

IAN McEwan's Depiction of World as a Dystopian Social Space

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ABSTRACT

This paper aims to study Ian McEwan's presentation of the world as a dystopian social space. McEwan paints an ugly picture of the present times and gives a warning to contemporary society against the inhuman cruelties that rock it every moment. The present world confronts alienation, anxiety, fear and death etc. on a daily basis and the fundamental role is played by fiction in expressing such experiences. The novels of McEwan present a bleak and dystopian picture before the readers as the things are going in a horrible direction. It can be inferred that McEwan is trying to bring home the idea of destruction and other mishappenings which have taken a toll on the world and thereby giving a message to the people to act before it is too late.

INTRODUCTION

The world presents a dismal scenario and it seems as if humans are surrounded by grunts and exasperation and there's blood all through. The people are engulfed in the mid-play of violent winds and scattered to die. All the creatures are vulnerable to attack in the present scenario in which the people have their own experiences and it is wondering how the world moves to love, fun and intimacy. The society is engaged in brutal conduct of savage recklessness and incredible outrages, regular bullying and insulting people mere for pleasure. The novels of McEwan are usually concerned with issues like perversity, psycho-social problems, alienation, fear, violence and death etc. which disrupt the conventional moral standpoints. One common aspect of his novels is that they reveal the beastliness of men. The visceral images of society and the repulsive descriptions of the everyday world in the novels of McEwan open the darker side of humanity. His novels paint a picture of a world which is undone by sympathy and empathy.

The World As a Dystopian Social Space In The Light Of Ian Mcewan

McEwan presents the world as a dystopian social space. In Terry Eagleton's opinion, dystopias, rather than utopias have relevance in the present context (31). In his view, utopian thought is "hardly in fashion in these sceptical politically downbeat days" (36). Although, the world is on the threshold of the third decade of the twenty-first century but it is still haunted by the horrific memories of the Wars. The aftereffects of Wars are still evident in the form of an invisible and everlasting imaginary horror. McEwan mostly reflects the post War fears such as the dangers of nuclear power, environmental degradation and declining values etc. His works are concerned with the horrors, distortions and anxieties of the contemporary psyche, depicting the condition of the present world. All this scenario perfectly fits the present condition where people are suffering and trying to nurse themselves in exile (*Nutshell* 16). McEwan's novel, *Nutshell* (2016), deftly mentions the gruesome condition of the present world and it is worth mentioning the textual quotation here:

The children are dying . . . The forests, creatures and polar ice are vanishing. The agriculture is poisonous . . . The oceans are turning to weak acids. There is . . . the catastrophic decline in population. The free speech is no longer free, liberal democracy no longer the obvious part of destiny, . . . socialism in disgrace, capitalism corrupt, destructive and in disgrace . . . We've built a world too complicated and dangerous for our quarrelsome natures to manage. In such hopelessness, the general vote will be for the supernatural. It's dusk . . . We were wonderful but now we are doomed. (*Nutshell* 25-26)

In the above quotation, the reader senses the overall scary scenario, destruction and deaths of the present world and such events can be related to some familiar repressed experiences. The dreaded scenario of the present era is "whirling our lives apart" (*Enduring Love* 222). The humans are "in a terrible state" and it is panic really, they should try to calm themselves and think what to do (*Enduring Love* 229). The life is "touched by despair" and there is "horror of

public relations . . ." (*Enduring Love* 221). All this chaos, confusion and dread reminds one of "The Waste Land" (1922) by the famous poet, T.S. Eliot (1888-1965), where the situation of the world is depicted along such lines. One is also reminded of "The Second Coming" (1920), a famous poem by W.B. Yeats (1865-1945), where again the deteriorating situation of the world is portrayed in vivid terms.

