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MISCELLANEOUS ASPECTS OF MASCULINITY IN JAN McEWAN'S LATE 20th CENTURY FICTION

The aim of the article is to present the issue concerning masculinity, men's role and their problems in selected novels of a postmodern British writer Ian McEwan. While briefly outlining McEwan's fiction the author of the article is going to present the world of contemporary men in British society, their relations with women and their different attitude towards marriage and family. Secondly, the two novels are going to be examined and compared, *The Cement Garden* and *The Child in Time* in which the British novelist depicted two stages of male maturity process and two different approaches to life, social facets, in particular to gender relations.

Male-female relations have been always one of the most widely conferred issues in world art and philosophy and literature, predominantly in Anglo-American fiction. In the 20th century, especially after 1945 writers examined and explored gender subject matter in the light of significantly radical social, cultural and political changes and transformations. Having witnessed enormous alterations in the sphere of culture, art, politics, economy and recently ecology, the artists, in particular novelists and short story writers, discussed modern gender relations and a changing role men and women performed in the post-war society.

There is no escaping the fact that in view of the above-mentioned world changing processes entailing a sexual revolution, feminist movements, which resulted in a different perception of male-female roles and positions in society and professional spheres of lives, as well as a fast pace of living, constant chase for career and work success, pursuit of professional fulfillment, decreasing family links and a diminishing importance of family values, one may find greater and greater difficulty in the reassessment of the role of motherhood and fatherhood, especially the role of and problems linked to masculinity and to men's crisis of identity. Since the increasing number of writers, critics and artists drew more and more attention to gender matters, scrutinizing predominantly subjects related to femininity and writing from a female perspective, other authors focused, contrastively or alternatively, on a male subject matter when

exploring, reexamining and redefining a changing status of men, their social role, personality and identity in the post-modern world. Among miscellaneous novelists dealing with gender issues, mainly man-like subject matter, two authors deserve, in my view, a special attention, Ian McEwan and Martin Amis. Both of them, being brought up in British socio-cultural ambience and creating in Anglo-American literary tradition, vividly and realistically depicted in their works tempestuous and frequently highly ambiguous male-female relations, placing the emphasis on portraying dramatic changes of the role and status of men and women both in the family sphere and in professional domain. Both McEwan and Amis are invariably referred to as masculine writers due to that in the majority of their oeuvre the authors write from male perspectives, prevailingly about male characters, addressing an implied male reader and deriving the inspiration, particularly in the case of Martin Amis, from male novelists, such as Nabokov, Bellow, Roth or Ballard.

Needless to say, when one brings up the issue of masculinity which is inextricably linked more profoundly examined with reference to the femininity subject matter one is tempted to suggest that it is Ian McEwan's prose which more closely reflects masculine world in connection with feminine subject matter and therefore men are not juxtaposed with or presented in contrast to and struggle with women, as one may perceive in Amis's works, but male and female territories are interrelated. Thus, the article aims at scrutinizing Ian McEwan's selected prose works, placing the emphasis on the author's several novels, in particular his two prominent works, *The Cement Garden* (1978) and *The Child in Time* (1987) that mirror different phases of his literary output and therefore his changing attitudes to and point of reference to the gender subject matter.

In Ian McEwan's literary output and artistic career we may encounter various motifs and themes, all of them, however, are inextricably linked with men-women relations, love, passion, sexual and mental aspects of male and female protagonists. One cannot fail to notice that in the first stages of his literary career the author graphically illustrates and thoroughly examines the world of men, their complex personality, psyche, troubled life, invariably their obsession with love, art as well as their rebellion against the norms and standards of the British society. In his introductory two short story collections – *First Love, Last Rights* and *In Between the Sheets* – the writer establishes several of the recurring subjects that would become hallmarks of his fiction, most notably, the exploration of the effects of power, passion and mania on the human psyche, predominantly on a male adolescent's mentality. The stories in *First Love, Last Rights* which are

