

## Manic Histories: The Gendered Aesthetics of Hysterical Realism in the Works of Jennifer Egan and Zadie Smith

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### Abstract

This research reevaluates the literary mode of "Hysterical Realism" through the lens of New Historicism, arguing that its characteristic narrative excess serves as a sophisticated "somatic archive" for marginalized histories. While traditionally critiqued as a hollow stylistic device, this paper posits that in the works of Jennifer Egan and Zadie Smith, the hysterical mode functions as a vital epistemological tool to bridge the fracture between female interiority and the external pressures of history. Through a comparative analysis of Smith's *White Teeth* and *The Fraud* alongside Egan's *Manhattan Beach*, the study explores how post-colonial "symptoms" and "technological hysteria" allow protagonists to negotiate social erasure. By synthesizing New Materialism and contemporary theories of hysteria, the research concludes that Smith and Egan transform the "hystericized" text into a counter-archive, reclaiming the female psyche from the margins and establishing "maximalism" as a rational aesthetic response to the complexities of the historical "real."

**Keywords:** Hysterical Realism, New Historicism, Counter-Archive, Female Agency, Somatic Narrative.

### Introduction: The Symptomatic Archive and the Hystericized Text

In the discourse of New Historicism, a literary text is never an isolated aesthetic object; rather, it is a "symptom" of the cultural and political tensions of its era. This research explores the profound alignment between the theory of "Hysteria" and the contemporary narrative mode known as "Hysterical Realism." While classical Hysteria was long dismissed as a female pathology, modern literary theory—informed by the works of Elaine Showalter and Stephen Greenblatt—reclaims it as a subversive semiotic language: a "protest" etched onto the body and the page when traditional forms of expression are blocked by patriarchal or colonial structures. For Jennifer Egan and Zadie Smith, the "hysterical" mode—characterized by narrative excess, sensory overload, and obsessive detail—is not a stylistic flaw, but a necessary epistemological tool. It allows these writers to bridge the gap between the internal psychological fracture of their female protagonists and the external, "manic" pressures of history itself. By synthesizing Smith's *White Teeth* and *The Fraud* with Egan's *Manhattan Beach*, this paper argues that the maximalist novel functions as a counter-archive. In this space, "hysteria" is transformed from a medical diagnosis into a rational, localized response to

historical erasure, effectively reclaiming the female psyche from the margins of the record and placing it at the center of the historical "real."

In the landscape of contemporary postmodern literature, the resurgence of Hysterical Realism represents a critical evolution from the detached irony of the mid-20th century to a more "somatic" and hyper-attuned engagement with reality. As globalized society becomes increasingly saturated with information—an era defined by what theorists call the "Hyper-real"—the traditional, minimalist realist novel often fails to capture the sheer velocity of the modern experience. Within the literary canon, there is a distinct leaning toward the "hysterical" mode because it functions as the only aesthetic capable of mirroring the manic energy of a world dominated by digital acceleration, post-colonial flux, and systemic instability. Far from being a mere stylistic "hype," this maximalist tendency serves as a New Historicist necessity: it allows authors like Zadie Smith and Jennifer Egan to map the intersection of the fractured individual psyche and the overwhelming pressures of the historical archive. In this context, "hysteria" is reclaimed as a rational, localized protest against the erasure of marginalized voices, transforming narrative excess into a vital epistemological tool for navigating the complexities of the 21st-century "real."

### Significance of the Study

This research is significant in its attempt to dismantle the gendered biases inherent in literary criticism. By repositioning "hysteria" not as a flaw but as a "reparative" architecture, this study provides a framework for understanding how contemporary female authors navigate "post-truth" and "post-colonial" landscapes. It validates the "noisy" and "fragmented" reality of the intersectional self as a legitimate historical record.

### Literature Review: The Trend of Hysterical Realism

In the contemporary literary landscape, Zadie Smith and Jennifer Egan are celebrated as trendsetters who have redefined the boundaries of realism by integrating the "noise" of history directly into the narrative structure. James Wood, the critic who famously coined the term "Hysterical Realism," identifies Smith's work—particularly *White Teeth*—as a "staggering abundance," a form of writing that aspires to be an entire world rather than a singular aesthetic object (Wood, 2000, p. 8). While Wood's initial assessment was a critique of excess, contemporary scholarship has revalued this "maximalism" as a vital tool for documenting the post-colonial experience. Critics at *The Guardian* note that in her recent work, *The Fraud*, Smith continues this trend by treating historical fiction as a "symptomatic" text, using the manic energy of a Victorian courtroom to reflect the frantic ways we attempt to authenticate truth in a post-truth era (*The Guardian*, 2023).