McEwan successfully maintains suspense, incorporating melodramatic physical details, reproducing tense and violent dialogue, hinting at apocalyptic and awful overtones and so on. His characters are highly obsessed with evil ideas that make their broader melodramatic histories, life and being like devils. Their tragic implications are such that he takes them very seriously, making a shocking and freezing sense of terror in the reader's mind. Everything seems in disorder and filthy. McEwan surprises his readers by presenting bizarre and terrifying events through the use of a large variety of narrative strategies. The breaks in the narrative, indefiniteness in point of view, deviations in diction and unpredictable changeability of focalisation, mirror the disintegrative features of the present times. The truth is that the modern world is immunized to the shock. The readers are alerted by the writer, presenting dystopias and pitfalls of the present course of society or what it might conceivably take in the future, thus depicting the disastrous, unpleasant and terrifying consequences for the whole of humanity.

The world is involved in evil deeds and bloody crimes, it seems possessed by devils and evil ideas. The condition of life in such a culture suffers from oppression, deprivation and terror. The writer's view of the future is overshadowed by the stimulating fears of the ugly consequences of present-day behaviour. There is a suspicion, a "cry of loneliness" and "there is no happiness" in this time of crisis. "We had lost heart, we are loveless, or we had lost the trick of love . . ." (*Enduring Love* 135-140). The people linger on the expressions of frustration or accusations. The suspicion of humans is alive and sooner or later they become part of this harm. Such logic drives one from love to destruction and from despair to hatred in one leap. At times, it seems "we are finished." (*Enduring Love* 145).

McEwan's novel, *Enduring Love* (1997) is at the heart of discourse as representative of the present times in which people are exposed to a world of dilemmas and ethical questions. It merges horror, macabre, fantasy and science fiction. In the novel, Joe recalls the death of Mr. Logan in the most vivid terms. "Life was revealed as cheap . . . terror, guilt and helplessness were the components" (*Enduring Love* 18). Joe presents a meaningless and nihilistic outlook on life. Such experiences of horror relate to all humans in one way or the other. A strange familiarity is observed or felt when one comes across such events. According to Joe, "we could think of nothing but chaos . . . It was rationalism gone berserk. It is the new fundamentalism" (*Enduring Love* 70). The novel mentions the tales of horror as under:

All around us there are knots, tangles of horror and we are like the prisoners in a cell, who run and beat the walls with their heads. This prison is growing larger day by day. The shocks have dulled our response and

everywhere there are shivering and shaking stories. The darkness beyond the gloom of the bedroom was infinite and cold as death (*Enduring Love* 34).

The above quote vividly represents the gloom and horror of the present-day world. It further highlights that the situation is deteriorating day by day. It is through such incidents that people interrogate their own unconscious fears, anxieties, terrors and horrors etc. and find a strange familiarity. The whole world seems doomed and there are deaths everywhere. There is the killing of people all around and scenes whose repetition people dread. In the present scenario, people sigh, wriggle, shiver and freeze to death (*Enduring Love* 161). Apart from the living components, there is a death of non-living components too, be it air, soil, water etc. The deaths are scattered everywhere in one form or the other, engulfing both human and non-human species. In such conditions, the only hope seems to return to nature and to God. All this scenario perfectly fits the present condition of the world, where people are suffering and McEwan's novel, *Enduring Love*, deftly mentions the gruesome condition of the world.

In the novel, Jed tells Joe that the idea of power to bring death on creatures contended him. He would get the creatures on the run, make him do "little skipping somersault, and then hit the ground, writhing and twitching . . ." (*Enduring Love* 151). This in a way finds relevance in the conditions of the present world where killing each other is fun. In the worn-torn countries of the present world, this idea fits better, where killing humans is a sport. In such a scenario, almost everybody is "gripped by the tragedy" (*Enduring Love* 161). The death threats have become so common that people take it as a normal phenomenon. The novel is brim with death events. "people die, . . . loose their identity altogether . . ." (*Enduring Love* 183). In the novel, "there is physical and mental dereliction, violence and agonising deaths . . ." (*Enduring Love* 187). There is a continuity in the violence and deaths, giving us an impression, that the miseries show no end stop.

