

Discomfort in Ian McEwan's The Comfort of Strangers

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ABSTRACT

This paper aims to study the discomfort experienced by characters in Ian McEwan's (1948-Present) novel, The Comfort of Strangers (1981). In the novel, the whole scenario presents a bleak picture before the readers and one can easily guess that the things are going in a horrible direction. The paper further studies that in the contemporary milieu, the anguish, cruelty, selfishness, discomfort, decomposition and death has spread everywhere. The life has lost meaning in its true sense and every entity of the planet seems at stake. McEwan explores the world of crisis and its persistent effect on contemporary society.

INTRODUCTION

In McEwan's novel, *The Comfort of Strangers*, the crisis of various sorts seems to function as a common and recurring theme as different characters as well as readers experience them. He presents anxiety, alienation, fear and death etc. resulting in an overall discomfort in the novel. He further presents both the internal as well as external fears through his characters. As the world seems to be an empty place, the people feel fear and death in everything. In the novel, nobody seems to converse with the other person with openness and something mysterious and unsaid element seem to be hovering over all the places in the novel. The title is suggestive of a sensation offered by 'strangers' in a strange place. It may be inferred as having ambiguity in its quintessence. This uncertainty intends to engulf the various possibilities that the word 'strangers' has to offer.

The comfort that is provided in this strangeness is indicative of its mysteries. In the novel, had the couple, Mary and Colin been able to understand the intensity of future catastrophe, they would not have depended very much on Robert and Caroline. A series of unfortunate things unfold before Colin and Mary afterwards. In the past, many researchers have contributed articles, research papers etc. on the thematic analysis and critical appreciation of Ian McEwan's novel, *The Comfort of Strangers*, while this paper highlights the overall discomfort experienced by the characters of the novel. The insights on the anxiety, fear and the pressing situation of the contemporary era presented in this paper can be helpful for other researchers to apply similar approaches in the analysis of their literary works.

THEORETICAL REVIEW

McEwan is a widely read author and a number of books, theses, research articles and interviews are available on his writing, primarily focusing on his themes, ideas, symbols and contemporary influences. His novels have been reviewed by a number of renowned writers like Peter Childs, who in his book, "The Fiction of Ian McEwan" presented a range of critical approaches to McEwan's fiction. The critical approaches are drawn from various articles, academic essays, magazines, journals and websites (Childs, 2006). Ryan Roberts (1951-Present) collected sixteen interviews in his book "In Conversations with Ian McEwan" of McEwan. This book contains McEwan's views on authorship, major themes, status of literature in contemporary society and the global politics etc. (Roberts, 2010). In his book, "Mind Presentation in Ian McEwan's Fiction," Karam Nayebour explores the mental workings and the mind presentation in three of McEwan's narratives (Nayebour, 2017).

Margaret Reynolds (1957-Present) and Jonathan Noakes (1934-2017) published their book, "Ian McEwan: The Essential Guide" which throws light on the genre, narrative techniques and themes employed by McEwan (Reynolds and Noakes, 2002). Another book entitled, "Ian McEwan: Art and Politics" by Pascal Nicklas (1965-Present) puts forth the view that McEwan's early works seem more concerned with the family issues but later McEwan showed some interest in politicization (Nicklas, 2009). A number of other books are written on Ian McEwan which deal with his themes, techniques and influences etc. There are also a lot of articles, research papers and theses on Ian McEwan which deal with

issues other than what is aimed in this research paper. Some of which are given here; Sylvia's McLeod's (1947-Present) thesis "Aspects of Voice in Ian McEwan's Fiction" explores Ian McEwan's aspects of voice in his writing as initially, as there was a predominance of male voices.

