

Alina BUZARNA-TIHENEA (GĂLBEAZĂ)

The Widening Gyre: Individual Identity and the Public Sphere in Ian McEwan's Fiction



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FOREWORD

Alina Buzarna-Tihenea (Gălbează) is an ambitious young scholar who chose to concentrate her research on a very poignant characteristic of our age: identity struggle. Already her third published book, *The Widening Gyre: Individual Identity and the Public Sphere in Ian McEwan's Fiction* presents the most eloquent findings in her analysis of Ian McEwan's novels. Although a very wide topic, identity is 'dissected' in terms of its relation to the macabre, to morality, to gender and sexuality and to politics and history. Although a scholarly approach, it does not fail to stress on the practicality of identity and on its implications to contemporary life, seen on a continuously speeding movement up (or down?) a widening vortex. Although tied to a certain historical time, identities are seen as permanently self-actualising and diachronic.

All the above-mentioned aspects are seen in a very close relation to the historical background in which McEwan's books were written: post-war agitation and political change that led to literary dynamism in various expressions, as Alina Buzarna-Tihenea (Gălbează) identifies: working-class novels, women's novels, academic or campus novels, historical novels, romances, thrillers etc. At the same time, there is a very strong polarity at the level of the novel itself that challenges binary oppositions. While the two poles are situated opposite to each other, in function of the play of power, one or the other is seen as stronger or more prominent and this degree of prominence is in a continuous movement. Such polarities are men and women, fear and love. No wonder therefore that some of McEwan's most salient characters are fighting women in a patriarchal society.

Gender, race, ethnicity, sexuality, and other dimensions of identity are analysed as forgers of identity, based on social psychology, namely on identity theory and social identity theory. The thesis is based on a strong theoretical background drawing from social psychology (Stets, Burke, Jenkins, Kroger, Woodward) and interwoven with feminism (Beauvoir, Brownmiller), deconstruction and psychology. Although eclecticism is a challenge, Alina Buzarna-Tihenea (Gălbează) manages to maintain the development of the book within the scope of social psychology, pointing out its strong connections to other disciplines. The book is well structured and balanced, offering a coherent view of character development as a mirror image of postmodern identities.

An important aspect of the analysis is the role of trauma – fostered by patriarchal social mentalities and taboos, contingency, frailties and excesses – in the formation of identity and its connection to the innocence of childhood.

Trauma is seen as the site of change, challenging previous beliefs, introducing doubt and imbalance and leading either to maturation and initiation or to alienation and displacement. McEwan's penchant for describing incest, sexual violence and perversion also occupies the centre-stage of the analysis, pointing out the destructive force of the politics of sexuality and the challenge of gender stereotypes. History and politics play a decisive role in the development of individualities and nations in the fictional societies depicted in the novels analysed. *Atonement*, *Black Dogs*, *Saturday*, *The Innocent* etc. They all present a (re)collection of times seen as decisive for the way in which individualities and nations are forged.

Alina Buzarna-Tihenea (Gălbează) offers a comprehensive, well-organized and original approach on Ian McEwan's fiction that can be used as a tool or starting point in future research. She also makes a captivating and invigorating reading, all the while providing an objective view of the serious aspect of affected identities in the contemporary culture. She manages to tackle the spiral movement, the evolution and the complexity of the identity formation and identification in a visual metaphor of the moving and growing vortex, both increasing the degree of abstraction of identity issue and simplifying it through extrapolation. She makes a powerful demonstration that gives way to endless future interpretations and analyses increasingly prominent topics connected to identity.

Lavinia Macarov

INTRODUCTION

The social and cultural scenes of the second half of the twentieth century and the beginning of the twenty-first century, as they are given memorable expression to in Ian McEwan's fiction, bear the marks of important historical and political global events, such as World War II, the Holocaust, the disintegration of the British Empire, the increasing political influence of the American nation, the Cold War, the fall of the Berlin Wall, the 9/11 terrorist attacks. This is also a period of fecundity and diversity of the British fiction that has been both critically praised and commercially successful, a period when powerful and intense works have drawn the attention to the contradictions and vulnerabilities of contemporary society.

