

## **A Search for Harmony in Jennifer Egan's Novel *A Visit from the Goon Squad*: A Post-postmodern Approach**

البحث عن التوافق في رواية زيارة من الزمرة الحمقاء لجنيفر إيجان: مدخل ما بعد-بعد  
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**Marwa Sayed Safina**

**MA Scholar in English Literature**

**Helwan University**

**[marwasd@hotmail.com](mailto:marwasd@hotmail.com)**

### **Abstract**

This paper aims to examine Post-postmodernism as a literary trend that emerges by the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup>. The paper makes a general survey on the different contributions in defining and naming the new trend following Postmodernism. It also highlights the impact of its preceding movements: Modernism and Postmodernism on Post-postmodernism as well as displaying its distinguishing features. While Postmodernism concentrated on the relativity of everything including the previously established truth, ethics and morality, Post-postmodernism is characterized by the revival of such concepts as truth, sincerity, and subjectivity. These concerns will be depicted in Jennifer Egan's Pulitzer Prize winning novel *A Visit from the Goon Squad* (2010). Egan uses diverse narrative techniques that proves the novel to belong to a new trend after Postmodernism. The novel echoes Michael Bakhtin's concept of Polyphony through the presentation of multiple voices in the narrative. She also uses analepses and prolepses in the narrative of the novel. The use of these techniques contributes to presenting the novel in a non-linear, multi-layered narrative. The multi-layered narrative is further reflected through the use of the PowerPoint format that, along with the multi-voices and non-linearity of the events enable for the fragmentation of the narrative. However, that fragmentation, which is a Postmodern feature, is defied by the characters' search for harmony and authenticity through the representation of the unity that connects all characters in a puzzle-like way of structural relationship web.

**Keywords:** Postmodernism, Post-postmodernism, Jennifer Egan, *A Visit from the Goon Squad*, Polyphony

## Introduction

This study aims at discussing Jennifer Egan's novel *A visit from the Goon Squad* from a Post-postmodernist perspective. The study seeks to depict the emergence of the movement after Postmodernism and the influence of this movement on producing fiction. The emergence of the Post-postmodernist theory is influenced by the preceding Modernist and Post-modernist novels. Although Postmodernism as Epstein claims "found things 'ready-made': it arose after the problems and contradictions posed by Modernism had been fully expressed" (550-51), it ignores expressing human feelings and has a sense of 'indifference'. In contrast, Post-postmodernism is concerned with expressing human feelings and finding harmony in life through highlighting themes previously ignored by postmodernist novelists such as family relations, friendship, and love. Beside these highlighted themes, *A Visit from the Goon Squad* is concerned with revealing the influence of social media on forming the lives of people in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Jennifer Egan uses language and narrative techniques that express the spirit of the new century, that, although borrowing from the previous movements prior to Post-postmodernism, it echoes the contemporaneity of the period.

## Post-postmodernism

Any literary movement emerges as an influence of the preceding movement(s) either as a reaction against it (like Classicism/Romanticism and Romanticism/Modernism) or an extension to that movement but with some new features that differ from the previous movement and distinguish the succeeding one (like Modernism/Postmodernism and Postmodernism/Post-postmodernism). Modernism as a literary movement started roughly by the 1900 and lasted till the great shift in the way of thinking and perception of life due to the influence of the two world wars. It is mainly characterized by an emphasis on "radical aesthetics, technical experimentation, spatial or rhythmic, rather than chronological form, [and] self-conscious reflexiveness" (Childs 18), and also the search for authenticity in human relations. On the contrary, these characteristics are lacking in Postmodernism or are treated as objects of irony. On that context Postmodernism can be defined as "a complex of anti-modernist strategies which emerged in the 1950s and developed momentum in the course of 1960s" (Bertens 3). Its main distinguishing feature is 'relativity' in which it rejects the belief in the existence of one fixed truth and argues the relativity of everything including the previously established truth, ethics and morality, and religious beliefs, and consequently it establishes a self-referential identity. Postmodernism also rejects the grand narrative of Modernism and suggests instead multi-narratives for history and stories. This tendency to adapt relativity and reject grand narratives is accompanied by "a deeply felt loss of faith in our ability to represent the real, in the widest sense" (Bertens 11). For style and structure of literary works, postmodern writers use a writing style that also reflects their skeptical attitude and

rejection of a well-organized linear narrative and replace it by fragmentation and non-linearity.

