

# A Jamesonian Reading of Joyce Carol Oates' Selected Short Stories: The Effects of Violence and Schizophrenia on Crisis of Identity

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## Abstract

The purpose of this essay is to analyze the concept of culture in the collection of short stories entitled *Lovely, Deep, Dark* and *I Am No One You Know* by Joyce Carol Oates through Fredric Jameson's theory of postmodern culture. Before a critical analysis of the short story collection, it would be necessary to introduce Joyce Carol Oates. The portraits of women, men, and children show Oates's compassion for human life in modern society. According to Jameson, postmodern culture is the internal and superstructural expression of a whole new wave of American military and economic domination throughout the world: in this sense, as throughout class history, the underside of culture is blood, torture, death, and terror. *Lovely, Deep, Dark* and *I Am No One You Know* represents the spot of a postmodern man's struggle with his background and real culture. There are distinctions between the Real and the culture. It might be anticipated that the selected short stories can be categorized as postmodern fiction. The stories are associated with an avant-garde movement in which nature is gone and this feature can be seen in all collections of the stories. They create a deconstructed condition in which there is no direct relation between social beings. The setting of the stories reminds the postmodern society which is the metaphor for the current American society with a revolutionized culture in which violence and Schizophrenia result in a crisis of identity. The present society is a fabricated system devoid of liberty and freedom. The place that the authors have created in the stories is devoid of natural life and happiness. It is a fabricated place in which the people are programmed like robots. Throughout the stories, the authors represent technological pessimism which refers to the sense of disappointment, anxiety, and menace in subjects due to technological issues. They are used to captivate human beings. The researcher contributes to identifying the main cause of Oates's attack on her characters in these collections. The main purpose of this research paper find the cause of Oates's message in a postmodern world.

**Keywords:** Postmodernism, Popular Culture, Subjectivity, Violence, Sexuality, Utopia

## Introduction

Jameson's concepts including postmodernism, culture, and popular culture are applied to Joyce Carol Oates's *I Am No One You Know* and *Lovely, Dark, Deep* collections. In the story "Lovely, Deep, Dark," she presents the postmodern allegories of the American poet's life, Robert Frost. An interviewer girl visits the poet Robert Frost and she goes through undermining Frost's life condition. She seems to know a lot of things about his life but her interview creates a challenge between Frost and her. Oates uses technological advancements to capture Frost's life.

Fredric Jameson is an American critic who has been called "probably the most important cultural critic writing in English today" (Jameson, 1995). His major work is considered in the realm of postmodernism and the concept of culture. Moreover, he has done a great deal of translation and interpretation of Hegelian Marxism. This means that the trace of different Marxists including Karl Marx (1818-1883), Lukacs Georg Lukacs (1885-1971), Theodor W. Adorno (1903-1969), and Louis Althusser (1918-1990) can be found in his works. Since his major works can be labeled as postmodernism, the roles of language and narration are highlighted. Moreover, his works are composed of architecture, science fiction, Victorian fiction, cinema, and avant-garde art.

The status of Jameson in philosophy is undeniable since both Marxist and postmodern motifs can be traced throughout his ideas. In other words, "Jameson is the world's leading exponent of Marxist ideas writing today; and his work on postmodernism has been the single most influential analysis of that cultural phenomenon" (Roberts, 2000). *Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, is Jameson's most cohesive and focused work on the subject regards 'schizophrenia'. Jameson contends that contemporary theory performs an ideological role when it discredits the very ideological and metaphysical" (*Postmodernism* 12). It does not mean that the post-structuralist viewpoint is right or wrong but that by the suppression of depth models, introduction of inter-textuality and plurality, and above all by shattering individual subjects' sense of integrity and unified self which has roots in a deeper reality, it allies with the market in reification of all sides of human life and emotions and ultimate commodification of non-practical realms. The Depth models that are repudiated in contemporary theory according to Jameson are "dialectical one of essence/appearance, Freudian model of latent/manifest or repression, existential model of authenticity and inauthenticity and signifier/signified" (*Postmodernism* 10). The immediate outcome is what he famously labels as "the waning of affect in postmodern culture" (the same) that is a fading away of emotional content in different mediatory forms and its replacement by the superficial intensity of feelings. By this, he does not mean that post-industrial people are devoid of emotions but that lacking any inner depth, they are alienated from their feelings.

