

SHORT ARTICLE

**Novels of Martin Amis: A Review of the Critical Reception**

Sukanta Sanyal  
IIT, Bhubaneswar, India

Tanutrushna Panigrahi  
IIT, Bhubaneswar, India

Lipika Das  
IIT, Bhubaneswar, India

## Introduction

Spanning four decades of his literary career with fifteen novels, ten works of nonfiction, five short story collections, two anthologies and more than four hundred reviews and essays, Martin Amis is currently one of the most interesting living British writers. While his work “has prompted new considerations of realism, postmodernism, feminism, politics, and culture...” it also “inspired some of the most controversial literary debates of the contemporary time” (Keulks, 2006, p. 1) because of his employment of dark and sinister humor, radical sexual themes, shocking vocabulary, unpalatable characterization and the purported commodification of women. This essay would review Amis’s narrative and thematic engagement in the light of the adverse critical comments he has been receiving.

### A *Smorgasbord* of Critical Responses

The *New York Times* called Amis the master of “the new unpleasantness” (Stout, 1990). The novelist Adam Mars-Jones remarked that “It’s easy to write Amis-like sentences, hard to write good ones” (Mars-Jones, 2012).

Notwithstanding such damning criticism, Amis’s literary merit has been highly regarded. Damian Reilly emphasized that he is “the greatest living British writer” (Amis, 2018). Several major commentators on English novels of the postmodern and post-postmodern schools also recognized Amis as a master narrator with an unmatched and unprecedented prose craft. Gavin Keulks in his introduction to an anthology of essays on Amis wrote that it is “... easier to regard him as a literary father in his own right... Amis remains a writer in transition, one who has never failed to captivate readers’ interest and imaginations” (Keulks, 2006, p. 3).

### The Narrative Style

Amis’s narrative style makes some readers supremely satiated while others turn antagonistic and hostile. Theo Hobson, in his essay ‘I’m bored of Martin Amis’ in *The Spectator* wrote, “An author who makes his name by elevating style over substance so dramatically, I suggest, cannot come back from it. It is a one-way act, like losing your virginity” (Amis, 2018). The contemptuous responses were incited as Amis hyper-created meaning through style. While some of his novels like *The Rachel Papers* followed a linear exposition of events, some were partly epistolary as in *Experience*. Some others followed the techniques of time reversal and confused chronology as in *Time’s Arrow*. Brian Finney observed that Amis employed three interrelated techniques: a narrative form of temporal reversal, a narrative perspective of splitting the protagonist and the narrator, and a narrative mode of irony that produces black humor (Finney, 2006, p. 104).

Amis has some characteristic techniques of narration. Mirror narcissism and self-reflectiveness were used in *The Rachel Papers* where Charles Highway frequently observed his own self in the mirror, ostensibly to survey his face but primarily to confront the reflection of his alter ego. Doubling was another technique employed on usually two male characters, as in Gregory and Terrence in *Success*, to highlight their opposing personalities and the reversal of their fortunes. Amis employed the first-person narration technique in *Success* as well as the use of the authorial voice in *Night Train* to ensure that the author’s point of view could be clearly communicated to the reader. Amis literally swam against the extant literary practices of narration and story-telling, thereby inviting both approbation and opprobrium for his body of work.

### Epistolary Narration

In *Experience*, Amis communicated with his parents through letters, an end-product of the exuberance of a teenager, overflowing with ideas and unable to restrict his desire to flaunt his newly acquired knowledge of literature, resulting in a surfeit of ideations but incoherent articulations. However, Amis later apologetically admitted this initial profusion and penury in his memoir *Experience*, “It would be nice to say that I ‘make no apologies’ for my early letters, which will punctuate the first part of this book. But I do: I make fervent apologies for them” (Amis, 2000, p. 12).

Initially he concluded his letters to his parents with P.S. and then P.P.S., which gradually tapered off to only a P.S. or even without that later. His very first letter concluded as:

P.P.S. On [sic] retrospect I consider ‘Middlemarch’ to be FUCKING good – Jane Austen + passion + dimension. Very fine.  
Love Mart, (Amis, 2000, p. 11).

The expletive in capital letters expressing one’s predisposition is both novel and shocking, but not surprising, as Amis had himself stated in the Prospect Interview that he didn’t want to write a sentence that anyone could have written. “Nice things are boring nasty things are funny” (Amis, 2010).

However, these coalesced in the opinions of some discerning readers who argued that Amis’s *oeuvre* lacked depth and reeked in the eddies of the disgusting and the unspeakable. To them, the aesthetics of literature were overpowered by an iniquitous cesspool of shallow words and sentence constructions. Jason Cowley disparagingly referred to Amis as “a turbocharged cartoonist” who was “lost in “the monotonous sublime of caricature” (Cowley, 2001).

