

Personal Identity and Postmodernism: Between Narcissism and Individualism

الهوية الشخصية وما بعد الحداثة: بين النرجسية والفردية

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ملخص

عندما يتعلق الأمر بالهوية، تقدم نظرية "ما بعد الحداثة" نهجا أكثر فردية مقارنة بالحركات الأدبية السابقة مما أدى إلى التأكيد على الهوية الشخصية على حساب الهوية الوطنية. وانتقد بعض العلماء ما بعد الحداثة فيما يتعلق بقضية الهوية الوطنية في حين انتقد آخرون افتقارها إلى تقييد الفردية عند التعامل مع الهوية الشخصية. يستند هذا القلق على الاعتقاد بأن الفردية قد تؤدي في النهاية إلى النرجسية. في عملهم، *The Handbook of Narcissism and Narcissistic Personality Disorder: Theoretical Approaches, Empirical Findings, and Treatments*، يصر كامل، دلبيو، و ميلر، ج. د. على أن "الدول والفترات الزمنية الفردية تنتج الكثير من المنتجات الثقافية النرجسية و المزيد من الأفراد الذين يبلغون مستويات عالية من النرجسية الذاتية". هذا يعني أن الثقافات و الحركات ذات التركيز الكبير على الفردية قد تدفع الأفراد نحو النرجسية. يمكن استكشاف "نرجسية البشر" و "حب البشرية للذات" من خلال فحص ما يسميه فرويد "الحاجز الذي تم وضعه بغرور بين الرجال والوحوش" (بينات، 2016، ص154) يجادل هذا البحث أنه على الرغم من تركيز ما بعد الحداثة على الفردية فيما يتعلق بالهوية الشخصية، فإنها ما في الحقيقة تشجع على الابتعاد عن النرجسية فيما يخص الهوية الشخصية و ذلك من خلال رفض فكرة فصل البشر عن الوحوش. ويتجلى هذا الموقف في الأعمال الأدبية الحديثة *New Moon* و *Twilight* من قبل ستيفني ماير. يهدف هذا البحث إلى التحقق من عمق حب البشرية للذات وكيفية التعامل مع الوحوش على أساس "الأخر" أو "الذات". ويهدف البحث أيضًا إلى دراسة آثار فردية ما بعد الحداثة على الهوية الشخصية.

الكلمات الدالة: ما بعد الحداثة: الهوية الشخصية: النرجسية: الوحوش.

Abstract

When it comes to identity, Postmodernism offers a more individualistic approach in comparison to the previous literary movements. This has led to the rise of personal identity at the expense of national identity. Some scholars have criticized postmodernism concerning the issue of national identity while others have criticized the lack of restriction of individualism when dealing with personal identity. This concern is based on the belief that individualism may eventually lead to narcissistic attitudes. In their work, *The Handbook of Narcissism and Narcissistic Personality Disorder: Theoretical Approaches, Empirical Findings, and Treatments*, Campbell, W.K. and Miller, J.D insist that “More individualistic nations and time periods produce more narcissistic cultural products and more individuals who self-report high levels of narcissism”. This means that a culture or a movement with a great focus on individualism may be pushing individuals towards narcissism. “Men’s narcissism” and “human self-love” can be explored by examining what Freud calls the “...barrier that had been arrogantly set up between men and beasts” (Bennett, 2016, p. 154). This paper argues that despite the postmodern focus on individualism regarding personal identity, postmodernism promotes a non-narcissistic attitude towards personal identity while rejecting the notion of the separation of the humans from the beast. Such attitude is manifested in the postmodern works *Twilight* and *New Moon* by Stephenie Meyer. This paper aims to investigate the depth of human self-love and the treatment of the beasts as either the “other” or the “self”. It also aims to investigate the effects of postmodern individualism on personal identity.