Postmodern schizo-fragmentation must be rendered as different from modern subjects' anxieties and hysteria. It exists in all walks of life and surrounds people even before they sense the slightest hint of its existence in their minds and inner selves. Schizophrenia is plural everywhere and involves an escape from the 'centered subject' or modernists' 'unified ego'. Post-structuralism and current theories of postmodernism are

all schizophrenic and introduce a de-centered sense of subjectivity in line with the ideology of the culture as well as the market. According to Jameson, in the post-structuralist view the idea of the subject is ideological and a mirage: "a once-existing centered subject, in the period of classical capitalism and the nuclear family, has today in the world of organizational bureaucracy dissolved" (*Postmodernism* 15). The natural result is 'the waning of affect' and total alienation from emotions. Where there exists no unified bourgeois ego, the attribution of feelings to the non-existent self sounds inappropriate. Jameson speaks of a kind of reality pluralism- a coexistence not even of multiple and alternate worlds so much as unrelated fuzzy sets and semiautonomous subsystems whose overlap is perceptually maintained like hallucinogenic depth planes in a space of many dimensions is, of course, what is replicated by the rhetoric of decentering (and what informs official rhetorical and philosophical attack on 'totality'. (*Postmodernism* 372)

Interestingly enough, this schizophrenia does not possess the morbid connotation it previously had in psychoanalysis. It is so much widespread as a style that its application is warmly welcomed by cultural thinkers and practitioners and regarded as one of the features of a time that embraces and accepts all and rejects none.

#### Literature Review

Joyce Carol Oates' works have been studied by different researchers and critics. However, the research on Oates works can be categorized into different categories. Regarding the psychological category, different works could be found. Debora M. Horvitz discussed sadism, memory, and violence in American fiction. She sees "Oates situating herself within the literary tradition of American realism" (Horvitz, 2000). She believes that sexual violence and sadism fill Oates' texts, and the characters encounter difficult and painful processes to psychologically react to being exposed to traumas. Moreover, her texts depict the pervasive oppression of women that fills the history of culture.

Govindaraj and Kundhavi (2013) have studied the portrayal of psychological horror in Joyce Carol Oates's short stories. The study depicts "the nightmarish conditions of the present Southern American culture with all its anxiety, paranoia, dislocation, and explosive conflicts". This research paper explores "the grotesque female individual obsessions and their transcendence with the aid of conscious awakening and faith in the self. It unpacks Oates's issue-based approach to writing short fiction and its impact in the postmodern world filled with repressed desires, emotional conflicts, and fragmented thoughts, which leads them to be the victim of horror" (C. Govindaraj1, 2013).

In another category, Oates' style of writing has been investigated in several works. Sharon L. Dean has made a review entitled "Literature and composition theory: Joyce Carol Oates's Journal Story". She believes that "Oates has a personal voice, and the letter form allows her to articulate that she remains silent about in traditional literature and composition classes" (Dean, 1992).

The body of Oates's work certainly provides evidence that she has, as critics have noted, many voices or styles. Lorna Sage remarks that "few contemporary writers have inhabited more styles than Joyce Carol Oates. She is the author as a picaresque character,

the traveling writer equally at home with Gothic, realism, romance and detection" (Sage, 1992).

Henry Louis Gates (1990) comments, "She picks up and discards generic forms at SSSSSSe rffusss oo rtttttt hrrsfff oo one sub,,,,, oo one sruuum of soyyyyy one personality type. Indeed her very productivity stands as a reproach" (Gates, 1990). Regarding Gates, the effects of different aspects of American society can be traced within Oates's stories. In other words, how power is distributed in different sections is revealed in Gates' stories.

Regarding the category of linguistics and history in Oates's works, several works could be found. Brenda Daly (1996) states "Oates's novels yield graphic traces of a struggle to free her imagination from linguistically imposed constraints of gender" The critic demonstrates that "between 1964 and 1994 Oates has created several different author-selves, each of whom functions as a means of resistance to novelistic conventions, as well as a response to social struggles taking place in the United States"(Daly, 1996).

Alice Robb writes about the way of writing that Oates has chosen in her historical research. She notes that "her piece is a work of fiction, though based on (limited, selected) historical research. Oates calls Frost Native American "primitive" and "closer to the animal rung of the ladder than to our own" (Robb, 2013).

Letterman has discussed the story "Three Girls" in the second collection *I Am No One You Know*, according to him this story "documents a brush with greatness that two young, college-age girls experienced. Told in a sort of flashback format and the second person as one girl is years later recalling the story to the other, it was a compact and thought-provoking story"(Letterman). In "Three Girls," the narrator describes a snowy evening in 1956, when "we were two NYU girl-poets drifting through the warehouse of treasures as through an enchanted forest." That warehouse is New York City's famous Strand bookstore, with its millions of books. The third girl of the title is Marilyn Monroe (whom Oates used as a protagonist in her masterful 700-plus-page novel "Blonde").

"Study on Oates's Gothic Short Stories from the Perspective of Psychological Realism -Haunted: Tales of the Grotesque as an Example" by Guangwei Wu. According to the author, Joyce Oates is by and large thought of as one of the most huge and getting through essayists of the contemporary era in America and partakes in the standing of "the Sovereign of Gothic". Haunted, her collection of short stories: In 1995, *Tales of the Grotesque* won the World Fantasy Award for its collection of classic ghost stories as well as psychological terror depictions. There have only been a few studies done on this book, with some preliminary interpretations of the themes of some short stories. The author will discuss the social issues reflected in the book and analyze the book's artistic characteristics from the perspective of psychological realism in this paper.