focused on a young man's microworld, are chiefly concerned with coming-of-age, though while reading the collection one cannot escape the impression that the author depicts maturity as tantamount to corruption. *In Between the Sheets* presents analogous subject matter and covers similar subject material, yet it exhibits a more Kafkaesque tone and is filled with black humour. In *The Cement Garden*, constituting undoubtedly the pinnacle of his early literary phase the British author continued to analyse corresponding themes, using specific aspects of violence in order to investigate how obsession can shape human desires, mostly male craving. When set beside the subversive and experimental elements of his earlier fiction that mirrors both the author's exploration of the psyche and mentality of male adolescents and his search for his own literary style, McEwan's later prose, particularly his works written since the late 1980s, among others *The Child in Time*, *Atonement* or *Amsterdam*, focus much more heavily on psychological depth, moral complexity, the process of human alienation and much more complex, highly equivocal relations between men and women in postmodern global world as well as on a more symbolic and metaphorical meaning of people's interaction. In view of this it is worth mentioning several of his works, especially those which reflect the writer's fascination and attraction to the process of maturity, mainly male adolescent world, frequently wild, chaotic, full of violence, aggression but also passion, obsession with love and wish to build and rebuild family links (*The Cement Garden*), and the ones which present in a more moderate and meditative tone acute problems and moral dilemmas of contemporary men and women living in a dystopian, disintegrated, environmentally-ill culture (*The Child in Time*), in the world of metafiction, subjectivity and artistic amorality (*Atonement*), spiritual callousness, isolation and estrangement (*Amsterdam*).

While analyzing these works, written within circa 30 years it is worth stating that together they reflect a process of shaping manhood, male maturity and the author's various and changing attitude towards women. In addition, the above novels mirror the developing portraits of male writers and their lives as the phases of the process of artistic creation. Due to the great miscellany of the motifs appearing in McEwan's oeuvre, the author of the article selected two of his novels, *The Cement Garden* and *The Child in Time* in order to examine distinctive phases and aspects of masculinity as well as the two dissimilar approaches to life, society and especially attitudes to women.

In the first of the afore-mentioned novels, *The Cement Garden*, the author displays the internal world of the adolescent boy, Jack against the background of his bereaved siblings and the process of self-containment

and social alienation. The book opens with a sense of guilt, sinfulness and a feeling of downcast self-imprisonment which introduces the prevailing ambience of the text. Ian McEwan depicts the fifteen year-old protagonist, with his masturbatory habits, lack of personal hygiene and a rebellious attitude towards the world, which is rather a characteristic feature and integral part of male adolescence. Nevertheless, the author distorts this apparent normality by centering on elements of corporality, physical bodily functions and somber mental processes which lends the protagonist, his siblings and the universe they inhabit the feeling of everyday actions and compartment becoming squalid and grotesque (Ambler 2003). From the initial sentence of the novel transpires Jack's feelings of reluctant guilt towards his father's death and thus the line displays a weird, complex and highly ambiguous father-son relations:

I did not kill my father, but I sometimes felt I had helped him on his way. And but for the fact that it coincided with a landmark in my own physical growth, his death seemed insignificant compared with what followed. My sisters and I talked about him the week after he died, and Sue certainly cried when the ambulance men tucked him up in a bright-red blanket and carried him away. He was a frail, irascible, obsessive man with yellowish hands and face...

