

How to Walk Away from the Trauma Corner: A Deconstructive Analysis of Besser's *Man in the Corner* and Birman's *How To Walk Away*

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Abstract

The present paper attempts to deconstruct two postmodern Australian Jewish novels to examine the chief social-psychological dimensions of the main characters: David, in Besser's *Man in the Corner* (2016) and Otis, in Birman's *How to Walk Away* (2015) and thus investigate their implications about contemporary Jewish identity within the ethnoreligious Australian Jewish context. The previous analyses of the texts have only been internet reviews focusing on the psychological dimension on its own. These reviews have not linked the texts to current Jewish identity, as attempted in this article. In addition, these attempts' focus has been on several perspectives, not deconstructive. Therefore, this paper delves into the mystic depths of these novels inferring, through deconstruction, the Jewish Identity in the postmodern era. The analyses have been conducted in light of Breakwell's Identity Process Theory (1986) and Derrida's Différance through textual analysis that elicits the traces beyond binaries, rhetoric expressions, and semantic and morphosyntactic tell-tale textual moments. David and Otis pass different experiences and personal traumas that primarily influence their ability to decisions making and thus initially increasingly shrink inward. However, the later awakening by confessing the existing problems, renewal and pleading to God provides ways to walk away from these traumas. These solutions reflect the overall diverse attempts of the Australian Jews today to overcome their traumatic past by universalizing the experiences of suffering, by attempts to communicate with the self and the other and to -sometimes- return to God.

Keywords: Australian Jewish fiction, deconstruction, différance, *How To Walk Away*, Identity Process Theory, Jewish identity, *Man in the Corner*, trauma

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Introduction

The Australian literature is, according to Bird (2000) and Huggan (2007), a reflection of the process and relationships in society in terms of races within the national boundary and beyond. It has been bestowed an interesting peculiarity as being a challenge to and an amalgamation of the literary currents from the two major Anglophone Jewish contexts, the American and the British, along with its reflection on the geographical closeness and mutual influence with the south Asian context. Among the main Australian literature themes are identity, compensation with the past, psychological and spiritual complexity and the relationship between text/ language and context/ land (Bird, 2000; Huggan, 2007; & Pierce 2009).

The Australian Jewish identity in literature shares these common features with Australian literature and has its own peculiarities. Fluidity is a common feature of Jewish identity in all contexts (Almasiri, 2002; Graham & Markus, 2018; Moore, 2008; Neshet, 2002; & Tapper, 2016). La Vall (2007) and Liberman (2014) agree that among other peculiarities here are expressing pain, exile, the Holocaust, wandering between assimilation and isolation along with an increasing tendency towards complexity and aesthetic dimensions. It is clear that these identity features, which reflect maniac obsession and delusion (Swinn, 2020), are symptoms of the traumatic Jewish perception of the Self. Cohn and Morrison (2017) emphasise this point, with a special reference to the Holocaust.

In the 21st century, Australian Jewish literature portrays intellectual richness and attracts more readers according to Liberman (2014). These tendencies are evident through holding Sydney and Melbourne Jewish writers' festivals that provide platforms for Jewish and non-Jewish writers to participate and highlight basic Jewish identity issues such as the Holocaust, survival, and adversity.

Trends in Contemporary Australian Jewish Identity

Among the 21st-century writers of the Australian Jewish context are Nathan Besser and Lisa Birman. Young and not prolific, but as described by Liberman, their novels are richly loaded with the psychological depths of contemporary lifestyles, especially since the fusion between the social and psychological identity dimensions is crucial in portraying such a fluid identity as the Jewish identity (Herman, 1989; Tapper, 2016). In the Australian context, Jewish identity is more sensitive to its ethnoreligious perspective as a minority in the whole society (Creese, 2019a; 2019b). The reflection of this identity perspective and its relationship to the social and psychological Jewish Self is remarkable, yet not solid; it is fluid corresponding with the overall fluidity of Jewish identity. In other words, discussing the ethnoreligious aspects of Australian Jewish identity is considered along a continuum of perspectives; ethnically from isolation to assimilation, and religiously from ultra-orthodox to secularism.

This study focuses on the more liberal Jewish observation of the self, i.e., the assimilation and the secularism, and their bidirectional influence on the social-psychological Jewish identity perspective. This categorisation meets the outer circles (C & D) of Elazar's typology of Jewish community involvement in comparison to the inner circles (A & B) which correspond with more isolated and religious observations (as cited in Creese, 2019b). Besides, this division also corresponds with Landau's (2015) community division to core (circles A & B), middle, and periphery (circles C & D). In this study, the scope is limited to the periphery of the more secular and assimilated Jewish characters: David in Besser's *Man in the Corner* (2016) and Otis in

Birman's *How To Walk Away* (2015) and the bidirectional influence of this stance on shaping their social-psychological selves. So, this article provides answers to the following questions:

- 1- How are the social-psychological Jewish identity features portrayed through David and Otis in the selected novels?
- 2- How do these identity aspects influence and are influenced by David's and Otis' ethnoreligious identity perspective?
- 3- What are the traumatic problems David and Otis encounter?
- 4- How do they manage to walk away from these traumas?
- 5- How do these traumas interact with the social-psychological and ethnoreligious Jewish identity perspectives?