### **Framework**

It has are many areas of culture and thought that have had a particular impact on literary criticism and cultural studies. Fredric Jameson is a literary critic who adopts a new interpretation of Marxism in his philosophical book *Postmodernism; or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*. Marxism is a system of beliefs that deals with the analysis of the inequalities and global inequities in which we live and transform it. Marx believes

that "all the things we observe in human life, from poverty and wealth to religion, art, politics and sport, are all determined by economic relations between people" (Roberts, 2000 ).

Jameson seeks this system which is devoid of capitalist ideas, so it would be an idealistic place to live in. Unlike Marx who believed that "utopian thought represented a diversion of revolutionary energy into idle wish-fulfillments. According to Jameson "Postmodernism is what you have when the modernization process is complete and nature is gone for good. It is a more fully human world than the older one, but one in which "culture" has become a veritable "second nature" (Jameson, 1991). What happened to culture may well be one of the more important clues for tracking the postmodern literature. Ira Chernus in his article "Fredric Jameson's Interpretation of Postmodernism" claims that:

Studying the mode of production also means studying the culture. Every mode of production has its own characteristic predominant culture: its particular lifestyle, way of speaking, fashions, arts, religion, etc. Modes of production and cultural styles change together. The change in our culture from modernity to postmodernity reflects a change in the mode of production (Chernus, 2007).

Jameson's criticism aims "both to interpret the books, plays, films, and art that culture produces and to explain how interpretation itself operates" (Roberts 51). Therefore, the researcher traces the concepts of culture from a postmodern point of view within the stories. Another concept that must be traced within the stories is the notion of utopia.

Jameson's works deal with the notion of Utopia which is referred to as a place where people are satisfied and content. Utopia is a political system in which the satisfactions"(Jameson, 1974) and emphasized practical solutions to resist and change the system of capitalism.

The system of utopia has been promised to humanity throughout philosophy, politics, and religion. Likewise, literature, culture, and art have shown their interest in the issue of utopia and the existence of a perfect society. According to Jameson, there are moments of utopia in which people attempt to "find utopian ideals" transcending "instrumental institutional conflicts" (Goldstein, 1990). Jameson has discarded Marx's notion of utopia and believed that in Marx's concept, "Utopian thought represented a diversion of revolutionary energy into idle wish-fulfillments and imaginary satisfactions" (Jameson, 1974). Therefore, the researcher depicts how utopian notion is shown in the selected works.

In another step, the researcher must trace the reification process within the stories. This process reflects both postmodern and Marxist sides of reification which are changing nature and material value. This is what capitalist societies are suffering from as the subjects change every phenomenon into an object that must be admired and worshiped. Throughout this type of society, creativity and power of mind are replaced and the subjects are controlled by commodities and the market. In other words, things and objects become a significant part of nature and human interactions since humans are attracted to them. These estranged or alienated forces in the forms of commodities and objects can come to dominate and oppress human existence.

The most important reason to choose Oates as the writer and Jameson as the thinker is because of the novelty them. Both the writer and the critic are almost untouched in the realm of literature. It means that the application of Jameson's postmodern theory to Oates' works which were all published in the 2000s can provide a new and creative work.

#### Discussion

Oates's fiction and her selected short stories depict an era that is characterized by the break with conventional values. Her stories are associated with an avant-garde movement in which nature is gone. In the first short story, *I Am Not Your Son, I am No One You Know*, human relations are devalued and replaced by a sense of pity. In this story, the narrator remembers visiting his father in a healthcare building. He is reminded of a day that he went to visit his father who suffered from Alzheimer and he expresses how the place and the people inside that place have impressed him. The beginning of the story marks a period when there is no human relation and humanity is dead. The narrator's brother orders him "Don't make eye contact" and "Don't look at them" (Oates, 2005). In the first lines of the story, Oates creates a deconstructed condition in which there is no direct relation between social beings. In fact, in the current period of deconstruction and postmodern era which is the metaphor for the contemporary world, particularly American society, the social beings are devoid of any meanings and the concept of social entities seems absurd. Deftly's statements, the narrator's brother, represent the human condition which cannot be understood as it used to be realized. By stating "not to look yet" (Oates, 2005), he implies the people in that place are not worthy of being looked which means the degradation of human relations in the postmodern era. In other words, Oates refers to a culture that does not revolve around human values; rather, she manifests a culture that is common to the postmodern era.

The place that the narrator has visited is a metaphor for the current American society with a revolutionized culture. The present society is a fabricated system devoid of liberty and freedom. It has been transformed into "a maximum-security prison" with "codes" (Oates, 2005). Entering into this society requires punching in the codes after which "the doors slid shut behind" (Oates, 2005) the subjects and are trapped in a dungeon.

As a result, they "are left with no reliable values, no moral standards, and no criteria of choice. The absence of sure foundations, they are convinced, means that they are left with an alarming and intolerable nihilism" (Winter, 1994). Oates represents technological pessimism which refers to the sense of disappointment, anxiety, and menace in subjects due to technological issues. The narrator is suffering from social pessimism which is a paradoxical feeling about technology. He does not regard technology as helping; instead, technology is used to chain people and manipulate people in the postmodern era. In fact, in this era, society can be considered metaphorically a prison with "a hefty double door with inset wire-lattice windows. Overhead, a video monitor" (Oates, 2005).

