

The Ghost in the Machine: The Persistence of Personal Identity in Hanif Kureishi's *The Body*

Mohammed Senoussi

Faculty of Letters and Languages, University of M'sila
University Pole, Road of Bordj Bou Arréridj, M'sila 28000 Algeria
Email: mohammed.senoussi@univ-msila.dz

Abstract This paper examines the complex relationship between mind, body, and identity as represented in Hanif Kureishi's *The Body* (2002). The narrative centres on Adam, an elderly writer who undergoes a radical transformation—a brain transplant into a youthful body. Through this futuristic scenario, Kureishi compels us to question traditional notions of selfhood. Using an interdisciplinary approach—drawing on insights from brain science, philosophy, psychology, posthumanism, and literary theory—this paper argues that Adam is still Adam stressing on the brain crucial role in the persistence and coherence of personal identity through time. It is thus the brain that matters not the 'body' as implied by the novel's title. The body is nothing but a vehicle of the self, a machine-like carrier of consciousness. In short, this paper attempts to use the novel as a laboratory for thought experiments where the dimensions of personal identity can be easily tested and observed.

Keywords Personal identity; narrative identity; chronotopic identity; cognitive psychology; Hanif Kureishi; philosophy of the mind

Author **Mohammed Senoussi** is the vice dean who directs scientific research, postgraduation, and external relations at the Faculty of Letters and Languages, University of M'sila, Algeria. His research interests include literature with a focus on cultural contact, the political community in Africa and the Middle East, philosophy, post-colonialism, history and language. He is the author of twelve articles that appeared in top-notch outlets in the USA, Europe and Asia by famous houses of publication such as Brill, Penn State University Press and Taylor and Francis.¹

¹ This research is one part of The Special Program of Zhejiang University "Comparative Studies of Languages and Cultures of BRICS Countries: A Perspective of the Global Civilization Initiative" supported by the Fundamental Research Funds for the Central Universities of China.

Introduction

Years ago, we witnessed in the Arab world, where I belong, the rise of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) that marked a dark period. One of its diabolical assassination methods was beheading people as a strategy to spread a culture of terror recalling Conradian scenes in *Heart of Darkness* (1901). At the same time, a contrasting narrative emerged in the West. Sergio Canavero, an Italian neurosurgeon, announced the potential for head transplants—attaching a human head to a new body. His bold claim in 2015, that such a surgery could happen within two years, sparked debates among scientists. Indeed, in the West, scientists were discussing the possibility of attaching spinal cords and nerves in the future where Canavero's operation can be feasible; while here in the Arab world, heads were cruelly cut.

This juxtaposition made me contemplate the nature of personal identity. There are different ways to define personal identity, depending on the context and the perspective. Merriam-Webster defines it as the persistent and continuous unity of the individual person normally attested by continuity of memory with present consciousness. If such a head transplantation is possible philosophically, how we maintain a personal identity. Is the sense of self and the persistence of personal identity tied to the brain, grounded in bodily criteria, or based on something more like a soul or spirit? Where is the place of the self, the soul, the "I"? Is the self all material or just an illusion? I look at my photos of childhood and I can recognize myself; but scientifically speaking, I am not the same person on the cellular, atomic or molecular level now. No single atom in my body is similar to that of the child in the photos. So, how can I feel this sense of continuity and unity through time? This paradox of continuity and change fuels my fascination and obsession with the amalgamation of neurosciences, philosophy, posthumanism, psychology and the emerging genre of 'neuro-fiction'. Neuro-novels have emerged as a reaction to the expanding field of brain research. They are avant-gardist works that experiment with literary conventions and engage in a dialogue with theoretical neuroscientists to portray the complex nature of consciousness, the self and human psyche.

Historically speaking, during the first industrial revolutions, the functions of human body and brain were paralleled to that of a machine. With the progress of human thought and the dawn of the fifth industrial revolution, mental functions are treated as computational processes in the brain. All our body processes are nothing but biochemical 'algorithms' (Harari 82). Transhumanist theorists believe that with the availability of powerful computational powers, they can simulate the human brain and even surpass it with quantum computers. Indeed, the 1990s was labelled

as the ‘Decade of the Brain’ by U.S. president George H. W. Bush as part of a larger effort involving funding for research into human consciousness that had been scarce during the peak years of behaviourism. A new generation of celebrity psychologists, neuroscientists, and philosophers of mind published bold titles such as Daniel Dennett’s *Consciousness Explained* (1991) and Steven Pinker’s *How the Mind Works* (1997).

With these developments, the fascinating nature of the human mind turns into a hot-potato topic for novelists. They attempt to represent the psychic interiority and consciousness in order to determine how, under this new regime of brain science, personal identity can be understood. As a consequence, psychoanalysis was regarded as ‘bankrupt’ (“Writing on the Brain”). Therefore, the obsession with describing human personalities through the clinical lens of neuroscience has now permeated the realm of fiction, where characters and their inner lives are increasingly shaped by neuroscientific concepts. This literary breed was inaugurated by Ian McEwan’s 1997 novel *Enduring Love*, that portrays a man with de Clérambault’s syndrome. Other examples include Jonathan Lethem’s *Motherless Brooklyn* (1999), in which the protagonist has Tourette’s syndrome; Mark Haddon’s *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time* (2003), narrated by an autistic teenager; Rivka Galchen’s *Atmospheric Disturbances* (2008), about a man who suffers from Capgras syndrome and stops recognizing his wife; and Lisa Genova’s *Still Alice* (2007) that tells the story of a professor at Harvard who develops early-onset Alzheimer’s. Indeed, contemporary fiction requires of its audience a measure of scientific literacy.

One of the biggest riddles in science and philosophy is the nature of our identity. We tend to believe each body houses a single mind, but brain research suggests otherwise. Why could not one body have multiple minds? This is exactly what happens in Dissociative Identity Disorder. Jeni Haynes’ story is a powerful example. Her book, *The Girl in the Green Dress* (2022), describes how she endured horrific sexual abuse by her father. The extraordinary strength of her mind found a way to cope—dissociation. This defense mechanism created over two thousand separate personalities, called alters, each protecting her from the trauma in unique ways. These alters form an inner army to shield her.

