

Towards Mosaic Wholeness: Jenifer Egan's *A Visit from the Goon Squad* as a Composite Novel

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Abstract: *Jenifer Egan's A Visit from the Goon Squad (2010) has raised much debate about its genre. Some critics see the book as a traditional novel, while others see it as a short story collection. Guided by Maggie Dunn and Ann Morris's The Composite Novel: The Short Story Cycle in Transition (1995), the aim of the study is to prove that Egan's book belongs to the genre of the 'composite novel'. The composite novel is made up of fragmented individual stories, but they have unifying ties that eventually lead to their narrative wholeness. A close examination of Egan's book reveals how the genre of the book is closely connected to its main thematic concern: achieving narrative wholeness out of fragmented stories through the characters' nostalgia.*

Key words: Jenifer Egan, *A Visit from the Goon Squad*, composite novel, fragmented stories, wholeness, nostalgia

Jenifer Egan (b. 1962) is an American novelist and short story writer whose *A Visit from the Goon Squad* (2010), a Pulitzer winner of fiction in 2011, has raised much debate about its genre. The New York Times review of the book poses the question, “whether this tough, uncategorizable work of fiction is a novel, a collection of carefully arranged interlocking stories or simply a display of Ms. Egan’s extreme virtuosity.” (Maslin, nytimes.com) In an interview with *Entertainment Weekly*, Jennifer Egan herself confirms the problematic issue of the genre of her book, “I knew that the book’s genre wasn’t easily named– Novel? Stories? Novel-in-stories?” (Lee, latimes.com) Notwithstanding these controversial views about the genre of the book, the aim of the study is to prove that Egan's *A Visit from the Goon Squad* belongs to the genre of 'the composite novel'. The composite novel is made up of fragmented individual stories, but they have unifying ties that eventually lead to their narrative wholeness. Guided by Maggie Dunn and Ann Morris's *The Composite Novel: The Short Story Cycle in Transition* (1995), in which they theorize the framework of the composite novels, the study reveals how the genre of Egan's book is closely connected to its main thematic concern: achieving mosaic narrative wholeness out of fragmented stories through the characters' nostalgia.

The complexity of categorizing Egan's book is largely due to its unique narrative structure. It is a series of chapters featuring "interlocking characters at different points in their lives". (Putra 64) Each chapter of the book is told from a different character’s perspective, though each character appears earlier or later in the book as either a minor or a major

character. In each chapter, the reader is introduced to a new character narrating his/her story in his/her own way. The book is, accordingly, seen as a collection of fragments: fragments of life stories of different characters.

Although they have their distinctive ways of narrating their stories, the characters' voices collaborate to create a work that is intended to combine the threads of their lives into a mosaic portrait in which the whole is more significant than its parts. Such mosaic wholeness is also intended to explore the characters' nostalgia for their past when they celebrated youth and glory. Consequently, all characters in *A Visit from the Goon Squad* are in pursuit of bridging the tempo-psychological gap between their lives in the past and in the present. In other words, all characters in the book share one concern: aging and disconnection as consequences of time-passing.

In terms of linear structure, Egan's composite novel is a journey through time: from the late 1970s' San Francisco to the 2020s' New York. This journey does not move in a chronological order; rather it jumps backward and forward in different timelines. Although the book resists synopsis due to its many individual timelines, a reviewer in the *New York Times* summarizes the interconnectivity (mosaic wholeness) of the book in a lengthy sentence:

The book starts with Sasha, a kleptomaniac, who works for Bennie, a record executive, who is a protégé of Lou who seduced Jocelyn who was loved by Scotty who played guitar for the Flaming Dildos, a San Francisco punk band for which Bennie once played bass guitar (none too well), before marrying Stephanie who is charged with trying to resurrect the career of the bloated rock legend Bosco who grants the sole rights for covering his farewell "suicide tour" to Stephanie's brother, Jules Jones, a celebrity journalist who attempted to rape the starlet Kitty Jackson, who one day will be forced to take a job from Stephanie's publicity mentor, La Doll, who is trying to soften the image of a genocidal tyrant because her career collapsed in spectacular fashion around the same time that Sasha in the years before going to work for Bennie was perhaps working as a prostitute in Naples where she was discovered by her Uncle Ted who was on holiday from a bad marriage, and while not much more will be heard from him,