Being held in such a society represents no liberation from mental manipulation and "remaining imprisoned within it" (Jameson, 1991). The narrator's description of the place refers to the condition of man in contemporary society which is accompanied by agony and excruciating pain of which those living it are not aware. These beings are delusional and they think they have the freedom to choose their destination. That is why the narrator hears "voices" which are "calling" and "pleading" (Oates, 2005) to take them. They cry

out that they are ready to leave the place as they have been promised once to do so, but all their efforts result in futility since there is no escape from that prison. The narrator observes the emptiness and absurdity of the human condition which is helpless. The obsrvooon of aan dderyoo mnn .... hh eeerrr nnnnnr from hrr skull kkk cccrddddd rrr e iii ngs, a sunknn-chested elderly man with a singed-looking face, a gnome-sized individual of no evident sex leaning on a walker and piping like an eager parrot" (Oates, 2005) signifies the future of man is beyond the rescue.

Oates manifests postmodern society and postmodern man which is associated with the death of identity. Throughout this gloomy condition, the residents are shut off from the real world, and condemned to be walking dead. She attempts to depict the oscillation and opposition between two poles of freedom and determinacy in the postmodern discourse. Although the subjects assume that they have the freedom of choice, they are unable to leave the place as they are trapped within the system. These trapped people suffer from Alzheimer which has symbolic significance and can be interpreted based on the context. It ss a mnnlll dssaase hltt nrfccss e posmmdrn rra and hhlly oo n't rmmnrr vve minutes from now" (Oates, 2005). All human values in this era have been replaced and the residents of the society are living in "utter forgetfulness of the past". Even the narrator is under the postmodern influence as he knows all those people but he cannot remember them. This is a prevalent disease in the postmodern era as Jameson mentions "we all know, but always forget" (Jameson, 1991) and it is the case with the narrator once he is reminded of "those strangers with weirdly familiar faces" (Oates, 2005). Oates illustrates how a postmodern man feels as he is confused and lives in a hazy condition. The healthcare building that the narrator visits depicts a postmodern society in which people and their values have been transformed completely and they live with "ruins of faces. Desperation in those faces" (Oates, 2005). Oates shows that nature is gone and what is left is the secondary nature which is now a shadow of nature. In the postmodern era, everything has been changed and Oates reflects the changing condition of man through what the narrator echoes: "The old house was gone. The past in which Dad had lived was gone. Nothing remained. An elderly doomed man might wish to escape to the years in which he was neither elderly nor doomed but those years are gone. You wake up one morning, those years are gone"(Oates, 2005).

Panopticon is a prison system designed for monitoring and controlling the prisoners by Bentham. The enclosure in this system is different from the old confining techniques; the individual cannot communicate with the other prisoners, as they are all separated by partitioned spaces, where they cannot see each other; they are distributed according to their rank and crime. This system can be regarded as a metaphor for the postmodern society in which the narrator's father is kept. Jameson is influenced by Foucault's idea of the Panopticon or prison and regards the postmodern society as a "system;' a totalizing dynamic, as these are detected in the movement of contemporary society." (Jameson, 1991)

Foucault refers to Bentham's Panopticon in his *Discipline and Punish*, and finds it as an economical and efficient system for applying disciplinary mechanisms in the most useful way. It is argued that the individual in this system is completely dominated and

socialized: "he is seen, but he does not see; he is the object of information, never a subject in communication" (Foucault, 2008). The individual is visible at all times. It can be assumed that the result of constant surveillance keeps the individual submissive. Since he does not know when he is gazed at and when not, he will not risk breaking any of the set rules, as there's always a possibility of being watched; however, the process of monitoring can be disjointed in its action. There may be intervals when the action of surveillance is not followed. The description that the narrator gives depicts the similarity of these two systems with each other:

Where my brother and I were, we were in the E-wing. Visiting Dad in the E-wing of Meadowbrook Manor... You wouldn't guess how if any patient in these wings tried to ppppp oonnnmmnt or hlrough mnnlll oonfusom pppaardd oobe rrynn oo ppppp rrrr m bells were triggered. (Oates, 2005)

The American society in the postmodern suffers from diseases as the postmodern man does. Thus, both are kept separated as Oates has shown in her fiction. Nowadays, whenever there is a danger of contagion, the patients are segregated immediately and are locked up. They are enclosed in a specified section or better say "space", and they are observed at every point. This is done for the advantage of the majority to prevent the spreading of a disease; this process of segregation is considered a kind of "disciplinary mechanism," since it applies the techniques of surveillance.