Literature Review

Nathan Besser's talent has been enriched by his job experiences (Besser, n.d.). He wrote two novels: *Man in the Corner* (2016) and *Wild* (2019). Besser's "command of both the cerebral and scenic elements of his demanding story" (Besser, n.d.) in *Man in the Corner* makes it a fertile textual matrix for the analyses representing a moment of the social-psychological development of the main character, David Sachs. Peter Pierce (2016) comments on Besser's promising style in highlighting people's doubts about any assertions. Generally commenting on the plot, Vajda (2016), Emma (2016) and Bennett-Simon (2016) describe the novel as "a clever and complex noir" revolving around the monotonous rhythm of David's life which is turned upside down by Leah's confessions and the intrusion of "the enigmatic Ben" in David's life. Supporting the views of Bard (2016) Prenzler (2016), Pete (2016), and Tina (2017), Chisholm (2016) highlights the flexibility to continuously build and revise the understanding and interpretations of the novel.

Birman is a poet, novelist, and editor. As a novelist, *How To Walk Away* (2015), her only novel so far, "was awarded the Colorado Book Award in Literary Fiction" (Birman, 2015, p. 291). The novel narrates the after-war trauma lived by Otis who had participated in the war in Afghanistan.

Warsh (2015) reviews Birman's novel describing it as a "cathartic, uncompromising look at the mind of a war veteran." Otis' complex of traumas (PWT and OCD) is "harrowing and rhapsodic." These traumas are highlighted through the daily life details with, mainly, Cat, Otis' wife, and then their parents. The world created by Birman is private, and upside down, but realistic. Randall's comments (2015) emphasise the psychological depths of the novel considering these traumas "the pandemic of our age" (p. iii). Besides, she highlights Birman's peculiar stylistic skill. Kapil (2015) gives a concluding review of the novel, "Geography, orientation and survival -what it means to choose one direction or number rather than another- perform or unfold a psychic space that is both internal and communal" (p. v). These reviews focus on Otis' foregrounded psychological traumas. This psychological atmosphere reminds other reviewers, like Mary (2018) and Shireen611 (2015), of Wolf's stream of consciousness. Supporting Warsh, Randall, and Kapil, Hill (2018) compares Birman's novel to Rodney Hall's *A Stolen Season* (2018) and Toni Jordan's *Addition* (2008) basically in the psychological depths although she considers *How To Walk Away* more profound and painful. Schantz (2015) and Barlow (2015) focus on the deep poetic language and the genuine attempts of Otis and Cat to survive all their traumas, connect and show commitment to each other as Birman's recommendation 'to walk away.'

Considering Besser's *Man in the Corner* and Birman's *How To Walk Away*, the reviews focus on the psychological perspective of David and Otis, and its impact on their behaviour with the social circles around them. In all, these reviews explain the outlines of the novels; they are not profound academic investigations. Moreover, these reviews have not linked the texts to current Jewish identity, as attempted in this article. In addition to that, in the previous literature, which has been scarce and chiefly about the American Jewish context, Jewish identity has been revealed as a result of their traumatic memory. These attempts' focus has been on several perspectives, not deconstructive. The aforementioned points highlight the significance of this paper which, therefore, attempts to deconstruct two postmodern Australian Jewish novels to examine the chief social-psychological dimensions of the main characters: David and Otis and to investigate their implications about contemporary Jewish identity within the ethnoreligious Australian Jewish context. The previous analyses of the texts have only been internet reviews focusing on the psychological dimension for its sole purpose.

Breakwell's Identity Process Theory (IPT) and Derrida's Différance

As indicated above the two pivotal theoretical perspectives of this article are Breakwell's Identity Process Theory (IPT) (1986) and Derrida's Différance (1978 & 1982). Breakwell's theory has been initiated to scrutinise the identities under threats and their strategies to cope with these traumatic circumstances. To achieve her goal, Breakwell dissects almost all identity dimensions including components, processes and principles, time frame, and social context. The holistic nature of IPT corresponds with the contemporary fluid identity whose typical representative is the Jewish identity. This is supported by the contemporary tendency to focus on the psychological and social aspects of Jewish identity (Budick, 2007; Herman, 1989; and Tapper, 2016). Therefore, identity in this paper is a dialectic between the psychological interaction of the individuals and their social context with all its components focusing more on the dominating fluid ethnoreligious factors in the Australian Jewish context. This perspective of identity is to be analysed by adopting Derrida's conception of Différance (1978 & 1982).

