"When You're Most Invisible of All": The Search for Identity in Jon McGregor's *Even the Dogs*

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Abstract: Individual and social identity have generally been considered inseparable components of a person's self-concept. When the social identity of a person is marginalised or stigmatised, his or her individual concept of self gets disrupted. In *Even the Dogs*, Jon McGregor utilises the metaphor of home to explore the individual and social negotiation of identity. The novel illustrates the struggle of a homeless group in forming individual identities when their social identities are lost and unrecognised. This study advances knowledge of the meanings of home and homelessness and contributes to existing understandings of identity formation in relation to marginalised groups.

Keywords: social identity, individual identity, home, Jon McGregor, homelessness, contemporary fiction

Introduction

In *Even the Dogs,* Jon McGregor uses the metaphor of home to explore the negotiation of identity within the complex context of society. The novel tells the story of the police discovering the body of a dead man, Robert, in his flat in a social housing block. We follow the corpse's journey to cremation, throughout which a group of homeless people – drug addicts, alcoholics and vagrants – who were in Robert's life come in and out of focus as they learn about Robert's death and move around the city looking for their next fixes. Mainly, these people are Danny, who finds Robert's body before the police do and runs off in panic; Mike, a Scouser who suffers from schizophrenia-type disorder; Heather, who pretends to be in control of her life though she is not; Steve, who used to be in the army; and Laura, Robert's daughter. Through this fragmentary narrative and the characters' relationships to the physical as well as abstract sense of home, we learn about the struggles they face in their negotiation of social and individual identities.

The metaphor of home is used in McGregor's novel to illustrate how individual identity formulates itself in relation to social identity: the loss of one often disrupts the other. Socially, the characters in the novel are stripped of their individual attributes and are identified collectively as "homeless." They describe themselves as being "invisible" in society. This categorisation results in the disruption of their individual identities. "Home" in the novel is used as a symbol of individual identity. Throughout the narrative, many of the meanings related to home are deconstructed, such as location, privacy and protection. This deconstruction can be seen as betraying the fragmentation and loss of individual identity that the characters face as a result of their loss of social identity.

Using the theories of home and identity, this article argues that the yearning for home of the main characters, Robert and Danny, is inextricable from their desire to find social and individual identities. The relationship between home and identity is germane to today's world of political and environmental issues, which lead many people to migrate to different countries, find greener pastures and alter their lifestyles. Therefore, the idea of home in relation to identity formation is a topic of ongoing, and even increasing, relevance today. Studying literature's portrayal of home and identity could yield insight into understanding the struggle of moving or losing a home, which results in the loss of identity. In *The Politics of Home*, Rosemary George claims that "all fiction is homesickness" (1996, 1). Rosemarie Buikema explains that great literary works "embod[y] the desire to come home, to be at home, to be recognized and to be protected by boundaries and a sense of sameness" (2005, 178). Finding that the metaphor of home is at the heart of McGregor's portrayal of loss of identity, this article analyses the relationship between the characters' notion of home and concepts of identity. With this analysis, the article presents an understanding of some of the multifarious meanings of home and identity.

Home and Identity

The theoretical framework of this article draws upon studies from different disciplines to understand home and identity. In its simplest form, the word *home* is used to refer to "one's fixed residence, the center of domestic life" (Knopp 2002, 15). Nevertheless, once we look deeply into the term and its various uses, we realise that *home* denotes much more than a specific geographical location. As Scott McQuire notes, "the older geographical question 'where

is my home?' has been replaced by a newer question: 'What is the meaning of home?'" (1997, 528). Studies that move away from the literal meaning of home to a more abstract understanding of it complicate the relationship between home and place. In his studies of exile, Hamid Naficy notes that "*home* is anyplace; it is temporary and it is moveable; it can be built, rebuilt, and carried in memory and by acts of imagination" (1999, 6). Nicole Schröder states that "not for everybody is home located in a certain house, at a certain address – rather, it might be connected to people, family, and friends, or it might be associated with a specific feeling" (2006, 34). However, for bell hooks – the cultural critic of race, class and gender issues – our understanding of home changes according to our feelings and experiences:

> At times, home is nowhere. At times, one knows only extreme estrangement and alienation. Then home is no longer just one place. It is locations. Home is that place which enables and promotes varied and everchanging perspectives, a place where one discovers new ways of seeing reality, frontiers of difference (1990, 148).