According to McEwan, humans have disturbed the natural order and they try to intervene in nature and that is why tragedies befall humans in every nook and corner of the world. In this connection, Jed in a letter to Joe mentions that people have tried to find intricacies in His creation, the more they jump into it the more they shall be at loss. It is quite childish on the part of humans if they try to deny His reality (*Enduring Love* 135). The fallible humans should not dare to touch the mysteries and must learn humility, as pride always destroys one. The novel mentions that in the earlier times, there were fewer complications in the world as it had fewer diseases, no allergies, and no hay fever but then people suddenly started polluting the world by putting chemicals into air, food, and water. The immune system got trapped due to "all this crap" which is accompanied by fear (*Enduring Love* 197).

Life is full of torture and "sad dry thoughts" (*Enduring Love* 133). In such a condition, the people can implore God to deliver them from this meaninglessness. The humans should order their troubled lives as soon as possible. The novel also mentions words like "anger," "upheaval," "turmoil," "curse," "difficulty," "pain," "despair," "rejection," "fury" and "bitterness" etc.

which show the despair and meaninglessness and also reveal the condition of the present world. (*Enduring Love* 138). The people are living in times that are badly drained and “sink into the darkness” (*Enduring Love* 6).

In *Nutshell*, there is a “touch of dissociation” between the narrator and his/her mother because she has cheated and ruined both her son/daughter and husband. The narrator adds that by nature my father is defenceless, “as I am by circumstance” (*Nutshell* 32). For the narrator as well as the reader, it seems that there is the wretched subsistence and curses everywhere. “There is a silence” and people are left in the dark to confront troubles (*Nutshell* 29). In the novel, the narrator asserts that “I’m in turmoil. What was I in my father’s peroration? Dead . . . I hear in them the form of my ruin. Shadow figures on a bloody screen are arguing in a hopeless struggle with their fate. So, here, the experience of Postmodern Gothic fear is deep, intense and elongated, where even the unborn children are not spared. The voices rise and fall . . . they conspire . . . and the house feels the ruin too” (*Nutshell* 71-72). Adding to it, the narrator further asserts:

I’m . . . troubled by a sickly fascination to know his scheme . . . This, he says, must look like a suicide, . . . These vessels must show no trace of her fingerprints . . . It should seem as though he ate alone . . . all traces of Claude . . . especially, must be eradicated, cleaned to extinction, every last hair and flake of skin.” (*Nutshell* 57-58)

The narrator is deeply disturbed by the strange and disturbing developments happening around him/her. He/she is sick of knowing the schemes of the outside world, feels bad and is full of fear. The narrator says the notion that “my mother wished my father dead” haunted me (*Nutshell* 74). “. . . my private gloom lost to eternal darkness. I’ve nothing to hold on to but hope . . .” (*Nutshell* 76). These thoughts have illuminated my fears and constant discord. The narrator is desperate to the end, he says that “I’m feeling strange. Famished. Exhausted. Desperate . . . Fear is an emetic. (*Nutshell* 155). The readers can very well make out the concern which is loaded in the above quotation. Keeping all this in view, it seems that there is barely hope for this world and the presence of fear is found throughout the novel which is always running in the minds of various characters.

In the novel, Joe aptly asserts that society is disintegrating (*Enduring Love* 19). People have become too selfish and look only for themselves. The places all around are brim with terror. The novel mentions that “. . . bodies were thumping to the ground . . . the more terrible it was, so terrible it was funny, it was a stunt, a joke, a cartoon, . . . the kind of thing that happened to Bugs Bunny, or Tom, or Jerry . . .” (*Enduring Love* 15). The novels of McEwan present scenes of scandal, attacks, ruining social structure, cruelty, hypocrisy, the inevitability of destruction, moral intricacies and much more. In the novel *Enduring Love*, Joe says to Clarrisa, “What I know is that I come back from a terrible day and walk straight into yours” (85). According to Joe, there is “. . . a terrible freedom is in the air” (*Enduring Love* 86). The whole world seems to be engulfed by the feeling of terror. The inhabitants feel choked and disintegrated.

