Chapter I
Introduction

1.1 Research Background

Narrative does not only present a series of events, but also shapes how characters understand themselves and how readers interpret them. In many contemporary studies, identity is understood not as something fixed, but as the result of narrative construction that gives coherence and meaning to life experience. McAdams (2001, pp. 100-101) explains that identity can be understood as an internalized and evolving story of the self, while Bauer, McAdams, and Pals (2008, p. 81) argue that narrative identity is a dynamic life story that individuals use to interpret their lives. In the same way, Bamberg (2011, pp. 3-4) emphasizes that narrating is central to identity formation because the self is negotiated through storytelling in relation to other people. Therefore, narrative form becomes important. The way a story is told can show how a speaker selects experiences, builds meaning, and presents a certain version of the self.

Rachel Cusk's *Outline* (2014) is a strong example of this pattern. The novel follows Faye, a writer who travels to Athens to teach a summer writing course. The plot is minimal; most of the novel is built through conversations with the people she meets during the trip. In her reading of the *Outline* trilogy, Ophir (2022) shows that Cusk develops a new narrative form through a distant first-person point of view, a non-linear plot, and the dominance of stories that seem to be heard from other people. In this context, the speech of the male characters in *Outline* cannot be understood as neutral reports of the past. Their speech appears as narratives shaped to explain experience, organize meaning, and present themselves in front of Faye.

To examine this pattern, structural narratology remains an important foundation because this study looks not only at what is told, but also at how the story is structured. The distinction between events and the way the story is presented helps explain why Outline does not depend on a dramatic plot, but rather on the form of storytelling within conversations. In this study, Genette's narratological concepts, especially order, duration, frequency, mood, and voice,

are used to explain how the structure of the novel organizes the position of the narrator, narrative distance, and the movement of voices in the text.

However, structural description alone is not enough. The male characters in *Outline* do not only occupy narrative space, but also construct identity through the stories they tell. In this framework, the study focuses on two main tendencies, namely self-presentation and self-justification. Leary and Kowalski (1990, pp. 34-35) explain that self-presentation is the process through which individuals try to control the impressions other people form about them. Meanwhile, Scott and Lyman (1968, pp. 46-47) explain that justification is a form of account in which a person accepts responsibility for an action, but rejects the negative quality attached to that action. Therefore, the stories told by the male characters in this novel can be read as attempts to present a certain self-image while also reinterpreting their life choices so that those choices still appear reasonable or acceptable.

In *Outline*, these tendencies can be seen when the male characters repeatedly shape stories about marriage, work, family, failure, and regret with certain emphases. They do not only tell what happened, but also direct how those experiences should be understood. From the perspective of narrative identity, the act of choosing details, connecting cause and effect, and giving judgment to experience is part of the process of self-construction through narrative. Therefore, the dialogues in this novel can be understood as a space of identity formation, not simply as a means of exchanging information.

Based on this framework, this study analyzes the narrative structure and narrative identity of the male characters in Rachel Cusk's *Outline*. First, this study examines how Genette's narratological categories, namely order, duration, frequency, mood, and voice, organize the novel's narrative structure. After that, it explains how the male characters construct narrative identity through the strategies of self-presentation and self-justification in the stories they tell to Faye.

1.2 Identification of the Study

This study seeks to identify and analyze two interrelated issues in Rachel Cusk's *Outline*. First, the novel is constructed through a framed narrative in which Faye serves as the main narrator, yet much of the discursive space is occupied by the stories told by other characters. As a result, narrative authority and speaking space do not always coincide in a simple or stable way. Second, the extended utterances of the male characters reveal recurring patterns in the construction of the self through narrative. They select details, reinterpret motives, and direct the moral meaning of past experiences in order to present particular versions of themselves. These recurring patterns suggest that identity in the novel does not appear as a fixed essence, but as something narrated, revised, and negotiated through dialogue.

By examining these two issues, the study aims to explain how narrative structure and narrative identity work together in *Outline*, especially in the representation of male characters who tell their stories to Faye.

The research utilizes two theoretical frameworks. First, **Gérard Genette's narratology** is used to examine the structural organization of the novel, particularly in terms of order, duration, frequency, mood, and voice. This framework helps explain how the novel distributes narrative authority and organizes the relationship between Faye's position as narrator and the voices of other characters. Second, the concept of **narrative identity developed by Dan P. McAdams** is used to explore how the male characters construct meaning about themselves through storytelling. In this context, the study focuses on two major tendencies, namely **self-presentation** and **self-justification**. These concepts help reveal how the characters shape their self-image, reinterpret their past actions, and attempt to make their choices appear understandable or acceptable to the listener. Through these two frameworks, the study seeks to show that *Outline* is not only a novel about conversation, but also a novel in which identity is formed and negotiated through narrative.

1.3 Limitation of the Study

This study sets several limitations to keep the analysis focused.

First, the main object of this study is Outline (2014) by Rachel Cusk. This study does not discuss the whole Outline trilogy. It only uses the first novel as the primary text.

Second, the structural analysis is limited to Genette's narratological concepts that are most relevant to the text, namely order, duration, frequency, mood, and narrative voice.

Third, the analysis of narrative identity is limited to selected male characters and to quotations that strongly show self-narration. This study gives special attention to the dialogues in Chapters I, II, IV, and V because these sections most clearly show repeated patterns of identity construction.

Fourth, self-presentation and self-justification are treated as analytical categories that emerge from the findings of the study, not as independent theories separate from the main framework of narrative identity.

1.4 Research Questions

The writer identifies the research problems as follows:

1. How is the narrative structure constructed in Rachel Cusk's Outline?
2. How is the narrative identity of male characters represented through dialogue in Rachel Cusk's Outline?

1.5 Objectives of the Study

Based on the stated research problems, of this research are:

1. To analyze the narrative structure in Rachel Cusk's Outline through order, duration, frequency, mood, and narrative voice.
2. To explain how the narrative identity of male characters is represented through self-presentation and self-justification in Rachel Cusk's Outline.

1.6 Significance of the Study

Theoretically, this study is expected to contribute to the field of literary studies, particularly in the reading of contemporary fiction. By combining structural narratology and narrative identity, this study demonstrates that narrative form and self-construction can be read together. Structure is not treated merely as a technical matter. Instead, this study shows that the formal arrangement of narrative also determines how identity becomes visible in the text.

This study also contributes to the reading of Rachel Cusk's *Outline*. It offers a more focused explanation of how the male characters use dialogue to construct their versions of themselves in front of Faye. Through this approach, the novel can be understood not only as a minimalist or dialogic text, but also as a novel that presents identity formation through selective self-narration.

Practically, this study can serve as a reference for students interested in narratology, contemporary fiction, and identity in literature. It can also assist future researchers who wish to examine dialogue, selfhood, and framed narration in other literary works.