### Shocking Neologisms

With his first novel, *The Rachel Papers*, Amis foregrounded the absurdity of contemporary society through satire and caricature, catapulting him to a unique position, where no other writer excited such extreme adulation or tremendous outrage. What made him particularly unique was his linguistic dexterity and neoteric wizardry. He remarked to Emma Brockes, “We are all held together by words” and “when words go, nothing much remains” (Amis, 2017).

In this respect, Amis is a votary of Barthes who had argued that a word “can be erotic on two opposing conditions, both excessive: if it is extravagantly repeated, or on the contrary, if it is unexpected, succulent in its newness” (Benyei, 2006, p. 47).

An example of his unique neologism from *Dead Babies* for which Amis is famous, or rather infamous is the conversation between Quentin and Andy about the pornographic magazines in Keith's possession and his modus-operandi of attaining sexual gratification through the visuals in them: “Yeah, he page-fucks the models” (Amis, 1988, p. 26).

The novelty lies as much in the recentness of the word “page fucks” as in its antiquity. It resonates of the picture-names used in old English as in *Beowulf*, where the body was referred to as a ‘bone-prison’ (Hall, 2005, p. 47).

“Page-fucks” also calls to mind a more contemporary picture-name visual accompanied by the mental masturbations of a sexually unsatiated individual. These were as highly evoking as they were colorful and a fine blend of the antiquated and the contemporary.

The salaciousness of repetition of the word “fuck” found representation in a conversation between Giles and Keith in Amis’s novel *Dead Babies*, igniting the dwarf’s concupiscence (“Andy’s fucked her, Quentin’s fucked her”, Amis, 1988, p. 20).

But the reception was heterogeneous – to some this was an absolute literary ravishment while to others, it was the introduction of a new vitality and contemporaneity in the language.

### **Foregrounding Taboo Subjects**

Based on the malaise and the excesses of the late capitalist western society, Amis’s novels have been anything but euphonious; centering on the unthinkable and the unutterable: male violence, sadism, sexual dysfunction, and pornography, along with the fatuities of contemporary society, contemporary living and millennialism.

Male violence was exposed when Geoffrey physically assaulted his wife, in *The Rachel Papers*. Sadism was exhibited when Quentin and Andy forced a physically incapacitated Keith to test drugs for them first before they tried it themselves in *Dead Babies*.

Sexual dysfunction was highlighted with Andy’s inability to cohabit as the antithesis of a macho man in *Dead Babies*.

Pornography was pronounced through the evocative sexual act between Rachel and Charles in *The Rachel Papers*.

Amis matched his language with the theme of his engagement. He featured them all with great devotion and absolute frankness. It is a veritable no-holds-barred exposition of the sordid details of life, so far shrouded in genteelness and civility. Being the problematic realities of life, they needed to be confronted for their resolution. While few would take the risk, Amis took up the responsibility of their exposition, for their proper understanding and ultimate mitigation.

### **Treatment of Women**

Amis experienced scathing criticism on the grounds of the objectification and commodification of women.

Shanti Padhi stated that Amis’s portrayal of women was “indecent” and “callow” (Parker, 2006, p. 56). Sara Mills thought that he was a “quintessentially sexist writer” (Parker, 2006, p. 56). Such allegations of misogyny cost Amis a Booker nomination. Helen Mc Neil and Maggie Gee, two of the panel of judges for the Booker Prize 1989, had objected to the shortlisting of Amis’s *London Fields* for it on the grounds that its female character Nicola “was a sexist figure of the male fantasy” (Brook, 2006, p. 88).

Amis had tried to escape such ignominy at the very onset of his literary career in his interview on *The Rachel Papers*, “Sex had become fundamentally un-mysterious. I tried to exaggerate this. I mean I wouldn’t like you to think that I felt that way about women, no not at all” (Bragg, 2010).

Despite such protestations, the disrepute of misogyny has stuck to him ever since. Even his attempt at exoneration by putting a woman at the center in his eighth novel, *The Information* failed to offer any redemption.

### **Amis's Legacy**

Amis, with his particular literary techniques, is a master raconteur. His unique style of writing in his linguistic jugglery, neologisms, word spins and biting satire is what makes one cringe and yet, ponder upon the sublime. His pyrotechnics are, after all, not lyrical language or verbal beauty, but the harshness of the word that reflects the reality around man, making him reflect and endeavor to continuously improve and progress in the journey called 'life'. However, the very fact that, despite such a mélange of caustic criticisms, Martin Amis continues to excite such interest in his work testifies to his continuing relevance and overriding importance in the English novelistic scene of the day.

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**Corresponding author:** Sukanta Sanyal  
**Email:** [sukantasanyal@rediffmail.com](mailto:sukantasanyal@rediffmail.com)