The thesis also shows McEwan's concern towards social and cultural aspects (McLeod, 2018). O'Hara in his thesis entitled "Mimesis and the Imaginable Other: Metafictional Narrative Ethics in the Novels of Ian McEwan" takes up the idea of narrative self-consciousness in *Atonement* and directs it toward the ethical issues (O'Hara, 2009). The summaries of the major psychological readings having been done on the select novels, *Enduring Love* and *Black Dogs* by Christina Byrnes in her dissertation entitled "The Work of Ian McEwan: A Psychodynamic Approach". Byrnes does her psychodynamic reading in the light of Carl Jung's theory (Byrnes, 2002). Other theses which deal with various other subjects than the one aimed in this thesis are; "Pervasive Perspectives: Gender Relationships in the Fiction of Ian McEwan" by Suzanne M. Bradley of Amherst College (Bradley, 2008).

"How to Read the Unreadable: A Post-Structuralist Approach to the Works of Ian McEwan" by Laura Vipond of University of Edinburgh (Vipond, 2008). "A Mind with a View: Cognitive Science, Neuroscience, and Contemporary Literature" by Louis Jason Slimak of University of Akron (Slimak, 2007). "Our Fictional Reality: A Study of the Novels of Ian McEwan" by Matthew Robert Parry of Appalachian State University (Parry, 2007). Kiernan Ryan invites our attention to the theme of 'fall' in terms of *Enduring Love* in his article, "After the fall." Ryan attempts to show that the novel deals with the idea of the Fall from innocence and God's grace extends to Joe and Clarissa, who become fallen lovers, cast out of their Edenic existence into deeply troubled lives (Ryan, 1996). Butler in her influential article "The Master's Narrative: Resisting the Essentializing Gaze in Ian McEwan's *Saturday*" believes that some literature including McEwan's *Saturday* suggest methods for resistance in terms of denied subjectivity.

She further believes that the white protagonist of the novel, Henry Perowne, upholds gender and racial stereotypes (Butler, 2010). Dana Chetrinescu's article, "Rethinking Spatiality: The Degraded Body in Ian McEwan's *Amsterdam*" does the feminist reading of McEwan's *Amsterdam* (Chetrinescu, 2001). Jonathan Greenberg in his article, "Why Can't Biologists Read Poetry?: Ian McEwan's *Enduring Love*," presents a series of interrelated conflicts between science, literature and religious discourse (Greenberg, 2007). Sean Matthews article "Seven types of unreliability" is another interesting investigation in the field of narrative study vis-a-vis McEwan's fictional oeuvre (Matthews, 2007). Randall wants to bring home in his essay "I don't want your story: open and fixed narratives in *Enduring Love*" multiplicity of narratives concerning events shared among a group of people. He attempts to show the competing viewpoints and versions of events (Randall, 2001). The literature review reveals that although there are plenty of research papers, articles, theses and books available on Ian McEwan but no comprehensive study is available

regarding the topic which is aimed in this paper. Hence, the present research study is original and will be carried out from a fresh perspective to fill this gap.

Discomfort in the Comfort of Strangers

Ian McEwan's novel narrates the story of Mary and Colin, who are on a holiday in a city which resembles modern day Venice. Their visit to Venice, though the city remains unmentioned and obscure, is a form of compulsory obsession on their part to carry out. The city of Venice, where labyrinthine streets make the two visitors confused and lost, symbolizes a state of hypnosis. The street here functions as a powerful seducing agent. There is some strange feeling in the air as is mentioned in the novel, "a matter of perpetual concern" (McEwan, 1981, p. 6). The labyrinthine city-spaces often disorient them and mislead them to such a horrible extent that they rely on the comfort of the strangers. Mary and Colin are seduced by the host's (Robert) hospitality and an invisible beast devours them. Mary and Colin attend "to delicate shifts of mood, repairing breaches" (McEwan, 1981, p. 6).