(McEwan 1978: 9)

The above quotation expresses the protagonist's ambivalent and seemingly weird attitude towards his father's demise, yet the author's depicts Jack's remorse and sense of unwilling guilt towards his parent's decease as a natural phase of the boy's maturity process, hence his demonstrative rebellion and defiance of standard family values, in particular his repression of filial instincts towards his father and to some extent towards his mother. Interestingly enough, Jack shortly finds the replacement and compensation for the lack of these instincts in the intimate relation with his sister Julie and his two younger siblings thanks to which he can feel again the sense of belonging to the family. Needless to say, the situation in Jack's family, especially after the death of their second parent, the mother, starts to be weird and becomes perceived by others as abnormal and dysfunctional. In the above-quoted excerpt of *The Cement Garden* McEwan introduces, or even "catapults" the reader into the tormented, distressing world of the teenage boy and then we may observe the external reality and the atmosphere in the family from his single standpoint. Everything we read, experience and explore in the novel is

filtered through Jack's desolate, dubious, equivocal perception (Ambler 2003). Hence, McEwan does not give much space to the reader but rather makes us analyse the action, the comportment of the characters and their relations from the boy's twisted, perverted yet prevailing perspective. In this way we experience and feel a sense of the claustrophobia and self-imprisonment saturating the boy's microworld. This reader's discomfort and uneasiness prepares us and anticipates Jack's anguished, estranged, separated, suppressed inner world. From the very beginning of the book we witness an alienation of the protagonist's family which is, even prior to the parents' decease, divided within itself and isolated from neighbours and friends. In view of that Jack's solitary voice lends the narration an atmosphere of obsessive and unhealthy stress on the factors that create, produce and strengthen the isolated phobia pervading this family (Ambler 2003).

As for the character of Jack, we may easily notice that he is lonely both as an individual and as a family member. He seemingly has no friends or acquaintances and mostly depends on his sisters' company though he does not feel a strong emotional link with them, except Julie. The most gloomy and disturbing picture of Jack's personality is perhaps the most vividly mirrored by his nightmare which gives a synchronic insight into the teenager's interior world:

I knew it was morning and I knew it was a bad dream... I was being followed by someone I could not see. In their hands they carried a box and they wanted me to look inside, but I hurried on. I paused for a moment and attempted to move my legs again, or open my eyes. But someone was coming with the box, there was no time and I had to run on. Then we came face to face. The box wooden and hinged, might once have contained expensive cigars. The lid was lifted half an inch or so, too dark to see inside. I ran on in order to gain time, and this time I succeeded in opening my eyes. Before they closed, I saw my bedroom, my school shirt lying across a chair, a shoe upside down on the floor. Here was the box again. I knew there was a small creature inside, kept captive against its will and stinking horribly. I tried to call out, hoping to wake myself with the sound of my own voice. No sound left my throat, and I could not even move my lips. The lid of the box was being lifted again. I could not turn and run, for I had been running all night and now I had no choice but to look inside. With great relief I heard the door of my bedroom open, and footsteps across the floor. Someone was sitting on the edge of my bed, right by my side, and I could open my eyes.

(McEwan 1978: 27, 28)

From the above citation which illustrates Jack's nightmare we may deduce that the protagonist embodies the animal and similarly to it he is locked within the static stink of his own milieu- for him staying would be sorrowful yet leaving would be even more frustrating. Hence, the animal symbolizes the sense of entrapment and fright which governs his life and utterly controls his mind and the dream sequence mirrors the boy's frustration, agony and spiritual bedlam that haunts his mental world (Ambler 2003). On the other hand, the presence of the animal in the protagonist's dream could be interpreted as a captive symbol of the boy's dismal grief-driven impulses that he desires to share with other people and therefore we witness the liberation of his own tensions and anxiety that the imprisoned, unnatural animal embodies.

Taking into account the role of Jack as a narrator one may easily observe that he is an outsider and even though his standpoint is apparently subjective and biased he shows only to some extent his self-awareness. It is Jack's conscious and intentional introspection which convinces and misleads the reader into trusting and believing in the narrator's story and his tormented, deranged mental world, yet the author dexterously depicts Jack's ability to be both involved and removed as a narrator. He plays a dual narrative role as that of a constantly anguished youth and every so often objective observer. It is illustrated in a passage where the boy's reflection in a mirror becomes a doppelganger for both sides of his character: "I stared at my own image till it began to dissociate itself and paralyse me with its look" (McEwan 1978: 20). In this way the author gives the reader some leads and insight into Jack's mental state and the structural aim it serves within the narrative framework (Ambler 2003). In view of this Jack the narrator is at times the voyeuristic watcher within the family whose role is to recount the story to the reader and he is also occasionally an objective family member who encourages us to judge and assess common-sense versus the subjective aspects of the story.