Sasha will come to New York and attend N.Y.U. and work for Bennie before disappearing into the desert to sculpture and raise a family with her college boyfriend, Drew, while Bennie, assisted by Alex, a former date of Sasha's from whom she lifted a wallet, soldiers on in New York, producing musicians including the rediscovered guitarist Scotty as the artistic world changes around him with the vertiginous speed of Moore's Law. (Blythe, nytimes.com)

The Composite Novel

In their *The Composite Novel: The Short Story Cycle in Transition*, Dunn and Morris trace the development of the composite novel. In this context, they stress the point that traditionally the composite novel was a "collaborative work— a novel written by a number of authors, each of whom contributes a chapter or an individual section" (2). Such collaborative works were produced during the years 1880-1930, particularly in the United States, "popularizing the concept of multiple authorship" (Ibid). Only in the twentieth century did the composite novel become a mature genre. In 1917, [Samuel Merwin](#) used the term 'composite novel' in the subtitle of his book: *The Sturdy Oak: A Composite Novel of American Politics by Fourteen American Authors*. In the mid-seventies, Eric Rabkin's use of the 'composite novel' appeared in the context of literary science fiction, in a 1976 discussion of Isaac Asimov's *I, Robot* (1950). Most important, Rabkin in his critical analyses dealt with each work that belongs to this genre as if it were a novel, stressing its novelistic cohesion (Ibid). These books were clearly not novels in the traditional sense, just as they were clearly more than collections of stories chosen at random to reside together under one cover. The dilemma seemed impenetrable for critics who admitted no middle ground (Ibid). Accordingly, Dunn and Morris suggest the 'composite novel' as a genre that is considered an umbrella to encompass these types of books.

Dunn and Morris define the term 'composite novel' as "a literary work composed of shorter texts that— though individually complete and autonomous— are interrelated in a coherent whole according to one or more organizing principles" (2). The parts that compromise a composite

novel, according to the suggested definition, are interrelated in a coherent whole (Ibid). The emphasis, then, is not upon the parts but rather upon the whole text through "a dynamic interaction with and among its parts" (Ibid). Hence, the composite novel is ultimately seen as pieces of mosaic texture, though autonomous, can only be recognized within the whole framework. The mechanisms of the composite novel, thus, disrupt the traditional conventions of both the novel and the short story collection, paving the way to the term as an emerging literary genre that can interpret the destabilization of the conventional narrative structure.

Dunn and Morris make distinctions between the composite novel and the short story collection on the one hand, and the composite novel and the traditional novel on the other hand. The composite novel and the short story collection are completely different in their generic assumptions. While the composite novel emphasizes the integrity of the whole, the short story collection emphasizes the integrity of the parts. In other words, in the short story collection the focus is on the individual characters rather than on the story itself. On the contrary, the composite novel's main emphasis is on the whole story within which different characters in different stories are articulating their opinions and concerns. (38)

Although the composite novel is seen as a grouping of short texts that have a kind of unity, these short texts should not be mistaken with the short story collection, for these short texts may include poems and a one-act play as in Jean Toomer's *Cane* (1923), rituals and ceremonies as in E. M. Broner's *A Weave of Women* (1978), recipes as in Ntozake Shange's *Sassafrass, Cypress & Indigo* (1982), plays, song lyrics, and collections of aphorisms as in Ursula K. LeGuin's *Always Coming Home* (1985) (Dunn and Morris 7), or PowerPoint slides and newspaper articles as in the book under study *A Visit from the Goon Squad* (2010). The composite novel's structural aesthetic, accordingly, approves of the insertion of text-pieces that short story collection might not permit, text-pieces that have not traditionally been thought of as "stories" or even "fiction" or "prose." (Ibid 7)

Another important difference between the composite novel and the short story collection is the size of the text-pieces and the short stories.

While there is an "agreed-upon word count for any short story", it is not logical to identify word count for the text-pieces, simply because the text-pieces are not short stories. John Barth's *Chimera* (1972) and Leslie Epstein's *Goldkorn Tales* (1985), for example, are composed entirely of novella-length pieces. (Ibid 8)

Although the composite novel emphasizes its affinity to "the traditional novel," it is distinguished from it by its extreme disruptions of the single plot, the "major-minor characters juxtapositions", and the "autonomy of its text-pieces chapters". (Ibid 12) Because of the unremitting shifts of the different individuals' perspectives in the text-pieces, the composite novel tends to prevent closure, a typical feature of the traditional novel. Considering the continuous shifts in perspectives, Morris and Dunn write, "and this is, after all, a paradigm of how we live our lives: constantly shifting our focus from past to future to present, from others to ourselves and back again, with autonomy and interconnection." (120)

Another important difference between the composite novel and the traditional novel is the lack of causality between the end of one chapter and the beginning of the following chapter owing to the change of the focalizing character and the setting of the stories in consequent chapters. (84) In other words, the reader, in each new chapter of the composite novel, can be introduced to new characters, new settings, and new relationships. Since all characters in the composite novel are major, the reader witnesses a wide spectrum of perspectives and opinions. This feature is, of course, exclusive to the composite novel.