Keywords: Postmodernism, personal identity, individualism, narcissism, the beasts



Résumé

En matière d'identité, le postmodernisme propose une approche plus individualiste par rapport aux précédents mouvements littéraires. Cela a conduit à la montée de l'identité personnelle aux dépens de l'identité nationale. Certains chercheurs ont critiqué le postmodernisme concernant la question de l'identité nationale, tandis que d'autres ont critiqué le manque de restriction de l'individualisme dans le traitement de l'identité personnelle. Cette préoccupation est basée sur la conviction que l'individualisme peut éventuellement conduire à des attitudes narcissiques. Dans leur ouvrage, *The Handbook of Narcissism and Narcissistic Personality Disorder: Theoretical Approaches, Empirical Findings, and Treatments*, Campbell, W.K. et Miller, J.D. insistent que "les nations et les périodes plus individualistes produisent des produits culturels narcissiques et des individus qui ont des niveaux élevés de narcissisme". Cela signifie qu'une culture ou un mouvement axé sur l'individualisme peut pousser les individus vers le narcissisme. "Narcissisme des hommes" peut être exploré en examinant ce que Freud appelle "la barrière... dressée avec arrogance entre hommes et bêtes" (Bennett, 2016, p. 154). Cet article soutient que malgré la focalisation postmoderne sur l'individualisme en matière d'identité personnelle, le postmodernisme encourage une attitude non narcissique à l'égard de l'identité personnelle tout en rejetant la notion de séparation des humains de la bête. Une telle attitude se manifeste dans les œuvres postmodernes *Twilight* et *New Moon* de Stephenie Meyer. Cet article a pour objectif d'enquêter sur la profondeur de Narcissisme et sur le traitement des bêtes comme "l'autre" ou le "soi". Il vise également à étudier les effets de l'individualisme postmoderne sur l'identité personnelle.

Mots-clés: les bêtes; postmodernisme; identité personnelle; individualisme; narcissisme.

Introduction

Postmodernism has always been the focus of research and studies as both a literary theory and a literary movement. It is characterized by the rise of many notions and the reformation



of others. One of the most highlighted themes in postmodernism is identity. Identity is a vast theme that intermingles with many other themes and subjects in the field of research in languages and humanities in general.

Many pieces of research have been dedicated to study identity and to highlight one of its many aspects. Identity is especially appealing to postmodernists who seek a better understanding of it by focusing on personal identity at the expense of national identity. Such focus on personal identity is the result of the emphasis on individualism as one of the pillars of postmodernism.

By focusing on "the self" rather than community, individuals have been able to explore and re-discover their personal identity and form relations with others away from the influence of society. Such an individualistic approach of postmodernist has concerned its critics who suggest that an unrestricted focus on individualism may result in some negative attitudes toward identity.

Such claim has been fostered by the idea that "too much" individualism, especially when it is neither well-defined nor restricted, can lead to the formation of identities that lean toward narcissism. This paper tends to explore such possibilities while making a distinction between postmodern individualism and narcissism and explaining the relationship between them.

Since narcissism is a vast topic that cannot be discussed in a single research, this paper focuses on the Freudian concept of "self-love" that manifests itself in the separation of humans from the beasts. It explains the postmodern dimension of personal identity in relation with individualism, the possible link between individualism and narcissism and the treatment of the beasts in postmodern literature through analyzing the human-beast discourse in Stephanie Meyer's *Twilight* and *New Moon*.



1. Postmodernism, individualism and narcissism

In its essence, postmodernism is an individualistic philosophy. This has posed a threat to the community-based philosophies and approaches that sought unity through focusing on national identity and community rather than personal identity and individuals. As a result, postmodernism has been heavily criticized by both those who see it as a threat and those who fear its possible outcome and influence on individuals. The criticism of individualism, and thus postmodernism, is mainly approached from two angles.