Nevertheless, while abandoning and distancing from the distracting and perplexing emphasis of the protagonist's gaze we may apparently observe that his life, actions and manners are challenging, rebellious, at times even slightly provocative, yet in fact relatively normal and typical of his age. In the novel the author makes us witness the situations when Jack torments and teases his younger brother Tom, is confused by his feelings for older sister Julie and is not in good terms with his father. The boy's vulnerability, selfishness, lack of confidence, filial disobedience and a hostile attitude to his father reflects a natural and integral part of the male maturity process. What remains puzzling, however, is the boy's and the

family's reaction to the father's death – the character's response to it at an emotional level is disturbingly expressed by a textual silence. All the same, this is the portrait of the family and its members depicted by the protagonist himself, thus it is highly subjective, personal, biased, idiosyncratic and fragmentary. Such a vision of the family unit, its disintegration, division, emotional dysfunction, alienation and self-confinement is one-sided, presented by a male teenage boy who, searching for his own way and goal in life deliberately twists and distorts the reality, and challenges and puts into doubt standard rules, norms, social conventions and values, such as family links, faith, school education, etc. Moreover, at the example of Jack the character Ian McEwan shows a painful phase of male adolescence not only with reference to the life and reality but also in connection to the process of artistic creation, in particular referring to his own rebellious, non-conformist and provocative attitude to the world as a young, maturing, developing male novelist who purposefully presents life as weird, bizarre and grotesque, and emphasizes the internal chaos and emotional disharmony of a typical British male adolescent.

The Cement Garden which depicts a painful process of male adolescence stands in a vivid contrast to Ian McEwan's other work, *The Child in Time* (1987), the novel marking a more mature period in the writer's literary output, though both the former and the latter texts contain certain common or corresponding motifs and issues, such as the problem of family disintegration and tense, ambiguous male-female relations. *The Child in Time* whose narrative concerns the loss of a child and a marital crisis is frequently referred to as a dystopian ecofeminist critique of Thatcherism, ecofeminist parable (Garrard 2009) or a dystopian vision of gender clash. Irrespective of its apparently socio-political overtone, it is worth highlighting the book's cultural and philosophical dimension, in particular the crisis of masculinity and male identity in the era dominated by women, their successes, careers and high positions in almost every sphere of life. Furthermore, when set beside McEwan's previous text written from the perspective of the immature, teenage narrator, in this work the writer focuses on the dilemmas and problems of an adult man, Stephen Lewis, a successful author of children's books, especially on his trauma caused by the loss of his 3-year-old daughter Kate who was kidnapped in the supermarket and as a result the protagonist spirals into bereavement that affects his relationship with his wife, Julie, his psyche and time itself.

As was pointed out before, *The Child in Time* explores and examines the problem of male identity and changing gender statuses. In this work the author redefines, all the more reverses the roles of men and women, which is presented at the example of Stephen and Julie. The story and action is

dominated by the character of Stephen, his life, mental world, we have an insight into his thoughts and experiences and it is his male perspective through which all the events are recounted. Nevertheless, on closer inspection it appears that the protagonist's behaviour, in particular his emotional reaction to the loss of his baby girl, his inability to come to terms with her absence and his initial reluctance to accept inevitable social and cultural changes in the world, reflects the protagonist's several distinctive feminine features on the one hand, and his desperate yet hopeless struggle for maintaining a male significant position in the society, both at work and in the family on the other hand. Contrastingly, his wife Julie hides her feelings and unwillingly raises the painful subject concerning her baby which astounds and puzzles Stephen, and as he desperately searches London for the missing Kate, he becomes aware that Julie "took his efforts to be a typically masculine evasion, an attempt to mask feelings behind displays of competence and organization and physical effort" (McEwan 1987: 24). This realization aggravates and deepens their marital crisis:

He was angry with Julie, disgusted by what he took to be a feminine self-destructiveness, a willful defeatism. But he could not speak to her about it. There was no room for anger, no openings. They moved like figures in a quagmire, with no strength for confrontation. Suddenly their sorrows were separate, insular, incommunicable. They went their different ways, he with his lists and daily trudging, she in her armchair, lost to deep, private grief. Now there was no mutual consolation, no touching, no love. Their old intimacy, their habitual assumption that they were on the same side, was dead. They remained huddled over their separate losses, and unspoken resentments began to grow.

(McEwan 1987: 24)

Stephen's protest and objection to his wife's seeming passiveness and acceptance of the loss of their little daughter, his over-emotionalism and inability to agree to the inevitability of fate mirrors the pain, grief and rebellion of the biblical Job. Analogously to Job, Stephen plunged into despair after the loss of his child and continually manifested his distress. Conversely, his wife led the private battle with her sorrow and suffering, finally overcoming them and thus managing to adjust to the new situation. Ultimately, however, the man admits the wisdom of Julie's realisation that she "had to go on loving [Kate], but...had to stop desiring her" (McEwan 1987: 2013). Thus, his own case exemplifies the limitations of his former conviction that "where once he had believed, or thought he ought to believe,

that men and women were, beyond all the obvious physical differences, essentially the same, he now suspected that one of their many distinguishing features was precisely their attitudes to change. Past a certain age, men froze into place..." (McEwan 1987: 54). It is thanks to his final acceptance of change that Stephen can experience an internal peace, harmony and, consequently can enjoy the birth of his second child and share his happiness with Julie:

It was only then that they began to exclaim and celebrate, and kiss and nuzzle the waxy head which smelled like a freshly baked bun. For minutes they were beyond forming sentences and could only make noises of triumph and wonder, and say each other's names aloud. Anchored by its cord, the baby lay with its head resting between its closed fists. It was a beautiful child. Its eyes were open, looking towards the mountain of Julie's breast. Beyond the bed was the window through which they could see the moon sinking into a gap in the pines. Directly above the moon was a planet. It was Mars, Julie said. It was a reminder of a harsh world. For now, however, they were immune, it was before the beginning of time, and they lay watching planet and moon descend through a sky that was turning blue.

(McEwan 1987: 220)

The concluding excerpt of the novel shows husband and wife's ultimate reintegration and the birth of their second baby strengthens their marriage and family links. The protagonist experiences a spiritual purification and regeneration, similarly to the biblical Job who, having suffered the death of his wife and progeny, eventually may celebrate the reunion with his new family and his mental rebirth. Furthermore, from an ecological and cosmological standpoint, Stephen and Julie's reunion parallels the planet's integration with the universe and the cosmic order reflects the earth's stability, its natural seasons and life cycles.

In conclusion it ought to be stated that Ian McEwan's works painstakingly examine miscellaneous facets of masculinity, particularly men's problems and dilemmas in Great Britain in the second half of the 20th century and at the beginning of the third millennium. It is a complex, labyrinthine, ambiguous, at times challenging and provocative men's world depicted by the British novelist which captures and retains the attention of its readers and which forces us to participate in the reading process, exploring the arcanae of the protagonists' mental world. At the example of his two novels, *The Cement Garden* and *The Child in Time*, the author of the present article compared and juxtaposed the two male worlds, two different visions, outlook on reality and two distinctive approaches to life,

particularly their attitudes to and relations with women. By contrasting and paralleling the lives of an adolescent orphaned boy and a mature writer, being simultaneously a husband and a father, the author drew the attention to various stages of manhood, particular phases of their mental and physical development during which the two protagonists create their distinctive microworlds and shape their own narrative structures.

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