The moments of calm and peace seem evasive, a whole range of terrors appear before humans for which the people can find their respective experiences, although, momentarily repressed in their psyches. In this connection, Joe says:

As I settled back to calm myself . . . I projected all kinds of inarticulate terrors" (*Enduring Love* 69). On the other hand, Clarissa is also perturbed and Joe reads a passage to console her. "Everything was stripped down . . . and in the process, some larger meaning was lost . . . of no real interest . . . love which only had meaning through time (*Enduring Love* 70).

In *Nutshell*, McEwan says that the world is trampled by brutes (18). There is no idea of what is happening. The prospects are dimmed and the existence is denied "rightful claims to a happy life . . ." (*Nutshell* 19). There is terror, horror, hopelessness and pessimism. There is anger, exhaustion, wars, rapine and enslavement. At the beginning of the novel, the narrator learns that Trudy and Claude are planning to kill John, which is the narrator's father and Trudy's estranged husband. In a way, the narrator feels contented that he is unborn and covered by the amniotic sac which protects him from the world and its bad happenings. The narrator asserts: "Enough. My amniotic sac . . . holds the fluid that protects me from the world and its bad dreams" (*Nutshell* 191). Through Trudy's biological responses, the narrator makes inferences about the outside world and the actions of other people. The narrator says:

I'm close to my mother's heart and know its rhythms and sudden turns. And now! It accelerates at her husband's voice, and there's an added sound, a disturbance in the chambers, like the distant rattling of maracas, or gravel shuffled softly in a tin. From down here I'd say it's a semilunar valve whose cusps are snapping shut too hard and sticking. (*Nutshell* 80)

The narrator feels quite terrorised and draws inferences about the outside happenings. Claude and Trudy's intention to poison John makes the narrator (unborn child) uncomfortable. It is revealed by the narrator that Claude is actually his/her uncle, who plants items in John's car so that it looks like a suicide case. The narrator says that my uncle "has entranced my mother and banished my father . . . He'll crush me. Unless, . . . a wisp of a word, ghostly token of altered fate, bleating little iamb of hope, its drifts across my thoughts like a floater . . ." (*Nutshell* 19). The narrator seems to have lost faith in life and displays absolute pessimism. For him/her, life is bleak and loveless and the deceit is all around. There is terror and threat of death from every side. The whole scenario presents a bleak picture before the readers as the things are going in a horrible direction. The narrator is too much worried about his post-birth condition and asserts:

What despicable part of myself . . . When I'm born and allowed at last to be alone . . . My affair with Trudy isn't going well . . . We're alone then, all of us, even me, each treading a deserted highway, toting in a bundle on a shouldered stick the schemes, the flow charts, for unconscious advancement. Too much to bear, too grim to be true. (*Nutshell* 33)

The above quote paints a grim picture of the postmodern condition beyond what one could have even thought. The narrator once attempts to hang himself/herself with his/her own umbilical cord during Claude and Trudy's

physical relations. This is how the novel mentions his/her plan to kill himself/herself within the mother's womb. The narrator declares the terrifying plan in the following words:

I'm going to kill myself. An infant death, a homicide in effect, due to my uncle's reckless assault . . . His arrest, trial, sentence, imprisonment. My father's death half avenged . . . To take my life I'll need the cord, three turns around my neck of the mortal coil . . . The fiction of my father's suicide will be an inspiration for my own attempt . . . To be stillborn—a tranquil term purged of tragedy . . .” (*Nutshell* 126-127)

The quotation fairly hints at the multiple crises of the narrator so much so that he/she is compelled to commit suicide. He/she thinks well in advance about the post-suicide repercussions and effects. In a way, he/she forces revenge for his/her suicide which will lead to the trial and imprisonment of the narrator's uncle. McEwan surprises his readers by presenting bizarre and terrifying events through the use of a large variety of narrative strategies. The breaks in the narrative, indefiniteness in point of view, deviations in diction and unpredictable changeability of focalisation, mirror the disintegrative features of the postmodern human being and the callous indifference of characters to the outrageous elements. The truth is that the modern world is immunized to the shock. The readers are alerted by the writer, presenting dystopias and pitfalls of the present course of society or what it might conceivably take in the future, thus depicting the disastrous, unpleasant and terrifying consequences for the whole of humanity.