By the 1990s a number of critics and academia have raised the issue of the start of a new era that differs from Postmodernism. However, this new trend is greatly influenced by its preceding movements and it became a dilemma to find it a new terminology. By 1995, an Engineering book written by the landscape architect Tom Turner discussed Post-postmodernism, in which he claims that; “the built environment professions are witnessing the gradual dawn of a post-Postmodernism that seeks to temper reason with faith” (8-9). Unlike Modernism which puts faith in question and Postmodernism which intends to confirm the relativity of everything including faith, Post-postmodernism in its search for harmony in life tries to reestablish faith.

In 1999, in his book *Russian Postmodernism*, Michael Epstein states that:

In considering the names that might possibly be used to designate the new era following postmodernism, one finds that the prefix "trans" stands out in a special way. The last third of the 20<sup>th</sup> century developed under the sign of "post," which signaled the demise of such concepts of modernity as "truth" and "objectivity," "soul" and "subjectivity," "utopia" and "ideality," "primary origin" and "originality," "sincerity" and "sentimentality." All these concepts are now being reborn in the form of "trans-subjectivity," "trans-idealism," "trans-utopianism," "trans-originality," "trans-lyricism," "trans-sentimentality" etc. (460-61)

Epstein prefers to use the prefix ‘trans’ postmodernism instead of ‘post’ postmodernism arguing that the prefix ‘post’ stands for the death or end of certain ‘modernity’ concepts, a matter that does not comply with the concepts the After-Postmodernism period approach. After-Postmodernism approaches certain concepts previously ignored by Postmodernism but from a different perspective that copes with the cultural feedings that formulate such perspective. So, the literature of After-Postmodernism is characterized by the revival of such concepts as truth, sincerity, and subjectivity but expressed through a new approach that registers the contemporary moment it reflects.

A different point of view about naming - and what that naming indicates - the period is presented by the British scholar Alan Kirby in his 2006 paper “The Death of Postmodernism and Beyond.” The name of the paper declares the death of Postmodernism as a remark for the emergence of a new era following Postmodernism. This ‘death’ is due to approaching life from a contemporary technological standard; “In pseudo-modernism one phones, clicks, presses, surfs, chooses, moves, downloads” (Kirby). Adrian Searle shares the same view with Kirby when she reports in *The Guardian* article named “Altermodern Review” that “Postmodernism is dead [...] but something altogether weirder has taken its

place.” Borurriaud defines altermodernism as a “synthesis between modernism and post-colonialism,” arguing that “our current modernity can no longer be characterized by either the modern discourse of the universal gaze of the white, western male or its postmodern deconstruction along the heterogeneous lines of race, gender, class, and locality” (qtd. in Vermeulen & Akker 3). This modernism, Vermeulen & Akker remarks, “is characterized by the oscillation between a typical modern commitment and a markedly postmodern detachment” (2). It can be said that this current era that critics and scholars strive to define is a kind of amalgamation of both Modernism and Postmodernism. It “recovers the interest in ‘experience’ and ‘social relevance’ that postmodernists had lost, while retaining an awareness of postmodernism’s epistemological lessons that ‘naïve realism’ has supposedly lacked” (Leypoldt 19). Consequently, it is not a return to Modernism but rather “an attempt to bypass the formal challenges that link postmodernism, to return to transparency and representation” (Green 25). We can assume that not all postmodern tendencies are over but they take another shape and carry “a new sense, a new meaning and direction” (Vermeulen & Akker 4).