Therefore, the meaning of home can differ and is changeable.

Not only that, but the meanings of home can also be contradictory. On the one hand, home can be connected to feelings of protection and stability. As Cresswell notes, home is "an exemplary kind of place where people feel a sense of attachment and rootedness. Home, more than anywhere else, is seen as a center of meaning and a field of care" (2004, 39). For Clare Marcus, home is "a place of self-expression, a vessel of memories, a refuge from the outside world, a cocoon where we can feel nurtured and let down our guard" (1995, 4). On the other hand, while home could embody positive meanings, such as stability and protection, it could also be viewed as a space of exclusion and oppression. Schröder affirms that

> it makes much more sense to view home as a site of and for ambiguity since its protective functions are interconnected with its limiting characteristics. Feelings of solidarity, safety, and protection are often achieved by severe acts of exclusion and regulation, which are in turn oppressive (2006, 33).

From this point of view, home is viewed as a space of "control" (Douglas 1991, 287) and as a "context for the exercise of power" (Sibley 1995, 91). Thus, homes are about shelter as much as they are about dominance.

Another contradiction of meanings appears in the relationship between home and self-expression. On the one hand, home is seen as a place that allows alternative versions of the self to emerge, "since the exclusion of the outside can also mean the protection from restricting outside forces such as social norms and laws" (Schröder 2006, 32). On the other hand, home can "be a place of limitation and even oppression, a place where the self is heavily restricted" (Schröder 2006, 32). Home therefore does not have the same meaning for everybody, and people's feelings towards it are complex: a mixture of yearning and resistance. These complex meanings of home signify that homelessness too cannot be simply explained as a lack of a home; rather, it can be defined as the absence of any of the meanings related to home, such as care, protection or – for that matter – identity.

These complex and contradictory meanings of home explain the significance of using it as a metaphor for identity in McGregor's novel. Like home, identity is viewed as fluid, contingent and multifaceted (Hogg, Terry, and White 1995; Novotny 1998; Young 1997). Furthermore, identity is defined as "the set of meanings that define who one is when one is an occupant of a particular role in society, a member of particular group, or claims particular characteristics that identify him or her as a unique person" (Burke and Stets 2009, 3). Like home, then, identity has a double meaning – social and individual – and they are linked together. As Korostelina explains, "most identity theories clearly state that identity has two main components: individual or 'self' identity (which includes role identity) and collective or 'we' identity (which includes group identities and social categories)" (2007, 35). "Social identity," she affirms, "is usually described in terms of group similarities and reflects shared interests, values, and beliefs, while individual identity is defined as a set of individual features and provides a basis for differentiating an individual from other people" (Korostelina 2007, 35). A person's unique and individual identity, however, is implicated in social identity (Byrne 2019, 444). The social context plays an important role in identity construction. Oyserman, Elmore and Smith note that people

> are likely to define themselves in terms of what is relevant in their time and place: Group memberships (e.g., religion, race, or gender),

> family roles, looks, school attainment, or athletic prowess should matter more or less depending on what is valued in one's culture and in one's place within social hierarchy (2012, 76).

However, this does not mean that individuals play a passive role when it comes to the construction and reconstruction of identities (Giddens 1991, 54). Schultermandl and Toplu are of the view that

> if we assume that identity is purely based on choice, it is difficult to account for the social and material realities that result from existing power relations and their impositions on the individual. If we assume identity to be solely inscribed by society onto the individual, we overlook the self-determination and agency of every individual (2012, 12).