Dunn and Morris have identified a number of elements that work as unifying ties in the composite novel; that is to say the elements that make the fragmented stories in a book look connected. These elements include the title of the book, the text-pieces, the sequence, the single protagonist, the collective protagonist, common thematic concerns, and the reader's role (13). These seven elements are to be discussed fully in the analysis of Egan's *A Visit from the Goon Squad*.

The Title of the Book

Dunn and Morris identify the parameter of determining the coherence of the composite novel through the generic implications of the work's title. They write

Any book whose title simply appropriates the title of one of its component stories and then adds "and Other Stories" as a subtitle appears to make no claim to be anything other than a collection. In direct contrast are those works like Gloria Naylor's *The Women of Brewster Place: A Novel in Seven Stories* (1982) and Sandra Birdsell's *Agassiz: A Novel in Stories* (1991) that proclaim their composite aesthetic quite clearly. (12)

Accordingly, the title functions as a coherent element under which all text- pieces (chapters, short stories, etc.) are collected. The title of Egan's book supports this point as the "goon squad" in the title refers to time. Time is the goon "a violent criminal who is paid to frighten and attack people." (Longman Dictionary) Time haunts all characters in the book. All characters are concerned with time as it is epitomizing their fears and disappointments in the present. In *A Visit from the Goon Squad*, the characters are depicted as those who are not on good terms with their present, so they seek refuge in their past. Time for them is a goon which transforms their lives into nightmares. Bennie stresses this concern with time, "Time's a goon, right? You gonna let that goon push you around?" (Egan 127) While the characters are constantly moving along to their past where they cherish their youth and moments of glory, they fall prey to their present where aging, lack of flamboyance and loss of meaningful social connections are the norms of their lives.

Jennifer Egan chooses to personify time as a goon, so time becomes another character, actively present in the story's world. According to Sean Carswell, time "catches up to all of us eventually. Our youth turns into middle age, into old age, into death." (323) Actually, time in the book haunts and torments every single character. For example, Bosco has gone from being a rock star to a poor dying man; Scotty has been transformed from being a celebrity to a person with mental disorder; Jocelyn has gone from being a promising young musician into a pathetic

old woman; and Bennie has changed from being an attractive young man into a person who lacks virility. The list of those victims of time seems countless.

Martin Moling in "No Future: Time, Punk Rock and Jennifer Egan's *A Visit from the Goon Squad*", explains the association between the book's title and the rock music by tracing the semantic development of the term. Moling writes

The word "goon" shares a rather close semantic affinity with rock music, and, in particular, with punk rock. Rock 'n' roll music was written and performed for the most part by cretinous goons, the word "punk" has evolved from denoting "prostitute" in the seventeenth century to "passive male homosexual," to "young hoodlum" or "petty criminal" in the course of the twentieth century. This semantic overlap between the latter-day "goon squad" and "punk rockers" may account for the novel's investigation of questions pertaining to the human experience of time within a rock-musical setting. (52)

It is worth noting that most characters in *A Visit from the Goon Squad* are working in the music business. Hence, the association between the implications of the title and the music business furthers the cohesion of the book.

The Text-pieces of the Composite Novel

As stated before, according to Dunn and Morris the composite novel consists of text-pieces (chapters) of irregular sizes and forms. In other words, the composite novel may include a text-piece which has more than 70 pages while another text-piece can be less than 15 pages. Moreover, the text-pieces may take the form of a normal short story, a journal article, a poem, etc. These text-pieces can be "accompanied by images, photographs, diagrams, and the print is enhanced by a variety of font size and shape, layout and design in general". (Dunn and Morris 98) The irregularity of the form and the size of the text-pieces is, therefore, a unique feature of the composite novel.

In *A Visit from the Goon Squad*, Egan experiments with the form and the size of the text-pieces of her book. For example, there are thirteen text-pieces (chapters) in this composite novel and of those thirteen text-pieces nine are "normal" chapters that anyone can find in any other book. However, there are four text-pieces which are different. Two of these four

text-pieces are set up in a multi-chapter structure within a single chapter. This means that one text-piece is split into four sections; however, it is read as a single chapter or a text-piece.