The first perspective views individualism as a philosophy that creates chaos and disorder through highlighting the individuals' personal and completely distinct way of thinking at the expense of the already established and well-functioning fabric of society and community. This view is extremely popular among religious groups and nationalists. In his paper "Christianity in confrontation with individualism and crisis of Western culture: person, community, dialog, reflexivity, and relationship ethics", Igor Bahovec perfectly illustrates this view by arguing that,

...Due to excessive individualism and subjectivism and a lack of common good, the dominant mode of thinking and acting are destructive nihilism and immanent narcissism...We provide some proposals for contemporary democratic communitarianism, in response to the excessive individualism and moral emptiness of contemporary society. Finally, we give some elements of a genuinely creative Christian response to the crisis (Bahovec, 2015, p. 335)

Another example is the French aristocrat Alexis de Tocqueville, one of the first social scientists to discuss the phenomenon of individualism in public opinion, who suggests in his second book, *Democracy in America*, that "...individualism, at first, only saps the virtues of public life; but in the long run it attacks and destroys all others and is at length absorbed in downright selfishness" (Tocqueville, 1998, p. 205). Individualism and community are seen as dichotomies, and like any other dichotomies the



rejection of one entails the asserting of the other (Nicholson, 2013). The criticism of postmodernism that is based on these dichotomies stresses mainly the full rejection of individualism and the assertion of community and nationalism. This paper does not focus on this side of the argument but rather focuses on the second perspective instead.

The second perspective views individualism as a notion that still needs restriction and re-definition i.e. this view questions the postmodern approach to individualism rather than individualism itself. An example of this outlook on individualism is given by Christopher Lasch in his, *The Culture of Narcissism*, under the heading "The Apotheosis of Individualism". Lasch who describes contemporary individualism as a "present-oriented hedonism", asserts that, "The pursuit of self-interest, formerly identified with the rational pursuit of gain and accumulation of wealth, has become a search for pleasure and psychic survival" (Lasch, 1979, p. 69-99).

In her conference paper "What Individualism Is and Is not: Or the ideals of Pippi Longstocking and Lisa Simpson", Gina Gustavsson describes the common perceptions when dealing with individualism. She explains that the most common view of individualism equates it with the pursuit of self-interest or "letting egoism take overhand over altruism "and alienation or "having no larger goals in life than one's own self-fulfillment" (Gustavsson, 2008, p. 6).

The postmodern era is characterized by the existence of what Emilé Durkheim's century-old formula describe as 'a cult of the individual'; 'the cult of which he is at once both object and follower' (Dahla, 2009, p. 1).

The main concern of this view is the absence of any limitations to the concept of individualism. Such absence, according to many critics, may lead to hyper-individualism, selfishness and eventually, narcissism. Critics believe that the excess of individualistic attitudes will eventually destroy both



communities and individuals. This belief is demonstrated through the questions Stephen R. C. Hicks asks in his work, *Explaining Postmodernism*, "...Will not such rational individualism encourage coldblooded, short-range, and grasping selfishness? Will it not encourage individuals to reject long-standing traditions and to sever communal ties, thus creating a non-society of isolated, rootless and restless atoms?" (Hicks, 2011, p. 26). The link between excessive individualism and narcissism that has been stressed by critics calls for more investigation on the dimensions of individualism in the postmodern era and the existence or a lack of limits to individualism.

The understanding of the limitations of individualism needs an understanding of individualism itself. In fact, the postmodern focus on individualism is a continuation of the modernist establishment of individualism. Modernists stress human self-sufficiency and the personal formation of one's own character and identity:

Modern thinkers emphasize the individual, seeing the individual as the unit of reality, holding that the individual's mind is sovereign, and that the individual is the unit of value—in contrast to the pre-modernist, feudal subordination of the individual to higher political, social, or religious realities and authorities (Hicks, 2011, p. 8)

Anna Yeatman Describes postmodernism as the era in which:

Instead of a divinely sanctioned, consensual moral order, there emerges the decentered world of a plurality of individual agents responsible for their own destinies. At the same time that this order of individualized agency undermines all religious presuppositions and secularizes our reality, the primitive type of individuality involved necessitates that there be a single standard or norm of authority which subordinates the plurality of individualized agency, and renders it so many distinct versions of this sole authoritative voice. Accordingly, the implications of the modernist



discovery of the existence of individualized and therefore plural values are contained in the face of the necessity to reduce this plurality to a single standard (Nicklson, 2013, p. 13).