Individuals, as Rose suggests, are "neither actors essentially possessed of agency, nor … passive products or puppets of cultural forces" (1998, 189). Both factors – social and individual – play important roles in identity formation.

In her study of social identity, Korostelina explains Mead's (1943) theory of social identity, which indicates that the social identity "Me" and the individual identity "I" "are deeply interconnected: A person makes his or her contribution to the development of society, and society influences the formation of the person" (2007, 36). This article aligns with this view of the complex mechanism of identity formation, which states that the stability of individual identity depends on the social context, in which individuals assess themselves as identical or different to others. As the following analysis shows, McGregor uses the metaphor of home to present this complex mechanism of identity formation.

The association between home and identity has been the focus of many studies (Hauge 2007; Lewicka 2008; Twigger-Ross and Uzzell 1996). Hazel Easthope argues that "the relationship that people have with their physical environment and the ways in which they understand that relationship through different conceptualizations of place are important aspects of identity construction (on both an individual and a group level)" (2009, 74–75). Focussing on home, Jane Jacobs and Susan Smith note that it is "a site for constituting and performing selfhood" (2008, 515). Indeed, the formation of home is closely similar to the formation of individual identity since, as Schröder notes, "both

are based on establishing difference" (2006, 32). That is to say, like individual identity, home formation is connected to acts of inclusion and exclusion, both physically and in an abstract sense. Home formation "depend[s] on strict differentiation between what is familiar (same or similar) and what is other and result in exclusions of what is deemed to be out of place" (Schröder 2006, 2). Similarly, "maintaining the purity of the self, defending the boundaries of the inner body, can be seen as a never-ending battle against residues" (Sibley 1995, 8). Therefore, as Schröder states, "the exclusion of the other in geographic terms can be interpreted as an externalized version of the desire to maintain a stable sense of (a homogeneous, pure) self" (2006, 18). The formation of both identity and home, then, are based on the drawing of rigid boundaries that differentiate between what is oneself and what is not.

In the same way, home contributes to identity formation; the lack of a home impacts a person's sense of self (Boydell et al. 2000; Rayburn and Guittar 2013; Wardhaugh 1999). Indeed, the meanings of home are intensified for those who do not have it and for those whose home exists in the past or in the imagination – something unattainable. The inability of the homeless characters in *Even the Dogs* to draw boundaries between what is home and what is not home influences their understanding and expression of the self and the other. As the following analysis shows, *Even the Dogs* particularly explores this identity confusion for the homeless through its choice of narrative technique.

The Search for Home/Identity in *Even the Dogs*

The main characters in *Even the Dogs*, Danny and Robert, are stripped of their social and individual identities. As mentioned above, the disruption of one results in the disruption of the other. Socially, Danny and Robert feel invisible to the world around them. McGregor portrays this invisibility through the narrative voice used in the book. Christopher Tayler comments that the narrative voice in *Even the Dogs* is "invisible presences of some kind" (2010). As we read the story, we realise that the characters in the novel drift into its world without being recognised. He explains that

> once the reader has settled into the novel's idiom, worries about the narrative perspective begin to fade. Perhaps it makes no difference if "we" are ghosts or hallucinations, living or dead: the kinds

> of people that McGregor is making speak are only very intermittently visible to inhabitants of the regular world either way (Tayler 2010).

Danny and Robert find themselves on the margin; they are always on the outside looking in: "aren't we always outside the remit. We watch" (McGregor 2010, 194). They feel what Carol McNaughton describes as the homeless archetype of "outsiders" (2008, 1). Their wait for recognition becomes more difficult when they find themselves in trouble and in need of help, when they become "most invisible of all":

> Lying on the ground and looking up and waiting for someone to come along and help. In some kind of trouble. A turned ankle or a cracked skull or a diabetic epileptic fit or just too drunk to stand up again without some kind of a helping hand. Which is when you're most invisible of all. Get a good look at people's shoes while they're stepping around you. Like they'll leave you there for days. Like they'll leave you there as long as it takes (McGregor 2010, 58).

