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Research Article

An Amalgamation of Postmodern elements; An Analysis of Ian McEwan's The Cement Garden as a postmodern Novel

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ABSTRACT: Ian McEwan is the best-known and controversial contemporary British novelist. McEwan seems to be interested in the relationship between reality and imagination, history and fabrication in the process of writing, which is generally considered as one of the themes related to postmodern metafiction writing. He also adopts the postmodern intertextuality in his writing practice. Those postmodern concerns and strategies confirm his position as a postmodernist. This paper is an attempt to bring out the various postmodern elements or strategies employed in his earlier novel ***The Cement Garden.***

KEYWORDS: McEwan, Postmodern Strategies, *The Cement Garden,* family, sex, violence, death and incest

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 honors 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).

Many postmodern novelists feature metafiction or "historiographic metafiction" and intertextuality in their writings, Ian McEwan is of no exception With self-conscious language, the issues of imagination, fabrication, history and storytelling are closely connected with these novels. McEwan's recent novels always carry the features of metafiction and the writer is consciously or unconsciously using such kind of devices. It is without doubt that McEwan is an experimentalist in his exploration of metafiction in the framework of the historical novel.

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 Center in New York on 11 September 2001 (Bentley 2005: 1 – 3).

The authors are often said to produce "metafiction" or "fiction about fiction", i.e. self-referential fiction concerned with the possibilities, limitations and devices of writing. Therefore, they use a range of self-reflexive forms and intertextual reference. This is connected with the role of the author in his story. The writer is not firmly in control and never knows how the narration may develop. For postmodernist authors the "grand narrative" is totalizing and their work does not make claims on a meaningful representation of the reality. For

this reason they frequently challenge not only established genres and literary forms but also the borders set by the society. Pastiche becomes a way of breaking established styles and rules. The employment of parody, paradox, language play and fragmentation further intensifies the experimental mode. Bentley claims that the 1990s is a decade known for its "fascination with parody, pastiche, retroism . . . and its general scepticism towards grand narratives" (Bentley 2005: 4). Recycling previous forms appears in music, fashion, TV series, films and other areas of cultural life.

Ian McEwan's novels are not easily characterized in terms of themes. Nevertheless, some of his novels present certain common features. The early works, both short stories and novels, all develop themes that earned the author the nickname "Ian Macabre". The issues explored had usually been avoided in fiction until the overall liberalisation of the British society in the 1960s. Hilský points out that this change of climate was reflected not only in a series of legislative measures but also in the arts. The issues of sex and sexual intercourse, which had been great taboos in the British society, became a public matter. The role of the family in the society was shattered. He draws attention to the revolutionary ideas published by R.D. Laing, an influential psychologist and psychiatrist of the 60s who identified family as a source of mental disorders, especially schizophrenia, and provided a detailed analysis of an oppressive function of the family. He also pronounced an argument that the family absorbs the power establishment of the society. The so called "new liberalism" of the 1960s and the "permissive society" of the 1970s became a breeding ground for controversy and a public debate over sexuality which, sooner or later, must have found vent in British prose (Hilský 1991: 14 – 17). McEwan's early works confirm these theories. There are shocking and bizarre subjects of secret burial, incest and masturbation (*The Cement Garden*), sexual perversion and obsession with death (*The Comfort of Strangers*).

McEwan'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 eybrows 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)

Jack, in spite of his animosity towards his father, shares certain qualities with him. He is keen about the idea of spreading concrete over the garden and while mixing the cement with water he seems to feel affinity for his father: "I was pleased that we knew so exactly what we were doing and what the other was thinking that we did not need to speak. For once I felt at ease with him." (McEwan 1997: 17). Malcolm stresses certain traits or features which he considers aspects of the male sphere. Jack is "ugly, selfish, potentially and actually violent, constantly masturbating" (Malcolm 2002: 58). There is another male character who shares the supposedly male needs to dominate and to be in control, namely Julie's boyfriend Derek. The reader must notice the rivalry between him and Jack resulting from the fact they both want to take on the traditional man's role of the head of the family. Although Julie soon penetrates Derek's intention to become "one of the family, . . . big smart daddy" (McEwan 1997: 134), she actually grows disgusted with him when she finds out he lives as his mother's fair-haired boy. It seems Julie conforms to the stereotype of the dominant role of men. When Derek turns out to be unable to play this role, he loses Julie's respect immediately. The role of women is equally well defined. Again, the Mother is the archetype of a female. She is submissive, gentle and quiet. In spite of the family's struggle to make ends meet, she does not have a job and devotes all her time to housework and the care of the children. She always backs up her husband in front of the children, even if she does not share his view. From the beginning of the novel, the male and female worlds are separated. The characters sometimes solve serious matters regarding