It is Derrida's key concept (Feder, Rawlinson, & Zakin, 1997; Lurcza, 2014; and Spivak, 1997) and it is the theoretical concept that leads to undoing the elements of the text to trace the contemporary Jewish identity features and highlights the open-ended identity interpretations, especially when investigating the highly fluid Jewish identity. Also, Redman (2000) and Graafsma, Bosma, Grotevant and De Levita (1994) show that generally identity can be interpreted as a deferred and differed process. Différance is that the meaning is persistently postponed by being differed each time supplemented by a play of traces within the time frame. This ambivalent movement continues repeatedly.

Methodology

The text-oriented approach in this thesis is to be realized through an adopted way of deconstruction analysis. The chief sources of this adopted way are Derrida's main lines in his works (especially *Writing and Difference*, 1978; & *Margins of Philosophy*, 1982). Other consulted deconstructionists' works are Culler (2008), Miller (1977) Johnson (1980), and Royle (2014) supported by the most relevant reviewed previous studies which are Gurses (2012), Clausson (2007), Shah & Abahussain (2019), Badurais & Abdullah (2020) and Badurais (2021a).

This article investigates the selected novels inferring, through deconstruction, features of Jewish identity in the postmodern era. The analyses have been conducted in light of Breakwell's Identity Process Theory (IPT) (1986) and Derrida's Différance. The arguments are realised through the textual analysis depending on the elicited traces beyond binaries, rhetoric expressions, semantic, and morphosyntactic tell-tale textual moments.

Analysis

Besser's Man in the Corner (2016)

Throughout his portrayal of David, Besser provides an example anatomising a traumatic memory: its roots and consequences. How it starts with a confession of a past mistake, how this confession affects "man" unconsciously deteriorating him physically, mentally, financially, and socially, and how he makes "wrong decisions" which ruin the rest of his life and his family's life. David's last words "Please God. Please God. Please God" (p. 292), reflect a need to fill the spiritual gap and are considered David's key reason for the dilemma. In addition, what is considered a prologue, Heraclitus' saying at the beginning of the novel, "Hidden harmony wins over visible harmony" can be read as a speculated solution for being in "the" corner emphasising the inner peace suggested to be spiritual in the novel is the secret unlike the materialistic guise of harmony which turns to be fake.

David's Psychological Dilemmas

David is an example of a modern Jew who is ridden with a heavy burden of a tragic past. This past strongly influences his present by influencing his ability to make decisions and worsens his present social-psychological self and puts his future on the edge.

The implicit reactions to the various experiences humans face are more fatal and destructive than their apparent quick reactions. David's shock at his wife's past prostitution is realised not in anger or divorce but in a severe headache that leads to a coma diagnosed as hydrocephalus, head trauma. That is a psychological shock that leads to physiological disorder and instability (Hydrocephalus, n.d.). In David's case, it is unexplained because there should be even a simple knock to the head. David does not remember anything happening to his head. The doctor diagnoses it as "unusual symptoms, the way there was nothing, then a sudden collapse" (p. 22). Hydrocephalus is a kind of head trauma resulting from the creation of fluid in the head. This meaning can be understood through the etymological meaning; from Greek origin, 'hydro-' means water and 'Cephalus' means head (Hydrocephalus, n.d.). The interesting point here is the implication that links fluids and instability. What emphasizes the abnormality of David's case is the "absurd symptom of 'gait disturbance' he had suffered intensely. It was as if his legs weren't his legs at all, but cylinders of solid iron, unable to bend or follow instruction" (p. 23) along with "short-term amnesia" (p. 23). Here, this case indicates the image of the relationship between 'up' and 'down' (of the body). When the head is healthy, it controls the other organs to achieve their functions well. But when it is unstable, the rest becomes unstable. This meaning is clearly expressed later by Green describing the neck as a link between the lofty head and the down-to-earth body ridden with materialistic desires.

Here, there is a bidirectional relationship between David's internal and external conflicts which corresponds with the social-psychological and ethnoreligious identity perspectives, respectively. Leah's confession traumatises David's psychological state, thus he develops an

unexpected and unexplained head trauma, hydrocephalus. This head trauma blurs his ability to make rational decisions and intensifies his religious doubts. The other two injured men he meets in Tradewinds Cafe reflect how the remaining scars act as a memory that revives their causes every time they are revealed. Besides, the three traumatic examples, David, Ben, and the one-handed man, portray a society, as represented in the novel's title through the collective word 'man,' of which David is only an example. Also, his implicit Jewishness and the assimilating ethnic perspective can be inferred from the names of his family members, David, Leah, Saul and Lexi, and H. H. Green, the Jewish man, of whom David is about to assume his identity, as will be explained in the coming sections.