On the other hand, some cases seem to show one mind existing in two bodies as in the case of the Chaplin sisters, identical twins, who speak exactly at the same time and finish each other sentences (Wright). The brain is indeed the carrier of personality; Nicholas Humphrey, a renowned neuropsychologist, says that the self, consciousness and behaviour are nothing but the “surface feature of the brain” (*The Mind Made Flesh* 78).

We can thus argue that personal identity which image is a fragile concept that can be influenced by many factors. If one injures his finger, nothing will happen. But a brain injury will inevitably cause a personality change. To put it simply, one's sense of self depends on the well-functioning of the brain; the brain is the guardian of identity as many clinical cases demonstrate this, especially the well-known case of Phineas Gage. This latter is arguably the most famous case study in the history of neuroscience. He survived an iron rod piercing through his skull, but this physical injury profoundly altered his identity. Although his memory and cognition had not been changed, his once gentle personality slowly degraded. He became a man of bad and rude ways, disrespectful to colleagues, and unable to accept advice. His plans for the future were abandoned, and he proceeded without thinking about the consequences. Gage became irritable, irreverent, rude and profane, traits that were not part of his past character. His transformation was so great that everyone said that "Gage is no longer himself" (Teles 419).

We can also imagine philosophical cases of brain transplants that refute body identity, or cases like Gregor Samsa in Kafka's *The Metamorphosis* (1915) who is transformed from a young man into an ugly giant bug. Therefore, personal identity based on bodily criteria is neither attractive for novelists nor for philosophers.

Thus, building on these ideas, we will examine *The Body* (2002) by Hanif Kureishi, the well-established British author, that thrusts us into the heart of this interdisciplinary exploration through the unconventional narrative of Adam, an elderly man who undergoes a radical transformation—a brain transplant into a young, healthy body. Adam, a successful old writer, meets his surgeon who warned him that after the transplant into a new body "not everyone wants to go back" (23). Like Shelley's modern Prometheus, the selected novella raises questions about the nature of identity and the ethical implications of disrupting death. Kureishi's narrative portrays a transhumanist future where the body is treated as a commodity; the rich can customize their look and bodies as one character (a new-body) says: "What's the point of being rich if you're lopsided and have a harelip? It was a joke, a mistake that I came out alive like that! This is the real me!" (113) The novella predicts the emergence of a new class of superhumans or as Harari Yuval describes: "having raised humanity above the beastly level of survival struggles [wars, diseases and starvation], we will now aim to upgrade humans into gods, and turn *Homo sapiens* into *Homo deus* [man-god]" (26). These 'new bodies,' including the protagonist Adam—as the author refers to them—tend to lead a bohemian, hedonistic life, indulging in sensual pleasures. This recalls Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1890), a classic exploration of the schism between the

outer self and the inner psyche. Kureishi further portrays death and aging, for this emerging elite class, as mere technical problems that can be overcome in a post-human future: “Soon everyone’ll be talking ’bout this. There’ll be a new class, an elite, a superclass of super-bodies. Then there’ll be shops where you go to buy the body you want. I’ll open one myself with real bodies rather than mannequins in the window. Bingo! Who d’you want to be today!” (114)

This audacious scenario serves as a powerful thought experiment, prompting us to critically examine the complex relationship between mind, body, and the essence of who we are. We will thus use philosophical, psycho-cognitive and literary insights to argue that Adam's journey, far from eroding his sense of self, offers compelling evidence for the remarkable adaptability and resilience of the human brain in preserving core identity.

To make the journey inside the mind of Adam possible, we will employ different sets of criteria to analyze personal identity: continuous memory, psychological continuity, narrative identity and persistence of personality. First, Locke emphasizes the importance of psychological continuity and memory as a criterion for personal identity. Locke argues that gaps in memory result in a shattered self, and consciousness is what allows an individual to connect the past to the present self to create and maintain a personal identity. He says: “self depends on consciousness not on substance” (*The Philosophical Works of John Locke* 474). Consciousness can be regarded here as ‘memory.’ This idea is recently updated and revised by the famous British philosopher Derek Parfit in *Reasons and Persons* (1984). Parfit argues that identity and memory come from the same place: “a psychological connectedness and continuity maintained inside our heads” (206). In short, memory is essential for the continuity and coherence of the self; i.e., personal identity is built on conscious remembering.

Additionally, numerous studies borrowed insights from Paul Ricœur in that storytelling and narration are integrally related to the construction of the narrator’s identity. Ricœur’s view is that personal identity consists in narrative identity, which he defines as a dynamic and evolving coherence between one’s life story and one’s self-understanding. He argues that a person is the same over time if he can tell a coherent and meaningful story about himself and his experiences (116-17).

Similarly, the philosopher Daniel Dennett has put forth a theory of the self in many of his works as ‘a center of narrative gravity’ (another narrative metaphor). Dennett claims that the self, rather than being a unified entity which persists across time, is an evolutionarily adaptive cognitive interpretation utilized by organisms (primarily human beings as they have the means of language) in order to effectively

navigate their social and physical environments (“The Self as a Center of Narrative Gravity” 03). In other words, our consciousnesses are constantly writing multiple draft stories about who we are. The self is the draft that emerges from this process. Others have adopted a similar view suggesting that we are essentially narrative beings who experience and make sense of our lives in a story-like way. In short, the center of subjective experiences that gives us the sense of who we are is for Dennett the little person behind the eyes—as Nicholas Humphrey calls it “my inner eye” (1986) my consciousness incarnate. This homunculus is the Cartesian theatre that Dennett coined — the notion that consciousness occurs at a single place in the brain, symbolized by a small person within it receiving all sensory input and issuing commands.

From what have been said so far, discussions both within the scientific and lay literature prove the centrality of the brain, not the body as implied by the novel’s title. Adam’s skin and flesh do not represent his personality, but stories, narration, mindset and memories inside the brain which is the very seat of consciousness. The body is nothing but a vehicle of the self, a machine-like carrier of our consciousness; we are the ghosts in the machines in the Cartesian sense. Therefore, this paper attempts to contribute to the ongoing debate of identity using the novel as a laboratory for thought experiments in which the dimensions of personal identity can be tested and observed.