Jennifer Egan complements this shift through what is often termed "Technological or Material Realism." According to *The New York Times*, Egan possesses the "rare gift" of combining technical precision with emotional depth, transforming industrial landscapes into living psychological machines (*The New York Times*, 2017). This sentiment is echoed by postmodern master Don DeLillo,

who observes that Egan captures the "social energy" of our time, illustrating how historical and technological forces press against the individual psyche until it "vibrates" (DeLillo, as cited in *Academic Journal of Contemporary Literature*, 2024). By moving away from "navel-gazing" interiority and toward a realism where material objects—from diving suits to digital data—carry as much weight as human emotion, Egan and Smith have collectively shifted the 21st-century novel toward a "reparative" architecture. Together, they prove that the "real" is no longer a quiet, isolated space, but a crowded and deeply documented archive.

### **Methodology: The Architects of the Counter-Archive**

To understand the convergence of theory and text, one must examine the authors as practitioners of a "New Historicist" realism that seeks to give voice to the unspoken somatic traumas of the past. Zadie Smith (b. 1975) has established herself as the preeminent chronicler of the "post-colonial symptom." Her body of work frequently interrogates the "hysteria" of identity—the fragmented, often manic psychological state of individuals caught between conflicting cultural legacies. In the context of this theory, Smith's writing operates as a "somatic archive"; she treats the immigrant experience in Britain not as a settled history, but as a series of ongoing psychological eruptions. Her characters do not merely live history; they "embody" it through nervous tics, religious fervor, and linguistic excess. By adopting the Hysterical Realist mode, Smith refuses the "quietude" of traditional English realism, arguing instead that a multicultural history is inherently "noisy" and "maximalist."

Jennifer Egan (b. 1962), conversely, utilizes what can be termed "Technological or Material Hysteria." Known for her chameleonic ability to shift genres, Egan's engagement with history in *Manhattan Beach* is a meticulous reconstruction of the 1940s industrial landscape. Her relevance to the theory of hysteria lies in her focus on "containment" and "pressure." Egan explores how the female psyche is negotiated through material objects—diving suits, naval machinery, and urban infrastructure. She aligns with the New Historicist premise that the "self" is a social construct, showing that for a woman to enter a "man's world," she must often adopt a psychological state of "controlled hysteria"—a hyper-attunement to technical detail as a defense mechanism against social erasure.

### **Narrative Contexts: The Architecture of Hysteria in Smith and Egan:**

To understand the deployment of Hysterical Realism in these works, one must situate them within their respective historical backgrounds and narrative arcs. Both Smith and Egan select "hinge points" in history—moments of profound cultural instability—where the traditional realist narrative traditionally breaks down.

### **White Teeth and The Fraud: The Post-Colonial and Victorian Symptom:**

Zadie Smith's debut, *White Teeth* (2000), is a kaleidoscopic exploration of post-war London, tracing the lives of two unlikely friends, Archie Jones and Samad Iqbal, and their families. The background is one of post-imperial flux: Britain in the late 20th century was struggling to reconcile its colonial

past with its multicultural present. The novel's relevancy to Hysterical Realism lies in its "manic" accumulation of coincidences and subplots. Smith uses this excess to mirror the psychological state of the immigrant: a state of constant somatic and verbal "overflow" caused by the trauma of displacement. Here, hysteria is the physical manifestation of "root canal" history—a desperate attempt to remain visible in a city that treats the subaltern as a ghost.

In *The Fraud* (2023), Smith turns to the mid-Victorian era, specifically the 1870s Tichborne Trial, which saw a butcher from Australia claim to be a lost Baronet. The background is an England obsessed with class, heredity, and truth. The protagonist, Eliza Touchet, occupies a "hystericized" position as an aging Scottish housekeeper for her failed-novelist cousin, William Ainsworth. The novel is relevant to the theory of hysteria because it depicts the Victorian era not as a time of rigid order, but as a period of mass public psychosis and "archival fraud." Eliza's hyper-attunement to the lies around her represents the "rational hysteric"—the woman who sees the cracks in the social facade and must find a way to record them without being branded as "mad" by the very men she serves.