The most obvious example of such irregularity in form and size is chapter 12 titled “Great Rock and Roll Pauses By Allison Blake.” Egan startles her readers by presenting a whole chapter written in seventy-five PowerPoint slides which include graphics and texts. In fact, “Great Rock and Roll Pauses” is the longest chapter in terms of the number of pages; however, readers will find themselves getting through it quickly due to the large font used in the slides. Allison Blake, the twelve-year old daughter of Sasha, is the author of this chapter. In this chapter, Allison, the representative of the new generation, depends entirely on technology to materialize her thoughts and opinions. Allison's slides have symbolic, thematic and cohesive functions in the book.

Symbolically, the PowerPoint slides represent the decay of meaningful social connections as the new generation depends on technology to (mis)communicate with their virtual friends. The slides along with other communicative media like the handset watch, through which teens and children communicate through texting even if they are sitting together, symbolize the lack of the true meaning of communication and social connection. When Sasha asks her daughter, “Why not try writing for a change? . . . I mean writing a paper,” Allison replies “Ugh! Who even uses that word?” (Egan 253) Allison's answer, therefore, confirms the new generation's attachment to technology in all areas of their life. In this respect, Pignagnoli points out that

Alison's digital writing is an exemplification of a possible (future) relationship with new technologies. The question of whether the slides are a “valid” writing medium, therefore, turns back to the readers who, through the reproduction of Alison's slides, are better able to judge them. (108)

Thematically, Alison's slides narrate her mother's endeavors to reconcile with her life miseries. The slides show how Sasha has transcended the psychological gap created by time. As Sasha went through daunting experiences in her youth, she constantly craves challenging situations and exceptional moments that make her very existence worth living. The slides, accordingly, widens our perception of the personality of Sasha.

Cohesively, the slides are a drift towards the unconventional method of articulating one's opinion which coincides with the unconventionality of the narrative structure of Egan's composite novel. In other words, both Allison and Egan depend on new forms of expression: PowerPoint slides and the unconventional narrative structure of the composite novel respectively.

Each of these different narrative techniques is quite significant in Egan's composite novel simply because it subverts the readers' flow in the story. *A Visit from the Goon Squad* is, therefore, distinguished from both the short story collection and the traditional novel in terms of its narrative structure, particularly the form and the size of its text-pieces (chapters).

The Sequence

In most of the composite novels, the sequence of text-pieces is important, and in others the sequence permits no alteration whatsoever. (Dunn and Morris 14) According to Dunn and Morris, the sequence refers to "identical story patterns" (Ibid). It is like an outline that works as a unifying element and an encompassing framework to the individual stories in the composite novel. Exactly like a mosaic pattern, the sequence of the composite novel glues all the fragmented stories to have a kind of unity and continuation. In some works, then, "the pattern recurs exactly in each text-piece so that the same outline is visible in and interconnects them all." (Ibid 15)

A Visit from the Goon Squad follows an identical sequence or a pattern that outlines the characters' lives. The book is divided into two main parts. Part "A" contains chapters from one to six; part "B" contains chapters from eight to thirteen; and chapter 7 titled "A to B" is the bridge between the two parts (stages). Part "A" represents the past where all characters felt safe and happy; whereas part "B" represents the present where they do not lead the same successful life they had in the past. The characters are, therefore, incarcerated between what they used to be in the past and what they are now in the present.

On visiting his friend Bennie in his luxurious office, Scotty, the former rock star, says, "I came for this reason, ... I want to know what happened between A and B ... A is when we were both in the band, chasing the same girl. B is now." (101) Scotty states that "A is when ... B is now". Scotty who used to be a rock star finds himself helpless and his glamour has faded away. Bosco, another victim of time, wonders, "that's the question I want to hit straight on: how did I go from being a rock star to being a fat fuck no one cares about?" (127) In other words, Bosco wants to find an answer for his movement from part (A) when he was a rock star to part (B) when he is now a fat miserable old man. The readers find that the characters' present is in sharp contrast to their past, without being acquainted with the reasons behind such transformations.