David is facing a religious conscience struggle. He has doubts about the spiritual life, later expressed in a conversation with Ben Strbic about the transmigration of the soul. These doubts are rendered in several tropes throughout the novel, for example, the allusion of Papa Smurf on the ceiling. Papa Smurf is a tiny cartoonish fairy creature. This allusion stands for a broken image of God and the self. Papa Smurf, with his thick white beard and broad knowledge chiefly of magic, represents wisdom. The frequent reference to this trope might seem childish and trivial. However, psychologically, it reflects a long-term dilemma and ignorance of religious spiritual practices. David's lack of this spiritual guidance creates a void inside him; he is unable to fill it with any satisfying rituals. This view is supported by his repeated sensitivity to the passing planes principally whenever he is in Ben's abode. Another reference to David's internal religious conflict is the existence of the termites and rats in the ceiling.

The whole situation of David is summarised in one word "catatonia" mentioned to describe his helplessness, "lay[ing] catatonic on the porch" (p. 235). The word catatonic means "a group of symptoms that usually involve a lack of movement and communication, and can include agitation, confusion, and restlessness. Until recently, it was thought of as a type of schizophrenia" (Online Oxford Learner's Dictionary, 2021). It is a state of outward numbness and physiological stiffness with internal fluidity and instability. It represents undecidability. David describes this state that he has undergone during the hydrocephalus attack, ending up doubting everything and involving himself deeper in a vortex of nothingness.

Throughout all these incidents, he declares his disbelief in spirituality. He blames the world or "the mechanics of the universe" (p. 291) wondering "Why torture him with the ability to re-examine the past and concoct plans for the future?" (p. 291). He finally gives up and "sank into his chair, closed his eyes and clasped his hands together, pressing his plaited knuckles into his forehead. Please God. Please God. Please God." (p. 292).

Another significant turn in David's traumas is the process to enable the incarnation, materialistic and metaphysical, between David and Green. This process is symbolic of the case of the Jews as they are bound by their ancient heritage of diaspora and torture, i.e., they have to incarnate the tortured souls of their ancestors in a process described as a transgenerational influence (Cohn & Morrison, 2017) and as soul transmigration in the novel.

The process of incarnation that Ben pushes David to "assume" requires metaphysical elements of 'migration' and "intention" (p. 83) and a materialistic construction that passes several stages. First, to "assume" a certain identity to specify a target victim's identity to assume. The word "assume" carries the meaning of taking something. Its etymology is from Latin to mean "ad-" "towards" and "sumere" "take" (Online Oxford Learner's Dictionary, 2021). To own someone's rightful property. Or, in direct expression, it is identity theft. Second, "to go into him" through

reading more about him, as in Green's journals. Third, "to establish your life. The details" (p. 81). This stage corresponds typically with Elliot's definition (2011) of the contemporary materialistic identity; the one identified through a bank account, the type of car, phone, appearance...etc. Ben focuses on "Lots of bits and pieces [that] add up to create an identity" (p. 82) such as the adoption certificate (a fake one), the apartment bills, the car license, and "utilities: water, gas, telephone, power, lease" (p. 81) because "as much as possible [is needed] in your name" (p. 81), "[t]hat wallet needs to be full" (p. 82). Ben emphasises this materialistic identity and advises David, "the more you buy, the more human you become" (p. 110). "Ben laid each of the items and documents in careful symmetry to the others, making a small alignment. They stood looking down at them like archaeological specimens" (p. 81). This image of the documents constructed in the form of a historical building signifies three things. First, identity is a historical accumulation. Second, it can be established out of paper. Establishing an identity, for Ben, requires psychological incarnation and a social realisation through papers and documents for the government. Third, the structure of papers entails dissemination and fragility. This perspective corresponds with Almasiri's (2002) definition of Jewish identity as an accumulation of layers of traumatic incidents.

One of the most crucial consequences of this kind of contemporary mere materialistic identity is that it is easily faked by repetition of lies; it is as David when he keeps withdrawing Green's money from the bank without being suspected as long as he provides the required official identity documents "nobody believed it to be anything other than the truth. People trusted what the world told them, even if what the world was telling them was a lie" (p. 134).

David's suspended mental status is kept lingering via Ben's philosophical arguments about soul transmigration, and the ship of Theseus. Ben considers identity partially metaphysical, "just a notion, not a physical reality" (p. 83). Besides, he begins to elaborate on his theory of soul transmigration, "there was evidence to suggest that an identity, a consciousness, was transferable" (p. 84). He uses the expression "deal in" which is initially a business term, "when you're dealing in human identity, things are not so straightforward" (p. 84). 'Deal in' means "1) to buy and sell something as a business; 2) to use or be involved in" (Merriam-Webster, n.d.)

