

## Introduction

Kate Atkinson has written three novels (*Behind the Scenes at the Museum*, *Human Croquet* and *Emotionally Weird*), several short stories (including her most recent publication; a collection of short stories entitled *Not the End of the World*), two plays (*Nice and Abandonment*), and a screenplay based on her most famous short story (*Karmic Mothers*).

Atkinson's writing centres itself on female experience. *Behind the Scenes at the Museum*, *Human Croquet* and *Emotionally Weird* are the primary focus of this study. All three novels concentrate on the journey of a young woman into adulthood. In essence they are revisions of the 'bildungsroman' and the quest for female identity is their principle focal point. Through this interest in female quests for identity we come across a major influence on Atkinson's work - her love of Lewis Carroll's 'Alice Adventures'.

Atkinson claims to have read *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* "once a week for five years"[\[1\]](#). The effect of these books on her writing is clear, she even states herself that "Because I read *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* so often, and at such an early age, it imprinted itself on me in a way I didn't really understand at the time. I think it probably formed my idea of what a good book should be"[\[2\]](#). Consequently, all three of her novels "are based on Alice in Wonderland in one way or another"[\[3\]](#). And, all three, like Alice's adventures, centre around a young female's quest for her own identity. "identity is such a big thing in both Alice books"[\[4\]](#). *Human Croquet* is "the clearest debt to Carroll with its sensible heroine adrift in a world of eccentrics, a world where magic is not out of the question"[\[5\]](#).

Other influences on Atkinson can be found in American postmodern writers such as Robert Coover and Donald Barthelme, Laurence Sterne's *Tristram Shandy* and countless fairy tale narratives that Atkinson alludes to and borrows from throughout her work:

"Fairy tales had a profound and lasting impact on her imagination. The trilogy contains countless allusions to classical fairy tales and repeatedly employs the fairy tale motifs of quest and test. The central protagonists all identify with fairy tale figures and accept fairy tales as true"[\[6\]](#)

She uses these classic, pervasive, narratives in numerous ways; from the creation of magic to the subversion of gender stereotypes.

The starting point for my exploration of Atkinson's writing is her presentation of the traditional family unit. Her three novels, two plays and many of her short stories are structured around a familial centre. In *Behind the Scenes* the action takes place across three generations and revolves around the descendants of

Alice and Frederick Barker. In *Human Croquet* it is the fortunes and misfortunes of the Fairfax family that the novel takes as its main subject. And, in *Emotionally Weird* Effie, her mother, and the history of the Stuart-Murrays are at the centre of the reader's attention. It becomes clear that the fundamental concept of the family unit, as well as the relationships and individuals within that construct, are hugely important when considering the writing of Kate Atkinson. Some critics have suggested that Atkinson's work is essentially "anti-family"[\[7\]](#) and that "unhappy families are what she does best"[\[8\]](#). Some even go as far as to suggest she has invented "a new, implicitly parodic, fictional genre: the anti-Family Saga novel"[\[9\]](#). It is fair to say that from Atkinson's portrayal of families in her writing it would be easy to create an odious picture of evil step-mothers, indifferent mothers, abusive, drunk fathers, sullen and aggressive teenagers, and sulky, obnoxious children (not to mention the often sordid horror of the extended family). But, I feel her exploration of familial relationships goes deeper than this superficial 'anti-family' label. In the first chapter, I will explore Atkinson's use of the family in her writing through the examination of the traditional family relationships she portrays. I will also highlight how she subverts many of the pervading myths surrounding this most firmly established of institutions.

In the second chapter I will discuss Atkinson's use of 'magic realism'. According to David Lodge magic (or magical) realism is "when marvellous and impossible events occur in what otherwise purports to be a realistic narrative"[\[10\]](#). It is the inclusion of magical and fantastic events within what seems a straightforward mimetic narrative. The term was coined by Franz Roh to describe the work of certain German artists. Subsequently, it has been used to describe the works of such Latin American authors as Borges, Garc a M rquez (his novel *One Hundred Years of Solitude* is seen as the master narrative of magic realism, one of, if not *the* first to employ the technique) and Alejo Carpenier. In the 1970s and 80s the technique was adopted in Britain by several of the most original young fiction writers such as Emma Tennant, Angela Carter and Salman Rushdie. By the 1990s it was being frequently employed by authors such as Kate Atkinson. Kathleen Wheeler suggests that "Alterations in our perceptions of reality are at the heart of magic realism"[\[11\]](#), therefore it becomes self-evident that Atkinson's use of this literary technique stems from her childhood opinion that "maybe there is another reality"[\[12\]](#). In Chapter II will explore how in her novels Atkinson engages magic realism in order to create an ambiguity in the fundamental acceptance of reality.

In the third chapter will propose how, as a novelist of the contemporary age, Kate Atkinson's novels are influenced not only by her own personal politics and experiences but also by social and cultural forces surrounding her. In *Mimesis, Genres, and Post-Colonial Discourse* Jean-Pierre Durix states that "A work of art can belong to several genres at the same time"[\[13\]](#). As artistic creations this statement can be applied to the literary works of Kate Atkinson. Her novels could be described as fantasy, realism, historical, family sagas, comic novels, postmodern or feminist with equal validity. Therefore, in this chapter I will discuss how the concerns and techniques of Atkinson's writing employs several different literary genres and techniques at the same time. I will also discuss how her novels relate to contemporary British fiction and reflect contemporary British society.

Ultimately, this project is ultimately an exploration into the major themes and concerns of Kate

Atkinson's writing with specific reference to her use of familial relationships, magic realism and contemporary literary trends and cultural concerns.

## Chapter I

# The Anti-Family Saga

The fundamental basis of the traditional ‘nuclear family’ is the lawful union of a man and a woman. Atkinson’s exploration of the family in her writing begins with her depiction of marriage. She presents this concept in generally unfavourable terms, resulting in one critic describing her as “the writer who ‘rejects marriage’ ...”[\[14\]](#). Through her writing Atkinson shows us how marriage has evolved from women in the Victorian era marrying for primarily social and economic reasons to the more liberated views of the 1960’s.

In *Behind the Scenes at the Museum* Alice provides an example of a lower middle-class woman in the 1800’s marrying so they no longer had to work. Alice’s choice was simple in it’s restrictions: “to go on teaching (which she loathed) or accept Frederick’s offer of marriage”[\[15\]](#). She marries and traps herself in years of unhappiness with a man she doesn’t even like. Frederick’s second ‘common law’ wife, Rachel, reflects how marriage was the aim of all women; to marry was “the sole justification of her existence”[\[16\]](#). Unmarried women were spinsters, lesser women devalued by society. Neither of these women achieves any kind of fundamental happiness or fulfilment from their marriages to Frederick Barker.

