

The External and The Internal of Individual Both Subjectively and Objectively Make an Everlasting Connection Between Individuals

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Abstract

This paper explores how individuals are perpetually interconnected through both subjective and objective dimensions, as illustrated in Jeanette Winterson's *The PowerBook* and Ali Smith's *Hotel World*. By employing a non-linear narrative structure, both novels present fragmented yet interwoven stories that highlight the inescapable ties between individuals and society. Drawing on Lacan's concept of the "Other," the analysis demonstrates that social and historical contexts objectively bind individuals within a symbolic order, while media, memory, and emotional experiences subjectively reinforce these connections. The paper argues that whether through external social forces or internal emotional drives, individuals consistently function as both protagonists in their own narratives and supporting characters in the lives of others. Ultimately, the study concludes that human existence is fundamentally communal, sustained through continuous interaction between the self and the Other.

Keywords: interconnectedness, lacanian psychoanalysis, non-linear narrative, subjectivity and objectivity, symbolic order

1. Introduction

Both *Hotel World* and *The PowerBook* adapt a non-linear narrative strategy, consisting of several independent stories which mainly describe the relationship between individuals. In *The PowerBook*, although the virtual world and the real world are connected through a powerbook, and the several virtual stories described seem to be unrelated, the whole novel is connected in series through the character Ali. Each story's own social context also plays a vital role in the development of the story. *Hotel World* mainly revolves around the stories of five women each of whom has an independent chapter. They are the protagonists in their own chapters, and see the world from their own different perspectives. However, the stories of each of them are superimposed and intertwined to form a complete story line about one fact.

Firstly, what happened to each individual existed under a integral social background. If the world is a giant net, then each individual is a part of the net which also construct the net. This basic structure is objective and can't be changed with human consciousness. But such an objective society will subjectively take measures on individuals for certain purposes to strengthen the binding relationship between them. Besides, for individuals, everyone is the protagonist of their own life, but supporting roles are also essential for the integrity of a story. Each protagonist also acts as a minor part in other individuals' stories. The stories between each individual are woven together. In addition, the individuality will also play its own subjective emotional role to strengthen the connection between individuals and others. Therefore, no matter from the point of view of the individual or the outside world, they both objectively and subjectively prove that individuals are always communal. Then I will combine *The PowerBook* and *Hotel World* for detailed analysis.

2. The Era and Social Background of the Individual and the Others He Can Come into Contact With Are The Same

Lacan's psychoanalysis proposes a theory called the Other, which is the product of the interaction between each independent individual in society, but this product will in turn limit each individual (Lacan 57-85). The Other can be any virtual or real thing, which can be understood as social custom rules or individual ideology in a concrete view. For every natural person, entering the society means entering the symbolic order. The symbolic order means the reality world with rules individuals are living in (Lacan 30-36). So then the individual can't escape the control of the Other, so every individual that constitutes the Other is interconnected[1].

In *The PowerBook*, the protagonist Ali travels between the virtual and real worlds, but the places she visits in the virtual world are closely related to the real world. Different eras and different locations have different civilizations and customs. As the novel says, “there is always a city, there is always a civilization” (Winterson 19), these different cultures also lead to different development of the story ending. For example, one of the stories is the tragedy of love between Francesca and Paolo. Francesca’s pursuit of true love ended in the tragedy of both parties’ deaths[2]. Women’s love became a bargaining chip for profit, which reflected that women in that era didn’t have the right to choose their own marriages. Also, the separation and quarrels between Ali and her lover were also caused by the restrictions on heterosexual marriage in the patriarchal society. Even if the individual enters the fictional story, the rules contained in the symbolic order still exist everywhere, and there is a high probability that it will directly lead things to the established result. In addition, even if the individual is alone and spending his own time, he won’t block everything from the outside world. When Ali spent intimate time with her lover, the author always intersperses and describes the trivial sounds and sights of the outside world, such as “you kissed my throat. The boy was dancing” (Winterson 67). As the novel says, “so many lives, and ours too, tangled up with this night, these strangers. Strangers ourselves” (Winterson 36), so it can be seen that all others that exist objectively are inseparable parts of the individual and are closely related to the daily life of the individual[3].