In her discussion, one may also note that "postmodernism might emerge as an extension of the individualism of modernity, only now deprived of its subordinating universals. The result would be the kind of absolute endorsement of particularity and difference" (Nicholson, 2013, p. 14).

This means that postmodernism has continued the modern focus on individualism while adapting it to its own principles and stripping it away from any authoritative figure besides the individual. This description of postmodern individualism can be easily confused with the description, of narcissism:

Individuals with narcissistic personality possess highly inflated, unrealistically positive views of the self. Often-times, this includes strong self-focus, feelings of entitlement, and lack of regard for others. Narcissists focus on what benefits them personally, with less regard for how their actions may benefit (or harm) others (Campbell, 2007, p. 117).

In *On Narcissism: an Introduction*, Freud described narcissism as "a type of attachment to the self rather than the other" (Sedikides, 2011, p.116). Perhaps this concern about the link between individualism and narcissism is the result of the confusion between the two concepts.

The reason for this confusion is the multiple similarities between postmodern individualistic tendencies and narcissistic tendencies. These similarities include a focus on "the self" rather than the "other", an adaptation of personal perspectives and the rejection of "universal truth", self-sufficiency, and dependence on the self and the appreciation of self-driven desires rather than "the greater good" of communities.



This makes one wonder about the existence of a link between them especially that postmodernism offers no limitations to individualism. This means that the possibility of individualism leading to the formation of narcissistic identities grows higher. This necessitates an analytical study of a postmodern literary work to investigate the existence of any narcissistic attitudes within its discourse and framework.

2. The Human vs. the Beast: *Twilight* and *New Moon* by Stephenie Meyer

Twilight (2005) and *New Moon* (2006) are two novels belonging to the same series, The *Twilight series* by Stephenie Meyers. In 2005, the books became immensely popular and commercially successful around the world, especially among young adults. The series won numerous awards, sold over 120 million copies worldwide with translations into at least 38 different languages around the globe and have been made into *The Twilight Saga* series of motion pictures by Summit Entertainment (Durham, 2015, p. 2). The series contains four novels in total and tells the story of a love triangle between a human (Bella Swan) a vampire (Edward Cullen) and a werewolf (Jacob Black). *Twilight* and *New Moon* are mainly narrated from Bella's point of view in which she portrays the human perspective of the beasts (vampires and werewolves). The story in these two literary works will be treated as a single story in this paper.

The sense of personal identity starts with one's self. In *Twilight* and *New Moon*, Bella has a strong sense of self despite the constant remarks that show some moments of self-doubt. She is aware of her strengths, instincts, and limitations and always strives to become a better version of herself. Bella is aware of her social skills and her inability to relate to people of her age. Such inability, according to Bella, is because she "can't relate well to people". Bella is unable to relate to people not because of her elevated sense of herself or her narcissistic tendencies but because of her introvert personality. Her introversion shows when she insists that her birthday celebration should not have any gifts or attention. In *New Moon*, she suggests



that "Attention is never a good thing, as any other accident-prone klutz would agree. No one wants a spotlight when they're likely to fall on their face". In fact, Bella is the furthest she could be from a narcissistic teenager with a tendency of isolation from others. According to Campbell, Rudich, & Sedikides, the narcissistic self is "positive, inflated, agentic, special, selfish, and oriented toward success". The narcissistic self is positive because narcissists believe they are better than others (Twenge, 2010, p. 19).

In the novel, Bella has always favored others over herself. She favors Edward over herself and is ready to sacrifice her soul for him and insists she does not care about it, saying, "I don't care Edward. I don't care! You can have my soul. I don't want it without you". The narcissistic self is inflated: the self-beliefs are inflated to the extent of becoming reality for the narcissist (Twenge, 2010). Bella's self-beliefs are not inflated but rather self-monitored and questioned.