The characters' transformation does not take place chronologically as the text-pieces jump from a certain moment in a character's life to another moment in another character's life. The text-pieces continue in this fashion, tracing an intricate thread of connections through character relationships. Egan's sequence of these fragmented stories is not random as "each glimpse of the character's life shows the depth of their unique experience and broadens the way the reader considers how time affects the lives of those around us." (Derosa 2014, 99)

The sequence of the temporal setting moves in a circular fashion. Egan manages to move the story forward and backward in time and place. This oscillation in spatiotemporal setting reflects the complex nature of modern life. Susan Mann, for example, contends that the "lack of continuity between the chapters allows the writer to stress the fragmentary nature of life, especially in the twentieth century." (12) Accordingly, the circular structural relationship between the parts and the whole in the composite novel resembles the diversity of the fragmented identity in our modern time where a person's psyche is an endless motion between the past, the present and the future.

The Single Protagonist

According to Dunn and Morris, the single protagonist in the composite novel is the character who acts as a unifying element in the story. This means the single protagonist is the character "upon whom the

book focuses or around whom it coheres. In some cases this may be a narrator-protagonist; in others a central figure whose progress is charted in story after story, creating a Bildungsroman or Künstlerroman effect." (Dunn and Morris 85) Accordingly, the single protagonist sporadically appears in the fragmented stories of the other characters either as a major character or as a minor one.

Sasha Grady is the "single protagonist" in *A Visit from the Goon Squad*. She is the focalizing character in the story, for she is the only character whose life is fully narrated from childhood till old age. The book begins by shedding light on her loneliness despite being surrounded by a huge web of connections. Sasha, like other characters, develops a sense of clinging to her past when she had been blessed with the company of her loving parents before they got divorced. That divorce is the root cause of her kleptomaniac behavior. Accordingly, Sasha's kleptomania is an embodiment of her loneliness as she resorts to theft as a mechanism of capturing the attention of the people around her. Other characters in the book mimic the same clinging to the past.

Sasha as a focalizing character reflects the central feature of the composite novel. As a kleptomaniac, Sasha sees the stolen objects, though trivial and meaningless fragments, as "precious" because they "tell the whole story when you really look" (299). Consequently, the fragments become meaningful when collected and glued together to create a harmonious mosaic texture. The composite novel operates in the same way as it is comprised of fragmented stories, when read individually they do not give the whole meaning. Yet, their meaningfulness is only attained when read as a "composite" story.

Although the book moves from one person to another, Sasha is usually mentioned even if with a passing reference:

In the first chapter Sasha is the protagonist. During that time, she is 35 years old and is looking for a solution for her kleptomania. The reader gets to know her damaged life. This view is accentuated by Bennie's delineation of Sasha in the second chapter, as he does not see her as an independent woman and wonders why she is unmarried and does not have children at the age of thirty-five. In the following chapters

Sasha is seen through the eyes of her best friend in college, by her uncle when she is a teenager and a runaway from home, and eventually by her daughter, in her PowerPoint slides. (Carswell 324)

Sasha is, accordingly, another unifying element in the mosaic wholeness of Egan's composite novel where the fragmented threads of the individual stories are collected through her character. The fragmented form of the book deepens the reader's understanding of Sasha's personality for they get to know her at various moments in her life through the eyes of different people.

As a kleptomaniac, Sasha is aware of her weird behavior. She and Coz, her psychiatrist, are "collaborators, writing a story whose end had already been determined: she would get well." (Egan 8) Sasha's awareness of the diagnosis of her mental illness as well as her confidence about her recovery foreshadow her future triumph to transcend the cruelty of time. She eventually moves to settle in the California desert where she and Drew marry and have two kids, Alison and Lincoln. Her kleptomania has been transformed to a more constructive hobby, Sasha uses unnecessary objects from the desert trash to create sculptures.

Sasha is, accordingly, entrusted with the responsibility of constructing the gap between "A" and "B" as she must "stop stealing from people and start caring again about the things that had once guided her: music; the network of friends she'd made when she first came to New York." (Egan 266) As discussed earlier, "A" and "B" refer to two temporal settings: "when" and "now". Hence, Sasha is presented by Egan as the one who could grasp the reality of time. Time for her is not a goon (the violent criminal); rather it is something that can provide her with maturity, insight and experience. The reader realizes this fact in the margins of the book where Sasha starts anew after each disheartening moment she experiences.

The Collective Protagonist

The fifth unifying element in the composite novel is the "collective protagonist". Dunn and Morris refer to it as "a couple, a family, a club or a special interest group, or perhaps figuratively a generation, a personality type, an archetypal embodiment." (15) The collective protagonist can be, therefore, a group that "functions as a central character." (59)

The collective protagonist in *A Visit from the goon squad* is "the musicians' group". Although the book includes different individual stories, many of the characters in Egan's book are musicians or at least are involved in the music industry. The narrative traces the development of the music industry from the late seventies punk-rock bands to a near future where people no longer attend live concerts. Sasha, Jocelyn, Rhea, Bosco, Alice and other characters are involved in the rock 'n roll band Bennie created. These musicians function as the group that unite the fragmented stories in the book.