Similar experiences befall the women of two subsequent generations. Nell’s fear of being left on the shelf prompts her to marry Frank (the only eligible man left that she knows after the war) and resigns herself to a life of dissatisfaction and lack of affection. Similarly, Bunty marries George after being abandoned by her fiance; “She wasn’t entirely sure about this, but, with the war now drawing to a close, the possibilities were beginning to fade”[\[17\]](#). Her marriage follows a similarly unsatisfying course of resentment and adultery. Both Nell and Bunty are pressured into marriage by social expectations of women at the time. At this point of history marriages were “generally not founded upon love”[\[18\]](#) and resulted in unhappiness and frustration.

It was not until the liberation of the 1960s and Ruby and Isobel’s generation that women began to see love rather than social pressures or economic dependence as the chief motive for marriage. This new romantic vision of marriage carried its own problems due to the pervasive “myth of

falling-in-love-and-getting-married”[19]. that ultimately originates in the happily-ever-after endings of fairy tales. Ruby, in *Behind the Scenes*, shows how damaging these unrealistic expectations of marriage can be. Ruby marries “a beautiful boy with green eyes and black-satin hair”[20]. Caught up in the romantic fantasy she believes “that a magnificent kind of destiny has revealed itself”[21] to her. Her romantic visions of marriage end in “some truly wretched years”[22] of the unromantic reality. Atkinson has presented us with a picture of marriage through the ages that shows how this union of two people has evolved but remained constantly harmful to the lives and happiness of women.

With the addition of children the union of two adults grows into the traditional nuclear family. One of the most interesting family relationships presented by Atkinson is that between mothers and their daughters. There exist in society several myths concerning what motherhood should be. These myths greatly effect the way in which daughters view their mothers. They are far-reaching and ingrained into the fabric of our society. They are also contradictory and “impossible to implement...”[23]. We see these myths reflected in much of Atkinson’s writing.

Her novels are littered with archetypal characters and the stock fairy tale character of ‘The Absent Mother’ is just one example. As Marina Warner points out “The good mother often dies at the beginning of the story”[24]. In *Behind the Scenes* this is clearly what Alice’s children are left believing and this is what actually happens to Eliza in *Human Croquet*. Consequently, both women become mythical figures to their children. Alice is “almost certainly an angel by now”[25] and to Isobel and Charles, Eliza becomes “an unreal woman”[26], like Alice, in her absence “she has grown sublime...the sovereign of our unseen, imaginary universe (home)”[27]. But, in time both Eliza and Alice would have disappointed their children. Shelley Phillips suggests that fairy tales are “subtle patriarchal propaganda”[28] that create such unreal images of motherhood that no real woman can live up to. We are all bombarded by “impossible definitions of the ideal mother. But ultimately, such a mother is not humanly possible, she is a myth”[29] In turn “many daughters are angry because their mothers are not perfect”[30] which leads to dissatisfaction and hostility within the relationship. Alice and Eliza show that the only way to live up to the myth is to be absent. No woman can fulfil the ideal of the ‘perfect mother’. Even Mrs Baxter, in *Human Croquet*, who is “built to motherly specifications – short and soft with no hard edges”[31], falls short. She fails to protect her precious daughter from her abusive husband; “see what a bad mother she’s been”[32].

It is suggested that mothering has historically “followed the same pattern from generation to generation.”[33]. In this way attitudes were “handed on, generation after generation, within families – attitudes that shaped the relationship between our great grandmothers and our grandmothers and down the line to our mothers and ourselves”[34]. Here we find the basis of mother/daughter relationships in Atkinson’s writing. We’ll take *Behind the Scenes* as the example. Nell was a new-born baby when her mother left so all the motherly attention she received was from “evil Rachel”[35]. When considering that “Self-esteem is...a deep down good opinion of oneself, and it is best given to a daughter by her mother”[36], we see that no such self-worth would ever be passed on to Nell by her “frightening

stepmother”[37]. In turn she will be unable to pass on positive images of womanhood to her own daughters. She “wasn’t a great one for compliments”[38] and she clearly favoured her sons leaving her daughters feeling rejected, further devoiding them of self-worth. Especially Bunty, who as the third child of five she was “stuck right in the middle with nothing to mark her out as special”[39].

The lack of motherly love and affection between Nell and Bunty leads on to the main focal point of the novel; the relationship between Bunty and her youngest daughter, Ruby. The constraints of 1950s patriarchy confine Bunty to exist within specific domestic spheres as wife and mother. She feels trapped by her family and by motherhood, she’s “a slave to housework”, she’s “chained to the cooker”[40], she is “the Martyred Wife”[41]. She fantasises about “what it would be like if her entire family was wiped out and she could start again”[42]. She clearly loves her children and is devastated by the loss of Pearl and Gillian. But, due to her relationship with her mother, she cannot express this love. Ruby describes her relationship with Bunty as “autistic mothering”[43] and from the beginning Ruby, our omnipotent narrator, feels dissatisfied with this mother. Bunty resents Ruby and her sisters because they’ve trapped her in a life she feels unsatisfied with. Ruby resents Bunty for not being the fairy tale mother that society and patriarchal discourses tell little girls they should expect. Although Bunty’s lack of mothering skills leaves the reader sympathising with her unhappy offspring the situation is not as simple as it first appears. As Emma Parker suggests, although “Ruby presents her mother as a monster”[44] Atkinson “generates sympathy for Bunty by telling her story”[45]. Atkinson does this with mothers throughout her writing. So, by presenting these mothers primarily as women, by telling their own, personal stories, Atkinson is subverting the fairy tale discourses and exposing the myths for what they are. We begin to understand that no woman can live up to the myth of the perfect mother when we understand that this mother is just a woman who’s never really found her own identity: “Because Bunty is human, she inevitably falls short of Ruby’s ideal”[46]

The final mother-daughter relationship in *Behind the Scenes* is the one we don’t really see – that of Ruby and her “little nut-brown girls”[47]. In the new era of liberation that Ruby becomes a mother she is able to take control of her life. She is given the self-esteem denied her by her mother through society’s growing respect for women. When she, like her great-grandmother and her mother realises she’s “leading the wrong life!”[48] she takes her children and starts a new life; not becoming “the foolish mother”[49], like Alice, or the “martyred wife”[50], like Bunty, but becomes an independent woman, a single mother. This is one example of the positive illustrations of untraditional families in Atkinson’s work that promote her opinion that the nuclear family can be a destructive and unhealthy institution. With the colliding of history in *Abandonment*, and Ruby’s breaking of the cycle of her family’s history we see Atkinson implying that history “endlessly repeats itself with the difference that women now have the chance to move from passive victims to active agents”[51]. The novel ends on a strong affirmation of personal identity; Ruby has taken her history and her family’s history with her through her life and has come to a point of acceptance:

“I am alive. I am a precious jewel. I am a drop of blood. I am Ruby Lennox”[52]

The last mother-figure we find in Atkinson's writing is the 'replacement' or 'surrogate' mother that goes beyond the simple stereotype of the wicked stepmother and once again promotes a positive view of untraditional family structures. Atkinson demonstrates "that motherhood is not merely a matter of biology"[\[53\]](#). *Emotionally Weird*, one critic suggests, "is clearly supposed to be a rumination on the bond between mothers and daughters"[\[54\]](#) and in it Atkinson shows how "Many of the great mothers have not been biological"[\[55\]](#). Nora is not Effie's biological mother, in fact she is no biological relation at all but she brings Effie up, she saves her and keeps her as her own. To Effie "She will always be my mother"[\[56\]](#), not a perfect mother or even "a genuine mother"[\[57\]](#) but a mother nonetheless. In Atkinson's play 'Abandonment' Elizabeth is the adopted daughter of Ina, who loves her as if she were her own, even though they do not have a close relationship Elizabeth is treated in the same way as her natural daughter, Kitty. This shows the reader that motherhood, is in fact, less about biology and more about a basic human relationship. Mothers come in forms other than the woman who gave birth to you.

Overall, mother-daughter relationships are as complex and far-reaching in the writing of Kate Atkinson as they are in real life, this theme is at the forefront of much of her writing and exposes her as a female writer primarily concerned with the female experience. This relationship is one that affects all women and is surrounded by much misconception, myth, and emotional turmoil. We can see how Atkinson's exploration of this relationship is part of her wider exploration of personal, predominantly female, identity. As Nancy Friday suggests in her best-seller *My Mother My Self* "Understanding what we have with our mothers is the beginning of understanding ourselves"[\[58\]](#).

However, Atkinson does not create a solely female experience and her presentation of fathers in her writing also arouses several debates about the role of the male in the family. Fathers are given far less emphasis than mothers are in Atkinson's writing. This, perhaps, reflects the father's less active role within the orthodox family structure.

As the traditional patriarch throughout history the father has often been absent from the home for much of the time. This is reflected in *Behind the Scenes* where Frederick is hardly present in the novel – always returning from a drunken night out, never really part of the home. He represents the kind of man Atkinson constantly portrays - the abusive drunk ("a sullen drunkard with an insatiable appetite for gambling"[\[59\]](#)) George, Bunty's husband is of a similar ilk. When Ruby and Pearl are born George is the ever "absent father" - at that moment "is in the Dog and Hare in Doncaster where he's just had a very satisfactory day at the races"[\[60\]](#). In *Human Croquet* Gordon deserts his children and even when he returns he's not quite *there* "a faded man, not really 'our dad' at all"[\[61\]](#). Mr Baxter is an abusive, adulterous, murdering, rapist. In *Emotionally Weird* Effie's father hasn't ever been a part of her life "Half of what made me is completely missing – the forensics of my father a mystery"[\[62\]](#). The main father figures in Atkinson's writing are therefore seemingly either abusive or absent. Absent fathers reflect the real life situation within many families when "In the past as today, fathers were more or less temporarily absent from their children"[\[63\]](#) due mainly to employment outside of the home, they would generally

have a “lack of involvement in child-raising”[64].

The abusive fathers are reminders of the power the patriarch still holds over his wife and children. Even if this father is temporarily absent, when he returns he makes his presence felt. Father provides the ultimate discipline and financial control over his family. Father, daughter incest is also common both in Atkinson’s fiction and in real life. Such abuse is seen by some feminist critics as a way of “conditioning women for a life-long role of submission to male sexuality and male definitions of female sexuality”[65]. Just another example of the abuse of women in a patriarchal society: “Abuse in childhood prepares the growing woman for a lifetime of abuse”[66]. The theme of sexual abuse in childhood is prevalent in Atkinson’s writing as it is in much contemporary literature, Roger Luckhurst sees this as the product “of a shift in awareness about the prevalence of sexual abuse and an admission of its primary location: inside the family.”[67]

Atkinson highlights a fundamental imbalance in the roles of mother and father in the way she gives little emphasis to the shortcomings of these clearly inept men. For example, Emma Parker points out how “in contrast to her complaints about her mother, Ruby overlooks the shortcomings of her father”[68]. This emphasises how daughters are generally less angry “about the deficiencies of fathers, than for the shortcomings of mothers”[69] and how “society tends to forgive the man who is not a good father...in contrast attitudes to neglecting or inadequate mothers are much more highly-charged with negative emotion”[70]. In *Human Croquet* Isobel and Charles show how the mother is generally the primary carer and the most valued parent. When both parents desert them Isobel comments that “Life without Gordon was marginally more boring, but without Eliza it was meaningless”[71]. Thus, “Parenting, though implying partnership and sharing...almost always ends up meaning being mother”[72]. Ultimately “To ‘father’ a child suggests above all to beget, to provide the sperm...To ‘mother’ a child implies a continuing presence”[73]. Here lies the most basic inequality. Overall fathers are absent from these books in much the same way as they are from the lives of their children, appearing only occasionally as horrific reminders that these female relationships are ultimately occurring under the ever-present spectre of the patriarch. What Atkinson reflects in her writing is that “motherhood is obligation without power and fatherhood...is power without obligation”[74].

The final familial relationship to take into consideration is that between siblings. To Atkinson the sibling bond seems to be something that holds some kind of mysticism. As an only child it seems she feels she missed out on something fundamental in her childhood, in one interview she states “If you could give me one gift it would be siblings”[75]. Subsequently, she holds this relationship in great reverence, often presenting this bond as the strongest and most pervasive within the family structure. In *Behind the Scenes* despite their arguments and rivalries Ruby realises that her sisters have been the most important influence in her life. She states it would be her sisters she would put into her “bottom drawer”, as something important to save “for the future”[76]. This unique relationship between sisters is discussed in Elizabeth Fishel’s book *Sisters: Love and Rivalry Inside the Family and Beyond*. She highlights the duality involved in this relationship but ultimately concludes that a sister can be a “dearest friend and

bitterest rival”[\[77\]](#) and that “this relationship...next to a girl’s relationship with her parents, is the most primary of any”[\[78\]](#). Atkinson mirrors this point-of-view in other close relationships between sisters throughout her writing; Nell and Lillian, Bunty and Betty (*Behind the Scenes.*), Elizabeth and Kitty (‘Abandonment’) as well as several sister-like relationships between female characters and their female friends. And, in *Human Croquet* and *Emotionally Weird* she presents close bonds between brother and sister, though perhaps not as prominently as she does between sisters.