This is evident during the events of the story when she starts doubting her self-beliefs concerning vampires and werewolves and the stereotypes surrounding them. She does not allow these stereotypes to shape her image of the beasts nor the way she treats them. The narcissistic self is agentic: narcissists' positive self-views are reflected in agentic domains and physical appearance (Twenge, 2010).

Bella has repeatedly expressed her dissatisfaction with her looks in comparison with the Cullen's and Edward: "The contrast between the two of us was painful. He looked like a god. I looked very average, even for a human". The narcissistic self is special: narcissists believe they are special and unique. This is an extremely unfitting description for Bella Swan who expressly said "I'm nothing but a human, after all. Nothing special". The narcissist self is selfish.

Narcissists' selfishness can be seen in their "high levels of entitlement" and "behavior in resource dilemmas" (Twenge, 2010, p.



19). At the end of *New Moon*, Bella rushes to save Edward. She describes the experience:

I felt like I was trapped in one of those terrifying nightmares, the one where you have to run, run till your lungs burst, but you can't make your body move fast enough...But this was no dream, and, unlike the nightmare, I wasn't running for my life; I was racing to save something infinitely more precious. My own life meant little to me today...

This incident shows that Bella is not selfish and she has no feeling of entitlement over Edward who is far more precious than her own self. At last, the narcissistic self is oriented toward success: "look for opportunities to enhance the self with relatively little fear of failure" (Twenge, 2010, p. 19). Bella shows no interest in improving herself as a human being. She is very insecure and has doubts about herself and her looks, yet, she shows no desire to improve herself while remaining a human being. She believes her mind "doesn't work right" and she's "freak" who is "average" looking even for a human being.

She shows no interest in her future considering going to college "plan B". Her only desire is turning into a vampire which is faced with the disapproval of Edward. Through analyzing the character of Bella, it is apparent that she lacks all ingredients of narcissism despite her individualistic sense of self.

Personal identity formation also comes from "the other" i.e. personal identity is the combination of the essence of one's self and the interactions and treatment of others who exist in one's personal sphere. The narcissistic self is not particularly oriented toward warm interpersonal relationship (Twenge, 2010). At first, Bella is not particularly attracted to others. However, through the course of the story, she becomes more aware of others and especially those who seem "special".

She is fascinated by the Cullen's when she sees them in the cafeteria, she becomes friends with some students in her high-



school, she becomes friends with Jacob Black and describes him as her "personal sun" and she falls in love with Edward Cullen. Throughout the story, Bella is never alone even when Edward leaves her. She, then, becomes close to Jacob who explicitly shows romantic interest in her. When Edward leaves Bella, she makes advances toward Jacob in an attempt to restore her hope in life. She describes these attempts as "Pure selfishness" yet she continues her advances.

These attempts are nothing but efforts on her part to retain relationships with others because of her constant need for personal interaction. Bella shows the exact opposite of a narcissistic self by displaying the emotions of the need to others rather than using them for personal benefit and self-inflation. In fact, Bella does not even separate herself, as a human from what is considered non-human. Bella discovers that some of the characters in the story are not human, namely the Cullen's including Edward Cullen and Jacob Black and his "pack".

Twilight and *New Moon* are fantasy-fiction where the humans meet and interact with supernatural beings or "beasts". The "monsters" as they call themselves or "the beasts" in this story are the vampires and the werewolves. Bella is the human in the story while Edward and Jacob are the beasts. There are other beasts as well such as Edward's family (the Cullen's), Jacob's family and other vampires such as the Volturi, Victoria, and James. Bella views and treats these beasts using their "goodness" or "evil" and not their monstrous nature as the basis. She loves Edward's "soul" and his personality, she admires Jacob's goodness and warmth, she enjoys the Cullen's kindness and hospitality and she admires the boldness and family-love of Jacob's family.