Ben attempts to use an external motive to enhance David's incarnation and the process of 'soul' transmigration between David and Green. It is a way of implicit programming to shake David's ability to think well if it will not change his beliefs about the soul. Ben starts philosophising the discussion of soul transmigration and the essence of identity through the symbol of the "Ship of Theseus." Considering the ship of Theseus, it is a philosophical argument about the reality of identity as the ship's boards have been replaced by others, is it still Theseus' ship? And if the old boards are used to build a new ship, will the new one be Theseus' ship or a new one? In the first case, if the ship is considered new, this indicates a materialistic view of identity that relies on the body (physical identity) not the soul (spiritual identity). David's confusion is getting worse, "I don't know who the money truly belongs to, who you really are, who I am. I don't know, maybe my ship isn't made of wood -maybe it's made of, I don't know, plastic" (p. 199). Along with the implication of the controversial essence of identity, the two materials, the wood and the plastic, indicate other dimensions. Wood can be cut, broken, and reshaped into ships but plastic is not as flexible and recyclable as wood. It will be irredeemably broken and fragmented (as no ships are wholly made of plastic).

Accordingly, this section is devoted to discussing David Sachs who represents a lost Jew internally and externally. His inability to make the right decisions deepens his bewilderment. His

loss is sharpened by the psychological and physical traumas resulting from his wife's past/ his tribe's past. This dilemma is exploited by Ben Strbic. Following Ben, David finds himself in a dilemma, beginning with identity theft and ending with murder and family destruction. These dilemmas have resulted from the psychological and social disturbances he faces along with David's ethnoreligious doubts due to his materialism and disbelief in spirituality. However, in this regard, there are muffled voices inside him questioning religiosity and the need for God in human life.

The Social Circles that Influence David's Psychological Self-perspective

The influential social circles around David start, according to strength, from outside his home. Ben Strbic/ Alexander Zevas and Harry Green are the working forces beyond his vortex and inability to settle regarding materialism/ spirituality and identity orientation. The catalyst that enhances and facilitates these influences is Leah's past of prostitution.

Ben's suspicious activities are confessed as he weirdly describes his business as "Taxidermic," (pp. 30-1). Taxidermy is "The art of preparing, stuffing, and mounting the skins of animals with lifelike effect." Originally, it is of Greek roots; a blend of 'taxi' meaning arrangement and 'derma' skin, and the original meaning is thus the arrangement of the skin (Online Oxford Learner's Dictionary, 2021). This figurative and vicious description of his business indirectly reflects its reality. Ben kills people and rearranges identities (skins) and alleges to control others' "low-lives" (p. 31). The complexity of Ben's identity and intentions bestows him the function of the motive to enhance identity theft using David (or the Davids) as puppets, with the ultimate goal to serve his own materialistic purposes. This role makes Ben a symbol of the forces in the Jewish collective existence that enhance clinging to the ancient heritage and intensify the feeling of guilt not for ethnoreligious ultimate goals but for limited materialistic gains.

Harry Green is a ghostly presence in David's life through the brief accounts of his miserable life of being an adopted Jew, an illegitimate hybrid of a persecuted Jewish mother and a persecuted Nazi soldier. Green functions as the present absence that enhances David's realisation of his past and present dilemmas. Green symbolises a source of the transgenerational Jewish ancient heritage which becomes an accumulating burden for each new generation. This burden sharpens the new generations' dilemma and inability to proceed socially and psychologically. The agents of these dilemmas are the likes of Ben Strbic who use deception, chiefly linguistic, to achieve their mercenary goals. Only when David gets rid of those negative influences (corners), his conscience becomes clear, and he finds his way to God and thus satisfaction which is inferred through his last supplication to God to help him overcome his troubles and rebuild his ruined life.

Birman's *How To Walk Away* (2015)

The novel is in the form of a stream of consciousness from Otis' perspective. Reading the novel leaves an impression of internal diaspora and desperate quest for the Self through mapping it, philosophising the concepts of space and time, and the binary of regret/compensation. Structurally, it is full of periods (or full stops) corresponding with Otis' dilemma. Semantically the words used are simple. However, the fragmented sentences and the persistent stops, along with the chapter division are sources of depth and complexity. In the title, the interrogative indirect clause inquiries about the manner to walk away which means "casually or irresponsibly withdraw from a situation in which one is involved, or for which one is responsible" (Online Oxford Learner's Dictionary, 2021, para. 1). It implies escapism.

The psychological world of Otis

The psychological world of Otis is intensified thoroughly in the whole text as it is all a kind of stream of consciousness. Otis represents a further moment along the adopted continuum. His multiple psychological disorders portray a heavy burden of the past -of unspecified roots- and of the present resulting from his wife's complex and the postwar trauma he suffers from. These factors along with the assimilating environment make him a representative of the contemporary Jew who still suffers, manages his/ her suffering, and initially attempts to shed past traumas, universalize the experiences of suffering, and, though initially unsuccessful, try to assimilate with all.