The world assailed by the war seemed barely able to totter to its feet. It is only through imploring God, who can solve all the miseries and succour all grief from the face of this earth. The people are crying for a world unsullied by the tarnish of violence. The need of the hour is to diagnose the roots of a malignant evil and look for solutions. The situation is grim, a time filled with an air of dejection and the people had been badly let down. Life is feeling too shabby for any good thing to be present in people's minds as something to fight for. The wars, the slump, the economic depression, and the rampant unemployment have paralysed the whole of humanity and brought the worst fears, terrors, horrors and deaths true. Today, the venomous forces, the shudder on hearing the exploits of the bombs are raging in all corners of the world and the words of peace seem a mockery. There is a need to call out to all those, who are ready to fight the ills of these forces and the decaying society.

The dreaded scenario of the present era is “whirling our lives apart” (*Enduring Love* 222). The humans are “in a terrible state” and it is panic really, they should try to calm themselves and think about what to do (*Enduring Love* 229). The life is “touched by despair” and there is “horror of public relations . . .” (*Enduring Love* 221). All this chaos, confusion and dread reminds one of “The Waste Land” (1922) by the famous poet, T.S. Eliot (1888-1965), where the situation of the world is depicted along such lines. One is also reminded of “The Second Coming” (1920), a famous poem by W.B. Yeats (1865-1945), where again the deteriorating situation of the world is portrayed in vivid terms. Ian McEwan throws light on the contemporary cultural and social anxieties of the

people. For him, the present society lacks faith and morality and is filled with horror. As Edmund Fuller argues in *Man in Modern Fiction*, that “man suffers not only from war, famine, persecution and ruin but also from isolation, inner problems and a meaninglessness in his way of existence” (3). In McEwan’s novel, *Nutshell*, the narrator sums up the desolate scenario, resembling the condition of the present world:

There are still last things to gather up. In Nigeria, children burned alive in front of their parents by keepers of the flame. In North Korea, a rocket is launched. Worldwide, rising sea levels run ahead of predictions. But none of these is first. That’s reserved for a new catastrophe. A combination, poverty and war, with climate change held in reserve, driving millions from their homes . . . vast moments of people, . . . angry or desolate . . . crammed at borders against the razor wire gates, drowning in thousands to share in the fortunes of the West . . . Old Europa tosses in her dreams, she pitches between pity and fear . . . And always, there are problems closer at hand. As radios and TVs everywhere drone on....(*Nutshell*189)

According to the narrator in the quote above, the whole world is engulfed by problems. There is terror and horror everywhere. The humankind is ushered into blinding darkness and the presence of dreadful locale all around, the dance of macabre death puts the human mind to spectral presence. An icing on the top is the dense showering of fakeness, sense of danger, the palpable blackness, the stiffening atmosphere and the numbing silence. This is the picture of this world which is painted in dark with a sinister foreboding and lacks sane inhabitants. The cities are of the living dead and the living skeletons of starving humanity listlessly moving in the lanes and by-lanes, while some lay motionless out of sheer exhaustion. Indeed the world is turning into an unsafe place to inhabit.

There is the dread of an approaching war, a continuation of human catastrophes, the fear of aerial bombardment, dishonest profiteering, the curse of ravaging greed, the scourge of mass famines, starvation and black marketing. Life and living seem to be of little value now. Life has become strange and meaningless, there is the feeling of being homeless at home, the feeling of being an alien within your community, the feeling of estrangement between your people and the endless failure of the attempts of adjusting to the environment either in-home or outside it. People feel alienated from the place where they belong, the place of their birth. The cruelty and ruthlessness of McEwan’s characters suggest that there lies “a subconscious Hitlerism in the heart of men,” that is “the desire for aggression; the desire to dominate and enslave” (*The Comfort of Strangers* 155). In McEwan’s novels, the violence is primordial and ineradicable. Apart from the physical experiences of horror, these experiences have made inroads into the thinking and casual life of humans. The quote below from McEwan’s *The Comfort of Strangers* is a testification to this in which Mary muttered 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”
(*The Comfort of Strangers* 102)