Overall, Atkinson presents the family from a female perspective, taking the stance that “Patriarchy’s chief institution is the family”[\[79\]](#) and therefore the ‘nuclear family’ is portrayed as a destructive institution. Although I would not agree that Atkinson is ‘anti-family’ per se, she herself claims “Being a mother is the most satisfying thing you can be”[\[80\]](#), she promotes relationships but not the constrictive nature of the traditional family structure and the pervasive social pressures that surround it.

## Chapter II

### **What is real?**

As has been seen in the previous chapter, Atkinson's writing often alludes to and encompasses techniques of fairy tales. Her novels take the reader to a place that has been described, in reference to other fiction, as "somewhere between the real world and fairy-land, where the Actual and the Imaginary may meet, and each imbue itself with the nature of the other"[\[81\]](#). Through this intertextuality with the classic narratives we find our first indication of the magical thread that runs throughout Atkinson's stories and the very basis of the magical nature of her writing.

From the outset the reader is presented with worlds that seem to reflect our own but are touched with the fantastic. Throughout all three novels "There's a strange quality to the air..."[\[82\]](#). Atkinson's writing draws on fantasy and fairy tale to allow it to slide seamlessly from the mundane to the magical. Her interest in fairy tales and ultimately magic realism stem from her own childhood and what could justifiably be described as her 'obsession' with Lewis Carroll's 'Alice' novels. What most concerns us here is that Atkinson makes it clear where her interest in magic realism first came from:

"Alice was probably the first book I ever read that used magic realism...it's that sliding in and out of reality, an acceptance of the ridiculous. As a child, I remember thinking 'Oh! Maybe there is another reality'"[\[83\]](#)

And so, like Carroll, Atkinson's novels slide 'in and out of reality', with a dry tone of acceptance. Thus, bringing into focus the unstable nature of what we see as the solid construct of reality. This is the main focus of her use of magic realism - a basic suspicion of perceived reality, a questioning of what is real and the suggestion "that literature constructs rather than reflects reality"[\[84\]](#).

In *Behind the Scenes* there are several events that could be described as 'magic realism'. The first, and most apparent being "a narrator who hovers peculiarly between Ruby and omniscience"[\[85\]](#). The first line of the novel; "I exist! I am conceived to the chimes of midnight on the clock of the mantelpiece"[\[86\]](#) indicates that Ruby, although a seemingly conventional first-person narrator sees events that, within the realm of realism, she would not be able to describe. She goes on to convey the details of her conception and experience of being in the womb. Clearly this is a 'magical' occurrence within this seemingly traditional narrative. Ruby goes on to narrate the historical events of her family from the marriage of her

great-grandmother to the birth of her older sisters, all events that realistically she would not be able to recount. This again is a fantastical event within a seemingly ‘realistic’ narrative. Through these narrative techniques we are reminded of Ruby’s status as an unreliable narrator. Unreliable not only because she relates a history she cannot know but also because she suppresses in her narration events that she suppresses from her consciousness (i.e. The death of Pearl). Ruby narrates from the first-person perspective and is therefore susceptible to the subjectivity inherent in this kind of narration but, at the same time she is omniscient – a combination that David Lodge suggest would only occur “in a very deviant, experimental text”[\[87\]](#). Throughout the novel there are secrets we are not let in on: Ruby is lying to herself and to the reader. David Lodge suggests that the use of an unreliable narrator is often employed “to reveal in an interesting way the gap between appearance and reality”[\[88\]](#). A clear theme in all three novels is the deceptive nature of appearance and the questionable status of orthodox reality. Both concepts clearly linked to Atkinson’s use of magic realism.

*Behind the Scenes* is not what could be described as a ‘magic realist text’ but it does contain this element of magic, fantasy and the extraordinary that can be found in all Atkinson’s writing. More importantly perhaps, is that as her first novel, *Behind the Scenes* shows the beginnings of her interest in questioning reality, an interest that is explored in greater detail and with greater reference to magic realism in her later work. Other magically real events in this novel include; Alice’s “out-of-body experience”[\[89\]](#) that is told in such a matter-of-fact way that the reader really does take it as fact that this woman was “...floating in a forget-me-not blue sky, some thirty feet above the cottage”[\[90\]](#). The “amiable ghosts Above the Shop”[\[91\]](#) that appear throughout the story, gossiping and muttering amongst themselves. The ghost of Albert appears to Frank as he looks up from the trenches and at the same time at the foot of Alice’s bed. There is a lucky rabbit’s foot cut off by Rachel that brings such good fortune to several different generations (“Frank led a charmed life once he had the rabbit’s foot”[\[92\]](#)) Finally, the Roman army marches through York as Ruby sits in a tea room with her sister. The last page of the novel sums up the use of magically real events in *Behind the Scenes* when Atkinson writes “who is to say which of these is real and which a fiction?”[\[93\]](#)

*Human Croquet* is a far more overtly magic realist text. The theme of appearance and reality runs at the forefront of this novel more and from the very beginning Atkinson warns us that “Just because you can’t see something doesn’t mean it isn’t there”[\[94\]](#). Throughout the text we are reminded “How deceptive appearance can be”[\[95\]](#) and become aware of how little we can trust what the narrator tells us. Like Ruby, Isobel could also be described as an ‘unreliable omniscient narrator’. She describes herself as “the alpha and omega of narrators” stating “(I am omniscient) and I know the beginning and the end”[\[96\]](#) and proceeds to take us through a family history that twists and turns through rips in the fabric of time, to parallel realities, imagined realities and sheer fantasies. The reader is left confused and questioning which version of events to believe – precisely Atkinson’s point:

“...what you see depends on what you think you’re seeing. And anyway, how can we tell if what we’re seeing is real? Reality seems to go out the window when perception comes in the door. And, if it comes

right down to it, how do we know there's such a thing as reality?"[97]

The most obvious example of magic realism in *Human Croquet* is when, throughout the novel, Isobel slips inexplicably into the past. Finding herself in the company of Shakespeare, sixteenth century fishwives and the Forest of Lythe before man arrived to destroy it. She has "discovered a rip in the fabric of time"[98] and finds herself at various points of history. This 'time-travel' is a clear comment of the unreliable nature of reality. By bringing into question the fundamental acceptance of linear time Atkinson subverts our most basic perceptions. At points we are also shown alternative realities; the events of Christmas Eve are a prime example. In one version of events we are told the Walshes' house sets on fire killing Richard and Hilary. Malcolm and Isobel are then in a fatal car crash killing Malcolm. The next thing we are told is that Isobel is waking up in her room on Christmas Eve, none of the previous events having taken place. We are subsequently taken through another Christmas Eve that sees the murder of Mr Baxter and Isobel being struck by Malcolm's car resulting, once again, in his death, and so it goes on. This sequence of events ends in Isobel waking from a coma, a tree having fallen on her in April and everything that has happened has been a dream – hasn't it?