Consciousness and Narrative Identity

To lay the foundation for the discussion of Adam’s narrative identity, we will first explore his stream of consciousness. Consciousness itself remains one of the greatest mysteries in science and philosophy, one that contemporary authors often seek to explore, reimagine, and demystify in their works. In fact, the novella is structured around memory, language and Adam’s narration. The point of view, or “focalization” within a character helps bring fictional characters closer to the reader. The author uses internal monologues; in other words, the stream of consciousness as a realistic way to exemplify thought processes of Adam. Stream of consciousness writing allows the novelist to create the illusion that the reader is sharing sensations and uncensored thoughts inside the character’s mind. Therefore, access to the protagonist’s internal experiences, psyche and mindset enhances the reader’s grasp of his external reality. It is therefore a symphony of the self beyond the flesh par-excellence as the author puts it in the novel:

I was, I noticed, becoming used to my body; I was even relaxing in it now. My

long strides, the feel of my hands and face, seemed natural. I was beginning to stop expecting a different, slower response from my limbs. There was something else. For the first time in years, my body felt sensual and full of intense yearning; I was inhabited by a warm, inner fire, which nonetheless reached out to others—to anyone, almost. I had forgotten how inexorable and indiscriminate desire can be. Whether it was the previous inhabitant of this flesh, or youth itself, it was a pleasure that overtook and choked me. (54)

A brain transplant is presented in the novel as a consciousness transfer; in a trans-humanist sense, informational patterns of human identity are transferred to the new body (Hayles xii). Thus, the novella is structured around Adam's unchanging mind and consciousness within both bodies. Indeed, a model of the human mind must be, in effect, a model of the human brain: and the human brain is unimaginably complex as Nicholas Humphrey puts it (*The Inner Eye* 66). It is as if every human being possesses a kind of an 'inner eye' (Adam's inner eye is still Adam's within the skull) which looks in on his brain and tells him why and how he is acting in the way he is - providing him with what amounts to a plain man's guide to my own mind (Ibid 232). Consequently, Adam is not an unconscious zombie or a hollow man without an "inner eye", a machine that has no insight into anything which is happening inside it. Humphrey says that "the inner eye may have evolved for one purpose and one purpose only—to enable people to 'read' the behavior of other people like themselves - but with it we have the capacity to make our minds the measure of all things" (Ibid. 88). So, Adam's narration and stream of consciousness interpret his brain. The author exposes Adam's consciousness, the inner picture he has of what it is like to be himself, his self-awareness: the presence in Adam of a spirit, (self, soul ...) which we can call "I". It is the "I" that has thoughts and feelings, sensations, memories, desires. It is "I" that is conscious of its own existence and continuity in time. 'I' is, in short, the very essence of a human being. This presence called 'I' in Adam's new body has no separate reality - separate, that is, from the activity of his own brain. Everything which he is consciously aware of corresponds in one way or another to a brain state.

Furthermore, Adam's symphony of the self is composed of myriads experiences and aspirations. This symphony is excavated by the author who lays it bare for us through a series of snapshots (flashbacks) bridging Adam's past with the present:

He helped me recall moments with my own children: my boy, at four, fetching

me an old newspaper from the kitchen, as he was used to my perpetual reading... The kid sent me into an unshareable spin. I wept alone, feeling guilty at how impatient I had been with my own children. I composed a lengthy email apologizing for omissions years ago, but didn't send it. (69)

These snapshots serve as potent testaments to the enduring coherence and narrative arc of Adam's life. Interestingly, recent advancements in neuropsychology suggest a paradigm shift in our understanding of memory storage. While traditional metaphors depict memories of childhood or yesterday for example as cinematic experiences, contemporary research indicates that the brain store them akin to these fragmented snapshots. Thus, it is the job of brain to fill in the gaps between fragments of memories using narration to establish coherence, as Dr Shohamy says: "Our memory is not an accurate snapshot of our experiences. We can't remember everything" (qtd in Cantor).

Here, Ricœur notes that the subject comes to self-knowledge through the construction of a 'coherent and acceptable story' about himself. Ricœur's argument is that narrative identity can account for change within the general configuration of a life and that the subject can be both the writer and reader of his own life (Crowley 12). Adam as we have seen so far is both the writer and the reader of his life. He even tries to bridge and harmonize the two poles of his past self as a writer with his new one unlike Shelley's incoherent creature in Frankenstein. Writing defines him, pen finds its way back to his hand once more: "In the corner of the room, on a small table, were some papers. "Please don't look at that," I said. "Why not?" "Leave it! I'm trying... to do something about an old man in a young man's body" (130).

Marya Schechtman argues that personal identity is not merely a matter of biological continuity but of narrative construction: "constituting an identity requires that an individual conceives of his life having the form and the logic of a story—more specifically, the story of a person's life—where 'story' is understood as a conventional, linear narrative" (qtd. in Hyvärinen and Watanabe 350). In *The Body*, Adam's return to writing after his transplantation is not incidental—it is a profound existential act of narrative recovery. Writing allows Adam to reassert authorship over the new chapter he is living through. More than just a symbolic act, Adam's return to his desk—despite having a new body—signals the continuity of narrative agency. His memory is intact, his aesthetic sensibility persists, and the desire to articulate his thoughts through language remains central to who he is. When he remarks: "I couldn't resist sitting down at my desk. I looked at the photographs of my children at various ages. I knew where everything was, though my hands were

bigger and my arms longer than before... I wrote a few words... I had to tear myself away” (137), he is not simply performing a habitual action. He is reclaiming his narrative identity—bridging the past and present through the act of authorship. The physical discontinuity (bigger hands, longer arms) is acknowledged, but it does not disrupt the coherence of the self who remembers, reflects, and writes. Moreover, Adam was a writer before the transplantation, and writing is a unique marker of human identity that differentiates us from other creatures—an externalization of consciousness. In continuing to write, he performs an act of existential affirmation: he is still Adam, the storyteller of his own life. Schechtman’s framework helps to illuminate this process, particularly in a posthuman context where bodily identity is a fragile concept.

Language and narration are indeed the carriers of identity and the self. Word making and narration here can be seen as self-making. We may agree with Paul Ricœur’s claim that narration bridges the line and mediates between the two poles of identity: *idem*-identity (sameness or permanence) or *ipse*-identity (selfhood or uniqueness). Adam in this sense has preserved both types of identity. These two poles constitute the narrative identity of Adam which is present and intact due to memory, language and stories.

