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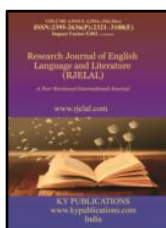
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GLOBAL CONCERNS IN MCEWAN

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ABSTRACT

To read McEwan is to be swept away by prose of astonishing precision and power and to be constantly surprised by the ambition and breadth of his scope. The Washington Post Book World proclaimed: "No one now writing fiction in the English language surpasses Ian McEwan." McEwan's major concern has been to highlight the grim realities of modern society- adolescents bristling with the sudden violent consciousness of selfhood, children prematurely burdened with egos, men with full grown bodies but minds never broken free of the appalling second womb of puberty, women breaking through societal barriers and becoming the strength within the alliance.

From his early macabre portraits to more recent introspective dramas- "The turning point for me was *The Child in Time*," McEwan considers, "when political, moral, social, comic and other possibilities moved in"- each new effort finds its way onto the shortlist of one major prize or another. And yet his latest, for many readers, manages to surpass everything that came before.

McEwan focuses a particular interest in propagating how the chaotic and turmoiled state of the modern world acts as a deterrent for viable, life-affirming relationships. As he begins to mature he becomes a proponent of equality between the sexes and also tries to create harmony or balance between extremes.

Keywords: Society, Macabre, Isolation, Chaotic, Selfhood.

When the Second World War ended in Europe in the summer of 1945, much of Britain was in ruins. This landscape of ruins is recognized as forming an integral part of much of the literature of 1940s and early much of the 1950s. It was a landscape which provided a metaphor for broken lives and spirits and in some remoter and less-defined sense, for the ruin of Great Britain itself. Artists and writers of that period were confronted with the unexpected. Houses were shattered and empty with the gardens in ruins. The familiar scene of Britain was experienced almost in a surreal way seen almost through a chink in a broken wall. Yet the fragmentation had already begun with the modernists and their experiments. Many writers

during the post-war period were aware that their task was one of reassembling fragments of meaning.

Coming to contemporary times the novel, is seen in general to have reflected the modern being and the fragmentation and chaos which are supposed to characterize contemporary life. The novel has become the most accessible, the most discussed, the most profound and the most sponsored literary form. Contemporary writers like, Julian Barnes, Graham Swift, Martin Amis and Ian McEwan have confirmed their position at the forefront of contemporary British writing by mirroring the complexities and drudgery of modern society.

Ian McEwan is certainly one of the most noteworthy of contemporary authors, writing with a

fearlessness combined with a viciously lean prose, he confronts boldly the weaknesses and shames of ourselves and our societies. He focuses a particular interest on the ways in which interpersonal alliances serve as microcosms of their societies, these relationships are often characterized by violence and confusion, tainted by a world of chaos, desolation and destructive hierarchies. He creates dark portraits of contemporary society, writing to expose the haunting desires and libidinal politics that lurk beneath the facade of an everyday world. His novels have an incredible fertility of invention. His characters-incestuous siblings, heart-broken gorillas, sadomasochistic lovers, infatuated prime ministers, corpse dismemberers-play the depraved lovers' games of a modern wasteland, hoping that the procurement of any sustaining relationship can provide refuge from the chaos and turmoil of their very lives and worlds.

Paul Bailey, rightly states in the Observer:

"His stories are so resonant and frightening because they are totally original. They are about the recognizable world of private fantasy and nightmare a world despite our protestations to the contrary, we are all involved in."

Ian McEwan's attempts to be a witness of history has made him to focus, within his fiction, and especially within his novels (such as *The Innocent*, *Atonement*, *Saturday*, *The Child in Time*, *Amsterdam*), on representations of major global events and to situate them within a wider matrix of socio-political and cultural meanings raising several issues concerning the entanglement of public and private relationships and their impact upon individual identity. Through his works, McEwan provoked cultural debates and moral outcries. His early literature of shock (especially his short stories and his first novel, *The Cement Garden*), as critic Jack Slay labels it (1996: ix), the exploration of grotesque and disturbing themes (such as breaking social conventions, codes and taboos, incest, sado-masochism, rape, pornography and murder) challenge the precepts and determinations of society, questioning and then defying the restraints predetermined by sex and class, by politics, culture and gender. His early writing style made critic Jack

Slay to claim, in the preface of his book entitled *Ian McEwan*, that the author "confronts the weaknesses and shames of ourselves and of our societies" (Slay 1996: ix).

Much of McEwan's literature of shock portrays the brutalization and mistreatment of women by a patriarchal society; as he begins to mature as a writer, his approach to the relationships between men and women becomes increasingly more feminist; he becomes more and more a proponent of equality between the sexes. Rebellious against the foibles of a male-dominated culture, McEwan proclaims the necessity of creating a world in which the sexes are equal. Finally in much of later fiction, McEwan becomes more politically conscious, creating portraits of Britain as it is today. For example, in *The Ploegman's Lunch* McEwan explores the duplicitous nature of British politics, examining the way in which governments purposely distort and reinvent their past histories in order to better serve their present needs.