"It's like Alice waking up and finding she dreamt the looking-glass world. It is difficult to believe that all those things that seemed so real have not happened. They felt real then, they feel real now. Appearances can be very deceptive"[99]

But, things are not explained as simply as 'it was all a dream', for as the allusion suggests; "Life, what is it but a dream?"[100]. Just as in *Through the Looking-Glass* we are left wondering which was dream and which reality. By the end of the novel the two worlds are inextricably intertwined when after supposedly waking from a coma to finally face reality, Isobel once again slips into a world of magic realism as Shakespeare appears on her bed and the sound "of opalescent fairy wings"[101] fills the air. The novel goes on to make use of a common trait of many magic realist texts – metamorphosis. Mr Rice turns into a fly, Charles turns into a dog and Isobel becomes part of a tree. Through the use of magic realism in this novel we the reader, like Isobel, the narrator, are left asking "How can I trust reality when the phenomenal world appears to be playing tricks on me at every turn?"[102]. The answer seems to be, according to Atkinson, you can't!

In many ways *Emotionally Weird* is a very different novel to *Behind the Scenes* and *Human Croquet*. In accordance with this its approach to magic realism is unlike that of the other two novels. This is primarily a novel about novels and the art of storytelling. The first reference to magic realism in the novel comes at one point in Effie's story when she describes catching "a glimpse of something gleaming in the dark – a flash of silver and bronze, something fishy and scaly..."[103]. However, this event is less an accepted moment of fantasy but rather induced by the drug-laced brownies Effie had just consumed. Following the description of these events Nora asks "So is that magic realism?" to which Effie replies "No, it's fiction"[104]. Here it seems that Atkinson is making a distinction between imaginative fiction writing and the inclusion of deliberate literary techniques such as magic realism. This event, although

strange, is explained in the text (i.e. the brownies) and should not be labelled magic realism just because it's out of the ordinary. However, Atkinson does go on to employ the technique although it is done with self-awareness. As in *Human Croquet* we are presented with alternative realities – when the owner of the 'yellow dog' falls to his death magic realism is employed and the body disappears. "It was as if we had suffered a mass hallucination... 'So he was dead' Andrea puzzled, 'and now he's...not dead?'"[105]. Effie follows the description of this event with the statement; "Now *that's* magic realism"[106]. She is almost parodying the technique in order to highlight the irrelevance of such literary terminology in the process of storytelling. The only other instance of magic realism in the novel is the rescue of Effie from drowning by her dead aunt who takes the form of "a mermaid...She had a huge fishscaled tail and her long hair trailed behind her like ribbons of seaweed"[107]. The inclusion of this event in this novel that otherwise seems to be concerned with more down to earth themes suggests that Atkinson cannot help but add some kind of mysticism or magic to her writing. In *Emotionally Weird* magic realism is once again employed as a subversion of reality but here it is done by enhancing the fictional nature of reality and the self-reflexivity of the novel:

"Perhaps we are on an *insula ex machina*, an artificial place not in the real world as all – a backdrop for the stories we must tell"[108]

It is clear then that Atkinson uses magic realism to question reality but what I have not made clear are the motives behind this technique that prompt her to employ it in her writing. The reasons can be linked to the prominent themes of the novels and the main agendas of Atkinson's writing. Firstly, magic realism can be linked to her use of history. All three of her novels deal with the past and family history. In her essay 'Past-On Stories: History and the Magically Real, Morrison and Allende on Call', P. Gabrielle Foreman examines two novels similar to the works of Kate Atkinson. Like *Behind the Scenes*, *Human Croquet*, and *Emotionally Weird* it is the revelation of family histories that the worlds of *The House of Spirits* [Isabel Allende] and *Song of Soloman* [Toni Morrison] are based: "worlds full of walking, talking ghosts, women with green hair and no navels, marvellous worlds"[109]. Foreman goes on to examine the links between magic realism, ontology and history, links that can clearly be related to Atkinson's novels.

Just as "Allende revises García Márquez's master text by positioning women as the site of the magical"[110], so too does Atkinson place women at the centre of her stories. Both authors are re-telling history from a female perspective as they "feminize generic codes to employ magic realism as a bridge to a history recoverable in the political realm"[111]. Thus, the magically real is used to re-present history from the perspective of the margin – in this case the female. It helps to de-centre previously accepted versions of reality and historical fact. Historical reality has lain in the lap of the educated male since the tradition of oral/aural storytelling was buried under the written word of patriarchy. These women writers are recovering that history for their people by going back to their roots, back to the storyteller, they employ magic realism as the chief tool to do this. In Toni Morrison's *Song of Soloman* she promotes "the value of the word is in the hearing, in the telling"[112] just as Atkinson promotes the tradition of the female storyteller in her novels. This is most evident in *Emotionally Weird* where Effie and Nora "sit by the cracking flames of a driftwood fire and spin our stories"[113]. Stories are the foundations of history;

history itself can be thought of as a fiction, only fact to the teller. Therefore, the use of magic realism in the context of historical fiction is, again, a clear question of what is accepted as real. Atkinson, Morrison and Allende all use magic realism as a shift away from the accepted perception of reality that has been forced upon society by white males. Men have for thousands of years decided what we unquestioningly accept as fact, especially historical fact. These female authors subvert this acceptance and finally question this most basic, yet pervasive, of assumptions. Just as Toni Morrison “recovers history for her people”[\[114\]](#) so too does Atkinson for *her* people – British women. She recovers personal female histories and experiences in Britain from the nineteenth to the very end of the twentieth century and by juxtaposing stories of history with stories of magic and fantasy she brings into question orthodox, male accounts of what *really* happened. This use of magic realism is most evident in *Behind the Scenes* and *Human Croquet* where Atkinson “gives feminine experience the grandeur and scope that masculine experience more traditionally has”[\[115\]](#) all within the realm of personal history, the domestic and “suburban family life”[\[116\]](#). Her novels present us with the untold, often disregarded, realities of female experience – realities that, through the use of magic realism, are seen to subvert the dominant patriarchal perspectives of historical ‘fact’.

