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Aura Of Postmodern Unrealities In Select Novels Of Ian Mcewan: An Intersectional Reading

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Abstract

McEwan's interest in examining the relationship between reality and imagination, history and fabrication in the process of writing is arguably considered as one of the themes related to postmodern metafiction writing. He also adopts the postmodern intertextuality in his writing practice. Such practice of postmodern concerns and strategies confirm his position as a postmodernist. The article deals with the extent to which McEwan's novels can be marked as postmodernist. For this purpose six of his works have been chosen. Firstly, the concept of postmodernism is defined in general terms. Secondly, selected novels are analysed as regards the author's narrative style to find out which of the postmodernist features are present. Finally, the postmodernist features in the novels is summarised.

Keywords: Postmodern Strategies, The Cement Garden, The Comfort of Strangers, The Child in Time.

1. Introduction

Ian McEwan, together with Martin Amis is now the best-known and controversial contemporary British novelist. He has been regarded as a serious, objective writer who is interested in writing about obsessive behaviour, sex and moral corruption. In 1975, McEwan published his first collection of short stories First Love, Last Rites, which won the Somerset Maugham Award. With the publication of the subsequent collection, In Between the Sheets and his two early novels, The Cement Garden and The Comfort of Strangers, he gained the nickname of "Ian Macabre". The macabre continued to be a feature in his later novels. His third novel showed some significant changes from his earlier works. As one of the outstanding British novelists of his generation, McEwan has won several awards. Those honours and awards have confirmed his position at the forefront of the contemporary British literary world, and have ensured him a niche in the British literary pantheon. The contemporary literary field is permeated with all kinds of experimental genres of novels; postmodern novels are one of the most influential ones, with the unique techniques of postmodern narration. Like many writers of this age, "McEwan was strongly influenced by the postmodernist techniques of contemporary novelists such as Irish Murdoch and John Fowles in England" (Han, J., & Wang 2014).

2. Context of Postmodernism in Ian Mcewan's Works

Ian McEwan ranks among contemporary British authors who have been writing and publishing their works in the era designated as postmodernism. Therefore, it becomes necessary to explain the concept of postmodernism in order to place McEwan's work into its context. Literary theorists agree that postmodernism does not identify with totalitarian explanations and arranging all kinds of experience in order. There is no definite validation of acts or events. There is always some doubt and the use of images and symbols gives opportunity for free interpretation. Postmodernism refuses any comprehensive interpretations of the reality, both external typical of realists and internal taken up by the modernists. It is not worth seeking for meaning. Life is a matter of chance and there are no patterns.

On the other hand, social and political conditions are subject to critical comment. Bentley lists a number of society-related issues including provincialism and globalisation, multiculturalism, national identity, gender, class, ethnicity etc. Although he emphasises the diversity of contemporary British fiction, he notices the frequent focus on the relationship between fiction and historical context. He cites Linda Hutcheon's term "historiographic metafiction" in relation to the novels dealing with our reflections on history. The two events which must have left trace in the end-of-century fiction were the collapse of the Berlin Wall in 1989 and the terrorist attack on the World Trade Centre in New York on 11 September 2001 (Bentley 2005: 1 – 3).

3. Postmodern Strategies in *The Cement Garden*

Mc Ewan's first novel deservedly aroused a lot of interest among the literary public. Most of the reviewers considered it a remarkable achievement. John Fowles, for example, applauded the work, recognizing its uniqueness: "McEwan has a style and a vision of life of his own . . . No one interested in the state and mood of contemporary Britain can afford not to read him".

Thematically, *The Cement Garden* foreshadows the future McEwan's novels. The most obvious subject is that of childhood. According to Childs the interest in the child in contemporary British fiction reflects "renewed discussions of the status of childhood . . . at the conclusion of the twentieth century". He points out three dominant themes, namely "child murder, child molestation and the influence of childhood trauma on later life" (Childs 2005: 123 - 124). Although he focuses on the period of the 1990s, it is clear that McEwan's writings anticipated these concerns much earlier. The issue of children becoming adults and adults returning to childhood runs through his lifelong work. The sudden loss of parents and the children's desperate effort to get along without them, Julie's endeavour to replace their mother, Tom's inclination to transvestism and Jack and Julie's incestuous behaviour are rather unnatural encounters with the adult world which necessarily have serious consequences for shaping their adult lives.

Another theme treated in detail is that of gender issues. There are constant references to the gap between men and women. From a simplified viewpoint, the characters are practically schematic. The Father is a typical representative of the male world. There is no doubt about his position of authority in the family regardless of his invalidity:

There were a few running jokes in the family, initiated and maintained by my father. Against Sue for having almost invisible eyebrows and lashes, against Julie for her ambitions to be a famous athlete, . . . and against me for my pimples which were just starting up at that time. . . . Because little jokes like this one were stage-managed by Father, none of them ever worked against him. . . . Jokes were not made against Father because they were not funny. (McEwan 1997: 15 - 16).