She also fears James, Victoria and the Volturi because of their trickery and notoriety, and she is wary of Sam Uley because of his temper and hostility toward the Cullen's and vampires in general. Bella treats all the beasts on the basis of their human



qualities and not as beasts. Essentially, Bella considers only those “bad” beasts as real “monsters”:

Jacob was my best friend, but was he a monster, too? A real one? A bad one? Should I warn him, if he and his friends were... were murderers? If they were out slaughtering innocent hikers in cold blood? If they were truly creatures from a horror movie in every sense, would it be wrong to protect them?

At first, she shows a bit of fear of Edward and the vampires and even the werewolves. This fear is later dismissed as a mere “human instinct”. Later, Bella shows no fear or shock when learning about the truth of vampires and werewolves. This reaction is addressed by both Jacob who asks her “You really, honestly don’t mind that I morph into a giant dog?” and Edward who asks her “You don’t care if I’m a monster? If I’m not human?” The indifference Bella shows about the beasts is followed by fascination.

At the beginning of the story, she is fascinated by the beauty of the Cullen’s and Edward whom she described as: “... Devastatingly, inhumanly beautiful. They were faces you never expected to see except perhaps on the airbrushed pages of a fashion magazine, Or painted by an old master as the face of an angel.” She is fascinated by the werewolves whom she describes as “... a pack. A pack of five mind-blowingly gigantic, multihued werewolves” and with Jacob’s beauty after turning into a werewolf: “Jacob had grown into some of his potential in the last eight months... the tendons and veins had become prominent under the red-brown skins of his arms, his hands.

His face... had hardened... the planes of his cheekbones sharper... all childish roundness gone”. Bella’s fascination with the world of the beasts, and especially that of vampires, shapes her identity and her desire for self-actualization. She chooses



transformation into a beast as the ultimate way in which she can be truly powerful and independent.

Bella has already shown her dissatisfaction with being a human because it necessitates weakness, mortality, and restriction. For Bella, turning into a beast will provide strength and power: "More than anything, I wanted to be fierce and deadly, someone no one would dare mess with. Someone who would scare Sam Uley silly. I wanted to be a vampire". It will also provide immortality. Bella's unconscious fears of mortality appear through her dream which she describes: "That was me, me in a mirror. Me – ancient, creased, and withered.

Edward stood beside me... excruciatingly lovely and forever seventeen." She also makes a conscious decision based on her fear of mortality by displaying disinterest in her eighteenth birthday celebration which, to her, is an indication she is "getting old". Turning into a vampire is also the ultimate way to taste the freedom she had once felt with Edward in the woods: "Racing down the road like that had been amazing.

The feel of the wind in my face, the speed and the freedom... it reminded me of a past life, flying through the thick forest without a road..." Bella does not only reject any separation from the humans and the beasts but also shows the possibilities of turning into a beast herself. While doing so, she rejects any narcissistic possibilities despite her high sense of self and desire for self-actualization through transformation.

Conclusion

Having so many similarities with narcissism, postmodern individualism has been criticized by many critics who have feared the formation of narcissistic identities. An analysis of *Twilight* and *New Moon* shows that despite the focus on individualism and the absence of any community-based laws



and principles, there is still a lack of narcissistic ingredients in the protagonist's sense of identity.

The protagonist identifies as a human being who does not mind the association with the beasts and seeks complete equality between the humans and the beasts through her own desire to transform into one. In the two literary works, it is apparent that there is an absence of any separation of the humans from the beasts.

This means there is a lack of human egoism or self-love that pushes humans to create "...barrier that had been arrogantly set up between men and beasts" (Bennett, 2016, p. 154). In fact, the beast in these novels is not seen as the "other" but rather as the "self"—or more likely the desired "self". These two postmodern works demonstrate that humans, even when presented with conditions that may create narcissistic selves, will still adhere to the individualistic principles of the era rather than dive into extreme self-love and narcissism.

In this era, the beasts are no longer feared as the "other" nor the "unknown" but rather a possibility that must be explored and approached delicately. The beast is also not the "inner self" but a different entity that can be equated with the self and approached from an individualistic perspective without fearing the threat of narcissism.

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