So magic realism helps to recover lost histories and see history as a fiction. From the examination of Atkinson’s writing it has become clear that a feminist reading of her work has to be at the foreground of any criticism. With this in mind, we can see that Atkinson uses magic realism with a feminist agenda. Magic realism has long been seen as a tool for post-colonial writers as a way of “breaking away from the discourse perceived as central”[\[117\]](#) and subverting the realities of the coloniser. But, “magic realism is not exclusively a postcolonial phenomenon”[\[118\]](#). These concepts of writing from the margins can be equally applied to gender as language or race. In both cases magic realism is used to “create an alternative world *correcting* so-called existing reality”[\[119\]](#), and thus righting the ‘wrongs’ this ‘reality’ depends upon. Magic realism thus reveals itself as “a *ruse* to invade and take over dominant discourse(s)”[\[120\]](#)

Another key theme of Atkinson’s writing is identity; this too is reflected by her use of magic realism. In magical fiction “the fantasy should be viewed as the magical creation of this chief character”[\[121\]](#) and more precisely the magic of magic realism “is almost always a reification of the hero’s inner conflicts”[\[122\]](#). Therefore, the magic realism in Atkinson’s three novels can be seen as a reflection of the confused state of mind of the individual narrators – three young women searching for their identities. Atkinson’s fiction would be described by Jeanne Delbaere-Garant as “Psychic Realism”; fiction that uses magic realism to express the inner conflicts of the protagonist. Like Angela Carter, Atkinson uses ‘Psychic realism’ to “destabilise culturally constructed notions of identity and gender by showing that, like all human constructs, they are, in fact, projections of individual fantasies”[\[123\]](#)

Overall, magic realism is used as a pro-feminist tool to question accepted perceptions of reality that are generally the creations of a male dominated society. Atkinson uses it to dispute the established position, history and identity of women in Britain.

# Chapter III

## A Contemporary Writer

Postmodern theories have prevailed in literature and literary criticism since the 1950s and “the term postmodern is used very loosely to cover all literature since the Second World War”[\[124\]](#). With this in mind, all contemporary fiction can be examined in term of the postmodern, Atkinson’s is no exception. Her implementation of this literary theory is just one of the ways in which she engages her fiction with contemporary trends and concerns.

Atkinson’s writing shows a clear postmodern influence. As I have illustrated in the previous chapter, her novels take the issue of what is real as one of their central themes. This is also a central concern of postmodernism; “the basic attitude of postmodernists was a scepticism about the claims of any kind of overall, totalizing explanation”[\[125\]](#). Therefore, “Atkinson’s post-modern narrative strategies expose the limits and illusions of realism, and reflect a presiding concern with questions about how we know, and the extent to which we can know, the world around us”[\[126\]](#). We have seen this at work in Atkinson’s writing through her use of magic realism and we see it again here, in her use of other postmodernist theories. She herself states that “I did my PhD on the American Short Story, with particular reference to the ‘postmodernists’ of the sixties...I think the writing of Barthelme and Coover in particular has been influential to some degree, I like their joy in language”[\[127\]](#). This interest in language and words can be seen throughout Atkinson’s writing and can be linked to postmodern philosophies of language, which encompass the theories of Jacques Derrida.

French linguist Ferdinand de Saussure put forward the idea of “the conception of language as a system of signs, arbitrarily assigned and only intelligible in terms of the particular system as a whole...Language is a *structure* whose parts can only be understood in relation to each other”[\[128\]](#). Derrida relied heavily on these theories and in turn created a philosophy of language as a reaction against the primacy of Saussure’s structuralism. He theorised that it is an illusion that “the meaning of a word has its origin in the structure of reality itself and hence makes the truth about that structure directly present to the mind”[\[129\]](#). For Derrida and other deconstructionists “the relationship of language to reality is not given,

or even reliable, since all language systems are inherently unreliable cultural constructs”[130]. For the deconstructionist then, language is everything. The world itself is a ‘text’ yet words have no connection with reality only to themselves. When you apply these linguistic concepts to postmodernism you realise that “the postmodern deconstructor wishes then to show how a previously trusted relationship, like the one between language and the world, will go astray”[131]

The most striking examples of these ideas at work in Atkinson’s writing is in *Emotionally Weird*, a novel that Atkinson suggests is “about words and language and writing”[132]. Lines such as “Perhaps I can just start making words up. Why not? How else do works come into being?”[133] reflect the deconstructionist theory that words bear no relation to reality - they are simply made-up, they are constructions of society. *Behind the Scenes* and *Human Croquet* also explore this theme of language and reality. One of the last lines of *Behind the Scenes* illustrates this relationship: “In the end, it is my belief, words are the only things that can construct a world that makes sense”[134]. Words don’t make a reality but they *construct* a version of reality, which, unlike ‘the real world’, makes sense. In *Human Croquet* “it begins with the word and the word is life”[135]. In this novel Atkinson is referring to the construction of literary texts and the creation of worlds and realities through words: “The beginning is the word and the end is silence. And in between are all the stories”[136]. These references to fiction within the text see Atkinson employing another postmodern device and creating what is described as ‘metafiction’.

Metafiction is “fiction about fiction: novels and stories that call attention to their fictional status...”[137]. All Atkinson’s novels do this to some degree. For example, “Ruby, Isobel, and Effie all flaunt their control of the narrative and draw attention to the act of storytelling.”[138]. Although all three of “the novels stress artifice and advertise an awareness of their fictional status”[139] *Emotionally Weird* is the most prominently metafictional. It is a novel about storytelling and the most obvious characteristic of the *Emotionally Weird* that points to its metafictional status is the inclusion of separate narratives within the main body of the text. For example, Effie’s work-in-progress *The Hand of Fate*, a detective novel appears at the very beginning of the book and throughout. There are also several other extracts from novels written by other characters as well as the intertwining stories of Effie and Nora, making *Emotionally Weird* a very clear example of the self-awareness of metafiction.

However, true to the idea that metafiction is “..a kind of writing which places itself on the border between fiction and criticism...”[140] *Emotionally Weird* is a novel about literature but it is also literature about literary criticism. In the novel Atkinson continually parodies academia, creating caricatures of university lecturers from the doddering head of department Professor Cousins to the hyper-intellectual Archie McCue. She also parodies literary techniques such as magic realism and unreliable narration, and even seems to be having “a crack at the none-too-subtle business of metafiction”[141] itself. It appears then that Atkinson is criticising criticism and even postmodernism. She presents such concepts as incomprehensible and meaningless. However, by juxtaposing these sections against the processes of writing fiction what Atkinson is suggesting is that literary criticism and theory is irrelevant to the actual process of creation. Fiction is storytelling, not the conscious construction

or implementation of literary theories. The criticism of metafiction itself remains in the vein or postmodernism by implementing “metafictional ploys such as...parody”[142]. So despite Atkinson’s disregard for literary criticism and theory as irrelevant to the writer, she doesn’t disregard it as irrelevant to fiction.

In *Behind the Scenes* and *Human Croquet* the degree to which Atkinson draws attention to the fictional nature of these novels is limited. In *Behind the Scenes* the repeated line “who is to say which of these is real and which a fiction?”[143] reminds the reader that not only are they reading a fictitious story but that the nature of the boundary between fiction and reality is highly ambiguous. In *Human Croquet* the reader is reminded of the fictional nature of the novel with Isobel’s proclamation “I am the alpha and omega of narrators”[144], as well as the use of unusual techniques such as one page with the words “A BABY!”[145] printed in a large font on their own. Yet, the primary way these basically ‘realistic’ texts draw attention to their status as fiction is through intertextuality.