gender. While discussing Tom's desire to look like a girl, Jack tells Julie that their brother would look stupid. Julie's passionate reaction has wider implications in terms of gender relations:

> You think it's humilitating to look like a girl, because you think it's humilitating to be a girl. . . . Girls can wear jeans and cut their hair short and wear shirts and boots because it's okay to be a boy, for girls it's like promotion. But for a boy to look like a girl is degrading, according to you, because secretly you believe that being a girl is degrading. (McEwan 1997: 47 - 48)

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).

The narrative style can hardly be called experimental. It seems quite straightforward and realistic, there are no abrupt twists in the chronological order or form. Yet the narration embodies passages which may surprise the reader as they somehow do not fit the alleged language of the narrator. The novel is written as a first-person narration. Jack, a protagonist, tells the story of himself and his family from his point of view. The narrator's language seems mostly laconic, unadorned, detached. Jack tends to use casual vocabulary and very simple sentences. These characteristics help to portray Jack as an apathetic and bored teenager with little interest in what is happening around him. His life appears to be empty, he does not care about personal hygiene, school is just a nuisance, and he has no friends. Although the novel appears to be a very personal narration, the reader cannot resist a feeling of distance between the narrator and the events in the book. Malcolm considers Jack an "unreliable narrator" and emphasises "the strangely detached focus of the narration" (Malcolm 2002: 48). There is no doubt that Jack's accounts of the events in the story and his own emotional state are somehow mechanical. He describes many extreme situations with coolness and emotional aloofness. The tenuity of the passage about his father's death evokes the style of an official report:

> My father was lying face down on the ground, his head resting on the newly spread concrete. The smoothing plank was in his hand. I approached slowly, knowing I had to run for help. . . . The radio was playing in the kitchen. I went back outside after the ambulance had left to look at our path. I did not have a thought in my head as I picked up the plank and carefully smoothed away his impression in the soft, fresh concrete. (McEwan 1997: 18 – 19)

Williams partly explains this emotional emptiness by the problem of "how to convey with maximum authenticity the thoughts and sensations of a mind that has not yet achieved full maturity". He uses Charlotte Brontë's argument that "Children can feel, but they cannot analyse their feelings" (Williams 1996: 216). This view, however, is at least disputable. Lack of order, alienation, insufficient communication and lack of the security of a loving family life must necessarily cause psychological flatness. Jack grows emotionally stale and numb, he is somehow paralysed. Although Jack has no control over his emotional development and the character is flattened, the reader might feel something more in the background. This should be emphasised as a typically postmodernist feature. Nothing is stated directly. There are only implications and glimpses for the reader to make sense of. On the other hand, Malcolm draws attention to a postmodernist feature in the narrator's language. He points out stylistic deviations from the simple language of a teenager – frequent examples of complicated structures and sophisticated vocabulary such as "weary admonition". He considers these stylistic elements to be a self-referential device which makes the narration an example of metafiction (Malcolm 2002: 50 – 51).

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

crenellations 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 . . . (McEwan 1997: 71)

I masturbated each morning and afternoon, and drifted through the house, from one room to another, sometimes surprised to find myself in my bedroom, lying on my back, staring at the ceiling, when I had intended to go out into the garden. . . . I stood in the centre of my room listening to the very distant, constant sound of traffic. Then I listened to the voices of children playing in the street. The two sounds merged and seemed to press down on the top of my head. I lay on the bed again and this time I closed my eyes. When a fly walked across my face I was determined not to move. I could not bear to remain on the bed, and yet any activity I thought of disgusted me in advance. (McEwan 1997: 74)

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.

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