the subject may approach the Real but its grasping is impossible, that is to say, “the real is the

impossible” (Lacan, 1995: 280). It is impossible because it cannot be articulated in language. The interesting point is that “the use of language in general, in fact, implies a loss, a lack”, (Tyson, 2006: 29), because insofar as the infant regards the things as inseparable from him there is no need to use language as stand-in. This can be connected to the matter of Lacanian concept of absence and presence.

Lacan in his first seminar delivers a speech on the matter of absence and presence in language. Alluding to the second chapter of Freud’s *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, he poses the discussion of fort/da. Fort! and Da! are German words of interjection uttered by Freud’s grandson playing a game. The child throws away the reed and says Fort! (far) and when he pulls the thread back says Da! (here). In Lacan’s idea fort/da is the child’s first step toward symbolization or getting access the Symbolic Order. He says “in this phonematic opposition, the child transcends, brings on to the symbolic plane, the phenomenon of presence and absence. He renders himself master of the thing, precisely in so far as he destroys it” (Lacan, 1988a: 173). Therefore, the foundation of the Symbolic Order is based on this fact that the subject be able to accept the absence of the things and make them present by the means of language. Robbie, Briony and the mother and child’s inability in locating the exact word to fill the absence of what already has happened is the cause of traumatic silence.

#### 4. Sum Up

McEwan’s *Atonement* is in accordance with the Lacanian ideas about the formation of ego and subjectivity. The characters of the novel need the recognition of the others; their subjectivity is constructed through their social interaction with the others. Briony and Cecilia become the subjects by the views and the perspectives of the others especially of their parents. It should be kept in mind that, this Other is not a concrete individual, although it may be incarnated in one (father or mother, for instance), but stands for a larger social order. Mere subjection to the dominant regulation of the society turns the characters to lack of being entities. It means that it is the outside world that constructs their identity and therefore their subjectivity. Accordingly, the subjectivity of the characters of *Atonement* is in the process of ever changing and becoming. This relational aspect of subjectivity suggests that the characters have little or no influence in

determining their identity. In other words, they are not the creators but rather they have been created. During the course of the novel the identity of Briony, Robbie and Cecilia changes frequently. Since they are not the decision makers, but they are decided for, their identity is not permanent and steady.

There is a process of identification with others which confirms the unsteadiness of the characters' identity and this is clarified in the case of Lacanian Triplet Orders. Briony and Cecilia's entrance into the Mirror Stage and the Imaginary Order molds their ideal ego. And their ego ideal shapes in The Symbolic Order and controls their ideal ego. The Symbolic Order is a domain into which the subject is born. It is the domain of law and rule. This rule transfers to the subject via language. Law permeates the unconscious to the extent that the subject is obedient to the Law unconsciously. Subsequently, the characters or the subjects' identity is constructed by the outside world or the dominant regulation of the society or the big Other. That is why the character of the novel are the epitome of the big Other. The traumatic nature of the Real Order is another aspect which is alluded to in this paper. It is state of the speechlessness; therefore, Robbie, Briony and the mother are unable to find the exact word to say what already has happened.

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