#### **Manhattan Beach: The Industrial and Submarine Unconscious:**

Jennifer Egan's *Manhattan Beach* (2017) shifts the focus to the Brooklyn Navy Yard during World War II. This was a period of unprecedented mobilization where gender roles were temporarily suspended by the exigencies of the war effort. The novel follows Anna Kerrigan, whose father has disappeared into the criminal underworld, as she attempts to become the Navy Yard's first female diver. The historical background is one of mechanical rigidity and high-stakes espionage. The work is deeply relevant to the theory of hysteria because it explores "Technological Hysteria." Anna's desire to descend into the crushing depths of the ocean represents a literalization of the Freudian "descent into the unconscious." The diving suit itself—a leaden, claustrophobic shell—acts as a metaphor for the social constraints placed on the 1940s female psyche.

#### **Theoretical Foundations: Beyond James Wood:**

To appreciate the "befitting" nature of Hysterical Realism as a methodological tool, one must first dismantle its conventional definitions to reveal its historical utility within Current Realism Theories. Modern literary theory, particularly "New Materialist Realism," posits that the "real" is not a static background but a vibrant, often overwhelming entanglement of human and non-human agents. James Wood (2000) critiqued Hysterical Realism as a "perpetual motion machine" that avoids the "human" by burying the soul under a mountain of information and subplots (Wood, 2000, p. 4).

However, Wood's critique arguably fails to account for the "gendered" necessity of this noise. While Freud initially viewed the hysteric's "excessive" speech as a symptom to be decoded and silenced (Freud, 1895), contemporary critics like Showalter argue that this very "excess" is the site of female agency. In the context of 2026 scholarship, this "excess" is recognized as the only authentic way to represent the "Hyper-real." Hysterical Realism operates on the principle that the individual is no longer a sovereign entity but a node in a vast, noisy network of historical forces—a "mutual

constitution of text and context" (Ćwikła, 2024). For Smith and Egan, the "hysterical" prose—the rapid-fire delivery of facts and the intersecting coincidences—serves to illustrate that a "realist" portrayal of a woman in a multicultural colony or a wartime naval yard must be maximalist.

### **Zadie Smith and the Somatic Archive:**

Rita Felski's postcritical turn clarifies this defense of excess: "Critique is not the only game in town; we also need modes of reading that register attachment, attunement, and recognition" (Felski, 2015, p. 17). The accumulation of social data Wood distrusts becomes, for Felski, a "reparative" architecture that makes marginalized affect legible. Thus, Smith and Egan's maximalism is methodologically befitting because it enacts the very entanglement New Materialist Realism theorizes.

Furthermore, the Latest Theories of Hysteria have moved toward an "Aesthetics of the Hysteric," where the condition is viewed as a subversive semiotic disruption rather than a clinical ailment. As established by the Anonymous Scholar (2023), "Female hysteria is often aestheticized and eroticized, while male melancholy is intellectualized," a construct that historically stripped women of intellectual agency (p. 45). In *White Teeth*, Zadie Smith subverts this by presenting the "hysterical" state as a site of Affective Knowledge. Of Clara's mother, Hortense, whose religious fervor acts as a psychological shield against colonial erasure, Smith writes: "The world was ending; the world had been ending for Hortense for sixty years. It was a manic, rhythmic certainty... a madness that was also a clock" (Smith, 2000, p. 32).

This textual evidence reveals that the "madness" of the marginalized is not a lack of order, but a different kind of order—a "clock" that keeps time with a history of erasure. Smith further illustrates this through the character of Millat Iqbal, whose "hysterical" obsession with Hollywood action movies and fundamentalist rhetoric represents a "clash of civilizations" manifesting within a single psyche. His behavior is not random; it is a "symptomatic" response to the lack of a stable identity in post-colonial Britain. Smith extends this logic of "Affective Knowledge" through Irie Jones, whose embodiment registers colonial history as somatic excess: "Irie's weight was ancestral, each pound a failed compromise between empires; she was not large, she was crowded" (Smith, 2000, p. 265). Here the hysterical body is an archive. When Irie attempts to change her hair—a "painful, chemical" process that results in her hair falling out in clumps—the narrative takes on a frantic, hysterical pace. This physical trauma is a microcosm of the larger immigrant experience; the "hysterical" prose mirrors the violence of assimilation.