Technology plays a significant role in changing the real nature of society and transforming it into a healthcare building that Oates has manifested in this short story. The trace of technology is vividly reflected in this system as the narrator hears "laughing TV voices" (Oates, 2005). In the postmodern era, power and technology are interrelated which means they are used to control. Power is manipulated on the individuals to reach the utility and economic level of the body, and this is achieved by the "surveillance" process, which makes it possible to have a proper knowledge of the body. In other words, constant observation reveals more information about a subject, its weaknesses, and its potential. Throughout this society, even the movements of the postmodern man are controlled and predetermined as the narrator recalls: "We were not alone in the garden. Other grown children were visiting with elderly adults. There were visitors, usually women, or couples. Never more than three individuals in a party, for too many visitors confuse the elderly residents of the E-wing. By chance, we were all walking in a counter-clockwise movement on the graveled path. We did not glance at one another" (Oates, 2005). Such continuous supervision of an individual, following the disciplinary rules, results in his docility in a way that he is normalized to the advantage of the power holders, and as it is claimed, to the benefit of the society as a whole; however, the complexity of human nature produces contradicting results in different stages and makes one ponder the possibility of conquering the mind and body of such creature. Likewise, both mind and body are under the influence of the postmodern spell and no fixity can be observed for the subjects.

Mesmerized by the postmodern impact, the narrator and his father are unable to identify themselves. Even "glancing into a mirror" (Oates, 2005) does not help them to realize who they are. They are invisible in this society as they are segregated and living throughout boundaries. Thus the narrator opines "We don't see you, you don't see us. We



have no idea what we look like" (Oates, 2005). They are living in a digitalized society where everything is under the duress of surveillance and observation.

This has resulted in loss of identity which could be the result of the ideological function that technology has brought about. The narrator expresses the link between technology and the sense of loss of identity: "Before my brother had punched in the code to open the E-wing doors, he'd told me that Dad no longer recognized himself in mirrors, so don't expect him to recognize you" (Oates, 2005). Oates' fiction implies that the narrator's father has been transformed into a mechanical entity that is devoid of identity. He is the product of technological effects that are inevitable throughout society. Leo Marx agrees "one reason we are ambivalent about the effects of technology in general is that it is difficult to be clear about the consequences of particular kinds of technical innovation". The present wave of technological pessimism in advanced societies is closely tied to the central place accorded to the mechanic arts in the "progressive world picture" (Marx, 2000). This is considered an image of reality that takes control the Western societies for a while.

The dominant sense of identity loss and confusion are the direct outcomes of technological emperorship. Oates mirrors this postmodern tension among the brothers who are skeptical and has no idea of truth regarding identity: "Why didn't you warn me, I asked my brother. You knew who he was. Who who was? What? That pathetic old guy? He's nobody. You knew. You know. God damn you" (Oates, 2005). The accusation that the brothers are faced by each other and their denial signifies the death of identity in the postmodern era. It marks a critical time in which the gap between generations is spreading.

It can be said that fragmentation has roots in the psychology of the postmodern man which is affected by the ever-changing and evolving situation of the world of which the subject is not aware. As a result, there is no stability and fixed rules and everything is in flux as the identity and psyche of the narrator in Oates' fiction. This issue leads to a postmodern common problem which is associated with the time from which the narrator suffers. As the concept of time is changed in a new era and its linearity is replaced by circularity, the concept of history is also changed. Therefore, it is no longer progressive and its examination should be done at a moment of history. As a result, as the narrator "went to the window to open it", he failed. In fact, "having trouble breathing suddenly", "the smell of wettish goat" and "other smells" (Oates, 2005) all signify the poisonous condition of the postmodern era that Oates has attempted to show.

This loss of identity and degradation of human values in the postmodern age can be seen in another short story by Oates. *The Girl with the Blackened Eye* portrays a hard situation that is real in society. It mirrors the fear and struggles of a woman who has been molested and raped. However, instead of detailing the event, Oates has shown the post-traumas of the girl in contemporary society. Before the abduction, she portrays herself as any normal girl, and she shows how her life completely changed afterward. This is a transition from two different eras that is metaphorically shown. In other words, the narrator's life turns darker after being taken to a cabin up in the Sonoma Mountains, raped and beaten by a man. Afterward, she does not feel the same and she experiences

fragmentation that Jameson terms "psychic fragmentation" (Jameson, 1991). Therefore, she briefs "Sometimes now I see myself in a mirror, like in the middle of the night getting up to use the bathroom, I see a blurred face, a woman's face I don't recognize. And I see that eye" (Oates, 2005) She has been suffering from that trauma for "twenty-seven years. In America, that's a lifetime" (Oates, 2005). Oates manifests the consequences of postmodern culture that have affected both the context and the subjects.

The short story titled *Lovely, Dark, Deep* is categorized as a postmodern work since it deals with postmodern themes. It includes different features such as pastiche and parody as the author has attempted to juxtapose different elements and topics together like pieces of a jigsaw. The sense of parody and also dark humor dominate the whole atmosphere of the story. The short story is a sharp attack on modernist values and doctrines that is symbolically and metaphorically manifested in the form of an interview. The story is about a young journalist, Evangeline Fife, who attempts to interview Robert Frost (1874-1963) in the summer of 1951, when he would have been aged seventy-seven and reached his zenith. Although the interview is fictional and takes place in Oates' mind, she is involved in more than an interview.