When Danny finds Robert's corpse "waiting" in his home for days, he realises that their wait to be recognised by people is endless, which shocks him to the core and sends him wandering the streets in search of answers.

Danny and Robert are invisible to society because they are viewed collectively as drug addicts, alcoholics or homeless people. This is indeed a reflection of the social discourse of the homeless. Celine-Marie Pascale notes that

> although most newspaper articles do not use class to characterize individuals, for people who cannot afford housing, their status as homeless precedes all other information about them, most generally, even their name. People without housing are commonly identified simply as 'the homeless' (2005, 257).

Therefore, she suggests that "the national discourse about people who cannot afford housing is not so much one of wealth and poverty as it is one of community and alienation" (Pascale 2005, 157). Understanding homelessness as an all-encompassing characteristic is dangerous because it distorts the multiplicity of the various identities of the people who experience it. Restricted to the "homeless"

label, these marginalised groups of people have little control over their social identities. As Bauman and Vecchi note,

> for the disadvantaged in society, access to identity is barred – they are given no say in deciding their preferences. They are burdened with the identities enforced or imposed by others; identities which they themselves resent, but are not allowed to shed (2004, 38).

Besides being classified narrowly by society as "homeless," this category is often negatively stigmatising (Rayburn and Guittar 2005, 160), and stigmatised identity attributes are hard to move away from (Brekhus 2003). It is a difficult manoeuvre for homeless people to construct and negotiate their individual identities, no matter how multiple and fluid their identities may be. "Homelessness" is seen as their ultimate "self." This is the struggle that the main characters of *Even the Dogs* face: A collective identity is enforced upon them by a society that strips them of their individuality.

The characters in *Even the Dogs* are perpetually waiting for social assistance, medical attention, love, care and, above all, recognition. The act of waiting reflects a level of passivity and a lack of agency on their part, resulting – as Bauman and Vecchi (2004) explained above – from the collective identity enforced upon them by society and the difficulty of shedding it. Jena notes that "homelessness poses a significant threat to the individual's positive sense of identity, as they live in a world of uncertainties, characterized by social isolation, discrimination, injustice, and fear characterized by the danger of prosecution, lack of protection and insecurity" (2020, 43). Because society fails to recognise their individuality, homeless people find refuge in the collective and generic identity imposed upon them: the homeless. Issues such as homelessness – at certain times and given the "right" contextual conditions – supersede the atomised individuality of the person. When drug addiction is involved, as in *Even the Dogs*, individual identity becomes even more distorted, and users temporarily escape the burden of individuality and identify with a group. "Heroin use," Abigail Gosselin argues, "causes individuals to cross identity boundaries, and it unites different people around a shared compelling interest, equalizing not only moments in time but also potentially distinctive markers of identity" (2011, 137). Gosselin also notes that markers and boundaries of identity are not so determinate for many people. "Problems like addiction," she emphasises,

"can obscure or highlight these boundaries, complicating or simplifying identity as a result" (2011, 137). Identity boundaries are obscured when drug addicts experience collective moments of ecstasy. Their sense of identity is superseded by a (temporary) identification with each other and they feel as one: "it's like when you're on the gear all your emotions and memories are blocked up" (McGregor 2010, 186). This state of collective identity is highlighted in the novel through descriptions such as the following:

> The rest of us sleeping. Danny and Ben and Laura and Mike and Ant and whoever else happened to be around. Or not quite sleeping but closing our eyes and listening to the music coming from the taped-up stereo in the kitchen, some broken-beated lullaby holding us up against the walls and against each other, while our hands fall open and spill the spoons and pipes and empty cans, the scraps of foil and paper and cotton wool. Our crumbs of comfort scattering across the floor. Our open hands (McGregor 2010, 9).

