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MCEWAN'S VISION OF LIFE

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ABSTRACT

In Postmodern society the tragic is unthinkable and yet it is incumbent on us to think it. The tragic is a deafening unsaid, for if there is anything that is lived on a day to day basis, it is indeed, "the tragic sense of life." Everyday facts and experiences are inescapable. There seems to be something fated about them and it is with this fatum that we must wrestle. This means recognizing on an individual as well as a collective level, the role of the unpredictable or the incalculable in causing decisive events. This is something like the 'Objective Chance' of the surrealists not limited to the happy few but widely lived by the whole of society. This paper aims to study Ian McEwan's vision of life as exhibited through his novels.

Ian McEwan believes in the randomness of fate and why it interests him as a novelist. In one of his interviews McEwan admits:

"I often think that when people talk of coincidences that they are almost bound to occur because we're like so many atoms in a turbulent system or a gas under pressure if you lead an averagely busy life, the number of people that you collide with, so to speak is extraordinary one could become your husband, or your wife, or for that matter your murderer. That random element in life is a gift to a novelist to make a pattern of it to make some sense of it, to contest its meaning or even ask whether there is any meaning to it all".

Keywords: Postmodern, randomness, fate, tragic, gothic.

McEwan grapples with the notion of fate like other novelists had also done with a view to delineating the human predicament. Thomas Hardy in the Victorian age had dealt with it in a period that was marked by confusion and contradictions. In *Hardy's* tragic drama of life a conflict between man and destiny is the center of events. *David Cecil* remarks:

"A struggle between man on one hand and an omnipotent and indifferent fate on the other hand goes on and that is Hardy's interpretation of the human condition".

The function of the element of chance in the universe is a theme which runs from the antiquity to

the modern times. The most common recurring terms indicating different aspects of the elements of chance are fortune, fate and chance itself although other terms such as necessity, destiny, providence. Predestination, virtue, luck also enter into the discussion. It was experienced by man that if the laws of the universe work with unfailing regularity based on antecedent causes, a complete knowledge of all factors regulating an outcome would unfailingly lead to the knowledge of the outcome itself. If observations prove that such unfailing regularity does not obtain in the laws of the universe, there must be some element that breaks that regularity, and that element may be due to the

observer or inherent in the laws themselves. This element generally known as chance, conceivably be the failure of man to know all possible factors effecting an outcome. So on one hand the assumption was that the greater the increase in human knowledge the lesser the sphere of the indeterminate. On the other hand if the element of indeterminateness is inherent in the very laws of causality, it would remain in spite of the most complete knowledge. The laws of the universe would be a summary of the highest probabilities affecting an outcome. At this time I would like to briefly trace the history of development of these ideas. In the Democritean or Atomistic cosmology though chance may have been present at the formation of the cosmos, once the heavens and all the worlds have come into being chance ceases to function because everything proceeds from an antecedent cause, a predictable and hence necessary result. In the world known to man indeterminism disappears except as the subjective insufficiency of knowledge on the part of man, but it still appears in ideas about formation of the universe. The earliest notion about fate could well have arisen from the observation of the inexorability of death. Among the Orphics fate was viewed as the law which controls the conditions of our birth, death and successive reincarnation. Man has been created by God, but his first bodily differentiation has been entrusted to the astral powers. The well being of the universe is the super concern of the deity, and to this end the welfare of individuals is subordinated and made instrumental. The law of fate is the power which keeps order in the universe. Different roles have been assigned to the stars and under their influence, to man in order to safeguard the fixed needs of the universe within that framework, in order to maintain some freedom of action for man, chance is made operative.

McEwan's novel *The Comfort of Strangers* (1981) clearly highlights the role of chance in shaping our lives. The couple Colin and Mary have gone on a vacation to Italy. They amble about the hotel and tourist streets like any other person on a holiday:

"Each evening, in the ritual hour they spent on their balcony before setting out to find a

restaurant, they had been listening patiently to the other's dreams to exchange for the luxury of recounting their own." (CS, 10)

They also quickly prove to be incompetent tourists failing to explore the area with any degree of proficiency. Always forgetting their maps, they continually become lost in the labyrinthine roadways, eventually becoming aware of their incompetence they find themselves forced to rely upon the comfort of strangers. Their accidental meeting with Robert provides the turning point in their lives. He seems to be a friendly man and the couple form an attachment to him. Though Colin and Mary are naturally repulsed and horrified at their first encounter with Robert and Caroline, the only time during the vacation that their relationship comes alive is immediately after this bizarre night with the sadomasochistic couple. This brief yet intense contact with strangers revitalizes their own dormant desires. Yet surprisingly for Colin and Mary, they do not explore the reasons behind this feeling:

"but for all (their)

Obsession, this analysis which extended to

The very means of discussion itself, they did not talk about

The cause of their renewal." (CS, 81)

Robert draws them into his unhappy family history. He relates to them a bizarre tale of his childhood concerning his tyrannical father and his condescending attitude towards women. Gradually Colin and Mary get trapped by Robert who tries to come between them and in a way separate them. Unable to come out of their dependency and comprehend Robert's plans they feel sympathetic towards Caroline. The comfort provided soon turns to uneasiness. According to *Observer Review*:

"McEwan, that master of the taciturn macabre so organizes his narrative that without insisting anything, every turn and glimpse is another tightening of the noose. The evils of power and the power of evil are transmitted with a steely coolness, and in a prose that has a feline grace."

Mary and Colin seem sleepwalkers, automatons guided by forces beyond their control. Robert takes charge over them. Finally Colin is brutally murdered in the

presence of a drugged and stupefied Mary. The action of *The Comfort of Strangers* is certainly suitable material for a Gothic text with obsession, hatred, violence, sadism madness, obscure perversion all blended together skilfully. McEwan very adeptly advocates the view that lives can change in a moment and we are not to be blamed because chance happenings are not in our control. He obviously agrees with *Angela Carter's* assessment : "We live in gothic times."

McEwan through his novel *Enduring Love* (1987) unleashes a brilliant and gripping tale about life and its ability to change in an instant. It follows the story of a man, Joe Rose a scientist when a bizarre chance encounter gives rise to a relentless obsession that drives him to the very brink of madness, Joe is picnicking in a park on the outskirts of London with his lover Clarissa who has returned after six weeks in the States. To complete the picture there's even a helium balloon dreamily across the wooded valley. But as Joe and Clarissa watch the balloon touch down, their idyll comes to an abrupt end. The pilot catches his leg in the anchor rope, while the only passenger's a boy is too scared to jump down. As the windwhips into action, Joe and four other men rush to secure the basket. Joe himself states:

"We were running towards a catastrophe which itself was a kind of furnace in whose heat identities and fates would buckle into new shapes."(EL,3)

Mother Nature however is not feeling very maternal, "A mighty fist socked the balloon in two rapid blows, one two the second more vicious than the first", and at once the rescuers are airborne. Joe finally manages to drop to the ground, as do most of his companions but one man is lifted sky-high, only to his death. The protagonist Joe while reflecting on how so many people happened to gather at one place at the time of such a dreadful happening in order to render help shows that in such times feeling of solidarity is established which leads to bonding.

Little did Joe knew that in itself the accident would change the survivor's lives too, filling them with an uneasy combination of shame, happiness and endless self-reproach. Fate had far more

unpleasant things in store for Joe Rose. Meeting the eye of fellow rescuer Jed Parry, for example turns out to be a very bad move. It opens the door to an encounter between a stalker and his victim. For Jed, the stalker instantly gets obsessed, making the first of many calls to Joe and Clarissa's London flat that very night. Soon he is openly shadowing Joe and writing him endless letters. Worse of all Jed's version of love comes to seem a distortion of Joe's feelings for Clarissa. It seems Joe and Clarissa were at the wrong place at the wrong time. This is the basis of their tragedy that befalls their life. Here McEwan makes us see how chance determines people's fate.

We generally think of accidents as events we cannot control, but is an event accidental if it occurs because we fail to control it? That question is a fundamental principle of ethics. It lies at the heart of McEwan's brilliant novel, *Atonement* (2001). Basically it deals with lovers Robbie and Cecilia parted by pitiless fate and promising to come back to each other in a time of war. At each turn a new surprise reassures us that we are in the hands of a masterful manipulator. The trouble is, it really isn't McEwan who has created the extraordinary world in *Atonement*. And when we learn who the 'real' author is it sends our sense and indeed, the truth really is as ghostly as invention. In this great exploration of accident versus moral choice, there are surely no accidental word choices. McEwan's writing is lush, detailed, vibrantly closed and intense. Here we see that a single encounter sets off a series of misreading that change the lives of the characters involved forever. It seems forces are at work over which the lovers, Cecilia and Robbie as well as the over imaginative central protagonist Briony have neither power nor comprehension. Fate is shaping their lives.

McEwan himself has admitted:

"When anything can happen everything matters".

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