The city itself presents a threatening site as its streets opens up into dark and narrow alleys. At certain points the streets vanish into "total darkness" with a series of "buildings . . . converged in gloom . . . and reddened . . ." (McEwan, 1981, p. 47). After coming out of the dark streets of the city, "Colin and Mary sat down near the quay's edge on packing cases which smelled strongly of dead fish. It was a relief to be free of the narrow streets and passageways of the city behind them, to be staring out to sea . . . completely given over to a cemetery" (McEwan, 1981, p. 50). It seems, one displeasure is giving way to the other and the whole thing gives a feeling of discomfort to characters as well as readers through realisation. The hotel in the novel is also presented as a fearful site. Mary is vocal about the atmosphere of the hotel which according to her is quite fearful and strange. The rooms and surroundings in the hotel are "cramped" (McEwan, 1981, p. 96). She asserts in the novel: . . . All those mountainous and wide-open spaces, Mary said. You know this place can be terribly suffocating sometimes . . . It's like a prison here . . . Colin folded his arms and looked at her a long time without blinking . . . Colin stared past Mary's head . . . and voices, murmurs of awe, children's . . . (McEwan, 1981, p. 56-58).

The above quotation presents the picture of place and atmosphere surrounding it. In the hotel, Mary feels fearful. There are dim lit streets, dark and narrow stairways as well as cramped corridors and the squalid alleys. Such a setting evokes the sense of dread to the readers as well, enhancing the threatening evil atmosphere. The hotel and city, which works as a seducing agent, also witnesses the shifting moods of Mary and Colin. After going through the terrible experience of one night outing, the couple enjoys the masked hospitality at Robert's lodging, who offers them hospitality which the couple find hard to refuse. They meet Caroline, Roberts' wife, at his home. Thus, Mary and Colin gets trapped in an absurd, bizarre and irrational world. Colin and Mary's experience in Robert's home are ingrained with an underlying sense of terror. They are exposed to a world that is beyond their expectations. Robert engages Mary and Colin in his fake childhood stories of torture and makes them feel sorry for him. They start pitying him and he figures as one who has sacrificed his innocence at

an early age. Robert's brutal machismo and Caroline's subservience and broken back colours the hospitality with uneasiness.

The things are no better at the Robert's apartment rather they get worse. Even the otherwise welcoming gallery of Robert's apartment looks fearful to Mary. She stops and sees "a monstrosity of reflecting surfaces whose every drawer had a brass knob in the shape of a woman's head . . . Carefully arranged on top was a display of personal but ostentatious items . . . cut throat razors . . . a row of pipes . . . a fly swat . . ." (McEwan, 1981, p. 72). The couple faces a fearful experience as the novel describes it in a fearful tone. About the outside settings of the Robert's apartment. The novel mentions that "a few stars had already broken through a sky of bruised pastels . . . the dark outlines of the cemetery island. Directly below the balcony . . . was a deserted courtyard. The . . . flowers gave off a penetrating fragrance, almost sickly. The woman lowered herself into a canvas chair with a little gasp of pain" (McEwan, 1981, p. 73). So, both the inside and outside of Robert's apartment is open to readers to form an opinion. It is while Caroline and Mary are talking to each other that there is a "ferocity in Caroline's voice" (McEwan, 1981, p.79). These two women further highlight their frightening experience in the apartment. The women take it as a presence of ghost. The novel mentions their frightening experience as: As she spoke more lights came on in the gallery behind them, and the balcony was suddenly illuminated through the glass door, and divided by the lines of deep shadow. Isn't it the one with the ghost? Mary nodded. She was listening to footsteps which had passed the length of gallery, and which now stopped abruptly . . . The footsteps started, and stopped immediately. A chair scrapped and there was a succession of metallic sounds such as cutlery makes. There's a ghost, she said vaguely. And a convent, but we can never see it (McEwan, 1981, p. 84).

Robert, the sadist and misogynist, as sketched in the novel, has instilled in himself, a hatred for women and always advocated supremacy of male over females. In support of his hypothesis of sex and violence, he scornfully speaks of women that they "love aggression and strength and power in men. It's deep in their minds . . ." (McEwan, 1981, p. 55). Robert's persona is elusive, mysterious and obnoxious from the beginning. The relationship of Robert and Caroline appears to be sadomasochistic. According to Caroline: Robert began to really hurt me . . . I was terrified . . . he whispered pure hatred, and though I was sick with humiliation . . . My body was covered in bruises, cuts, weals. Three of my ribs were cracked. Robert knocked out one of my teeth. I had a broken finger . . . the madness of what we were doing, and my own acquiescence in it, terrified me . . . Robert confessed one night that . . . He wanted to kill me . . . (McEwan, 1981, p. 143-144).