Egan associates music to the central theme of her book, nostalgia. The characters in Egan's book hold very high expectations for their future. This leads them to turn a blind eye to the fact that they will get old and a new age of digital music will overthrow the traditional one. In this respect, Gerard Moorey describes the novel as "responding to recent changes in the music industry, digitization and the growth of the internet, as a way to explore themes of aging, mid-life crisis, obsolescence, nostalgia, and regret." (67) Furthermore, Van de Velde argued that Egan's book expresses a pronounced nostalgia for the past, symbolized by the authenticity of punk music. (128)

Throughout the book, Egan addresses the death of "pure" natural music and the birth of digital music. When the music is digitized, it follows that that the musicians' roles are replaced by computerized digital instruments. Bennie expressing his upset with the new digitized music says, "The problem was precision, perfection; the problem was digitization, which sucked the life out of everything that got smeared through its microscopic mesh. Film, photography, music: dead." (Egan 23) This means that Egan condemns the new technology for spoiling authenticity as well as for distancing artists from real values. This is the reason behind Bennie's decision to take the risk by preparing a live concert for Scotty. Bennie believes that it is the last attempt to stop the digital age and to rescue the "pure" music from loss. Similarly, Bennie

and other characters are in the pursuit of pausing their flawed present by restoring the purity of their past memories.

Common Thematic Concerns

Dunn and Morris contend that despite the "great number of the individual stories" in the composite novel, they all must share common thematic concerns. The writer of the composite novel creates stories, though fragmented, that develop a central theme or image. Hence, these text-pieces or stories can be seen as "a whole". (23-25)

All characters, males and females, in *A Visit from the Goon Squad* fear time. Time for them is their ghostly merciless enemy that robs them of their youth, happiness, glory and meaningful social connections. David Cowart, for example, believes that "Jennifer Egan stages and restages the doomed battle of youth with time, the 'goon' of her title." (241) Consequently, time is seen as another character in the book, the villain that intimidates everyone.

All characters in the book have moved from stage "A" to stage "B", from being young people to being old people who attempt either to cope with their present or to resurrect their past. Bosco, a 1970's rock star, is one of the characters who cannot accept his present, so he decides to resurrect his past. Bosco intends to make a music tour called "Suicide Tour" in which he plans to "do all the same stuff onstage" that he used to do, to "move like [he] moved before." (Egan 128) When Stephanie, his publicist and Bennie's wife, expresses her worries about the fatal consequences of this tour, Bosco says, "Don't you get it, Steph? ... That's the whole point. We know the outcome, but we don't know when, or where, or who will be there when it finally happens. It's a Suicide Tour." (129) Bosco is, therefore, aware of the outcomes of his suicidal act; however, he is quite ready to sacrifice his life for the sake of momentary experience of glory that he once enjoyed in the past:

I want to tour. Like I used to, doing all the same stuff onstage. I'm going to move like I did before, only more so It's a Suicide Tour. ... I'm done. I'm old, I'm sad – that's on a good day. I want out of this mess. But I don't want to fade away, I want to *flame* away – I want my death to be an attraction, a spectacle, a mystery. A work of art. Reality TV, hell it doesn't get any realer than this. Suicide

is a weapon; that we all know. But what about an art?
(Egan 148)

The suicide tour is a deliberate effort to reestablish Bosco within the social network that celebrated his name in the past. He is eventually seen as the one who is trying to "reiterate the memory to construct a version of themselves in the present." (Cowart, 247) However, his "Suicide Tour" does not meet any success. Instead of dying on-stage, he becomes a dairy-farmer. Bosco, therefore, does not defeat nor transcend time.

Bennie Salazar is also nostalgic. He used to be a father, a husband, and a self-made man on the top of music business. Now he is divorced, allowed to see his son once a week and is forced to sell his company. He is eager to recapture the old days when he enjoyed the purity of music. His decision to give Scotty another chance is in fact an attempt to resurrect the days when both of them were surrounded by their fans. For Bennie, Scotty is "a shell whose essence has vanished." (Egan 332) In other words, Scotty is reminiscent of Bennie's past glamour; the success of Scotty's concert in the present means Bennie's success to resurrect his past. Bennie also feels nostalgic for his libido. In the second chapter entitled "The Gold Cure", Bennie endeavors to regain his virility by consuming eight thousand dollars worth of gold flakes every two months because he believes it will help him to reestablish his former identity as a lover, "an identification that in turn highlights his terror of being alone." (Moorey 72) The gold flakes are part of his attempt to be the river, to stop the goon from "pushing him around." (Egan 26) However, neither Scotty's concert nor the cold flakes mitigate Bennie's agony; hence, his endeavor to restore his past meets with failure.