In the *Hotel World*, the global chain of hotels can be seen as a materialized symbol of the Other. In Gao’s thesis, she believes that this novel adopts topographic and spatial narration, and the hotel is the most important spatial entity in the novel, which exists as the background of the whole story, represents a miniature society, and symbolizes the oppression of human nature by capitalism (Gao 11). Because the existence of the hotel provides the conditions for the producers to sell their productivity, the individual deep in it doesn’t have the ability to jump outside the limit of the Other, but tries to seek a better position in it. For example, there is a description in the novel about the quality of the brand of the hotel. No one knows what quality means, they only know “it’s something to do with the difference between good and bad and the need for better” (Smith 91), and the existence of the brand is just a class distinction for people of different status. This can be seen as the individual’s curry favor with the Other. Lise is a working-class receptionist in a hotel, but she fantasizes that “she is the well-dressed young woman who came in earlier” (Smith 87) to cross her own class. Therefore, it can be seen that everyone is struggling in the environment of the Other in their mind, and no one can think beyond the scope of the Other[4].

3. The Other Will Deliberately Strengthen the Connection Between Individuals For Certain Purposes

The society from the previous paper media to the current electronic media era is always in the information era, and individuals receive more information than they need every day. The desire of the individual is the desire of the Other, and people will have their own desires only after they know the desire of the Other (Lacan 119-137), so some media for disseminating information will be used as a tool to spread values and incite group emotions. This strengthens the connection between individuals, and individuals and others.

In *The PowerBook*, Ali’s lover also mentioned this to her, “you just want what everybody wants-everything” (Winterson 47), the subjective thoughts that individuals think are generated by themselves aren’t completely subjective, but are influenced by others. In *Hotel World*, the subjective effect of objects and media on the subject is more prominent. “The crumbs on it so that proved it happened” (Smith 163), it can be seen that everything that happened and existed will leave traces, and these traces will always remind people of what happened to fight against the forgetfulness of human brain[5]. In addition to inanimate products, “the computer can provide information on hotel guests, staff, international tariffs and more general Global matters” (Smith 91), which shows that the information of each of us is recorded in the Other, which also provides the possibility for the Other to take active measures. Lise had a relationship with the deceased Sara once, but it was difficult for her to remember Sara’s appearance accurately, but “it is much easier to picture her from the photographs in the papers and on TV than to try to remember” (Smith 86), it can be seen that the communication media has the effect of reminding and strengthening the individual’s memory. When the individual’s memory of a certain person or something fades, these media that can be seen everywhere in life will appear to help to remember, which makes individuals think that connection with others is strong. The same situation is for arts such as poetry and music. The dissemination of these arts is something “which robbed him of proper and soothing oblivion” (Smith 168), because art always contains the cultural connotations of the eras, so the dissemination of these works is also a kind of specific enhancement and continuation of the memory of cultural values. This allows individuals to feel that their connections with compatriots of different eras are strengthened, and they always exist by their side[6].

4. The Individual is The Protagonist of His Own Story and a Supporting Role in Everyone Else’s Story

At the same time when the story of each individual happens, the stories of others also happen simultaneously. So the cause of a certain story may be the effect of another story. Although each individual has different importance

to each matter, every link of an individual's story is inseparable from the participation of others. Individuals who are the protagonists of their own will also play minor parts in other people's stories. They are intertwined and connected.

In *The Powerbook*, Ali is the center of the narrative of the whole novel. Although the main line of the story is the love story between Ali and her lover, there are many seemingly unrelated storylines in the 5th century, 14th and 15th centuries[7]. Zeng believes in her thesis that the stories in *The PowerBook* didn't happen in chronological order, and the chronological order of these events was disordered and disrupted, so the timeline of the story between Ali and her lover was also chaotic, such a narrative form is a kind of resistance to the limit of time (Zeng 16-17), the author herself emphasizes the verticality of time, which means that a subject can break through the constraints of time and space and bloom brilliantly in many events at the same time, just as in the novel said, "more life into a time without boundaries" (Winterson 53). If time is regarded as a horizontal advancement, an individual is only the protagonist in his own story, and seems to have no participation in other people's stories, so the author adopts such an exaggerated narrative technique across time to prove an individual can simultaneously play roles of varying degrees of importance in many stories.