Being together and experiencing the same level of ecstasy, they feel as one. Ben Malbon argues that certain social situations, such as clubbing, allow a "going-beyond of individual identities, an experience of being both within yet in some way outside of oneself at once" (1999, 49). This state could apply to homeless people and drug addicts, who alternate between an awareness of their individual identities and a sense of collective identification with other members of the group. The homeless characters in *Even the Dogs*, then, are not completely passive when it comes to identity formation. Ultimately, they yearn for individuality and, at the same time, find comfort in the collective identity to which they choose to escape, which is also enforced upon them by society.

The narrative voice in *Even the Dogs* significantly embodies the way this confusion and alternation of individual and social identity operate for homeless people. McGregor uses an ambiguous "we" to narrate, and unify, the story of all characters. Every now and then, however, the narrative voice shifts from "we" into an "I," a "he" or a "she," giving each character a unique and recognisable voice. As Tayler notes, in *Even the Dogs*, "distinct characters start emerging from the ragged compound voice" (2010). These characters "are both depressingly similar and strongly particularised" (Tayler 2010). Donna Nurse describes the narrative voice in *Even the Dogs* as a "ghostly Greek

chorus" with characters "taking a turn as soloist" (2010). The narrator "we," she notes, "effortlessly slip[s] in and out of each unmistakable voice" (Nurse 2010). To make sense of the collective, yet fragmentary narrative voice in *Even the Dog*, Toby Clements compares these voices to organs in the body: "[A]s Robert's body is bagged and driven across town for its post-mortem, McGregor performs a similar operation on Danny and Steve and Heather and Laura, taking each one in turn as if they were organs in Robert's body" (2010). This comparison is useful because it reflects the type of relationship these characters have with each other; they feel like and are referred to as one, yet at the same time, they are distinct from one another.

Furthermore, in its attempt to reflect this interconnection between social identity and individual identity, *Even the Dogs* utilises the metaphor of home as a representation of identity. Presenting home as a symbol for individual identity, it draws an analogy between home and the physical as well as emotional peculiarities of the characters. The reader of the novel can immediately notice the resemblance, for example, between Robert's home, in a housing block, and his dead body. Robert's home is dirty and messy; the wallpaper is tattered, and "peppered spores of mould thicken and spread towards the ceiling" (McGregor 2010, 11). When Robert's body is found, it is in a similarly horrible condition. The policeman "shines a torch over the body, the damp clothes, the broken and blistered flesh. … the swollen and softening skin, the sunken gaze, the oily pool of fluids spreading across the floor. The twitch and crawl of newly hatched life, feeding" (McGregor 2010, 5). There's a resemblance between Danny's imaginative appearance and imaginative home, too. When Danny daydreams about he and his wife being healthy, clean and drug-free, he imagines the home they'll be living in as clean and fully equipped:

> And for a minute he'd seen the two of them somewhere else, somewhere clean, a brief and lonely vision of them dying clean and healthy in a big wide bed of their own, a car in the driveway, two cars in the driveway, jobs to go to, his contact lenses in a little case on the bedside table, the smell of coffee and bread drifting in from a spotless kitchen at the other end of the house and the two of them clean and naked in bed beneath soft white sheets without scars or sores or bruises or scabs (McGregor 2010, 44).

Home not only reflects Robert's physical appearance, but his past behaviours as well:

> Tea-stains the colour of old photographs splash across the wall, lingering long after the broken cups are cleared away …. A dent, the size of a fist or a forehead is hidden by a framed school portrait … the damp patches spread further, and the paper sags away from the wall, and the ceiling stains a darkening nicotine yellow (McGregor 2010, 10–12).

The stains and dent in the wall suggest that the emotional damage resulting from these violent behaviours is still lingering inside of him and has not healed. This image of home, reflecting Robert's physical and emotional side, resembles his individual identity.