This direction towards a new era referred to in this paper as “post-Postmodernism” can be the result of a number of material changes such as climate change, economic and political uprisings and digital/technological revolutions, argue Vermeulen and Akker (2). We can notice such changes on different levels of approaching life:

Planners and architects increasingly replace their blueprints for environments with environmental ‘greenprints’. And new generations of artists increasingly abandon the aesthetic precepts of deconstruction, parataxis, and pastiche in favor of *aesth-ethical* notions of reconstruction, myth, and metaxis. These trends can no longer be explained in terms of the postmodern. They express a [...] hopefulness and [...] sincerity that hint at another structure of feeling, intimating another discourse. (Vermeulen & Akker 2)

A number of contemporary writers follow that new direction and have been classified by critics and academics as Post-postmodernist novelists, including David Foster Wallace, Jonathan Franzen, Jennifer Egan, Zadie Smith, Jonathan Safran Foer and others.

Post-postmodernism is still under debate by critics and needs a thorough study to stand for a formatted definition for the ‘movement’/’theory’ and to define its distinguishing characteristics in different fields of study, especially as a new literary movement.

### **A Post-postmodern Approach to *A Visit from the Goon Squad***

In her Pulitzer Prize winning novel, *A Visit from the Goon Squad* Jennifer Egan, through character representation, epitomizes a tendency towards harmony with the self and the outside world. This tendency is revealed through highlighting

such themes as love, family, friendship and human communication, themes that are remarkably Post-postmodernist and echo Leypoldt words that Post-postmodernism “recovers the interest in ‘experience’ and ‘social relevance’ that postmodernists had lost” (19). In a thirteen chapters’ novel, Egan presents a world of characters and their lives. Although each of the thirteen chapters centers on different characters and events, all characters’ lives are intermingled to a certain extent. Each chapter introduces a certain character in a certain stage of her/his life. This technique promotes Mikhail Bakhtin’s concept of the Polyphonic Novel in which multiple voices or consciousnesses are heard in the narrative. The term is introduced by Bakhtin in his 1929 book *Problems of Dostoevsky’s Art* in which he defines ‘polyphony’ as: “A plurality of independent and unmerged voices and consciousnesses” (Bakhtin 9).

Although there are characters that travel from one story to another, each one has its unique voice. The novel sheds light on the lives of a vast number of characters in a non-linear way that echoes the fragmentation of the world those characters live in. However, as a distinguishing feature from Postmodernism’s fragmentation, such fragmentation is defied through characters’ search for harmony and authenticity through the representation of the unity that connects all characters in a puzzle-like way of structural relationship web. *A Visit from the Goon Squad* presents lives of its characters who all have relations with the two characters introduced in the first and second chapters of the novel. These two characters, namely Sasha and her former boss Bennie Salazar, are portrayed by various characters through different periods of their lives.

The novel opens with a chapter about Sasha in which her boss Bennie is briefly referred to. This structure, of introducing a character through the perspective of another character is repeated throughout the novel. So, the reader can see the character through different eyes and by different perspectives. Sasha is introduced in the first chapter as a middle-aged woman who suffers from being kleptomaniac who cannot help stealing from people. Sasha finds things seducing her to ‘take’. In describing her feeling towards stealing a wallet from the bag of a hotel-resident lady, she tells the story to her psychiatrist Coz from her own perspective:

That fat, tender wallet, offering itself to her hand-it seemed so dull, so life-as-usual to just leave it there rather than seize the moment, accept the challenge, take the leap, fly the coop, throw caution to the wind, live dangerously [...], and *take* the fucking thing.” Doctor Coz comments, “you mean steal it.” (*Goon Squad* 13)

For Sasha, stealing things is a vehicle of experiencing life in a different way, to break all traditional forms in dealing with life and to be so involved in life through living it “dangerously.” Sasha has a self-consciousness that leads her to perceive her problem in finding a connection with the outside world through the mean of

stealing and trying to solve that problem by consulting a psychiatrist. “Sasha and Coz had dubbed that feeling she got the “personal challenge,” as in: taking the wallet was a way for Sasha to assert her toughness, her individuality” (*Goon Squad* 13). This self-consciousness, a prominent characteristic of Modernism - as Childs puts it; “self-conscious reflexiveness” (18) – is lacked in Postmodernism but revived in the Post-postmodern writings.