Postmodern fiction plays upon intertextuality to highlight the fictional nature of the novel. These are “narratives which signify their artificiality by obtrusive reference to traditional forms or borrow their thematic and structural principles from other narratives”[146]. I have already highlighted an example of Atkinson’s use of intertextuality in the two previous chapters when referring to her continual allusions to, and use of, fairy tales. In this way Atkinson can be compared to contemporary authors such as Angela Carter or Jeanette Winterson who both use fairy tale conventions in their writing to challenge realist fiction. “Throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries literary authors have exploited the fairy tale in a variety of ways”[147] and Atkinson’s ‘exploitation’ of this genre is due not simple to metafictional intertextuality but also because of the view that sees the fairy tale as “a powerful discourse which produces representations of gender”[148]. So, to subvert and transform this traditional narrative is to undermine the assumptions it makes about gender roles.

Other narratives alluded to in Atkinson’s writing are Lewis Carroll’s ‘Alice Adventures’ and Laurence Sterne’s *Tristram Shandy*. In *Behind the Scenes* Sterne’s classic novel has a strong intertextual influence. Stern is one of the ghosts Above the Shop (“the scratch-scratch of the Reverend Sterne’s quill”[149]). The novels have many structural similarities from fractured narratives to both Atkinson and Stern highlighting “the books status as a material object by inserting blank, black and marbled pages, and using different fonts and graphics”[150]. Overall, “Sterne’s presence looms large in *Behind the Scenes* and *Tristram Shandy* remains an intertextual touchstone throughout the trilogy...”[151]

Intertextuality in postmodern literature can also be seen as “a formal manifestation of both a desire to close the gap between past and present of the reader and a desire to rewrite the past in a new context”[152]. This then leads us to another postmodern literary technique at work in the writing of Kate Atkinson; ‘historiographic metafiction’. This type of writing is once again linked to a questioning of perceived reality and “the postmodern view that we can only know ‘reality’ as it is produced and

sustained by cultural representations of it”[153]. Basically, historiographic metafiction is fiction that uses historical events and/or characters within a metafictional narrative to suggest that history itself is subjective and “All history books tell you a story...”[154]. As such, to postmodernists “history was just another narrative, whose paradigm structures were no better than fictional...”[155]

The best example of Atkinson executing historiographic metafiction in her writing is in *Behind the Scenes*. In this novel the narrative spans across four generations, through historical events that range from the Boer War to the 1966 World Cup. All are defining events in the history of Britain. However, these events are only passed over, they provide the background for the untold stories of history – the personal stories. “Atkinson pushes what is central in canonical accounts of history (political leaders, monarchs, military heroes) to the peripheries in order to foreground aspects of history that are often overlooked”[156]. By retelling these stories through Ruby, Atkinson is again suggesting that history is a fragmentary account reliant on memory and implying that it is impossible to know what really happened in the past. History, like the memory of the narrator, “contains gaps and never tells the whole story”[157]. In his essay ‘Memory Recovered / Recovered Memory’ Roger Luckhurst suggests that “the cultural politics of memory”[158] is a theme that occurs frequently in contemporary literature. Atkinson’s “exploration of memory and the mind’s ability to deceive itself...”[159] fits in with this contemporary literary theme and cultural preoccupation. In *Behind the Scenes* Atkinson “manoeuvres the reader into the position of the unknowing subject of repressed memory, subject to all the estrangements and dissonances a belated revelation of a hidden secret can produce”[160]. When we consider that memory is the only access to the historical past, we begin to understand that “the past becomes rewritten in memory...”[161]. In her novels Atkinson re-presents history from the perspective of ordinary women. She “offers a woman-centred revision of ‘his-story’”[162] and in doing so reflects how “historiographic metafiction is a pretext to enter a kind of time tunnel and rediscover suppressed histories in the process of redefining concepts of ‘reality’ and ‘truth’”[163]. Historiographic metafiction is then, used by Atkinson to recover the suppressed histories of women by presenting history as just another story to be told, and women the chief storytellers.

Here then we come across the most prevalent literary approach in Atkinson’s writing and the writing of many of her contemporaries - feminism. Atkinson uses postmodernism and many other techniques in her novels to promote the voices, issues and rights of women. For example, “postmodern arguments have helped many to *define* the roots of their difference from the majority, or ‘those in power’”[164]. Although Atkinson does not label herself a ‘woman writer’ or a ‘feminist writer’ I think it would be fair to say that Atkinson’s work is woman-centred and that there are many affinities between her writing and other contemporary ‘feminist’ writers.

As I have discussed before, Atkinson’s writing is at the most basic level concerned with identity. “The quest for identity is perhaps the most pervasive theme in contemporary women’ writing”[165] and Atkinson’s novels could be seen as feminist revisions of the classic ‘bildungsroman’ structure. Another aspect of this and of British contemporary literature is the question of national identity. During the 1990s

several events brought the issue of national identity to prominence in Britain. “For Britain the Nineties were a time of great political uncertainty. The strengthening of Europe and the decline of the classic idea of the nation state was weakening faith in the Union which...had given Britons their identity”[\[166\]](#). The nineties saw the devolution of Britain and New Labour’s reinvention of the country as “Cool Britannia”, there came a period of confusion and “re-evaluation of Englishness”[\[167\]](#). This feeling has transpired itself into contemporary fiction in many different examples including Julian Barnes’ *England England* and Benedict Anderson’s *Imagined Communities*. Atkinson’s writing also engages with this theme and questions what it means to be English. Her novels exhibit “disdain for the dominant ideology of Englishness”[\[168\]](#) by undermining the dominant discourses of England and revealing the entire concept as socially constructed. She achieves this in a number of ways.

Firstly, she undermines the discourses of history by giving prominence to female voices that are historically denied this authority in British history. And then by presenting events of historical importance as unrealistic versions of the actual experience and creating a picture of “the U.K as a fundamentally disunited kingdom”[\[169\]](#): The Coronation of Queen Elizabeth II is portrayed not as a uniting national event but cause of family arguments. Similarly, the World Cup final 1966 is a disjointed event of men disappearing from a family gathering to watch a historic national event that excluded half the nation (i.e. women).