Within this framework of international conflicts and tensions, new meanings, new person, role and social identity standards radically influenced individual interactions and patterns of behaviour, providing new themes and subjects to be dealt with. This complex system of reciprocal influences between individuals and society is also fictionally illustrated within McEwan's novels; from this author's perspective, the novelist's privilege is to observe the intricate paths of human interaction and to fictionally render the representations of both the characters' internal and external worlds, by means of revealing their thoughts, their reactions to each event, and their weighing up of various actions and consequences.

Starting from the premise (asserted in one of his interviews) that individuals "are innately moral beings" whose social behaviour "is an instinct (...) coloured of course by local cultural conditions" (Louvel, Ménégaldo and Fortin 4), McEwan's novels (such as *The Innocent*, *Black Dogs*, *The Child in Time*, *Amsterdam*, *Atonement*, *Saturday*) fictionally represent social structures which are deeply affected by struggles for power, anxieties, private and public conflicts, political and social tensions, where individuals, interpersonal relationships, social groups, communities, and even nations permanently redefine themselves, their identity standards and the environment they live in.

Although McEwan's novels render fictive landscapes of major historical events, of their socio-political and cultural meanings and of their impact upon individuals' lives, their critical studies do not entirely approach the issues regarding interactions and patterns of behaviour and the influences of these events on person, role and social identities. Therefore, the present interests which this author has raised (especially due to his shocking style and to his

challenging contemporary themes), and his novelty, as far as research papers dealing with the relationship between his novels and social identity theories are concerned, are among the main reasons which determined me to engage into research concerning his fiction and his preoccupations with the ways in which the "widening gyre" of historical and social contexts are particularly prominent in connection to the different dimensions and meanings of personal, role and social identities.

Structured in four chapters, this thesis has as main purpose the approach of different aspects of identity, as they are rendered in several novels by Ian McEwan (*The Cement Garden*, *The Comfort of Strangers*, *The Child in Time*, *The Innocent*, *Black Dogs*, *Amsterdam*, *Atonement*, *Saturday*, *On Chesil Beach*; since this study began in 2008, I will exclude from my analysis McEwan's latest novel, *Solar*, which was published in 2012). In this respect, social identity theory concepts, such as person identity, role identity (especially gender role identity), social identity (with an emphasis on class identity and national identity), identity standards, meanings and patterns of behaviour, will be extremely useful in the analysis of the dynamics of interactions and in illustrating the impact that the socio-political and historical spheres have on the private life of individuals, in the context of the widening gyre of intricate relationships and social structures, within the framework of the wider concerns of history and the world, as represented in the above mentioned novels by McEwan.

Making a brief description of the situation of the English novel after World War II, with a focus on the divided critical opinions which ranged from critics mourning the decay of the novel within conservatism and conformism, to those announcing an age of diversity and novelty, and placing and presenting Ian McEwan's work against this dynamic background, one of the purposes of the first chapter, entitled "Rising from the Macabre: McEwan's Increasing Concerns with Social, Historical and Political Forces", will be to establish an image of Ian McEwan's fiction, as a body of work increasingly concerned with historical, political and social issues, and with their impact on different aspects related to identities.

The metaphor of the widening gyre, inspired by W. B. Yeats's poem, "The Second Coming" (1919), refers to the dynamism, fluidity and the ever expanding scope of identity, to the tensions between the inner personal world concentrating on emotions and individuality and the external social world, with its historical, socio-political factors, which permanently influence the private dimension of individuals. This metaphor is particularly prominent in connection to McEwan's fictional rendering of social structures which are deeply affected by competitions for international supremacy, war-induced anxieties, political ideologies and social conflicts, where person, role and social identity standards

and meanings are permanently transformed; the metaphor of the widening gyre emphasizes this connection between the individual and the expanding social structures around him, between the private and the public spheres, professed by all social identity theorists and fictionally mirrored within McEwan's novels.

Apart from presenting McEwan's work as a fictive illustration of cultural commentaries dealing with a wide range of issues, including feminism, the proliferation of nuclear weapons during the Cold War, the political ideologies of Capitalism and Communism, terrorism, and the anxieties of the post- 9/11 world, this first chapter will also tackle several social identity theories and concepts, in order to emphasise this interdependence between individual and society, against the historical and social background, as rendered in Ian McEwan's novels.