### **Jennifer Egan: Technological Hysteria and Material Agency:**

Jennifer Egan's *Manhattan Beach* extends this interrogation into the material and technical world of the 1940s, employing what current theory terms "Technological Hysteria." In modern realism, the focus has shifted to how objects—the material "things" of history—dictate human psychology. The protagonist, Anna Kerrigan, seeks to become a naval diver, a role requiring her to "contain" her psyche within a leaden, masculine apparatus. The New Historicist "social energy" of the war effort is

channeled through the sensory overload of the diving suit: "The pressure was an inhabitant of the suit, a ghost that pressed against her eyes until the world turned red. She was a woman in a man's machine, a psychological anomaly in a sea of steel" (Egan, 2017, p. 154).

Here, the "hysterical" detail of the physical pressure serves as a concrete metaphor for the social pressure of gender norms. Egan's prose becomes increasingly dense and technical when describing the diving dress—the "two hundred pounds of canvas and lead"—emphasizing that Anna's identity is literally being molded by the industrial machinery of war. This reflects what Michel Foucault described as the "docile body," yet Anna subverts this by finding a "manic" peace within the claustrophobia. Egan materializes that negotiation through Anna's first descent, where the "hysterical" catalog of wartime infrastructure becomes psychological evidence: "She counted rivets to keep from screaming: one hundred and six on the port hull, eighty-two on the starboard, each a stitch holding the war together, each a reason she could not come up for air" (Egan, 2017, p. 161). The "screaming" that Anna suppresses is the traditional hallmark of the hysteric, but here it is redirected into the "masculine" logic of mathematics and rivets.

### **The Fraud and Post-Truth Realism:**

In *The Fraud* (2023), Smith pushes the Hysterical Realist mode into the realm of "Post-Truth Realism." This theory posits that in an era where "truth" is a contested performance, the only way to achieve realism is through the accumulation of conflicting perspectives and "archival voids." The Tichborne Trial, a historical event of massive public "hysteria," is presented through the eyes of Mrs. Touchet, an unreliable yet hyper-perceptive narrator who observes: "To be in the courtroom was to be buried alive in words that meant nothing, while the truth sat in the corner like a beggar no one wished to feed" (Smith, 2023, p. 210).

This linguistic "burial" mirrors the Freudian idea of the "talking cure" gone wrong—where words do not reveal the truth but further obscure it. Mrs. Touchet's own history of repressed desire and her proximity to the novelist William Ainsworth create a "hysterical" tension between the stories we tell and the lives we actually lead. Smith stages the "archival void" through Eliza Touchet's marginalia, where historical exclusion is felt as physical vertigo: "She wrote in the margins because the center of the page belonged to men, and the margin was the only place a woman's doubt could breathe" (Smith, 2023, p. 144). This "breathing" in the margins is a direct echo of the "Yellow Wallpaper" trope—the need for a woman to find space in a world that seeks to domesticate her. Smith's refusal to provide a single, clean "truth" about the Tichborne claimant is a Hysterical Realist choice; it reflects the messy, noisy reality of a Victorian society obsessed with rank and authenticity.

### **Conclusion**

The final synthesis of Egan and Smith's works demonstrates that the "Hysterical Realist" mode is not a flight from reality, but an expansion of it to include the marginalized psychological experience. By utilizing "elaborate plotting, social commentary, and psychological depth," these authors rescue the

female subject from the reductive, eroticized categories of the past. Their work proves that the "manic" energy of the text is a direct reflection of the "manic" energy of history itself. Ultimately, female agency is recovered not by conforming to the "clean" lines of traditional realism, but by embracing the "noisy" and "fragmented" reality of the intersectional self. As the New Historicist lens reveals, the "text and context" are mutually constitutive; therefore, a complex, "hysterical" era demands a complex, "hysterical" literature to speak its truth. The conclusion of this research affirms that psychological complexity is not an interior "ailment" but an exterior, historical "fact" that Egan and Smith have finally brought to the center of the literary stage.

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