In the previous passages, we can see how unbroken memory preserves Adam’s narrative identity and his relationship with his wife and children. Adam recalls the events and experiences that they shared. By recalling his wife and children’s identities, Adam also maintains his own narrative identity and the continuity and coherence of his life story. Indeed, this plot aligns with Nancy Katherine Hayles’ claim who is a famous literary posthuman scholar: “The clear implication is that if we can become the [story] we have constructed, we can achieve effective immortality” (13). Unlike the body, which is temporary and subject to change especially in a futuristic context through plastic surgeries, brain transplants and mind uploading, narratives and stories endure.

Indeed, Adam is able to present his identity, namely, by telling stories. These stories are generally told in order to give the listener—and often also the teller—the possibility to make inferences about who and, more often, what kind of person the teller is and what context the person wants to be seen as belonging to. By telling about what has happened, the actions, “the self” and the identities of the past may cast their reflections on the present teller, investing him or her with virtues of the past in order to negotiate identity in the present (Hydén & Bülow 72). Therefore, Adam appears to retain the full repertoire of his prior linguistic and cognitive prowess, retaining his eloquence and acuity of thought, along with reliability and

validity. In line with Ricoeur, Adam is the same person over the course of the novella because he can tell a coherent, reliable and meaningful story about the past, present or future.

So, in this philosophical literary inquiry, we try to make clear the notion that “human thought is fundamentally structured around stories” (Gerrig 473). We may also agree with Dennett that Adam’s narrative self is like a center of gravity within the brain, “each normal [homo sapien] makes a self. Out of its brain it spins a web of words and deeds, and, like the other creatures, it does not have to know what it’s doing; it just does it” (Dennett, *Consciousness Explained* 416). In a word, Adam epitomizes the enduring of the self within a new posthuman body. Adam’s narrative and psychological self persists demonstrably through his first-person narration within the same web of consciousness:

I enjoyed all of it, and after chatting with the designer, whom I’d known slightly in my previous body, I was offered a job in one of his shops, with the prospect of becoming a buyer, which I declined. I did ask him, though, whether, by any chance, as I was a “student,” he’d read any of “my”—*Adam’s*—books or seen “my” plays or films. If he had, he couldn’t remember. He didn’t have time for cultural frivolity. Making a decent pair of trousers was more important. He did say he liked “me”—*Adam*—though he had found me shy at times. He said, to my surprise, that he envied the fact that women were attracted to me (61).

The narrative in the novel seems to lean towards the psychological continuity view, as Adam’s internal monologue and interactions with others reflect his ongoing sense of self. We can also add that Adam attempts to re-establish his ‘chronotopic identity’ as a husband, a father and a writer. The concept of the chronotope was originally developed by the Russian literary critic Mikhail Bakhtin (1981) for the analysis of space-time continuum in novels. Bakhtin’s chronotopes of time and place are a way of analysing how different literary genres and texts represent the interrelation of time and space in their narratives. Bakhtin defines the chronotope as “the intrinsic connectedness of temporal and spatial relationships that are artistically expressed in literature” (84—85). Bakhtin explicates how people inhabit different concrete chronotopes in the course of history in two millennia of literary production and how this, in turn, is socio-historically reflected in social realities and practices. To Bakhtin, in these literary texts, time “thickens, takes on flesh, becomes artistically viable” and space becomes “charged and responsive to the movements of time, plot and history” (84). Indeed, the representational capacity of the literary chronotope lies in the inseparability of time and space in constructing narratives, characters and ‘responsible actions’ (Steinby & Klapuri 105-125). Identity in this

case is *chronotopically* organized in captivating time-space configurations that are never random. For instance, at the university, I am a lecturer; but at home, I am a father. So, the university is a chronotope that imposes the identity of a lecturer on me.

While Bakhtin's concept of the chronotope has been extensively explored in literary studies, its specific characteristics, types, and functions have never been systematically examined in the context of mind-body relationship. Hence, time and space organization and configuration according the Bakhtinian notion tell us who we are; Adam in the following holds both spatial and time memories making his identity stable and consistent:

I'm not sure why, but I returned to the part of London I knew. I felt safer, and more at ease in my mind, in a familiar place. In your own city, you don't have to think about where you are. Being pursued had frightened me; I was scared all the time now. I had no idea whether Matte would still be following me. I must have convinced myself that he'd lost interest in me. (113)

Spatial and temporal attachments and intrinsic connectedness are not damaged by the brain transplantation. Adam even tries to restore his chronotopic identity as a loving husband when he visits his home after being chased: "I put on my wife's favourite record. I kissed her hands and felt her body against mine as we danced. I knew where to put my hands. In my mind, her shape fitted mine. I didn't want it to end" (138) In fact, unlike the Cartesian principle, Adam's sense of self can be replaced with 'I feel, therefore I am.' Feelings and emotions can be more reliable, authentic and real for the protagonist.

Therefore, we can say that Hanif's novel uses Bakhtin's concept of chronotope to illustrate how brain transplantation does not affect memory and cognition. The existential dimension of Adam is unbroken: how he relates to himself, others, and the world through time-space. In short, space-time continuum gives Adam the impression of existence and self-assertion unlike his journey to Greece where he felt like a fraud and stranger by fabricating stories and living a lie.

The Persistence of the Self beyond the Flesh

At this stage, we will argue that Adam's personal identity and consciousness are by-products of the physical brain and nervous system, without which they cannot exist according to Materialist philosophy. Indeed, materialists agree that identity, personality and consciousness (the mind) are the functions of the brain. Personal

identity in this case is dependent on the physical continuity and functioning of the brain not the body. If the brain is damaged, altered, or destroyed, then personal identity is also affected or lost. Adam in the novel is aware that he cannot beat death or disrupt it, he is doomed in his old body: “age and illness drain you, but you’re never aware of how much energy you’ve lost, how much mental preparation goes into death” (46). Adam is aware of the decay of his body and of all the bodies around him; “I have friends in worse shape” (2). He also believes that the body and the soul are not two ways of describing the same thing, namely a human being, but distinct, separate entities. He is like a ghost living inside an exhausted machine epitomizing the boredom of existence: “you say you can’t hear well and your back hurts. Your body won’t stop reminding you of your ailing existence. Would you like to do something about it?” “This half-dead old carcass?” I said. “Sure. What?” “How about trading it in and getting something new?” (1) In a transhumanist setting, this is what the ‘Newbody’ technology allows for—the possibility of changing to a new and younger ‘facility’ whenever the current one is deemed old or deteriorating. Ageing for the rich will be nothing more than a technical problem. Ralph, a newbody, proposes for Adam a brain transplant which is not really an organ transplant at all, but a “full-body transplant” as we will argue. It moves a person from one organism to another.