In the above quote, the strange intention of Mary to hire a surgeon to amputate arms and legs of Colin is unveiled. In the same vein, Colin too expresses his wish almost of a similar kind. From a general perception, there cannot be anything more terrible and horrible than this. Postmodern horror is actually beyond ordinary expectations. On the one hand, it crosses the limits of barbarity and crudeness and on the other, it is being normalised as a way of life. The parallel examples of this kind can also be seen in the present world, where torture, horror, killing and mutilation have become the order of the day and the familiar experiences of which can be seen in the human psyches. In *Nutshell*, the narrator says that there is excruciating pain everywhere, “nausea, vomiting, hyperventilation, seizures, heart attack, coma, . . . failure” (*Nutshell* 50). The narrator is too horrified while grasping the idea of the outside developments. For him/her, the world is engulfed by the things like agony, chaos, dread and horror which finds mentioned in the below quotation. The narrator asserts:

I’m horrified then crushed by the strength that’s unleashed . . . So it continues, wave on wave, shouts and wails, and pleas for the agony to cease. Unmerciful progress, relentless ejection . . . Forward and out . . . I’m dead, blind and dumb, it hurts everywhere . . . I can’t deny the dread I feel. The rest is chaos.” (*Nutshell* 192-197)

For the narrator, the world is full of terrible experiences and it hurts everywhere. There is a continuation of agonies and wails. There is horror, dread and chaos everywhere and people feel crushed. All this is not felt by the narrator only but such feelings are aroused in readers also. McEwan’s novels can be seen as a critique of postmodern society. His novels serve as a diagnostic of what affects postmodern society and how individual lives are affected in the postmodern environment which is only multiplying and intensifying. In a way, it can be argued that people can cope with or master the fears, alienation, anxieties, terrors and horrors etc. which are inherent in society through the works of McEwan.

As a historian of the contemporary time, McEwan gives a prophetic portrayal of the disintegrating civilization of the present. Marc Delrez calls McEwan the “unrelenting analyst of evil in our time” (7). McEwan’s characters seek refuge from the chaos and turmoil of their very lives as well as the depraved wasteland world (Slay 1). There seems to be an eternal affliction and the experiences of horror do not seem to stop. The whole world seems “radiating disgust and horror” (*Enduring Love* 210). Jack Slay remarks that McEwan exposes the haunting desire and dark portraits of contemporary society that lurk beneath the facade of an everyday world (Slay 1). The way things are going is quite extraordinary. There is so much sensation and violence involved. “. . . it is a thriller of sorts, violent, sensational . . . with elements of horror . . .” (*Nutshell* 128). In *Nutshell*, the narrator asserts that the world is “at the darker end of pessimism . . .” (29).

CONCLUSION

The modern man not only suffers from war, ruin and famine but from inner problems as well, such as existential meaninglessness. As is known that literature reflects every epoch and always brings something new. The recurring concept of tragedy in McEwan's novels is remarkable. He wants to drive home the idea that stepping from normality or stability into a nightmarish world is quite easy. David Malcolm comments on the predicament of the characters, McEwan seems to suggest: "open the wrong door, turn down the wrong street, loose attention for a moment . . . and you can step into a nightmare" (156). Jack Slay, who defends McEwan's shock strategy, sees the "shocks into literature" as "the origins of a more profound social consciousness," it shocks the readers into a realisation: he wants people to realise the sordidness, filth and disorder outside, in the real world (18). While going through the novels of McEwan, one seems conscious of all these things.

FURTHER STUDY

This research still has limitations so that further research is still needed related to the topic Ian McEwan's Depiction of World as a Dystopian Social Space.

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