Otis is a sociopath with a genuine problem of being unable to normally involve in society. Since childhood, he has struggled to be involved in everyday activities like other children. Yet he has been haunted by a feeling of always being different and detached, "I was still in my silent world. [...] I wasn't a part of this anymore" (p. 185) but pretending, "Like I was normal. Like I was living" (p. 185). His thoughts highlight a significant implication of assimilation. Assimilation, as an extreme along the study's continuum, is of ethno-religious reference. It represents a group of Jews who mix in their respective societies not isolated in their private communities as in the case of the haredis in Bavati's *Dancing in the Dark* (2010). However, another problem that results from this aspect of assimilation is psychological isolation. Otis does not explicitly involve himself in the activities in the broader society, he is still isolated in a cocoon of his heritage of which he is fully, but implicitly aware through the hints at his psychological Jewish diaspora inferred from between the lines. The sense of fragmentation dominates his life to the extent that he feels a severe internal/ psychological conflict between the "I" and the "Self"

I don't remember the time before this. Or I can see the general shapes. Before breaking into pieces. Before the concentrated gaze. There's a looseness I remember. I miss it in the vaguest sense. Without knowing what it feels like. As if I was another person. As if every part of what I was is separating from the now. It's hard to travel forward. I know the steps and trust the road. But I do not know where I am going or how I will arrive or when. I try to concentrate but all I see are pieces. I cannot find my place inside. (p. 26)

This quotation reflects his dilemma before and after the harsh war experience; is it only the war or something else that happened long before? "before the breaking into pieces." The overwhelming feeling of looseness leads to a schizophrenic temporal state, "[...] what I was is separating from the now." This state of bewilderment makes him fear the future, "It's hard to travel forward." Although he is sure of his "direction," he cannot identify the destination. So, what guides these steps and directions? It is a state of diaspora; a separation between the past and the present due to shattering heritage and experience, along with an inability to step forward.

The traumatic experience on the front lines traumatises his dissemination. It is a kind of torture to live and to see the shreds of the casualties. He is confronted by vicious scenes of people he does not know being severely injured and their bodies are scattered in an image of torture worse than death itself. His shock renders him as though in a state of incarnation with an unknown man whose fate, being cut into two parts in an explosion, mirrors Otis', as he apprehends it. A point of significance here is highlighting the physical separation of the body "body from the body" which recalls the separation of the body from the soul, as in the case of David and Green. In this image, the first kind is worse than the second as the first leaves one in a state between life and death.

Otis is accustomed to the war scenes and to the feeling that he will be the next victim. It seems that as he returns home safe, a persistent feeling of guilt makes him wish for any damage to

share -as a monument- with the war victims and compensate for his feeling of guilt, "I knew that my body was not my body. I knew I wasn't meant to come back whole. I didn't know exactly how but I knew I would live, and I knew I would lose things" (p. 62). In correspondence with his shock on seeing the body shreds on the battlefield, his feeling of guilt makes him feel incomplete; "[m]aybe I could be normal on the inside if the outside broke away" (p. 63). Here, a shared collective feeling of mourning, suffering and guilt bestows a burden on Otis and exaggerates his traumas. It is a miniature moment representing the Jewish heritage of suffering and its negative influences.

Otis' feeling of guilt reaches a climax when he starts to blame himself because he is not injured like others. He feels as though he has extra limbs and wishes to lose one of them, "[w]hen I saw my arm missing from his body. When I saw him end exactly where I'm meant to end. When it was so precise. So misplaced. I didn't even know him but there he was being me" (p. 64). Not knowing that victim but having that overwhelming wish to share with him his fate is a marked symptom of unity, incarnation, and a shared burden of the Jewish people specifically and with humanity in general. This implication paradoxically indicates a source of the Jewish problem and a suggested solution: the problem is being entrapped in a tragic past and the consequent feeling of guilt. The possible solution is to think of the matter as a common human experience, maybe, then the burden will be less.

When his wish is fulfilled after the car accident (when he has lost his arm), he describes himself as "Subtracted" (p. 103) which reflects dissatisfaction with being hurt. It is an enigmatic feeling that he once badly wished to share this painful experience of loss; however, when fulfilled, he cannot accept it. His fist, which ought to be like any other fist "might break windows or cheekbones. I(t) will not unclench" (p. 103). "I(t) will not unclench." The structure reflects that there is no way of recovery. The two subjects; the first-person pronoun "I" and the nonhuman third-person pronoun "It" merged in the word "It" along with the double negation "not" and "un-" emphasize the incompleteness. Otis differentiates his satisfaction of coming home from his dissatisfaction of being complete, of returning without any concrete loss, "I told her that. I told her I didn't feel bad about coming home. I was just confused by mirrors. I didn't fit inside my frame." (p. 137). In all, these symptoms can be interpreted as a process of suspended metamorphosis or change that results from being stuck in one's cocoon.