The narrator also concentrates on the contradictoriness of the two worlds. He describes Julie's behaviour after Father's death: "She wore make-up and had all kinds of secrets. . . . She had long conversations with mother in the kitchen that would break off if Tom, Sue or I came in suddenly." (McEwan 1997: 29 – 30). Similarly, after Mother's death, Julie and Sue have secret conversation in

the kitchen. This dissonance between the two worlds may be related to another set of images explored by Malcolm, that of exclusion and inclusion. He argues that exclusion prevails both within the family and in its relations with the outside world. The parents never get any visitors, the children never bring friends.There are no neighbours, the Father even plans to build a high wall to isolate the family completely. He is also isolated in his own family.

His children either fear him or despise him. Jack also frequently feels isolated, when he cannot take part in his sisters' conversations (Malcolm 2002: 61). Much like McEwan's later novels, The Cement Garden also touches problems related with the state of the society and public life. The children's rebellion against authorities, rules and norms reflects the state of the society Malcolm considers this opposition to be a metaphor for the "specifically British rejection of a sterile, authoritarian and patriarchal past" (Malcolm 2002: 65).

Genre mixture features markedly in this novel. Malcolm considers the book a "psychological study of adolescence" with many elements of the Gothic and the urban horror(Malcolm 2002: 51 – 52). There are psychological motifs such as adolescent resistance to a parent verging on malice, feelings of shame and guilt, incestuous desire, which mingle with the Gothic features. The decadent lifestyle of the forlorn siblings in the neglected house, the decaying body of their deceased mother buried in the cellar and its smell spreading round the house create a typically Gothic mood. The descriptions of the settings contribute to the gloomy atmosphere. The family's house "was old and large. It was built to look like a castle, with thick walls, squat windows and crenelations above the front door" (McEwan 1997: 23). Not only the house but also the surroundings are dismal, grey places. In the fourth chapter Jack describes one of the abandoned prefabs in the neighbourhood:

> Most houses were crammed with immovable objects in their proper places . . . But in this burned-out place there was no order, everything had gone. . . . There was a mattress in one room, buckled between the blackened, broken joists. The wall was crumbling away round the window, and the ceiling had fallen in without quite reaching the ground. . . . I thought of my own bedroom, of Julie's, my mother's, all rooms that would one day collapse. (McEwan 1997: 40 – 41)

There are no explicit references to specific times or places, the family does not have a surname, Mother and Father are never identified by their names. The protagonists are trapped in a timeless atmosphere. The characters linger on in the stiffness of their days while the house is slowly decaying:

> The days were too long, it was too hot, the house seemed to have fallen asleep. We did not even sit outside because the wind was blowing a fine black dust from the direction of the tower blocks and the main roads behind them. And even while it was hot, the sun never quite broke through a high, yellowish cloud . . . (McEwan1997: 71)

The environment is very symptomatic. No one notices that the children are absolutely forlorn. No one cares about the welfare of others. The description of the complete loss of order and social responsibility gives the impression of admonitory reproach and social criticism.

4. Postmodern Strategies in the Comfort of Strangers

The most evident postmodern feature of The Comfort of Strangers is the subject itself. According to Lye "the challenging of the borders and limits, including those of decency" is one of the typical elements of postmodernist fiction (Lye 1997). Here the relative borders of "decency" are disregarded by an overt description of human perversion leading to abnormal violence and crime. Robert and Caroline are unable to rise above their physicality, they are confined in their bodies, obtaining sexual pleasure from sado-masochistic practices. As Lye points out, postmodern authors put an emphasis on the incarnate, on the humans as physical beings in a physical world(Lye 1997).

The obscene subject matter is however not the core of the story. The author seems to turn away from any unified theme. The subject matter is somehow dispersed or disrupted by the characters' aimlessness. They are passive, trapped in their meaningless existence which is symbolized by the paralyzing heat. The protagonists, Colin and Mary, seem to be bored with each other's company. Sometimes their mutual attitude is almost hostile. They sleep in separate beds and their communication is restricted to a "ritual hour" before dinner when they listen to each other's account of last night's dreams only because they need to share their own:

> This was no longer a great passion. Its pleasures were in its unhurried friendliness, the familiarity of its rituals and procedures, the secure, precision-fit of limbs and bodies, comfortable, like a cast returned to its mould. . . . They would deny indignantly that they were bored. They often said they found it difficult to remember that the other was a separate person. When they looked at each other they looked into a misted mirror. When they talked about the politics of sex, which they did sometimes, they did not talk of themselves. It was precisely this collusion that made them vulnerable and sensitive to each other, easily hurt by the rediscovery that their needs and interests were distinct. (McEwan 1982: 18 – 19)

The author suggests their alienation in the foreign city. When exploring the city, they get lost frequently and fail to agree on the right way. Their estrangement and hopelessness makes them vulnerable and they end up as victims of Robert and Caroline's perverted plan.