In the chapter "You (plural)", Jocelyn, another member of Bennie's band, is also suspended between her past and present. She is the only character who straightforwardly discusses and confronts the issue of aging. Her visit to her old boyfriend, Lou, on his deathbed, jogs her memory of their naivety about mortality, "Rhea and I stand by Lou's bed, unsure what to do. We know him from a time when there was no such thing as normal people dying." (Egan 97) Lou's near death makes Jocelyn aware of her age and mortality. She further interrogates the cruelty of time while talking with Lou:

My questions all seem wrong: How did you get so old? Was it all at once, in a day, or did you peter out bit by bit? When did you stop having parties? Did everyone else get old too, or was that just you? Are other people still here, hiding in the palm trees or holding their breath under water? When did you last swim your laps? Do your bones hurt? Did you know it was coming and hide that you know, or did it ambush you from behind? (Egan 97)

Aging frightens Jocelyn. She is not able to recognize that time has gone by fast as she feels she did not accomplish anything in her entire life. Though her past was not that good, Jocelyn came to be what Dylan Clark describes as those "whose nostalgia heals wounds from the past, making the past appears better than it was." (226) Jocelyn, unlike Bennie, Scotty and Bosco, rejects her stigma as a prisoner of her past; instead she looks ahead for her future by earning a university degree in her late forties so that she can resume life.

Sasha's kleptomania is mainly due to her nostalgia. She sticks to her memories through the objects she steals. When she describes the table of the stolen objects, she says, "it almost shook under its load of embarrassments and close shaves and little triumphs and moments of pure exhilaration. It contained years of her life compressed." (15) To Sasha, the table bears the weight of memories, not of objects.

Sasha feels nostalgic to the time where her parents were still together. She frequently feels the presence of her father around her, "I thought he might be following me, making sure I was okay. And then, when it seemed like he wasn't, I got really scared." (Egan 225) Although her father's departure and thoughtlessness disheartened her, she fantasizes about meeting him anyway. This shows that she views the past as more positive than it truly was.

Sasha, however, does not engage in nostalgia as a mechanism to overcome her traumatic experience. She wishes to transcend the past rather than return to it. (van de Velde 131) In other words, Sasha

transforms the destructive experiences into constructive ones. For example, in "Great Rock and Roll Pauses." She has adopted a more constructive expression of her former disorder in art, where she "makes sculptures in the desert out of trash and... old toys" instead of collecting stolen objects. (Egan 242) She also tries to present the model parent she once dreamt of to her kids. Nostalgia, therefore, makes Sasha a stronger person and sustains her willingness to overcome her losses. She finally accepts the game's rule: time cannot be defeated but can be reconciled. Once a person understands the very nature of time, he/she can lead a serene life.

The Reader's Role

The composite novel needs the reader to arrange its fragmented parts to eventually have the complete outline of its narrative. Dunn and Morris maintain that the reader of the composite novel sometimes feels frustrated as he/she is in an endless job of building connections of individual stories. Moreover, the reader must constantly adjust to new characters, settings, and circumstances. The reader "must constantly begin over again, starting anew with each story, and literally becomes exhausted in the process." (Dunn and Morris 5) Dunn and Morris stress the active role of the readers who must negotiate for themselves "the interstices and trajectories." (18) Readers ultimately become "co-learners or co-writers, as it were, fellow-travelers in the mapping and remapping of textual components". (Ibid) In essence, the reader of the composite novel faces a task of "mapping," that is, establishing connections between and among text-pieces. (Ibid 19-20)

Jennifer Egan's *A Visit from the Goon Squad* contains thirteen chapters that span from 1973 till the near future. In these chapters, moments of transition and transformation in the characters' lives are left out, and hence large narrative gaps occur. These gaps are not revealed; rather, they are simply recognized as features of the genre of the composite novel. The reader is given a large space to imaginatively construct the missing parts of the story. Imagining these gaps is not, however, a matter of reconstructing the story; rather, it is about imagining the possible variations of the characters' experience. Aaron DeRosa (2011) explains:

Suspended in a state of ignorance, readers of *A Visit from the Goon Squad* must anticipate, project, and imaginatively

construct the connections between these nonlinear, multiply-focalized stories. The stories are connected by a web of interrelated experiences and social connections. These stories share common spatial and temporal settings within the network, but little exists to link one story to another. One character in one chapter may be referenced in another chapter. An object in Chapter One is stolen in Chapter Two. The reader is assumed to fill in these narrative gaps by imagining the unspoken connections between these stories. (612)

The gaps in *A Visit from the Goon Squad* are manifested by the discontinuity that exists between "the seemingly disparate chapters, points of views, dates, and geographical locations." (Ibid) Moreover, thematically the book sheds light on the characters' painstaking efforts to fill in the gaps between "A" and "B". Scotty, for example, wants to know "what happened between A and B ... A is when we [Scotty and Bennie] were both in the band, chasing the same girl. B is now." (101) The reader shares with the characters these attempts to understand the reasons for their movement from "A" to "B".

In the third chapter, when Jocelyn visits a dying Lou, Jocelyn finds out for the first time that Rolph, Lou's son, committed suicide years earlier. The last time that Rolph appeared in the narrative was when he accompanied his father into a journey to Africa. However, the reader is given some clues about the tension between Rolph and his selfish father. The reader, therefore, infers that Rolph, due to the thoughtlessness of his father and the vacuity of his life, committed suicide. In addition, Jocelyn was first presented as an addict in her twenties; later however, she is pursuing a university degree in her late forties. What happened between "A" and "B" is also unknown and the reader has to fill in this gap.

Because Egan does not write a flashback to every character, the readers lose major critical moments in the characters' lives that they must create themselves. In this way, by reflecting on how humans think, the composite novel reading process gives "the reader the chance to think about real life. The composite novel also offers the reader a safe haven to practice and exercise the mode of thought so crucial to daily life." (Dunn and Morris 195)

Egan invites her readers to build the connections between characters, just as the characters also attempt to build their own connections. For some characters, the gaps help them to be enlightened about the concept of time; hence, revising their past will lead them to construct new identities. These identities will help them to approach time as a deconstructive force or as a reconciling one.

The reader of the composite novel is, therefore, invited to trace the development of a character through episodes and interactions with other characters regardless of their sequential order. The reader does not simply connect a chapter to other chapters. Instead, each chapter contains a frame, and the reader must connect these frames together to achieve wholeness.

Dunn and Morris have provided an insightful approach to the genre of the composite novel. They have adeptly outlined the framework, the qualities and the narrative unifying elements of this genre. Their work supports the point that the composite novel offers the writer a variety of perspectives and points of view through which he/she can express his/ her stance about the world we live in. In addition, the writer of the composite novel can perform authorial experimentation through an endless process of building and rebuilding connections.

Although the composite novel features seemingly disparate stories that have independence when read individually, these stories suggest new meanings when read together with the appropriate sequence. The reader of the composite novel, therefore, becomes a more active maker of meaning than the reader of the traditional novel. While the writer presents the parts of the story in a fragmentary fashion, the reader is entrusted with the responsibility of arranging them and filling in the gaps so as to complete the meaning. In this way, the writer and the reader complete each other.

When read as a composite novel, the fragmented stories in *A Visit from the Goon Squad* can be seen as a mosaic texture in which the whole story is compromised of minor stories. If read as a traditional novel or a short story collections, the book will lose its aesthetics. The book is dense with narrative gaps as it consists of fragments from the lives of thirteen

different characters. It is the reader's role, that is stressed by Dunn and Morris, to fill in these gaps to attain the underlying narrative framework.

As the title suggests, all characters see time as the criminal that threatens their life. Time is personified in the book, for all characters have fallen victims to its supremacy. Time has unsympathetically transformed the lives of all characters in the book, that is why they all feel nostalgic. The problem lies in how these characters respond to the cruelty of time. An important finding in the study is that the female characters develop a more constructive understanding of time. Although they are nostalgic, they are looking forward to their future; they are looking forward to amending their present by aspiring to their futures. Sasha and Jocelyn are brilliant examples of those women who, though tormented by time, managed to transcend their sorrows and to resume their lives. For those female characters, looking back to the past can be seen as one step back to move forward. They may also accept finite disappointment, but never lose infinite hope. When reading the stories of these women together, *A Visit from the Goon Squad* becomes an incredibly hopeful story that illuminates the readers about the goon (time) and how to get ready for its visit.

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