Self-consciousness is apparent through Sasha’s perception of her cure:

She would stop stealing from people and start caring again about things that had once guided her: music; the network of friends [...]; a set of goals [...] taped to the walls of her early apartments:

Find a band to manage

Understand the news

Study Japanese

Practice the harp (*Goon Squad* 15)

Sasha knows that her own salvation could be attained by means of connecting to the self through doing the things she has passion in: ‘music’ and ‘friendship’. She can obtain harmony with the self by creating a bridge of communication with the outer world through directing people who share her the interest in music industry, having knowledge about the events take place in the world she lives in, and learning a new language that enables her to be introduced to varied areas of knowledge different from hers as well as broadening her space of communication. This notion of ‘transparency’ with the self and the other is a Post-postmodern feature as remarked by Jeremy Green; “an attempt to bypass the formal challenges that link postmodernism, to return to transparency and representation” (25). By introducing self-consciousness and self-reflexivity, Egan does not return to Modernism but rather makes “an attempt to bypass the formal challenges that link postmodernism, to return to transparency and representation” (Green 25).

By adapting the polyphonic technique and giving voice to each character to portray other characters, Egan goes deep inside the characters and puts their psych to the fore. Although Sasha has the control over representing herself and reflecting the world from her own perspective by being the narrator of the first chapter, she is portrayed through different lenses and in different stages of her life. She is portrayed by Bennie Salazar in chapter two as a psychologically damaged and depressed woman. Unlike Postmodernism which opposes the grand-narratives, Post-postmodernism does not give much importance to defying it and we find characters in the novel who adapt the ‘taken for granted’ notions. Among these characters is Bennie who cannot see Sasha as an independent person and wonders about Sasha’s state of being as unmarried and not having children: “He rarely thought of Sasha as independent person, and beyond a vague awareness of boyfriends coming and going [...] But seeing her outside this family home,

Bennie experienced a flare curiosity [...] Why hadn't she married? Did she want kids?" (*Goon Squad* 29). We can notice the sense of 'caring' in Bennie's words and the tendency to create a deep communication with Sasha through the "curiosity" towards her. This deep desire in interacting with others is a distinguishing feature of Post-postmodern characters.

The theme of passion, the need for love, and most importantly, expressing it, is echoed in the relationship between Bennie and Sasha: "Bennie felt no lust at all ... what he felt for Sasha was love, a safety and closeness [...] She turned to him, [...] "There's no way, Bennie," she said, "we need each other" (*Goon Squad* 34). Sasha knows well that both she and Bennie need each other, and she does not want to put in risk their stable relationship of work and friendship and replace it by a love relationship that may be destroyed or lost under any circumstances. She wants to keep Bennie in her life and perceives that he needs her in his, as well "we need each other." In a reaction against Postmodernism's rejection of the grand narrative and its tendency to adapt relativity due to "a deeply felt loss of faith in our ability to represent the real, in the widest sense" (Bertens 11), it seems that Sasha and Bennie have a 'faith' in each other and in the strong bond that ties them and to "represent the real" in Bennie's full perception of his feelings towards Sasha which may be vague before that moment of revelation, he "felt no lust at all" but instead it was clear for him enough to reveal it; "what he felt [...] was love, a safety and closeness" (*Goon Squad* 34). Through this short dialogue between the two characters, Egan succeeds in drawing features of the Post-postmodern trend in her novel.