McEwan's novel, *The Child in Time* (1987), won the Whitbread novel award and marked a new confidence in McEwan's writings. The novel is longer and has a much more complex story material than McEwan's earlier novels. With *The Child in Time* McEwan creates a unique amalgamation of the old and the new: he effectively combines the political and social concerns of his film scripts with the darker, more visceral edge of his fiction. Commenting on this merger, McEwan says:

"My prose tended to remain private. I always wanted to broaden it, find the fruitful ground where private and political (could exist) together. This novel is to some extent a fulfilment of an ambition" (Smith, 69).

In *The Child in Time*, McEwan continues his explorations of duplicitous and inefficient governments. He complements these political examinations with his familiar themes: the power of sustaining relationships, regression as a means of escape, the strength of the female, the detrimental effects of contemporary society on its individuals. This novel in one part is a political fable, set in the near future of an England controlled by a post Thatcherite conservative extremism. Though set

several years in the future, the novel nonetheless serves as a satire of present-day England. It is a dystopic vision of what one might call Thatcherite Britain.

The Innocent (1990) is a love story set in post-war Berlin. The protagonist of the novel, Leonard Markham is an inexperienced twenty-five year old British Post Office engineer who is sent to Berlin in 1955 to work in a joint British and U.S. Intelligence operation to dig a tunnel into the territory of the German Democratic Republic in order to tap Soviet and East German military telephone lines. His stay in Berlin exposes him to a wide range of new experiences.

McEwan's next novel *Black Dogs* (1992) visits the most significant events of modern European history, ranging from Nazi death camps to post-war France and the collapse of the Berlin wall. Presented in the form of a memoir, the novel chronicles Jeremy's fascination with his wife's parents, June and Bernard Tremaine. June and Bernard Tremaine are depicted in the novel as an acrimonious union, representatives of diametrically opposing forces and , beliefs: June is a spiritualist, a believer in the healing power of love, religion and mysticism while Bernard is a rationalist, a believer in political ideology, an Establishment man. Early during their honeymoon the confusion is revealed in an irrational argument over a dragonfly. Bernard wants to kill it while June wants to protect its individual life. For the first time their disparity of beliefs collide. With the appearance of the black dogs, this rift becomes the unhealing wound of their lives. They gradually exhaust each other, then, not only through their ideological oppositions but also through the love they cannot rein. Their relationship becomes obvious representation of postwar Europe, a combination of love and hate, politics and sentiment, and their marriage, appropriately, spans the cold war, ending only when June dies in 1987. The construction of the Berlin Wall in 1961 was a testament to the failure of Bernard's early creed. Its fall in 1989, however bestows credence on his current dogma. Drawn to participate in the bravado of freedom that surrounds the crumbling wall, Bernard and Jeremy encounter a situation that seems to ascertain June's spiritual view of the world.

Though grounded in the rioting confusions and turmoils of the cold war, of the twentieth century, *Black Dogs* offers a tender optimism. Jeremy ultimately discovers that there is hope in love. This novel earned McEwan his second nomination for the Booker Prize.

M. John Harrison, stated in Times Literary Supplement:

Compassionate without resorting to sentimentality

Clever without ever losing its honesty,

An undisguised novel of ideas which is also

Ian McEwan's most human work.

In his later novels like *Enduring Love* (1987) McEwan explores more complexities of interpersonal relationships. In this novel we come across varieties of love and relationships. Through this novel McEwan has powerfully projected how relations can take unexpected twists and how smooth functioning of a successful ideal relationship also can be damaged by unavoidable invasions by any disturbing personality.

Amsterdam (1998) McEwan's Booker Prize winning novel is a dark and sour account of contemporary Britain. The novel is set in the mid 1990s, and it centers on the moral dilemmas confronting two successful middle-aged friends, Clive a composer and Vernon a newspaper editor. Clive and Vernon meet at the funeral of Molly Lane that opens the novel. If Clive and Vernon are in a sense, hollow men, then, the novel suggests, so is their whole generation. This is amply borne out by the action of the text. A whole generation within an important section of society is being mocked in Clive and Vernon's moral shabbiness and delusive self-esteem. The novel ends with each of the two friends, now bitter enemies, arranging the other's death. In this novel McEwan depicts how in society in which past is being demanded in name of efficiency and grandeur freedom is that matters in terms of relationship.

In his recent novel *On Chesil Beach*, McEwan explores adult mature relationships like marriage and how lack of communication as well as innocence can transform lives and lead to disastrous consequences. This novel takes us back to the year 1962 when marriage was presumed to be the

outward sign of maturity and independence. The protagonists Edward and Florence are deeply in love and they finally decide to get married. Both were excited about their new status which promised them freedom. On Chesil Beach, very aptly projects how one's upbringing, personality, culture and history impacts their perception, expectations and relationships in a myriad of ways. It is about how seemingly small decisions can reverberate through our lives in unexpected ways. Infact it is a story of lives transformed by a gesture not made or a word not spoken. In his other mature works McEwan brings modern English society under a close-and scathing-scrutiny. At the core of each of his major works some sector of English society plays a devious and unflattering role.

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