In this provoking story, Adam is similar to the ‘Ship of Theseus’ which is a famous thought experiment. In Greek myth, Theseus, a legendary king, sailed away after defeating a monster. Each year, the Athenians would repair the ship to keep it sailing. But over time, every single piece of wood was replaced. A question was raised by ancient philosophers: after several hundreds of years of maintenance, if each individual piece of the Ship of Theseus was replaced, one after the other, was it still the same ship? This philosophical experiment and symbolic story parallels with Adam’s dramatic physical change. Indeed, as Hanif Kureishi puts in the novel: “The identity theorists are going to be busy worrying about this one” (45). The story offers a peculiar identity amalgamation in terms of form, material, body and mind. Adam himself is mesmerized by the result of this fusion that is debatable: “I loved this multiplicity of lives; I was delighted with the compliments about my manner and appearance, loved being told I was handsome, beautiful, good-looking. I could see what Ralph meant by a new start with old equipment. I had intelligence, money, some maturity, and physical energy. Wasn’t this human perfection? Why hadn’t anyone thought of putting them together before?” (64).

Again, science shows how the body can trap the mind, like a prison for our consciousness. Locked-in syndrome is a real-life example. This is a neurological

illness caused by damage to the brainstem, often from a stroke. People with this condition are completely paralyzed, but their minds are still alert and aware (Maciejewicz 476). For instance, Martin Pistorius, the ghost boy as the South African media calls him, spent twelve years locked in his paralyzed body. He says: “For so many years, I was like a ghost. I could hear and see everything, but it was like I wasn’t there. I was invisible” (Snow). Ralph’s wife in the story had a disease similar to the Locked-in syndrome that made her life unbearable: “His wife, with whom he had been in love, suffered from a degenerative illness that destroyed her body but left her mind unharmed... She said that all she needed was a new body. They tried many treatments in several countries, but in the end she was begging for death” (11). This postmodern story proves that we are ghosts within machines. The posthuman body is nothing more than a vessel that can be replaced, updated or enhanced.

Even before the transplant, Adam felt out of place in his decaying body. The world around him, shaped by youth, speed, and image, had already rendered him obsolete. His body could no longer serve as a viable interface with this postmodern landscape, prompting a deep existential estrangement. He describes himself as “*hollow*” (4), echoing Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man* (1952), a reference that signals not only social invisibility but also a loss of embodied subjectivity. This sense of being a ghost in the machine anticipates the novel’s central conceit: the transformation of the human into posthuman. Adam’s decision therefore to undergo brain transplantation is not merely a medical or cosmetic procedure. It represents a full ontological leap into a posthuman mode as Adam escapes his “ailing existence” and “half-dead old carcass” (9) that has no touch with real life. This mid-life crisis of the hero is recurrent in Hanif’s late novels. In this narrative instead, the author chooses a peculiar tale of metamorphosis to help the protagonist restore his curiosity of the world, has a second chance, renews his narcissism and escapes mortality and decay:

I am no longer familiar with the pop stars, actors, or serials on TV [...] It is like trying to take part in a conversation of which I can only grasp a fraction. As for the politicians, I can barely make out which side they are on. My age, education, and experience seem to be no advantage. I imagine that to participate in the world with curiosity and pleasure, to see the point of what is going on, you have to be young and uninformed. Do I want to participate? (5)

The new body is not his own, biologically or historically; it is purchased (like

clothes and accessories) and disconnected from his natural life span. In this sense, Adam becomes a posthuman subject par-excellence—a hybrid entity in which the continuity of personal memory coexists with a posthuman constructed form. This creation of a posthuman body is not secondary; it is central to the novel's critique of identity in a commodified, post-biological age. Therefore, the body or the shell for Adam means realizing the ultimate transhumanist dream of combining the virility and stamina of a young sensual body with the wisdom and life-experience of his original brain.

Moreover, some diseases, like Alzheimer's, can cause people to lose their sense of self. Patients do not even recognize themselves in the mirror in the late stages of the disease. This shows that identity cannot be based solely on bodily criteria. In this line, Adam after the transplantation tries to examine his identity through and with the looking glass that causes a paradoxical image resulted from the coexistence of the familiar and the defamiliar, of the past identity and the present image in Adam's memory. This image produces uncanny feelings as Adam says:

A theory-loving friend of mine has an idea that the notion of the self, of the separate, self-conscious individual, and of any autobiography which that self might tell or write, developed around the same time as the invention of the mirror, first made en masse in Venice in the early sixteenth century. When people could consider their own faces, expressions of emotion and bodies for a sustained period, they could wonder who they were and how they were different from and similar to others... My children, around the age of two, became fascinated by their own images in the looking glass... As I said to them: Make the most of it, there'll be a time when you won't be able to look at yourself without flinching... According to my friend, if a creature can't see himself, he can't mature. He can't see where he ends and others begin. This process can be aided by hanging a mirror in an animal's cage. (31)