In *Hotel World*, the novel is divided into five parts, and the protagonists of each part are different people. These five people seem to be unconnected and have independent stories, but in fact their stories are all intertwined. The story of Else the tramp mainly revolves around Else's tragic family experience and current miserable life, and Lise is just an unknown waiter who happens to give Else a chance to stay in the hotel for one night. But in Lise's story line, it mainly revolves around Lise's psychological activities, and introduces Lise's motivation for bringing Else into the hotel. Else is just a tool in her entire plan. The importance of an event in each individual's heart is different, and the protagonist of one's own story is only a supporting role for others. But such a supporting role is indispensable. It is the fact that Else's entering the hotel triggered the story of Clare, Penny and Else in front of the wall. As Penny said, "by chance she had become a cog in the mechanism of something really happening" (Smith 105), everyone becomes a part of someone else's story, so this connection is inevitable.

5. Individuals' Subjective Emotions Strengthen and Attach Additional Meaning to The Connection

Human beings are creatures with thoughts, emotions and subjective initiative. At the same time, human memory isn't totally accurate, so the importance of many stories will be amplified and additional meaning will be added subjectively.

In *The PowerBook*, love can be seen as a main proposition, and many of Ali's expositions also revolve around love, time and death. She believes that "beyond time, beyond death, love is." (Winterson 129), by which can be seen that the subjective passion of love will have a great impact on people's cognition. Love will magnify the relationship between people and their lovers. For example, in Ali's heart, her lover is "sun and moon to me" (Winterson 77). This kind of passion will sanctify the relationship between people, making this relationship more stable. And this ability to love will also strengthen the individual's sense of connection with others, "I am my own master but not always master of myself" (Winterson, 55), it's this emotion that makes an independent individual more integrated into interactions with others. In addition to love, other feelings of the individual, such as family and friendship, will allow the individual to break part of the boundaries of the self and integrate into others. People can't completely abandon feelings, so this connection with others can't be severed.

Hotel World is a good example of the amplifying effect of family affection on the connection between people. Most of Clare's stories are about showing Clare's nostalgia for her sister Sara. The family cleaned up her sister's belongings, but Clare "took it all back inside my arms" (Smith 144). Because she has a strong miss for her sister, whenever she sees these items, she will think of the daily life when her sister was still there, and even when eating, she will "remember for you what it tastes like" (Smith 155). Although her sister has left her in the physical world, because of the existence of Clare's memory, the connection between her and her sister seems to have never been broken. Therefore, the connection between people doesn't have to rely on physical objective existence to maintain. In addition, it can be seen from Penny's narrative that people reject loneliness in their deep hearts. When she was alone in a hotel room, "for a moment she felt bereft" (Smith 132), she also felt the need to connect others when she chose to go out in the previous article. People will try to find connections with others subjectively and emotionally, so it can be seen that this kind of interaction and connection is inevitable.

6. Discussion and Further Implications

6.1 Cultural, Philosophical, and Social Dimensions

The close reading of *The PowerBook* and *Hotel World* makes clear that individuals are never truly isolated; they are always entangled with others through social institutions, cultural codes, and subjective memory. To further

situate this insight, it is useful to extend the analysis beyond literary technique and psychoanalytic theory into broader philosophical and social frameworks. Jeanette Winterson's exploration of virtual and real interactions anticipates contemporary digital culture, in which online and offline identities overlap. Social media platforms today establish symbolic orders with their own rules of visibility and recognition. The pursuit of "likes" or "followers" demonstrates Lacan's claim that desire is mediated by the desire of the Other. Individual aspirations appear autonomous but are in fact conditioned by larger collective values. In this way, literature not only reflects but also prefigures the dynamics of modern connectivity.

Ali Smith's portrayal of the hotel as a microcosm of capitalist society likewise resonates with sociological analyses of globalization. The hotel binds individuals through labor and consumption while simultaneously fragmenting relationships into transactional roles. This paradox aligns with Zygmunt Bauman's concept of "liquid modernity," where social bonds are plentiful yet fragile, easily dissolved by economic pressures and rapid cultural shifts. Both novels highlight how institutions regulate connection, granting opportunities for interaction while also imposing hierarchies and exclusions. The figure of Lise fantasizing about crossing class boundaries underscores the impossibility of escaping the Other's influence while still desiring to transcend it.