The beginning of the story is ordinary as the narrator recounts how she met Robert Frost for the first time. The narrator functions like an objective camera and sets the stage for the audience as they anticipate more details and nuances. The narrator initiates her objective descriptive by observing Frost as "the great man was much heavier, his body much more solid" and she adds commentary on what she observes and states "You would not have called him fat, but his torso sagged against his shirt like a great udder, and his thighs in summer trousers were fleshy, like those of a middle-aged woman". The beginning of the story creates a feeling that the reader is about to watch a documentary on a remarkable artist and the narrator who is also the director of this documentary is tremendously excited about it. She describes this magical moment by saying her "voice was tentative, apologetic", and her "heart had begun to beat erratically like some small, perishable creature" as she saw "the great man — so suddenly" (Oates, 2014). These statements seem usual and ordinary with a bit of popular culture sense. However, as the story progresses and the reader is absorbed into the narrative, the reader feels creepy as the narrator shows her obsession with Frost.

She uses technological advancements to capture Frost's life. In other words, Like Jameson, Oates reflects "the role of photography and the photographic negative in contemporary art of this kind" (Jameson, 1991). The narrator admits "Taking Mr. Frost's pictures without permission was a brazen act, I know" and continues "I was trembling in dread of Mr. Frost walking and discovering me. Exhilaration coursed through my body like a swift, sexual shock — I will still the poet's soul! It is what I deserve"(Oates, 2014). The narrator believes her action is eerie and unusual and it signifies horror. In other words, horror is "what characterizes the newer intensities of the postmodern" (Jameson, 1991) feature of Oates' work. Moreover, the author refers to the objectifying process in which a great artist like Robert Frost can be changed into an object and sold:

I took seven surreptitious pictures that afternoon of Mr. Frost slack-jawed and dozing on a porch swing. Sold to a private collector, resold to another collector, and one day to

be placed in the Robert Frost Special Collections in the Middlebury College Library, discreetly cataloged "Bread Loaf August 1951 (photographer unknown).

What Oates here suggests reminds the process of reification in a utopian society through the use of mass culture. The action of taking photos, selling them differently, and preserving them in a particular collection implies how art loses its touch with emotion and originality and turns into a commodity. Likewise, the narrator is involved in this process by saying "In my shaky hands I positioned the camera, peered through the viewfinder at the shadowy figure within with its ghostly white hair, dared to press the shutter. Very carefully then I wound the film for the next picture". The mission of postmodern societies is to change any values and principles and replace them with consumerism in which men have an insatiable appetite for shopping. Oates points out this issue by showing how the narrator is eager to publish Robert Frost's interview and regards it as "an ambiguous gift". Once she is asked about the name of the magazine and the subjects that it deals with, she replies "It isn't *Poetry* but *Poetry Parnassus*". Frost does not know anything about the magazine and the narrator explains how it works. She remarks "You will be featured on the cover, Mr. Frost. As I explained in my letter" and keeps on "the entire October issue will be devoted to Robert Frost"(Oates, 2014). What the narrator suggests reminds Jameson process of reification which he writes "ultimate form of commodity reification in contemporary consumer society is precisely the image itself. With this universal commodification of our object world" (Jameson, 1991) what people remembered as truth and nature would vanish.

Through the conversation between Evangeline Fife and Robert Frost, Oates inveighs against art in the contemporary era. The twisted conversation between Evangeline Fife and Robert Frost symbolizes the tension between two generations of poets as they attempt to accuse each other. Frost believes in nature and originality; when he asks "And what did you say your name is, dear?" and the narrator replies "Evangeline Fife", Frost makes irony and asks "Is it authentic, or shrewdly invented on the spot, to prick the poet's curiosity?". The question surprises and traps the narrator: "What a strange question!" being caught by this tricky question, she stammers "I — I am — my name is *authentic*, Mr. Frost". The narrator assumes it was a proper answer and she is released, but once more Frost startles her by asking "As authentic as 'Robert Frost,' eh?". The question is so enigmatic that the narrator thinks "This was very clever! Or so it seemed to me. For "Robert Frost" was the ideal name for the individual who'd created the poetry of Robert Frost". Oates portrays these challenges and tensions as the backbone of the boundary between modern and postmodern senses of truth and culture.