Otis' traumas result from/in a variety of disorders that throw their shades into his self-perception. These disorders reflect an obsession to fill a gap. Otis' sufferings are rendered in several kinds of traumas: obsessive-compulsive disorders including arithmomania and onomatomania. The arithmomania is about his obsession to divide everything into fives: walking steps, word syllables, and breaths. And the onomatomania is represented through always alphabetically reciting names of people of different ethnicities and religions such as Abigail, Aron, Ameena, Charmaine, Cesia, Chaman, Hamasa, Heniek, Hila, Homa and Huda, among others.

He keeps dividing things into fives and naming them while walking and remembering. Walking is a dynamic progress like migration, "To remove myself. To find myself" (p. 69). The use of the word "remove" is peculiar here; the pun, here, can be considered as including a neologism. The surface meaning of the pun is the known indication of "remove," as if Otis wishes to shed his identity, replacing it with another more definite. The deep indication reflects a two-morpheme verb: "re-" + "move" with the prefix "re-" meaning "repetition" and the head verb, "move." This implication clearly explains the persistent movement to *Be*. Here, memory is linked

to the process of walking, mapping, and naming. To remember is to keep the memory vivid. Walking, as principally indicated in the text, is a process of mapping, migration, and a persistent quest for an unknown destination. The memory is a past heritage to be carried in the journey of walking in search of an unobtainable end, a summary of the Jewish story. Again, walking and remembering names are soothing strategies. Walking is a reminder of the caravan migrating movements westward and eastward in the diaspora. And the names are reminders of the lost, missed, and casualties in the process of walking. He then links the two strategies, "To walk the names" (p. 77).

During walking, there is a process of recording the events that take place on the body (reflecting individuality rather than collectivity) as a geographical area to catch "a future memory" (p. 158) because the present is unstable, "because this happens and that happens. Because we have come to rely on roads. On doors that allow for exit and entry. On possible collisions"(p. 158). Relying on these shadowy areas is unguaranteed and they lead to indeterminate ends. It is a phobic reflection of depending on the misleading collective time and place (history and geography) being soothed by a preference for depending on individuality.

The notion of the amalgamation of body and space is highlighted as both are apt to be located, mapped, and divided. The outline and the borders of the body and the place represent the outer frame that identifies its location, "[t]he borders are open to debate. [...] My skin is built to break. To close. [...] We wrap ourselves in maps. Whole territories of terra incognita" (p. 152). As there are unknown areas in the universe, there are unidentified territories of the self/ body. He elaborates the image fusing the two entities, the body and the place together, "[t]his country here, behind the shoulder blade, I do not know. Something happened here. A transgression. A violence. Something passed through the skin. A foreign body. (Un)seen." (p. 152). The (un)seen reflects a full diaspora and estrangement of the self-being suspended between visibility and invisibility. Otis wonders whether visibility helps to understand our reality. Is it reliable? Or is it just false confidence that leads to failure?? Another inquiry is where are the differences (between people) noticeable most: in the whole or the part (details)? Otis thinks it relies upon the parts, "[b]ut if we take it down to the smallest possible unit. Maybe something internal. The differences magnify. It's just a matter of noticing. Of paying attention" (p. 155). Magnifying differences through focusing on minute details, either of the outer appearance or ethnicity, religion, and nationality, among others, is one of the major troubles of the Jews regarding either the way they look at themselves or the way they look at others.

The Social Circles that Influence Otis' Psychological Self-perspective: Cat

Cat, Otis' wife, is one major influence in his inability to settle. She has her own trauma due to the death of her only brother, Thomas, during a storm and fire in the forest near her parent's house and the feeling of guilt that she was an indirect reason behind her brother's death. The closet is her refuge whenever there is a storm.

The closet in this novel can be read as a symbol of isolating and ghettoising the Self, basically psychologically, to practice torturing this Self and temporarily soothe feelings of guilt. This symbol can be, first, extended to Otis who represses his fears and disorders until they become everlasting torturing complexes; and second, the closet symbol can be generalised to the whole Jewish case as they isolate themselves from other nations. However, there is a glimpse of hope to "walk away" from this traumatic corner. First, confessing the problem, "We have always walked

around and never through” (p. 272). Second, to initiate the process of change, “to recycle everything. To start again” (p. 287).

Therefore, Otis paradoxically lives assimilated and not assimilated. From the ethno-religious perspective, he mingles in the wider society without being isolated in a ghettoised Jewish community. But from the social-psychological point of view, his first kind of assimilation deepens his psychological and social traumas as he is unable to normalise his life, as the invisible barriers are still vividly there.