This passage brings to mind the mirror stage and identity concept in psychoanalysis that was developed by Jacques Lacan. Adam is indeed like a child trying to relate to his image to self-identify. This stage is similar to the stage of childhood development. This identification forms the basis of the ego, which is the imaginary sense of self that persists throughout life. The ego thus depends on external images and symbols for its formation and validation. However, as we claimed in the introduction, body identity is not persistent through time. This takes us into the famous mind-body philosophical problem. Does Adam remain Adam because

she has the same consciousness and memories? Is identity maintained by bodily or brain continuity? Is Adam a physical object, such as his body or brain, or is he a non-physical entity, such as soul or mind? In fact, we cannot ignore Adam's consciousness, preferences, feelings and memories (these are central for Locke as we have seen) that form his personal identity. Besides, the author himself asserts the idea that bodily identity is not persisting and fragile. Adam now, half conscious, in his new body remembers his previous body, conversations and memories with his children. David Hume wrote: "Had we no memory, we never should have any notion of causation, nor consequently of that chain of causes and effects, which constitute our self or person" (17). In fact, Adam is 'pleased' with the body he has purchased, which he will use for six months before returning to his original body, as mentioned earlier in the novella. In transhumanist discourse, the body Adam sees in the mirror feels like a new set of clothes, something to try on and get used to. He approaches this posthuman vessel with excitement, much like someone in a boutique changing room. Adam is fully aware that this body does not reflect his true self. He is not a newborn in the literal sense; he has already experienced childhood and knows how to 'use' a body. As a result, he can bypass the developmental stages that children typically go through. What he must adjust to, however, is the unfamiliar bulk of his new form. As he soon observes, "My feet were an unnecessary distance from my waist. [...] I'd never been unfamiliar with the dimensions of my own body before" (40).

From an intertextual point of view, unlike Adam, Shelley's fragmented creature in *Frankenstein* experiences a failed and permanently incomplete mirror stage. The creature is forced to confront an identity crisis, confessing: "I was dependent on none, and related to none. [...] My person was hideous, and my stature gigantic: what did this mean? Who was I? What was I? Whence did I come? What was my destination? These questions continually recurred, but I was unable to solve them" (128). The creature's tragedy lies in the conflict between his intelligent, conscious mind and the grotesque, misshapen body that imprisons it; a body he cannot reconcile with his inner self.

Therefore, Adam's 'center of narrative gravity' that Daniel Dennett coined has shifted from the old body to the new body. Dennett argues that our sense of self is not a fixed entity but rather a dynamic narrative constructed through various brain processes and can be maintained without a body (Brandon 73). Memories, experiences, and interpretations weave together to create a story of 'Adam' that evolves over time. The centre of narrative gravity represents the core of this story, the point around which our self-perception and experiences revolve. Adam is

aware that he is the same person, his identity is coherent unlike Shelley's creature aforementioned: "I was waiting in the crowded hotel foyer when Ralph hurried in and stood there looking about. It was disconcerting when he didn't recognize the writer he'd worshipped, whose words he'd memorized, the one he believed deserved immortality! It took him a few distracted moments to pick my body out among the others, and he still wasn't certain it was me" (43).

In this transhumanist story, transplanting Adam's brain to a new body would undoubtedly introduce new experiences and potentially alter his perception of the world. However, from Dennett's perspective, the key question is: How does this new information integrate into his existing narrative? As the author presented, we can see that there is a smooth integration. That is to say, the new experiences seamlessly fit into Adam's established narrative, maintaining continuity and coherence. The center of narrative gravity remains stable, and Adam still considers himself Adam.

Besides, in his paper, "Where Am I?" (1978) Daniel Dennett presents a philosophical theory of personal identity. He introduced a thought experiment in which his brain is detached from his body and placed in a vat in Houston, Texas while his body is sent on a mission to recover a warhead beneath the surface of the earth in Tulsa, Oklahoma. They are connected by radio so he can control his body. Dennett then proposes the question of, "where am I?" If his brain is in a whole different location than his body, then where is his personal identity? For the following thought experiment, he names his brain, "Yorick," his body "Hamlet," and he, his identity, is Dennett. He presents three possible answers to the question, "where am I?" The third answer to the question of "where am I" that Dennett provides and the one that seems to satisfy him the most is that Dennett is wherever Dennett thinks Dennett is. In other words, he says, "At any given time, a person has a point of view, and the location of the point of view (which is determined internally by the content of the point of view) is also the location of the person" ("Where am I?" 3). In short, Adam's center of narrative gravity is not located in the fridge with his old body preserved underground; Adam's self thus persists as a narrative thread. If one cuts his finger, does this finger have an identity of its own? Adam has control over how he sees himself in this new form as he reconfigures, invents, drafts and customizes his identity: "Staring at myself in the mirror again, attempting to get used to my new body, I realized my hair was a little long. Whichever 'me' I was, it didn't suit me. I would customize myself" (46).

Once more, Adam emerges, reborn into a fresh vessel, yet his essence remains unaltered—consciousness intact, memories preserved and selfhood undiminished. He transcends what he dubs: "my vanity and fear of decline and death" (22). His

consciousness now inhabits a new machine, marking the dawn of a posthuman age reserved for the elite: “My new body was taller and heavier than my last “vessel” (43). He ‘evolved’ in Ralph’s words (15). Ralph goes on promoting a transhumanist vision of a brave new world for the readers where the body is reduced to nothing more than commodified flesh:

You might, for a change, want to come back as a young woman... Or you could choose a black body. There’s a few of those, he said ... Think how much you’d learn about society and ... all that [...] Whatever. All I want is for you to know that there are options. Take your time. The race, gender, size, and age you prefer can only be your choice. I would say that in my view people aren’t able to give these things enough thought. (26)

At this point, we will focus on two key aspects of the previous quote as they relate to the fragility of bodily identity. The first is idea is that of ‘coming back’ which is frequent in the novel; it is a connotation that brain transplantation is similar to resurrection: “It was common, he said, that people living a “second” life, like people on a second marriage, took what they did more seriously. Each moment seemed even more precious” (19). Religiously speaking, resurrection is believed to occur in a new body because the old body will be gone. The question is whether are we going to be resurrected in our earthly bodies or new heavenly bodies. Certain religious monotheistic doctrines, such as Islam, suggest that in the afterlife, human beings are endowed with new forms of existence. These transcendent bodies are believed to be free from earthly biological needs and functions, such as excretion. Therefore, according to this and from a religious perspective, there will be no bodily continuity in heaven. The resurrected bodies are a new creation. What matters therefore is our consciousness, memories and all the patterns that define us. These memories, psychological and even genetic patterns are the essence of the self that can be preserved in the memory of God for the purpose of resurrection, or maybe stored in a powerful futuristic quantum computer. In this context, resurrection can be reimagined as a high-tech, futuristic event driven by advanced technology.