Frost dismisses the narrator's name as a poet and believes there is no originality in the name. However, the narrator considers the name of 'Robert Frost' as ideal and perfect. However, there is an irony since Oates depicts how the place of the interviewer and interviewee are changed and they merge. Through this displacement of roles, the issue of identity is raised. Robert asks "And who are the Fifes, my dear?". This question shatters the sense of wholeness for the narrator and she senses the fragmentation of identity. She feels her "heart sank in dismay" and states "I'd never thought of my family and relatives as 'the Fifes'. It was rare that I gave them much thought at all". Oates portrays how history and

identity are tied to each other. Frost's questions and the narrator's replies show everything is a matter of perspective and there is no stability. The narrator mentions "My family and my father's relatives live in Maine, mostly in Bangor" and she is told "Bangor! Not a hospitable place for the cultivation of poetry, I think." regarding her mother, the narrator says "She — they — there were ancestors who lived in Salem, Massachusetts" and she faces with another shocking question by Frost "Were your mother's Salem ancestors witch-hunters, or witches?". Frost here emphasizes the element of uncertainty as a significant feature of postmodernism. "If you don't know with certainty, your ancestors were likely witches. The witch-hunters were the ruling class of the Puritan settlements"(Oates, 2014). It shows and highlights the element of horror in the postmodern era since in this era, "horrors of human history" (Jameson, 1991).

Oates shows Frost is the symbol of such a group who wants to hold the power and condemns the other ethnicities for who they are. Frost mentions they are "Human, but primitive. Beings, but closer to the animal rung of the ladder than to our own, and emphasizes that he "believes in civilization — which is to say Caucasian civilization". Oates shows how and to what extent American society is corrupted by such an ideology. Once Frost compares the Native Americans to animals that must be slaughtered to be civilized, it is the postmodern society of America that is criticized for its values as Jameson associates it with the decline of humanity. Thus, Oates through her narrator challenges Frost's statement regarding the notion of Utopia and mentions: But, Mr. Frost, the indigenous people you call 'Indians' were the original native Americans. Caucasians from the British Isles and Europe came to this continent as settlers, explorers, and tradesmen. instead (Oates, 25).

The narrator is criticizing American materialism and idealism as postmodern elements with which the American rulers kill and abuse other nations to gain profits by the excuse of turning the world into a better place. Postmodern societies and Utopian land signify consumerist life in which human beings are inspired to use and waste. Living in such a world implies "the dimension of Utopian desire which remains unsatisfied, and which cannot be felt to have been fulfilled without falling into the world and becoming another degraded act of consumption" (Jameson, 2005). This is how hegemony and dominant culture in America started to emerge and here Oates criticizes them. All the structures and practices in society are first regulated by the dominant, and then they are enacted. Hegemony acts effectively since through hegemony, "the difficulties encountered by theories of reflection, mediation, typification, and homology" (Williams & Williams, 1977) can be lifted.

Based on the mentioned statements, different periods of history can be distinguished based on how production takes place. Therefore, two general categories "feudal and bourgeois" (Mahtabi & Eslamieh, 2015) are made. Oates shows the function of these two groups through the narrator's interview with Frost. She believes that what the Americans have done to the native people of America was a mass genocide. However, Frost defends the Americans and considers their actions as brave and heroic. In other words, Frost claims they "conquered the wilderness, established a decent civilization". Frost's reference to conquering their world strengthens the idea of hegemonic culture which is turning dominant. The narrator attempts to resist Frost's ideology which is the consequent

ideology of the postmodern American society. She claims that "there was not a 'wilderness' here — there were Indian civilizations, living on the land. Of course, the original inhabitants were not city dwellers — they lived in nature. But surely they had their civilizations, different from our own?" (Oates, 2014).

Oates' use of parody and humor in this short story makes it utterly postmodern as *Lovely, Dark, Deep* reflects heavy emphasis on parody and it provides an "ironical and humorous counterpoint to the rigidity of the" (Knžžvvcć 2011) mmmnnnn soyyyyy Likewise, Frost's comment regarding Evangeline's panties and his sexual bullying can be vividly realized once Frost addresses the narrator, "You might want to change your panties, Evangeline, and take another seat here on the porch, one without a damp cushion" (Oates, 2014). This scene of the story is a comic relief that can intensify the irony of a situation, with ordinary characters and situations exaggerated beyond the limits of a normal conversation and Oates reflects this sense of exaggeration and adding comic feeling. The narrator presumes "I had no other recourse than to say, with a blush, that I couldn't change my panties, since I didn't have another, dry pair to put on" and humorously Frost responds "Really, my dear! You came to Bread Loaf to interview the revered Mr. Frost with but a single pair of panties?" (Oates, 2014). This humorous conversation questions the sanity of all the characters in the story and, in a wider context, the purpose and justifiability of the postmodernity driving people insane.

The second story, *Patricide*, is about Roland Marks who is a Nobel Prize-winning novelist and a womanizer. He is fond of younger women and has already had four failed marriages. Lou-Lou Marks, his grown daughter, is a successful academic in her own right. But her real career lies in attending to her father. Roland Marks, as a selfish father, demands her absolute loyalty and an uncompromising acquiescence to his every need. When Roland falls in love with a woman fifty years his junior, Lou-Lou senses the decline of her power. Intent on preventing Roland from marrying for a fifth time and signing away his estate and her inheritance, the relationship takes a darkly comical twist, and decides to kill him.