In order to engage with society and its values, to show the interconnections between the public and the private words, and to emphasize the tensions at the level of personal relationships and interactions, his fiction deals with issues such as innocence, experience, guilt, morality and taboos, against the broader historical and political background. For the general purpose of this research, "Chapter II: Dark Insights within "Innocent" Crimes: Personal Relationships and Morality Issues in Ian McEwan's Fiction" will focus on personal and role identity issues and on the micro level of interactions and personal relationships, which refer to the concrete patterns of behaviour that characterize day-to-day contacts among people in families, schools, and so on, typically studied by symbolic interactionists. This chapter will also focus on the themes of innocence and experience, on notions of passage and thresholds, and on the consequences that new (and even traumatic) experiences have on individual identity, against the background of interactions, such as those taking place at the level of the family, or between friends, lovers or colleagues, in McEwan's fiction.

Focusing on novels, such as *The Innocent*, *The Cement Garden*, *Black Dogs*, *Atonement* and *The Child in Time*, another purpose of the second chapter will be to try to reveal, against the background of McEwan's representations of different aspects of the contemporary civilization, the more or less unexpected ways in which the individuals in his fiction acquire experience, and the ways in which they grow up through interactions or, on the contrary, they fall on the slopes of regress or guilt, as result of their permanent loss of innocence. Other further issues which are going to be tackled are whether and how does experience involve the potential for horrific nightmares and guilt, such as Leonard's terrible and grotesque crime in *The Innocent*, Jack and Julie's incest in *The Cement Garden* and Briony's false incrimination in *Atonement* and to what extent is there some innocence left within the characters after they are "growing up".

Starting from the premise that, in McEwan's fiction, contingency, trauma, environment, mentalities and taboos affect the individual, sometimes leading to

his or her emotional or physical isolation, this chapter will also analyse the different representations of isolation in McEwan's fiction and the effects that it has upon (fictional) individuals' lives, on their relationships and on their identities.

McEwan's novels display a wide range of characters, such as orphaned children who isolate themselves within their derelict home and create their own, grotesque and incestuous version of family (*The Cement Garden*); individuals who have to come to terms with the tensions between their difference and the very different natures of the people around them, between their opinions and mentalities and the very different opinions and mentalities of those they interact with (*The Innocent*, *Black Dogs*, *Amsterdam*); couples descending into nightmares, concluding either in murder (*The Comfort of Strangers*, *The Innocent*), miscommunication and/or separation (*On Chesil Beach*, *Black Dogs*) or, on the contrary, in reconciling their differences and misunderstandings (*The Child in Time*); individuals who fail to understand each other's intentions and actions, who misinterpret the events they witness to (*Amsterdam*, *Atonement*) or who struggle in order to cope with situations such as loss, trauma, anxiety and change (*The Child in Time*, *The Cement Garden*, *The Innocent*, *Black Dogs*, *Atonement*).

In order to reveal the subtle mechanisms through which trauma deeply influences individuals' identities (and those of their fictional counterparts), this second chapter will deal with traumatic instances fictionally illustrated by McEwan in his novels and with the characters' responses to these situations. For example, in *The Cement Garden*, the suddenly orphaned siblings, affected by the loss of their parents, fall into a regressive hypnotic state and establish several unsettling relationships and interactions. In *The Child in Time*, due to a moment of inattention, little Kate disappears at a supermarket, and her parents' (Stephen and Julie's) domestic existence does not survive this traumatic loss. In *The Innocent*, Leonard Marnham, a young and naive telephone communications specialist, together with his lover, Maria Eckdorf, murder the latter's ex-husband, dismember his body and find that their relationship cannot survive this grotesque experience, brought by their commission of crime. In *Black Dogs*, a traumatic encounter with two horrific Gestapo black dogs irremediably separates Bernard Tremaine, a politician, scientist and rationalist, from his wife, June, because of what he considers to be her fantastic and sentimental interpretation of the violent encounter. The lives of the main characters in *Atonement* are destroyed by the traumatic and wrongful arrest of Robbie, who had been mistakenly accused of rape, while the just married couple in *On Chesil Beach* is not able to survive the emotional trauma of their wedding night (Wood). In *Amsterdam*, in spite of their lifelong friendship, the relationship of the main characters, Clive and Vernon, is seriously affected by their career ambitions and

eventually culminates with the "enforcement" of the pact they made about mutual euthanasia.

Since the movement from the disrupting situation created by trauma to a healing attempt is presented as one of the main preoccupation of the characters in Ian McEwan's novels, this second chapter will try to show, therefore, how traumatic events push them towards a reflection process and how they attempt to recreate a situation, an environment, similar to the pre-traumatic one, and how (and if) these characters go through a series of transformations, in the sense of maturation, and in a possible awakening of their moral consciousness.