The celebration by the importance of friendship seems to reach its peak in the chapter entitled "Ask Me If I Care" which travels back in time to the late 1970s and early 1980s and portrays the lives of Bennie's friends during their secondary school days. This chapter is narrated by one of Bennie's teenage friends called Rhea. In describing the strong friendship ties between Rhea, the narrator, and another friend called Jocelyn, she declares "I'm nervous walking in unless Jocelyn is already there, or (for her) me. We stand in for each other" (*Goon Squad* 36). In another passage, Rhea goes on displaying the strong friendship bonds with Jocelyn:

Jocelyn and I have done everything together since fourth grade: hopscotch, jump rope, charm bracelets, buried treasures, Harriet the Spying, blood sisters, [...] She's seen my dad pucking into the hedge outside our building, and I was with her on Polk Street the night she recognized one of the leather boys hugging outside the White Swallow and it was her dad, who was on "business trip" before he moved away." (*Goon Squad* 37)

This passage, although showing the strong friendship between the two, it sheds light on part of the history of Jocelyn's family and gives justification to the

relationship between Jocelyn and a music producer in his forties called Lou. He is introduced to us by Rhea: “a man is setting in a round booth, smiling teeth at us, and that man is Lou. He looks as old as my dad, meaning forty-three. He has shaggy blond hair; and his face is handsome, I guess the way dads can sometimes be” (*Goon Squad* 41). Although Rhea adapts a relative view towards Lou when she guesses that “all dads seem handsome sometimes,” Jocelyn adapts a grand-narrative view towards things: “Rich children are always blond, Jocelyn goes, it has to do with vitamins” (*Goon Squad* 35). In pacifying Rhea, who loves Bennie, who in turn loves a rich girl called Alice, Jocelyn declares another ‘taken for granted’ fact; “Rhea, Bennie’s a cholo [...] rich girls won’t go with cholos” (*Goon Squad* 34). In another situation, Jocelyn puts another fact of hers; “Rich people like to hostess, so they can show off their stuff” (*Goon Squad* 39). In criticizing the grand narratives of Jocelyn, Rhea mentions a situation when Jocelyn is the hostess herself and acts like the people she has previously criticized as “show their nice stuff”:

In Kitchen, Jocelyn pours Fritos into dish and takes a glass bowl of green apples out of the refrigerator. She already passed around quaaludes, offering one to every person except me. I think she’s afraid to look at me. Who’s the *hostess* now? I want to ask. (*Goon Squad* 43)

It seems that Egan combines the relativity and the grand-narrative views side by side. *A Visit from the Goon Squad* shapes a new identity, different from both the Modernist and Postmodernist identities, and aspires for a kind of unity with the self and the outer world in a Post-postmodern era.

Referring back to the character of Sasha, she is introduced at the beginning of the novel as a mid-thirties woman, in the course of the novel she reappears as a seventeen-year-old girl, who escapes from her family and travels to Naples, and after a considerable part of the novel she appears as a married woman in her forties with two children. In that former part, her character is perceived through the eyes of her eleven-years-old daughter, Alison, who writes her own diaries in PowerPoint sliders.

The power point slides function as a way of expressing Alison’s, Sasha’s daughter, perception of life and other characters around her, mainly her family members. As a Post-postmodern characteristic, the desire to create communication with others, by different means is the prominent concern of Egan’s characters regardless of their age or position within the social realm of life. Both Sasha and her husband are concerned by Lincoln’s communication with his peers and the whole world respectively. In a PowerPoint slide, Alison writes down her parents’ comment on Lincoln’s obsession with song pauses “Dad, to Mom, Whispering Under the Music (but I can hear him) “How is this helping him connect to other kids?/” It connects him to the world” (*Goon Squad* 170).

In Egan's novel, she does not only use polyphony and analepses to reveal her characters' social lives in parallel to their inner psychological ones, but she also uses prolepses by flashing forward in the future to predict some of her characters' preceding lives. In the "Safari" chapter, in which events take place in Africa, some future events are predicted:

Thirty five years from now, in 2008, this warrior [...] will have had four wives and sixty-three grandchildren [...] one of whom [...] named Joe [...] will go to college and study engineering [...] He'll marry an American named Lulu. (*Goon Squad* 48)