Yet, as suggested above, Robert's individual identity is deconstructed by outside factors, which he submits to. When Robert learns that his wife and daughter are never coming back, he decides to sell all of his furniture, which alludes to the idea that he is giving up all the peculiarities that form his individual identity. Gradually, his home empties and is deconstructed literally. Two men from a rental shop carry the furniture from the home without looking at – that is, without recognising – him:

> The last things to go, as the flat kept emptying out, were the television and the washing machine. Two men from the rental shop came and collected them, and he didn't have whatever it might have taken for an argument. Strength, heart, fucking, gumption or something. There's nothing worth watching anyway, he joked, as they unplugged the television and carried it out of the flat without looking at him. Mind your backs lads, he said, as they eased the washing machine down the hallway, dripping water behind them and taking a chunk out of the doorframe on their way through (McGregor 2010, 60).

The gradual emptying of Robert's home reflects the gradual loss of individual identity that he experiences in every encounter with the outside world, where he is viewed solely as homeless.

To illustrate the characters' obscuration of identity boundaries, the novel destabilises the meaning of home as a protected and private space by representing it as being continually invaded. Throughout the story, doors and windows are used to invade the privacy of homes rather than to exclude invaders. Once doors and windows are open, all kinds of things rush into a home; things that can be felt with almost all the senses: "sunlight comes in" (McGregor 2010, 10), "exhaust fumes from the road drift in" (McGregor 2010, 11), "spring air" (McGregor 2010, 11), "sounds of children being called home for bed, and music, and the faint shouts of football games on the playing fields" (McGregor 2010, 11). The novel itself opens by breaking down the door and completely demolishing the privacy of Robert's home: "they break down the door at the end of December and carry the body away" (McGregor 2010, 1). The novel also highlights the idea of home as an invaded space by depicting Laura storming into Robert's flat through the kitchen window (McGregor 2010, 1). Even when Robert is alive, he has no control over who enters his home:

> For a moment the room feels crowded again, crowded like it was the last time we were all here together with Robert stretched out on the floor the way he always was by the end of the night, with that look on his face he only ever got when he was sleeping. And there he is, snoring, spluttering, reaching out a hand behind his head like he's looking for something to hold on to. One of us, Heather probably, leaning forward to pull his coat more snugly across his broad chest, his shoulders, tucking his hat back on to his head until she sees the rest of us watching (McGregor 2010, 9).

Robert's home is a place where everyone can hang out: "seemed like the deal was if people brought him food and drink they could hang out in his flat" (McGregor 2010, 30). The walls of the home, too, are not intact separators between the outside and the inside. They are torn and blistered. Rather than providing enclosure and structure, they reveal chaos and a lack of boundaries.

Destabilising home as a private and protected space problematises the characters' relationships to home and, by extension, to individual identity. The characters' conceptions of their individual identities seem to be similarly distorted. They fail to find themselves because they are unable to fit in within society, to feel "at home" anywhere or to find their social identity. For Danny,

home is like "when you're climbing a tree and the branch breaks off. You're still holding on to the branch but you're falling through" (McGregor 2010, 34). This image alludes brilliantly to the contradictory forces these characters face: No matter how hard they try to find their individual identity beyond the label "homeless," they fail because they feel rootless, detached and invisible to society all the time. Danny and his friends yearn to find and express their individuality, and to be recognised for it, yet they always find themselves forced into, and at the same time gravitating towards, the generic category of the homeless. While every one of them has his/her own characteristics – such as age, background, education and hobbies – once they become *homeless*, the differences between them flatten and they identify themselves essentially as *homeless* – a group of people who share nothing in common except the lack of a home.

Conclusion

Through the metaphor of home, McGregor represents how a lack of social identity calls into question individual determinants of identity. The issue of the novel's characters goes some way beyond the search for a home to live in; the quest here is to feel at home in oneself. Immersed in the social identity of "the homeless," the characters' search for a home is a search for an individual identity that they never found. Since having a home is one of the main identifiers of one's identity, homelessness promises only confusion and a loss of one's sense of self. The characters find themselves lost and constantly in a state of waiting. Through its representation of the homeless characters' struggle with identity formation, the novel presents an exemplary display of the difficulties involved in obtaining a positive social identity that acknowledges individuality and differences. The home metaphor used in *Even the Dogs*, in other words, helps us understand the struggle of marginalised people to "place" themselves in society.

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