Like other stories by Oates, this short story features different postmodern elements. The decline of nature and the emergence of a new type of culture, the decay of the relationship between father and daughter, the destruction of family ties, the loss of identity, suffering from melancholic and depressing states, and living under capitalism are all features of postmodern literature that can be found in *Patricide*. The beginning of the story signifies a dark time devoid of morality and principles. The narrator describes the moments of his father's death. The narrator expresses his "father's terrified voice" (Oates, 2014) calling for help while the narrator stands "very still" and watches "in silence". The narrator's indifference about her father's death is shocking, but it gets more shocking when she mentions "If I were to be tried for the murder of my father, if I were to be judged, it is this silence that would find me guilty" (Oates, 2014). The narrator's horrible confession signifies a time in which values are lost for human beings and it is distinguished by schizophrenic and melancholic states. The narrator confesses that she wants to "sit in the darkened rooms at night and listen to her" pains (Jameson, 1991).

However, the narrator's flashbacks illuminate the motivations and causes that lead to her crime.

The introduction that Oates gives about the story shows that how different external and internal forces have influenced the narrator's mentality. The description of the place signifies the capitalist society of America in which nature is gone and it has already been displaced by the dominant culture of consumerism. Oates displays how man is living under technological conditions and turning into senseless machines that a postmodern society requires. In such a society there is no social interaction and the narrator encounters no social being. She recalls "In desperation I'd lowered my window to speak" since "it was an old habit of mine, speaking to myself"(Oates, 2014). The narrator is living in a postmodern Utopian society which leaves "us alone with ourselves and our purely existential concerns: states in which anxious meditations on the Event and its nature and possibility return with a vengeance" (Jameson, 2005). The narrator's vengeance which is symbolic is the result of living under this condition.

The dominant culture includes religious and social dogmas that are established via different responsible organizations and institutions. Since dominant culture is manipulated, directed, and enforced by daily practices with which people deal including "communicational systems, educational institutions, artistic expressions, laws, political processes, and businesses" (Marshall & Scott, 1998), it has acquired acceptance and legitimacy. Therefore, a majority of social agents follow and apply it to their daily matters. The narrator is exposed to such a culture in which she is influenced by the power of technology. Oates' depiction of streets where there is no trace of nature and it has been replaced by the dominant culture implies a postmodern society in which life is dead. The narrator describes these frozen moments by saying:

For more than thirty minutes traffic had been slowed to virtually a stop in gusts of sleet on the upper level of the George Washington Bridge; ahead was a vortex of lights, red lights mingling with bright blinding lights, for there had been an accident involving at least two vehicles, a skidding-accident on the slick wet pavement. In a tight space, a tow truck was maneuvering with maddening slowness and a high-pitched beep-beep-beeping that made my heart race (Oates, 2014).

These descriptions signify life in hell. Oates is drawing a picture of the American society which is postmodern and capitalist. There is no trace of pure nature and truth and what can be seen is the cacophonous and harsh arena of life set in postmodernism. The dominant culture that Jameson has pointed out has posited is similar to the concept of 'ideological apparatus' by Althusser. Althusser believes that it is not just economic institutions that hold the power and control societies; rather the different and separate levels that each operates independently. The most significant factor which is the motive of driving society to the point that the state desires is through ideology. Likewise, Jameson believes other ideologies are hidden and act when the subject is unconscious. Jameson believes that the "ideology of social groups appears within the postmodern environment" (Kellner, 1989). These institutions are more specialized and the subject always interacts with it. The most vital ones that are influential include religious doctrines, the outcome of education, and what can be taught and learned in the form of

direct and indirect education. These institutions have formed the dominant culture for the narrator as well.

#### Conclusion

Having analyzed Oates' short stories, it could be realized that her writings can be categorized as postmodern fiction. Her stories are associated with an avant-garde movement in which nature is gone and this feature can be seen in both collections of her stories. The story of *I am not Your Son* creates a deconstructed condition in which there is no direct relation between social beings. The setting of the story reminds the postmodern society which is the metaphor for the current American society with a revolutionized culture. The present society is a fabricated system devoid of liberty and freedom. The place that Oates has created in this story is devoid of natural life and happiness. It is a fabricated place in which the people are programmed like robots. Throughout this story, Oates represents technological pessimism which refers to the sense of disappointment, anxiety, and menace in subjects due to technological issues. They are used to captivate human beings.

Moreover, the author pictures emptiness and absurdity of the human condition which is helpless in the postmodern condition as there is no social bond among the characters. Oates symbolically shows that the people in the postmodern era are like patients in an asylum that are alien to both others and themselves. Even there is no sense of love among the family members since the son and father do not know each other. The reader witnesses the decay and degradation of the society that is unveiled. Whatever used to be considered valuable and meaningful like that old house is gone and replaced and the characters are left with a nostalgic sense for the past which is long gone. In other words, the postmodern society that Oates has depicted in the story is changed into a prison and because of its effects, those who are stuck in that prison suffer from loss of identity.

#### Disclosure Statements

The authors declare no conflict of interest

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