Philosophical perspectives deepen this understanding by foregrounding the ethical stakes of interconnectedness. Emmanuel Levinas emphasizes that the face of the Other imposes an infinite responsibility upon the self, reminding us that every personal act carries consequences for others. Literature dramatizes this ethical imperative by showing how Clare's grief for her sister or Ali's longing for her lover implicates them in webs of obligation and memory. The novels insist that the individual cannot exist in isolation, for each narrative thread is tied to the fates of others. This view challenges Western notions of radical autonomy by suggesting that selfhood is constituted through responsibility to the Other.

Finally, the theme of memory illustrates the cultural dimension of human connection. Memory is not only a personal faculty but also a socially mediated construct sustained through artifacts, rituals, and media. Clare's attachment to her sister's belongings or Lise's recollection aided by photographs exemplify how objects and narratives preserve relational bonds. In modern societies, memory increasingly resides in digital archives and cultural databases, raising urgent questions of curation and erasure. By foregrounding memory as connective tissue, these novels remind us that identity and community are sustained as much by what is remembered as by what is lived. The cultural, philosophical, and social implications thus expand the literary analysis into a broader meditation on the conditions of being human in an interconnected world.

6.2 Contemporary Resonance and Human Interconnectedness

Beyond theoretical considerations, the novels also carry profound resonance for understanding the contemporary human condition. The paradox of connection and loneliness is particularly striking. Penny's sense of emptiness in *Hotel World* or Ali's moments of solitude in *The PowerBook* illustrate how one may feel most alone precisely when immersed in networks of others. Psychological studies echo this point: increased mediated communication does not always alleviate loneliness and can sometimes exacerbate it, as superficial ties fail to provide genuine intimacy. Literature thus articulates the paradox of the modern age—abundant connections that may still leave individuals yearning for deeper belonging.

Narrative form itself reinforces this insight. Winterson's non-linear, fragmented storytelling resists chronological order, suggesting that time cannot contain the full scope of human interconnectedness. Ali's simultaneous presence across centuries emphasizes that love and desire reverberate beyond linear temporality. Smith's polyphonic narrative likewise highlights simultaneity, where multiple perspectives overlap to produce a collective account of loss and survival. These strategies align with philosophical discussions of "deep time," in which personal stories are situated within broader temporal horizons that exceed individual lifespans. By framing narratives outside linear progression, the novels demonstrate that interconnectedness is not only spatial and social but also temporal, linking generations through shared memory and affect.

At a global level, the recognition of interconnectedness carries urgent ethical and political weight. Climate change, pandemics, and economic inequality all underscore the impossibility of solitary survival. The COVID-19 pandemic, for example, revealed how the vulnerability of one community reverberates across borders, echoing the literary portrayal of how one person's story triggers the unfolding of others. Literature's insistence on the communal nature of existence thus resonates with contemporary discourses of global solidarity and the idea of a shared human destiny. These crises affirm what the novels already dramatize: that the well-being of the self is inseparable from the condition of others.

Equally important is the role of art as a cultural laboratory for exploring human connection. Both *The PowerBook* and *Hotel World* stage experiments in narrative that allow readers to imagine alternative modes of relationality.

By weaving together disparate voices and times, the novels enact what Mikhail Bakhtin described as the “polyphonic” dimension of literature, where multiple consciousnesses coexist without being reduced to a single viewpoint. This openness invites readers to see themselves not only as protagonists of their own lives but also as minor characters in the stories of others. Such a realization fosters humility and empathy, virtues crucial for sustaining human interconnectedness in an era of division and uncertainty.

Ultimately, the contemporary resonance of these novels lies in their insistence that human beings are fundamentally relational. To live is to be implicated in the lives of others, across space, time, and circumstance. The novels affirm that while loneliness and disconnection are inevitable aspects of the human condition, they are never final. The possibility of renewed connection—through memory, desire, or narrative—remains ever-present. In extending this insight beyond the literary domain, we can see that the task of the present age is to cultivate practices of solidarity that honor both individuality and community. Literature, by dramatizing these complexities, offers a vision of interconnectedness that is as ethically compelling as it is aesthetically profound.

7. Conclusion

To summarize, whether it is the individual himself or the outside world on which the individual depends, both subjectively or objectively connect individuals and others through various clues. When a natural person is endowed with the identity of a social person, it’s impossible for him to escape from the symbolic order’s control. Although people will inevitably have time alone and moments when they feel lonely in their hearts, individuals are always in constant interaction with the others inevitably.

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