Gender issues and inequality take its extreme form in Robert and Caroline's relationship. Robert's male dominance is clear from the very beginning. He reveals it while telling Colin and Mary the story of his childhood in a typically patriarchal family after he has invited them to his bar. He tells them about his father's cruel treatment of the whole family: "Everybody was afraid of him. My mother, my four sisters, even the ambassador was afraid of my father. When he frowned nobody could speak. At the dining-table you could not speak unless spoken to first by my father" (McEwan 1982: 32). Robert also tells them how severely his father punished him when he broke his ban on eating chocolate:

> Later my mother came to see me in my bedroom, and in the morning a psychiatrist came and said there had been a trauma. But for my father it was enough that I had eaten chocolate. He beat me every night for three days and for many months he did not speak kindly to me. . . . And to this day I never eat chocolate, and I have never forgiven my sisters. (McEwan 1982: 38)

The setting, both local and temporal, is somehow blurred. It is not identified explicitly, although it is generally considered to be contemporary Venice. The city, however, is never named. Moreover, it is described as a hostile place, with its maze of narrow streets and imposing palaces, without signs. The maps are sold in the kiosks but tourists never know which one to buy and the mysterious vendors never answer their questions about directions. The loss of direction is symbolic – both the story and the characters are trapped in a vicious circle. The gloomy atmosphere of the city contributes to the sense of the Gothic style. The author thus makes use of pastiche, which is another characteristic tool in the hands of postmodern writers. According to Malcolm "the novel's Gothic elements are used to emphasise the intrusion of past into present and the eruption of the brutal and the macabre into the seemingly every day. . . . Such a treatment also functions as a metaliterary comment on the Gothic and as an attempt to refresh an at least partly automatized and stale genre" (2002: 79 – 80).

5. Postmodern Strategies in *The Child in Time*

Although The Child in Time shares a lot of motifs with its predecessors, it is often considered a breakthrough in McEwan's literary career. In her review for The Irish Times (23rd August 1997)

Eileen Battersby points out that in his third novel "McEwan has shifted away from the grotesque extremes and has instead become concerned with disturbed and disturbing psychological trauma" (qtd. in Reynolds and Noakes 2002: 172). The diversion from McEwan's typical elements of the Gothic including violence, psychotic states, sordid details and other macabre or taboo subjects is emphasised by Malcolm (2002: 90).

The style of the narrative is distinct from the previous two novels. First and foremost, it is not presented in a linear, chronological order. The narration starts two years after the abduction of Stephen's daughter Kate. The reader becomes acquainted with the protagonist, Shephen Lewis, an author of children's books, who walks from his flat to Whitehall to attend a meeting of the Official Commission on Childcare, where he participates in the Subcommittee on Reading and Writing. This is his only commitment as most of his life is spent in seclusion. His life gradually seeps away and he drowns his memories of the happy times with his wife and daughter in Scotch. The reader gets to know about the protagonist's life story in fragments separated by episodes in the Whitehall. While sitting in the committee, Stephen recollects various incidents from his past life: "He daydreamed in fragments, without control, almost without consciousness" (McEwan 1999: 7). This fragmentariness is characteristic of the whole novel. The author alternates descriptive passages with stream of consciousness. There are fragments of Stephen's life before Kate was lost, recollections from his childhood, the beginning of his career, glimpses of his relationship with Charles Darke and his wife Thelma, visits to his parents' house. Chapter three, for instance, is about his visit at Julie's new home, a country cottage she bought after they separated and sold their common flat in London. The detailed description of the journey is suddenly interspersed with a passage recollecting Stephen's encounter with Julie after her return from a retreat in a monastery. This section is devoted to the description of their mutual feelings and how their relationship was influenced by the sense of loss. He gradually proceeds to a deeper, almost philosophical contemplation on male and female interpretation of life and its sense. After a few pages the author returns to the realistic account of the journey only to interrupt it again with an account of the protagonist's metaphysical *déjà vous* experience which proves to be a kind of transfer into a different time where he witnesses his parents as a young unmarried couple discussing something very seriously. He watches them sitting in a pub and talking and starts to feel lonely and excluded and experiences a strange reversal into an unborn child having no one to look forward to his birth: "He had nowhere to go, no moment that could embody him, he was not expected, no destination or time could be named; for while he moved forward violently, he was immobile, he was hurtling round a fixed point" (McEwan 1999: 66).