Continuously dealing within his fiction with issues of masculinity and femininity, by means of fictionally "experiencing" sexuality, Ian McEwan has initially become famous as a writer obsessed with shocking topics such as violence, crimes and sexual perversion, exploring in his early literature disturbing themes (such as breaking social conventions, codes and taboos, incest, sadomasochism, rape, pornography and murder) which challenge social norms, precepts and mentalities, questioning and then defying the restraints established by (biological) sex and class, by politics, culture and gender, in a world which deeply influences individuals and their relationships, and the meanings associated to their gender role identities.

Starting from the premise that both individuals and their fictional counterparts derive their identities from the roles they play in society, the groups they belong to and their personal characteristics, and taking into account that both gender and sexuality are strongly connected to the understanding of identity, "Chapter III. Experiencing Sexuality: the Politics of Gender Identity in Ian McEwan's Fiction" is going to deal with issues such as identity standards and the part that the dimension of gender roles and sexuality plays in connection to the politics of relationships; this chapter will also focus on the impact of historical and political constructs upon the private sexual life of individuals (and on their fictional counterparts) and on private male-female heterosexual relationships (excluding *The Comfort of Strangers* from the analysis, as this novel focuses on Jed's pathological passion for Joe, thus on a "homosexual relationship", if we may call it so, taking into account that the heterosexual Joe rejects Jed's homosexual advances).

Even from the very beginning, McEwan's fiction emphasized the connection between authoritarian political systems and patriarchy, revealing their influence on the personality and the intimate relationships of characters. His early novels illustrate traditional male and female gender roles and unequal relationships and, by presenting extreme male attitudes of control, domination and exploitation toward women, intermingled with shocking themes of sexual deviation (such as incest and sado-masochism), they represent an overt criticism

of the extreme patriarchal ideologies which are created, encouraged and even perpetuated by contemporary social structures. Such examples are Father's patriarchal imposed order and the sexual behaviour of the siblings falling on the slopes of incest and excessive masturbation in *The Cement Garden*; Caroline's (socially induced) masochism and Robert's male despotism and sadistic sexual perversion in *The Comfort of Strangers*; transvestism and euthanasia in *Amsterdam*; Leonard's sexual fantasies of submission and rape in *The Innocent*; Mr. Tallis's patriarchal authority visible despite his absence from the household and his family's tacit acceptance of his extramarital relationship in *Atonement*.

On the other hand, the third chapter will also reveal several instances of McEwan's strong female characters, who become the dominant ones within their relationships, asserting their power in front of men; such women are Julie in *The Cement Garden*, Mary in *The Comfort of Strangers*, Maria in *The Innocent*, Thelma and Julie in *The Child in Time*.

Focusing on male-female interactions within socio-political structures, this chapter will highlight the fragile nature of several male-female relationships from the author's fiction, and the ways in which they are (more or less permanently) destroyed by unexpected and sudden happenings: for instance, *Black Dogs* reveals the intermingling of the most hidden desires (such as sex, wealth or untamed passions) with social relationships, against the background of a continuous interplay between spirituality and rationality, raised from a dramatic encounter with the eponymous black dogs, which shakes June and Bernard's marriage; in *The Child in Time*, Stephen and Julie's marriage is also seriously affected by the sudden disappearance of their daughter; in *Atonement*, the misinterpretation of sexual desire and the mentalities discouraging sex outside the wedlock destroy genuine love and send the innocent Robbie to prison and then to war; social mentalities and taboos related to sex (and especially to sex outside marriage) put an end to the relationship of a newly-wed couple in *On Chesil Beach*.

Among the most significant aims of this third chapter will be, therefore, to show that, whether we are talking about McEwan's early or late fiction, through the lens of the (patriarchal) politics of sexuality and gender roles, as a whole, his novels might be considered good illustrations of the ways in which sexuality is a socially constructed term, related to power relations. Moreover, his novels fictionally render the changes that occur in family structures, in social concepts and trends, exploring the tight interconnections between public and private dimensions, family and larger communities, sexual and social lives.

Taking into account that McEwan's novels deal with major events of the European history from the second half of the twentieth century and the beginning of the twenty-first century, the fourth chapter, entitled "Publicly and