Discussion

David’s materialism and his struggle with an internal dissatisfaction concerning spirituality intensified by his wife’s shameful past lead him to a plethora of psychological instabilities, involvement in social dilemmas and wrong decisions, i.e., a state of catatonic life. In the world of David, his feverish quest for spiritual balance is displayed in numerous upward tropes that frequently attract only his attention such as the allusion to Papa Smurf and the sensitivity to passing planes. Besides, the ethno-religious struggle is explicitly transformed to a deeper unreal/ shadowy level which is created by attempting to incarnate in Harry Green’s identity. Although the purpose here is purely materialistic, to steal Green’s money, the internal vortex opened through Green’s traumas exaggerates David’s own bewilderment. So, David portrays a moment toward greater assimilation and secularism. His social and psychological traumas result from mere materialistic life and spiritual instability. This catatonia is partially resolved by both the shock of losing his familial security and regaining his faith which is initially unshaped and created in diasporic cries, “Please God, please God, please God.”

With Otis, the furthest extreme of the adopted continuum is represented. Here, there is a mere incarnation of the multiple and complex psychological disabilities Otis suffers from. Otis is on a persistent quest for an absent destination. He is mapping, walking, naming, and numbering in an attempt to find a rhythm in his life and to identify his surroundings, and thus, identify his belonging and himself, in vain. He lives and relives his tribe’s past heritage which is portrayed vividly in Afghanistan through the apocalyptic scenes especially the Holocaust that happens to the innocent Afghani family. Moreover, this internal trauma is deepened by Otis’ inability to communicate with his wife who suffers from a feeling of guilt and is engaged in a nihilistic search for reuniting with her deceased brother by producing family trees and uncovering unexpected and unknown relationships between members of families separated for one reason or the other. In this extreme moment, as the internal diasporic feeling is traumatized, there is a tendency to conciliate and reunite with all other nations through the wide range of backgrounds of the names recited by Otis in his illusionary quest for a destination.

Therefore, David’s relationships with Ben, Green, and Leah, Otis’ inability to communicate with Cat, and his inferior feeling since childhood, i.e., their senses of their fragmentary critical/ catastrophic social “Me,” all play crucial roles in shaping and intensifying David’s and Otis’ psychological dilemmas and doubts and the process of stability suspension and/ or the intention to find a solution and “walk away” from these dilemmas. The artificially-segmented Jewish identity to the layers of social-psychological dimensions, closer to the analysed characters, and the ethno-religious dimensions comprising wider circles surrounding and bidirectionally interacting with the social-psychological ones portray a crucial representation of the contemporary Jewish identity in the Australian context. The social-psychological aspects as

summarised above demonstrate problematic reflections of the internal processes to identify the self being exaggerated by the way their social surroundings, usually contradictory and indeterminate, receive and respond to them. These factors gain momentum as emerging from and working in a continuously changing ethno-religious medium. Tracing the ethno-religious features of Jewish identity in the two analysed moments/ characters, those who are away from strictly practicing their Jewishness, those who assimilate into the wider society, David and Otis, are unable to settle as their suffering is internally deepened and explicitly represented as a fusion of wrong decisions and psychological complexes. Both, David and Otis live in a vortex being in or out of the ethno-religious atmosphere, a situation deepened by the social-psychological dilemmas, which explain why the Jewish identity is persistently fragmentary, mosaic-like, and undecidable.

The ability of David, and Otis to identify their identities (perspectives of the *I* and *Me* along the ethno-religious continuum) is persistently delayed. The four live through traumatic experiences on the horizon between the explicit and implicit perceptions of their Jewishness, as an ethno-religious group in their diasporic context. This leads to a persistent play along the continuum: David is returning to a more religious perspective and Otis attempts to break that whole chain of obligations and “walk away” from trauma corners.

Conclusion

This article aims to deconstruct Besser's *Man in the Corner* and Birman's *How To Walk Away*, as two examples of contemporary Australian Jewish novels, to examine the social-psychological identity features of the major characters, David and Otis, and trace the ethnoreligious aspects of Jewish identity. David's ethnoreligious belonging and rituals, though implicit, put him in a 'catatonic' state of inability to make the right decisions. The ultimate solution is through a return to spiritual stability to strike that urgently needed balance. This does not mean isolation from the wider society, but mingling actively and participating in its activities normally. With the last moment on the other extreme of the ethnoreligious continuum, Otis' assimilation is greater than the previous moment while his social-psychological isolation is deeper. This depth of isolation is represented through the variety of OCDs he suffers from. These traumas make him painfully live an internal diaspora reviving all his tribes' tragedies and projecting them internally. However, David and Otis, there are suggested solutions for the Jewish problem of continuous social-psychological isolation even after the ethnoreligious assimilation. This solution is suggested through filling the spiritual gap by restoring religious faith to achieve a state of rebirth or renewal of the self and to open ways for communication with the other, be within the narrow or wider social circles to build a positive memory for the future, and live the shared human experience shedding the heritage of guilt and being persecuted.

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