Secondly, she presents England as a country inhospitable to women offering them “as little hope as it does glory”[\[170\]](#): All the women in *Behind the Scenes* who find happiness have had to migrate (Lillian to Canada, Patricia to Australia and Ruby across the border into Scotland) The patriotic “flower[s] of English womanhood”[\[171\]](#) are presented as xenophobic, class-conscious, self absorbed, unfriendly individuals. Bunty represents this distrust and rejection of difference that is one of the most negative stereotypes of imperialist Englishness. (She “does not like foreign food. She has not actually tasted any foreign food but nonetheless she knows she doesn’t like it”[\[172\]](#)). This imperialist attitude is ridiculed when Atkinson presents the English as a hybrid race in *Behind the Scenes* with continual reference to Vikings and Romans and presents non-English characters in more favourable terms than many of their English counterparts. (Auntie Doreen is Irish and is seen by Ruby and her sisters as “a splendid ‘Marmee’”[\[173\]](#); a kind thoughtful woman. Kind Dr Hezmark is German, and, Marjorie Morrison, Aileen McDonald and Mrs Baxter are all wonderful, caring Scottish women) The intense class-consciousness of the English is also parodied by Atkinson. In *Human Croquet* this issue is seen throughout the text, from the pomp and circumstance of Sir Francis Fairfax to the inverted snobbery of The Widow and her daughters; “ ‘The ruddy silver spoon’s still in her mouth’ Madge said to Vinny when they first me Eliza”[\[174\]](#).

Thirdly, Atkinson’s interest in and promotion of Scotland and the Scottish runs throughout her work, from Aileen McDonald and Mrs Baxter in *Behind the Scenes* and *Human Croquet* to the setting of *Emotionally Weird* in Dundee and the wilds of a tiny Scottish island. Her interest in and assertion of this country “not only rejects England but resists a grand narrative of nationhood in which Scotland is often subsumed by or seen as synonymous with England”[\[175\]](#)

Finally, the pervasive myth of England as a 'green and pleasant land' is subverted by Atkinson's centring of the urban north in *Behind the Scenes* and *Human Croquet* and her portrayal of the inhospitable nature of the 'countryside'. Alice suffers in the countryside, Atkinson paints the picture of her life "as if someone had taken an idyllic rural scene and set it slightly off-key"[\[176\]](#). Similarly, the woods in *Human Croquet* far from provide a pleasant backdrop to a family picnic but rather an oppressive presence in a family tragedy. ("*It isn't very good in the middle of the wood*"[\[177\]](#)) The fantasy of rural England is the ideal self-image of the nation but here Atkinson subverts this to reveal the reality of urban England and the not-so-idyllic countryside. She undermines stereotypes of Englishness and presents an image of a country through history that has much more in common with the way it is seen by a great number of people who have and do live there.

Kate Atkinson's writing clearly has much in common with other contemporary fiction; overall, she could be described as, if such labels are warranted, a 'postmodern, pro-feminist writer'. However, Atkinson still maintains an award-winning sense of originality and in many ways still "stands aloof from contemporary British fiction"[\[178\]](#).

## Conclusion

In conclusion, through the examination of Kate Atkinson's writing in reference to her use of the family and magic realism and of her position as a contemporary writer I have been able to uncover the main themes and concerns of her fiction.

Kate Atkinson's novels are focused, in the main, on the experiences of women and she is primarily a writer of female fiction. "...she is interested in narratives of female development and women's struggle for selfhood in a patriarchal world"[\[179\]](#) This is not to say that her writing is only accessible to women, or that this is its sole concern. She does not write for a specific audience and her novels hold significance for many different people. However, as I have illustrated, each aspect of her fiction has an underlying consideration of female experience. Throughout her novels, short stories and plays she promotes the rights, feelings, histories and happiness of women. Feminist thoughts shape her fiction in a distinct and prevalent manner.

Her presentation of the family in her writing concentrates on the female experience of this institution and the relationships within it. She sees marriage as a historically damaging arrangement. An institution that has in the past forced women to devote themselves to domestic servitude in loveless marriages with abusive husbands. And, more recently has been the vehicle of patriarchal myths surrounding love and

marriage that serve to keep the nuclear family, the strongest of patriarchal institutions, alive and well.

Her exploration of relationships within a family structure begins with parallel myths concerning fairy tale archetypes of mothers. The damaging effects of these myths on the relationship between women and their children (especially their daughters) can be seen throughout her writing, where countless daughters resent their less-than-perfect mothers and countless mothers try, and fail, to become the impossible ideal of their children. Fathers are depicted by Atkinson as abusive or just plain absent and as essentially having negative effects on their children. Her writing overlooks male relationships and the presentations of male characters are either negative or lacking depth. She promotes the relationship between sisters and gives little emphasis to that between brother and sister and even less to brother and brother. Atkinson's inclusion of families and familial relationships in her writing is essentially questioning, from a female perspective, whether "happy families exist...outside of fiction"[\[180\]](#). She shows little faith in this socially constructed institution and portrays it as fundamentally damaging to women and beneficial to patriarchy. For Kate Atkinson, from the female point-of-view, traditional happy families don't exist whether it is inside or outside of fiction.

Through her use of magic realism Atkinson undermines accepted perceptions of reality and consequently brings into question accepted patriarchal discourses. She uses magic realism to dispute our most basic acceptances of the world around us. History is recovered by the female voice in *Behind the Scenes* and turned on its head by the inclusion of magical events that suggest to us that what was seen as historical fact can justifiably be viewed as 'historical fiction'. In *Human Croquet* the very fabric of time is ripped in two as Atkinson presents us with parallel universes and time travel. In *Emotionally Weird* the world and our perceptions of it are presented as nothing more than an artificial backdrop for the stories we must tell. All in all magic realism is used as a feminist tool to break away from the central patriarchal discourse that is perceived reality.

Atkinson's use of magic realism clearly links to her wider exploration of postmodernism. Postmodernism is a prevalent concept in post 1950s literature and as a contemporary writer Atkinson cannot avoid engaging with this literary theory. In her use of the postmodern she uses and refers to techniques such as deconstruction, metafiction, historiographic metafiction, unreliable narration and intertextuality. Each of the above is put into practice in order to subvert reality and promote female narratives.

National identity is another prominent theme in contemporary British literature that Kate Atkinson explores. I have demonstrated that she has a basic suspicion of stereotypical concepts of Englishness which is based upon the suppressed identity of English women and the lack of opportunity and security the country has provided them.

Other issues and themes that Atkinson shows a clear interest in are: Identity, appearance and reality, imagination, memory, history, home, loss and self-knowledge. She has a clear love of language and

wordplay, comedy and the wonder of childhood. But, ultimately, as Atkinson herself puts it:

“I didn’t have brothers and I haven’t had sons so I’ve had a very insular female experience. Despite having been married twice, men are still a bit of a mystery to me.”[\[181\]](#)

Consequently it is the female experience that permeates her writing. Throughout her fiction she undermines dominant discourses and prevalent myths in order to promote female perspectives.

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