The above quotation gives a fair idea how brutal and ghastly treatment is given to Caroline and her surprising acceptance of it. All this process is taken to be a normal phenomenon even when one's body is put out of order. Robert mistreats Caroline in an inhuman way and even confesses to kill her one day. The couple later starts dominating the lives of Colin and Mary and finally murders Colin. The abnormal behaviour is not restricted to Robert and Caroline only. In the novel, Mary mutters in Colin's ear dark and random stories: stories that

produced moans and giggles of hopeless abandon, . . . Mary muttered her intention of hiring a surgeon to amputate Colin's arms and legs . . . Colin hummed in Mary's ear. Once Mary was strapped in, fitted to tubes that fed and evacuated her body . . . till she was dead and on even after that . . . (McEwan, 1981, p.102).

In the above quote, we find a strange intention of Mary to hire a surgeon to amputate arms and legs of Colin. Colin too expresses his wish almost of a similar kind. From the reader's perception, there cannot be anything more terrible and horrible than this. The parallel examples of this kind can be seen in the contemporary world, where torture, killing and mutilation has become the order of the day. The novel presents the characters as deviants and perverts, who defy the social norms and morals. The behaviours of such characters are governed more by 'id' than by 'super-ego' in Freudian terms. There is no distinction between what is right and wrong and no control on their desire and emotion in consequence. While talking, Colin and Mary hear some strange voices and sounds from outside and they are frightened. Mary begins to tremble, she clasps her knees, the sound of approaching footsteps, the shivering and fumbling makes the atmosphere full of terror. The novel mentions: From the room next door to theirs came the murmur of a voice and the sound . . . Mary clasped her knees and began to tremble . . . There are footsteps across the nearby room, a door opened, and footsteps again the corridor, which broke off abruptly as if to listen. What is it, Mary? Colin said . . . as though witnessing a catastrophe from a hilltop. Colin was naked, and he shivered as he fumbled . . ." (McEwan, 1981, p. 107-108).

In the novel, Mary is frightened to an extent that she began to tremble on hearing strange voices outside. She says to Colin ". . . with desperate repetition. I'm so frightened . . . I'm so frightened, she cried. Her body grew tauter and shook till her teeth chattered and she could no longer speak." (McEwan, 1981, p. 109). She rocks backwards and forwards, almost crying and says to Colin, "Why is it so frightening . . . Why is it so scary?" (McEwan, 1981, p. 114). For Mary, the things are turning out of her control. She is not able to accommodate this much of terror and horror which is surrounding her in one way or the other. The problem of survival as well as the evil existing in the world is predominant in the novel. The novel describes the sadomasochistic behaviour of Robert and Caroline in the following words: Caroline said, you've cut my lip. She collected blood from her lower lip on to her forefinger and daubed it on Colin's lips . . . Robert's hand still rested on at the base of his neck close to his throat. Caroline transferred more of her blood on the end of her finger till Colin's lips were completely and accurately roughed . . . wiped the pinkish streaks of saliva from his chin with the back of her hand. (McEwan, 1981, p. 158).

From the above quote, we can guess the abnormal and extraordinary condition of the characters especially Robert and Caroline. McEwan reveals horrifyingly, what could become of individuals in our society, if they don't act well in time. The description of the murder of Colin finishes with the sentence: "Robert drew the razor lightly . . . across Colin's wrist opening wide the artery" that he died. (McEwan, 1981, p. 159). The quote is full of terror and the effect is calculated to scare. the incidents like this presents an overall feeling of discomfort

in the novel. The novel presents the horrific description in the following words: Robert . . . reached for Colin's arm, and turned his palm upward. See how easy it is, he said perhaps to himself, as he drew the razor lightly, almost playfully, across Colin's wrist, opening wide the artery. His arm jerked forward . . . Mary's eyes closed. When she opened them, Colin was sitting on the floor, against the wall . . . Curiously, his canvas beach shoes were soaked, stained scarlet. (McEwan, 1981, p. 159).