Later his mother tells him about the situation she experienced with her future husband and her account exactly corresponds to what Stephen saw through the window of the pub. She tells him they were talking about an abortion but suddenly she saw a pale face of a child at the window and she "knew" that she was looking at her own child. That was the moment when she started to love the child inside her and decided firmly to have him. This story, however, comes more than a hundred and fifty pages later. Chapter three thus reveals the author's postmodernist understanding of the concepts of time and memory. Their validity is impeached by his supernatural experience as he recognises a place he has never been to: "He had never been here before, not as a child, not as an adult. But this certainty was confused by the knowledge that he had imagined it just like this. And he had no memory of imagining it at all. . . . How could he have expectations without memory?"(McEwan 1999: 61). He is "attempting to connect the place and its day with a memory, a dream, a film, a forgotten childhood visit" but finally he has to admit that the strange familiarity of the location has "its origins outside his own existence". The postmodernist character of this element resides in the fact that a subjective experience creates reality. The traditional perception of objective reality is in contradiction with subjective reality but here they surprisingly correspond. Reality arises from what we experience. The sense of elusive memory is strengthened by an appearance of two old-fashioned black bicycles, an allusion to the episode in the previous chapter where Stephen and his mother recollect their trip to the sea on the same heavy black bicycles. Reynolds and Noakes come up with the idea that Stephen's journey to see Julie is a metaphor for a journey through time (Reynolds and Noakes 2002: 39).

The most experimental treatment of time is presented by Charles Darke, Stephen's friend and a successful politician and businessman who retreats into childhood and completely succumbs to this illusion. In the interview included in Reynolds and Noakes'sIan McEwan: The Essential Guide, the author expresses himself to the notion of a deeper patterning of time. He talks about childhood and its perpetual presence in our lives which makes the sense of time very subjective. He confirms this subjectivity of time by the way it accelerates in a crisis. Finally, he stresses the play with time he used in his novel which he framed by the sense of arrival of Stephen and Julie's second child: "The novel more or less unfolds within the gestation period of a pregnancy" (Reynolds and Noakes 2002: 13). Time is, without doubt, the central theme of the novel. The title is symbolic and may be interpreted in several ways as well as the notion of time. It may denote the development of a fetus in a mother's body as Stephen's second child develops in Julie's body throughout the novel's plot. It may also represent the miracle of birth of Stephen and Julie's second child after a long period of anguish after the loss of their daughter Kate. It is also worth noting that the novel is divided into nine chapters.

As in McEwan's earlier novels, the narrator is anonymous but it is always Stephen, the protagonist of the novel, whose point of view is presented. The author, however incorporates a typically postmodern element of metafiction – stepping in the text with a detached comment. Malcolm adduces several examples of this technique when the narrator addresses the reader. A few pieces of the text do not present anyone's viewpoint. These are rather detailed accounts of situations or events given by the anonymous narrator. Furthermore, Malcolm points out several passages where the point of view belongs to a different character, namely to Mrs Lewis (Malcolm 2002: 93).

There is another feature drawing attention to the process of writing. The Child in Time, as many other postmodern novels, is a self-referential work. Malcolm ascribes great significance to the formality of language and syntactical complexity(Malcolm 2002).

Reynolds and Noakes also stress a significant aspect of the novel's formal structure: "Every detail serves a purpose in a wider picture although the reader must often wait to see how" (Reynolds and Noakes2002: 39). This narrative technique makes the reader involved in the creative process of narration. It helps them to take an active part in discovering the protagonist's inner life and in the interpretation of the symbolic devices used in the novel. Some of these symbols remain hidden to individual readers as it is possible to explain them in different ways. "The Bell", which is first mentioned in Chapter three, may serve as a good example. On his way to Julie's house Stephen has to pass a pub called The Bell. It is the place that features in his enigmatic vision from his parents' past before he was born. The name of the pub is mentioned several times and it seems to be used as a symbol of the female principle of the perfection of wisdom.

6. Conclusion

In general, it is obvious that his work has gone through significant development and the novels from different periods of his career vary considerably. On the other hand, many features confirm they are books from the pen of the same author. The first noticeable feature in terms of themes is the focus on shocking and bizarre subjects. This corresponds to the postmodernist tendency to cross existing borders and limits. The themes involve, among others, human perversion, violence, crime, focus on the body, obsessive behaviour, mental disorders and other unconventional topics. From this point of view, McEwan is one of those British authors who participated in forming the literature of the 1960s. Not only has he drawn inspiration from them, but he has also banished some of the taboos from the British reality. McEwan's attitude to the subject matter of his works is connected with his treatment of any totalizing interpretations of the world. As in most postmodernist works, truth is always relative and security is an illusion. He often deals with the distinction between subjective and objective realities and shows how subjective experience creates reality. Different interpretations of the same reality play a significant role in *The Cement Garden, The Child in Time, Enduring Love* and *Atonement.* The protagonists of these novels often get under the command of their selective or unreliable memory. McEwan also disrupts any totalizing concepts and existing social patterns and thus reveals their relativity and limited validity.

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