Beside predicting some characters' future, Egan also travels forth in time and imagine people marketing on Facebook and Twitter by hiring teams of paid agents called "parrots" to market their products and services by spreading the word like digital press agents. This part of the novel, which is in fact the last chapter, is set in 2020 and brings back a character introduced in the very beginning of the novel, a boyfriend of Sasha in chapter one whom she has known via the internet and who is called Alex. It seems that those "parrots" agree to use their trustworthiness as a product and sell it on the virtual world of the internet. It is not a moral act to be yourself like a product but those "parrots" agree to play such a role:

Alex leaned against his cushion and lit up a joint. He'd spent the afternoon trying- and failing to tell Rebecca what he'd agreed to do for Bennie Salazar. Bennie had never used the word "parrot," since the Blogscandals, the term had become an obscenity [...] the suspicion that people's opinions weren't really their own." Who is paying you?" [...] who would let themselves be bought? But Alex had promised Bennie fifty parrots to create "authentic" word of mouth for Scotty Hausmann's first live concert. (*Goon Squad* 189-190)

Despite criticizing the materiality of the technological age of the 21<sup>st</sup> century and to which extent it makes people just like products that can be bought, Egan displays a wide range of people's tendencies and reactions towards such materiality and reveals that not all people are drown in the illusion of being 'bought,' "who would let themselves be bought?" Egan much aware of the cons and pros of the relationship between technology, social media and communication, writes a considerable part of her novel, a 76 pages chapter in PowerPoint format linked to the website of the digital version of her novel.

## **Conclusion**

In the final analysis, by putting a 76 pages chapter in PowerPoint format linked to an internet website, Egan perceives the important role of digital

technology in spreading a certain message and in communicating with a wide range of readers. Whereas, by reflecting a dystopian image of the social media in her last chapter, she does not totally reject the technological advancements and social media, but rather highlights the possible drastic influence of such technology on the ethical principles of people. Consequently, through that notion, Egan's novel recalls a world of ethics and human values that has been lost in the relativity and skepticism of Postmodernism and establishes a Post-postmodern identity.

While the main distinguishing feature of Postmodernism is 'relativity' in which it rejects the belief in the existence of one fixed truth and argues the relativity of everything including the previously established truth, ethics and morality, and consequently it establishes a self-referential identity, Egan, through using polyphony, and giving voices to the characters to represent other characters, puts in question the self-referential identity of Postmodernism and replaces it by a more flexible and less-centered identity of Post-postmodernism. This less-centered identity is revealed through characters' eagerness to build bridges of communication with other characters.

While Postmodernism rejects the grand narrative of Modernism and suggests instead multi-narratives for history and stories, Post-postmodernism represents side-by-side both the relative and grand narrative points of view. In contrary to Postmodernism which ignores expressing human feelings and has a sense of 'indifference,' Post-postmodernism concerns with expressing human feelings and finding harmony in life through highlighting themes previously ignored by postmodernist novelists such as love, friendship, family relations and human communication, themes that are remarkably Post-postmodernist and echo Leypoldt words that Pos-postmodernism "recovers the interest in 'experience' and 'social relevance' that postmodernists had lost" (19). We have seen those themes through characters' actions and interactions throughout the events of the novel. They are revealed in the love and tender relationship between Sasha and Bennie, in the friendship relation between Rhea and Jocelyn, in the family relationship of Alison's family members and the tendency of creating communication between all characters of the novel.

For style and structure of the novel, *A Visit from the Goon Squad* creates a world of characters search for harmony in a Post-postmodern era. Although there are characters that travel in time and space from one story to another through the prolepses and analepses techniques, each character has its unique voice. The novel sheds light on the lives of a vast number of characters in a non-linear way that echoes the fragmentation of the world those characters live in. Although postmodern writers use a writing style that reflects their skeptical attitude and rejection of a well-organized linear narrative and replace it by fragmentation and non-linearity, such fragmentation is defied in characters' search for harmony and authenticity through the representation of the unity that connects all characters in

a puzzle-like way of structural relationship web. Such techniques promote a more interactive, tolerable and harmonious view towards the world and reflect a new tendency in creating a more communicative and sincere world different from that of the Postmodern era towards a Post-postmodern trend echoed in Jennifer Egan's novel *A Visit from the Goon Squad*.

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