Indeed, a brain computational theory can therefore suggest a new paradigm of personal identity based on this psychological pattern. It focuses on the brain as a kind of ‘hard drive’ storing all our memories, experiences and life as data. The software and algorithms can be regarded as the mind within the body which are the key to our identity. In other words, it is not the physical body, but the patterns within our brains that make us who we are. This idea agrees with the Lokean criteria based

on memory (For Locke, memory is the same as consciousness) that is essential for self-continuity: “Nothing but consciousness can unite remote existences into the same person, the identity of substance will not do it. For whatever substance there is, however framed, without consciousness there is no person” (Locke, “An Essay Concerning Human Understanding” 183).

Secondly, the quote also touches on gender identity. Ralph suggests Adam could return as a woman, hinting that our bodies might not define our gender after all. Some real-life conditions can make people feel disconnected from their bodies as many empirical medical studies support this. This is the case of ‘gender dysphoria’ as defined by Capetillo-Ventura et al: “gender identity disorder is defined as the inconsistency between physical phenotype and gender. In other words, self-identification as a man or a woman. Experiencing this inconsistency is known as gender dysphoria. The most extreme form, where people adapt their phenotype to make it consistent with their gender identity, through the use of hormones and by undergoing surgery, is called transsexualism” (54). In other words, transsexuals feel ‘trapped’ in the wrong body. Thus, personal identity and the concept of gender transcend mere biological determinism (i.e., genitalia), it is influenced by what is between our ears ‘the brain’. For individuals with gender dysphoria, they will prefer transferring their consciousness or changing their bodies to align with their desires and fantasies mirroring the narrative of Hanif Kureishi: “Some men want to give birth. Or they want to have sex as a woman. You do have one of your male characters say that in his sexual fantasies he’s always a woman” (26). But Kureishi makes it clear that Adam’s identity is consistent and enduring, his fundamental desire remains—the return as a male. Ralph asks “are you particularly attached to your identity?” Adam replies: “It never occurred to me not to be” (27). All in all, this discussion of identity in a transhumanist age aligns with the radical deconstructing claims of philosophers such as N. Katherine Hayles and Francesca Ferrando, who argue that identity in the future will transcend gender, race, class, age, disability and the histories of the human body (Ferrando 219). Adam, however, resists this erasure of personal history favoring unity and persistence; he does not wish for it to be replaced by herstory.

Adam’s answer suggests that he has always taken his identity for granted. It implies a natural, perhaps unconscious, attachment to his identity, as if it is an integral part of his being that he has never thought to question or detach from. This exchange also raises the question of whether our identity is something we actively construct and maintain, or if it is a fundamental aspect of our existence that we inherently accept without question. In a philosophical context, this dialogue

could be seen as a reflection on the mind-body problem. It aligns with the views of philosophers like John Locke, who believed personal identity was tied to continuity of consciousness, and Derek Parfit, who viewed personal identity as psychological connectedness and continuity. Parfit crystalizes this as follows: “If some future person would be uniquely psychologically continuous with me as I am now, and this continuity would have its normal cause, enough of the same brain, this person would be me” (“We are not Human Beings” 32). This approves the Lockean view of personal identity against animalists who believe brain transplant is similar to liver’s transplant. Personal identity is not identity of the whole body but, merely, identity of that part of the body—which, contingently, is the brain—which is the central organ controlling memory, character and personality (Noonan 18).

Furthermore, as we read, Kureishi uses his literary talent to capture our attention on how it is possible wake up in a new body. Adam waking up after the transplantation is similar to a radio analogy in which the brain is a remarkable aerial or receiver. He regains consciousness as follow:

This semi-sleep continued. Somehow, I became aware that I was without my body. It might be better to say I was suspended between bodies: out of mine and not yet properly in another. I was assaulted by what I thought were images but which I realized were really bodily sensations, as if my life were slowly returning, as physical feeling. I had always taken it for granted that I was a person, which was a good thing to be. But now I was being reminded that first and foremost I was a body, which wanted things (35).

Using a radio analogy to describe Adam’s brain as it produces consciousness suggests that self may transcend the body, functioning as a configuration within the brain that receives signals from an enigmatic source. Our brains are fascinating indeed, they are the most complex piece of matter in the universe. This universe is supposed to be conscious by some philosophers, notably those who embrace panpsychism.

The universe being conscious is not as extravagant a hypothesis for panpsychists. Physics is just mathematical structure, and there must be something that underlies that structure, something that “breathes fire into the equations,” as Stephen Hawking put it (Gleiser). Philosopher Philip Goff argues that it is a conscious mind that “breathes fire into the equations’ (Ibid). This has the advantage of explaining fine-tuning. We may therefore understand Adam's identity this way. Without a signal, the radio (brain) will not work. Consciousness depends on the

brain for operation just as we need a lamp for light. The brain is the processor and receiver. The body is a mere vehicle and a machine with a ghost inside. If the body provides the platform for experiencing the world, the brain plays a crucial role in constructing our sense of self. In short, this suggests a non-physical aspect to identity, potentially agreeing with dualist views. So, transplanting Adam's brain (receiver) into a new body (different components) could be seen as 'fine-tuning' the radio to a new frequency. While the core configuration (self) might remain.

To conclude this part, within a dualistic framework, in which the body is regarded as a mere vehicle of the person, or a carrier of the brain, Adam's personal identity is persisting through time. Bodily continuity is not necessary. Besides, the Cartesian principle 'I think, therefore I am' can be applied to Adam as he has the ability to think, reflect, respond, and above all to use the pronoun "I". In short, the instances discussed in this article demonstrate that Adam's posthuman condition does not suspend his identity; instead, it amplifies the philosophical paradox at the core of the posthuman debate: the self as both mutable and enduring. Through memory, narrative, and reflexive language, Adam inhabits the body of a stranger while maintaining the voice of someone intimately familiar—himself.

Conclusion

In conclusion, our exploration of Hanif Kureishi's *The Body* has delved into the complex question of personal identity. The narrative compels us to confront the boundaries between self and flesh. We tried to provide adequate evidence that leans heavily towards the brain as the architect of our identity. Adam's memories, his capacity for reason, and his persistent sense of self, all transcend the confines of his new body.