There is terror and horror to an extent that one can easily feel its intensity. It sends shivers down our spines and delivers only gore. It not only gives discomfort to the characters in the novel but also to the readers of the novel. McEwan seems to have worked hard in using gothic tropes that heighten our experience of terror and horror. In spite of Caroline's broken back, she supports Robert and finally drugs Mary, watches with silent eyes Colin's vein cut and his death approaching slowly. While drugging Mary, Caroline supports Robert, although Caroline was not good on health. She was enveloped in her own problems but strangely she wanted others to be on same side, a typical postmodern phenomenon. According to her, "I blacked out with pain . . . My back was broken . . . I felt a terrible pain, like an electric shock" (McEwan, 1981, p. 144-145). She adds that "I became a virtual prisoner. I could leave the apartment anytime, but I could never be sure of getting back . . ." (McEwan, 1981, p. 146). Robert has been paying a neighbour to do all our shopping, and I have hardly been outside for four years. The novel further mentions the desperate condition of Mary while she is drugged by Robert and Caroline: Her eyes, wide with longing, or desperation, were fixed on his own; a tear welled suddenly and dropped on to the ridge other cheekbone. Colin wiped it with his forefinger . . . The faintest sound, barely more than a breath, left her lips. Colin leaned close and put his ear to her mouth. Tell me, he urged, try and tell me. She . . . articulated from the back of her throat a strangled, hard C. Are you saying my name? Mary opened her mouth wider, she was breathing quickly, almost panting. She held Colin's hand in a ferocious grip . . . With another immense effort she managed . . . and then whispered, 'Go' . . . There was panic in his voice (McEwan, 1981, p. 153-154).

Such quotations from the novel are indicative of an atmosphere of discomfort. This sadistic couple of Robert and Caroline seems to derive pleasure in inflicting miseries both upon themselves and others, a typical contemporary phenomenon, where people are always on the toe to experience new things. In this regard, Caroline asserts that "we couldn't forget what we'd been through, nor could we stop wanting it. We were the same people after all, and this idea, I mean the idea of death . . ." (McEwan, 1981, p. 144). Robert's sado-masochism and cruelty, analyzed from psychological point of view, is the result of his upbringing. He eventually kills Colin; Colin's eyes remain fixed on Mary in such a dreadful event. Through fear and wonderment, the face of Colin changed. The novel further mentions the tragic condition of Colin as: Mary's eyes were closed. When she opened them, Colin was sitting on the floor, against the wall, his legs splayed before him. Curiously, his canvas beach shoes were soaked, stained scarlet. His head swayed upon his shoulders . . . eyes . . . blazed at her across the

room in disbelief . . . his body had shrunk. His eyes still open, still on her, were tired, without expression (McEwan, 1981, p. 159-160).

Along these lines, the reader can well imagine the experience of Colin and the pesky and threatening behaviour of Robert. As we read the novel, this imitative representation or mimesis cause real fears in readers. Like the characters in the novel, the imagination of the readers' too is expanded as we experience, through our imagination, the fears, terrors and horrors of the characters' state-altering paranoia. It is wondering that how the world returns to love, fun and intimacy. The death threats have become so common that people take it as a normal phenomenon. The novel is brim with death events. "There is physical and mental dereliction, violence and agonising deaths . . . which flow out of human weakness and defect of character" (McEwan, 1981, p. 187).