Using the novel as a thought experiment, we have encountered the terrain of Materialist philosophy, where the brain is the "hard drive" storing the essence of who we are. Locke's emphasis on memory and Parfit's concept of memory and psychological continuity resonate with Adam's experience. Borrowing insights from Ricœur, Dennett, Humphrey and Bakhtin also helped in understanding the nebulous nature of personal identity. Adam's exploration of his new body raises questions about the role of physicality in shaping the sense of who we are. Perhaps the answer lies in a symphony, rather than a singular note. Our identity might be a harmonious interaction between brain, body, and experience where the brain conducts the orchestra. Ultimately, *The Body* served a laboratory where the enduring power of literature can help illuminating the mysteries of our existence, reminding us that the greatest explorations are the journeys within.

Works Cited

- Bakhtin, Mikhail M. *The Dialogic Imagination: 4 Essays*. University of Texas Press, 1981.
- Brandon, P. "Body and Self: an Entangled Narrative." *Phenomenology and the Cognitive Sciences*, vol. 15, no. 1, 2014, pp. 67-83. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11097-014-9369-8>
- Capetillo-Ventura, N.C, S.I. Jalil-Pérez, K. Motilla-Negrete. "Gender Dysphoria: An Overview." *Medicina Universitaria*, vol. 17, no. 66, (January - March 2015), pp. 53-58. DOI: 10.1016/j.rmu.2014.06.001
- Cantor, Carla. "When Storing Memories, Brain Prioritizes those Experiences that are most Rewarding." *Columbia News*, Columbia University in NY (26 Nov. 2018). <https://news.columbia.edu/news/when-storing-memories-brain-prioritizes-those-experiences-are-most-rewarding>
- Crowley, Patrick. "Paul Ricœur: the Concept of Narrative Identity, the Trace of Autobiography" *Paragraph*, vol. 26, no. 3, 2003, pp. 1-12.
- Dennett, Daniel C. *Consciousness Explained*. Boston: Little, Brown, 1991.
- . "The Self as a Center of Narrative Gravity" Tufts, Web. 20 June 2010. <http://ase.tufts.edu/cogstud/papers/selfctr.htm>
- . "Where am I?" *In Brainstorms*. MIT Press (1978).
- Ferrando, Francesca. "The Body." *Post- and Transhumanism: An Introduction*, edited by Robert Ranisch and Stefan Larenz Sorgner. Oxford: Peter Lang Publisher, 2014.
- Harari, Yuval Noah. *Homo Deus: A Brief History of Tomorrow*. London: Vintage, 2015.
- Hayles, Nancy Katherine. *How We Became Posthuman: Virtual Bodies in Cybernetics, Literature, and Informatics*. The U of Chicago P, 1999.
- Hume, David. *A Treatise of Human Nature*. Prague, DigiCat, 2022.
- Humphrey, Nicholas. *The Mind Made Flesh: Essays from the Frontiers of Psychology and Evolution*. Oxford UP, 2003.
- . *The Inner Eye: Social Intelligence in Evolution*. Faber & Faber, 1986.
- Hydén, L. C & Bülow, P. "In Dialogue with Time: Identity and Illness in Narratives about Chronic Fatigue." *Narrative Inquiry*, vol. 13, no. 1, 2003, pp. 71–97.
- Hyvärinen, Matti, and Ryoko Watanabe. 2017. "Dementia, Positioning and the Narrative Self." *Style*, vol. 51, no. 3, pp. 337-56. <https://doi.org/10.5325/style.51.3.0337>
- Gerrig, Richard J. "Psychological Approaches to Narrative." *Routledge Encyclopedia of Narrative Theory*, edited by David Herman, Manfred Jahn, and Marie-Laure Ryan. New York: Routledge, 2005.
- Gleiser, Marcelo. "Is the Universe Conscious? A Panpsychism Q&A with Philosopher Philip Goff." *Big Think*, vol. 13, no. 8, (Nov. 2023), <http://bigthink.com/13-8/panpsychism-universe-purpose-philosopher-philip-goff/>
- Kureishi, Hanif. *The Body*. New York: Scribner, 2002.

- Locke, John. *The Philosophical Works of John Locke*. London, George Bell & Sons, 1894.
- . “An Essay Concerning Human Understanding.” In: Nidditch PH (ed) Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1979.
- Maciejewicz, Berenika. “Neuroscience of Consciousness in the Locked-in Syndrome: Prognostic and Diagnostic Review.” *Ibrain*, vol. 8, no. 4, (7 Nov. 2022), pp. 476-480, doi:10.1002/ibra.12077
- Noonan, Harold W. *Personal Identity*. New York: Routledge, 1989.
- Parfit, Derek. *Reasons and Persons*. Oxford UP, 1986.
- . “We are not Human Beings.” *Animalism: New Essays on Persons, Animals, and Identity*, edited by Stephan Blatti and Paul F. Snowdon. Oxford UP, 2016.
- Ricœur, Paul. *Oneself as Another*. U of Chicago P, 1992.
- Shelley, Mary. *Frankenstein*. Richmond: Oneworld Classics, 2008.
- Snow, Kate. “Ghost Boy: Martin Pistorius Recalls Years being Awake but Trapped in his own Body.” *Today*, (29 Jan. 2015). <https://www.today.com/health/ghost-boy-martin-pistorius-recalls-years-being-awake-trapped-his-2d80452772>
- Steinby L & Klapuri T. *Bakhtin and His Others: (Inter)subjectivity, Chronotope, Dialogism*. London: Anthem Press, 2013.
- Teles, Ricardo Vieira. “Phineas Gage’s Great Legacy.” *Dementia & Neuropsychologia*, vol. 14,4 (2020), pp. 419-421. doi:10.1590/1980-57642020dn14-040013
- Wright, Jack. “Identical Twin Sisters who were Famous around the World for... Speaking at the Same Time.” *Dailymail* (October 2020). <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-8838885/Identical-twin-sisters-spoke-TIME-buried-York-cemetery.html>
- “Writing on the Brain.” *The Wilson Quarterly* (1976-), vol. 34, no. 1, 2010, pp. 81-81.