METHODOLOGY

The research has been carried out through a qualitative method and for this research, McEwan's novel *The Comfort of Strangers* has been used as a primary source while as the supplementary books and articles related to this novel are used as secondary sources. In this research paper, the researchers have found the novel's overall discomfort in the form of anxiety, despair and fear etc. through the literary analysis of McEwan's novel. The researchers have analysed the novel by using certain other books, journals and articles. After using different texts and sources, the findings and conclusions have been drained and recommendations have been made. The descriptive method has been used in this study and the researchers have analysed specific data and provided interpretations based on related subject matter. While collecting the data, several procedures were followed such as going through the novel in detail and then the identification, scrutiny and relating the relevant quotations from it.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

In his novel, *The Comfort of Strangers*, Ian McEwan has presented various crises of his time which needs heavenly intervention. McEwan uses anxiety, fear, dark visions, nightmarish dreams etc. in his novel which shows the discomfort and darker side of humanity. McEwan uses these aspects to explore into the unconscious side of human psyche. He uses language as a tool to depict a sense of longing and meaninglessness in daily life. The experiences of terror and horror have been normalised in such a fashion that every human activity seems to be associated somehow with these experiences. Apart from the cruelty and ruthlessness, there lies "a subconscious Hitlerism in the heart of men," that is "the desire for aggression; the desire to dominate and enslave" (McEwan, 1981, p. 155). The paper has attempted to look at the anxiety, degeneration, social corruption, moral degradation, and sin that has reached into every area of the life. McEwan warns the people and his works proved to be reliable social documents.

This study will allow better understanding and appreciation of Ian McEwan's novels. His novels present the hollowness of the humanity and that the reconstruction must begin with the individual itself. If one cannot reform society as a whole, one must begin with one-self to save the humanity from the

prevailing distress and discomfort. The *Comfort of Strangers* presents an overall atmosphere of discomfort. A series of unfortunate things and discomfort unfold before Colin and Mary, the main characters of the novel. The couple wants to free themselves from misery and entanglements but they aren't freed in actual sense like the contemporary humans, who only get entrapped from one miserable situation into the other. It seems, one displeasure is giving way to the other and the whole thing gives a feeling of discomfort to characters as well as readers. In the novel, the violence is primordial and ineradicable. Apart from the physical experiences of fear, terror and horror, these experiences have made inroads into the thinking and casual life of contemporary humans as well.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

McEwan presents the world as collapsed through the portrayal of his characters and in the contemporary milieu, people are in the gloomy recesses and begging for mercy. The people are living through tragedies, terrible loss, extra pain and the incarnation of worst fears as presented by McEwan in his novel. There is a touch of sadness everywhere. There are inconsistencies and lopsidedness everywhere for which sometimes the people need to distract themselves. Actually, the humans have disturbed the natural order and that is why tragedies befall them in every nook and corner of the world. They have started fiddling with the natural systems which have fallen upon us. The fallible humans should not dare to touch the mysteries of nature and they must learn humility, as pride always destroys one.

The world has lost the balance and the people have started to suffer for their own faults. Life seems at the worst end, full of torture and sad thoughts. In such a condition we can ask God to order our troubled lives and deliver us from this meaninglessness. The study can pave the way for understanding the distress and discomfort in the contemporary milieu. This paper can also be helpful in highlighting the role of will and self-determination in shaping one's personality, thereby helping oneself and society in maintaining peace and order. The study was delimited to the to the analysis of the McEwan's novel, *The Comfort of Strangers* with select interpretations. For, future research, it is recommended that the other novels of McEwan may be explored from various other perspectives.

FURTHER STUDY

Further presents both the internal as well as external fears through his characters. As the world seems to be an empty place, the people feel fear and death in everything. In the novel, nobody seems to converse with the other person with openness and something mysterious and unsaid element seem to be hovering over all the places in the novel. The title is suggestive of a sensation offered by 'strangers' in a strange place. It may be inferred as having ambiguity in its quintessence. This uncertainty intends to engulf the various possibilities that the word 'strangers' has to offer. The comfort that is provided in this strangeness is indicative of its mysteries. In the novel, had the couple, Mary and Colin been able to understand the intensity of future catastrophe, they would not have depended very much on Robert and Caroline. A series of unfortunate things unfold before Colin and Mary afterwards. In the past, many researchers have

contributed articles, research papers etc. on the thematic analysis and critical appreciation of Ian McEwan's novel, *The Comfort of Strangers*, while this paper highlights the overall discomfort experienced by the characters of the novel.

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