

Contemporary Postmodern Representations in British Fictions with reference to Ian McEwan's *Black Dogs*

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Britain has suffered the aftermath of the two world wars than any other nation in the world. As her colonies were affected economically at large, the people of Britain underwent a complete social unrest. Pushed into a sense of dismay and dullness, the postwar period in England was pitiable and pathetic, which reflected in the ways of the life of the people. Ian McEwan, a prolific writer of contemporary literary world, an active witness and sufferer of the war period, reflects on the consequences of the same in the lives of people through his novels, especially his earlier ones. Ian McEwan, along with his contemporaries continues in post modernistic trend and practice, 'the autonomy of art' through his novel, with appreciable technical excellence. Many of his novels **The Innocent**, **Black Dogs**, **Atonement**, **The Child in Time** touch upon the war period and the people living in that period, consequently.

With the wide spread of innovative techniques in contemporary writing, the new writings especially from Britain concentrate on the concept of spirituality rather than material prosperity. As a result of this practical ideology, the new and modern thoughts throw light on the inner and intense sense of human personality, giving it a novel form in their writings. Ian McEwan is one of these writers, who turned the intellectual crowd to his side by his very earlier fictions themselves, exposing himself as a promising and brilliant English fiction writer. McEwan, in the very first fiction itself, broke through the established fictional trends and traditions with his admission of forbidden things bringing in a novel and daring style both in his diction and narration. His interest into the grotesque and the mysterious human mind reflected in his novels, bringing a distinguished status in the contemporary fictional world. Bradbury comments on McEwan's writing which reflected the condition of the century,

'An increasingly grotesque and alien world, a world in which perverse, inner fantasy and grotesque outward reality were forced to meet in new mixtures.'

(The Modern British Novel, 390)

and quite naturally, McEwan's fictional world is a highly different and alienated one, where the human mind releases its other side – the hidden and the unspoken. McEwan's intense insight into such an analysis paves way for brilliant portrayals of contemporary society of chaos. The widened knowledge about the various part of the world, people and their multi-cultural lifestyles of McEwan reflects in his novels, as well.

Ian Russell McEwan was born as the son of an army officer in 1948 and had the privilege of spending his younger days in different parts of the world. Initially he had an army childhood in Singapore and Tripoli. McEwan, having read English and French at the University of Sussex studied creative writing at the University of East Anglia. Later, his visit to Afghanistan, USA and North-west nations nurtured him with a fine acquaintance of multilingual, multicultural and geographical details.

McEwan's introduction to the English literary world was primarily, as a short story writer. With his new kind of inception in story writing, McEwan bewildered the literary world with his short story collection. Meantime, it also termed him as one of the most original writers of the period. Winning the Somerset Maugham Award for his primary collection, McEwan raised wider anticipation among the English readers as a socially conscious and responsible author. He writes on the responsibility of an individual towards his fellow human being and the society thereby. He is also an example of it, as he regrets the ways of modern life and our attitude in the name of religion, liberalism and technology etc. One of his earlier works, **Black dogs** (1992) brought McEwan a wider recognition and better critical acclaim which recommends the modern man 'to get hold of the Good' to save himself from the materialistic world. The novel brought him reputation as an intense and original writer, which also made him famous outside Britain among the reading public. The novel, *Black Dogs* is a major deviation in his career stamping McEwan as a serious writer of English fictions for he explores, in the novel the concept of spiritual serenity through the character June Tremaine.

Jeremy, the narrator of the plot has a strong affection or attraction towards other people's parents, having lost his own in a road accident, when he was eight. This habit of Jeremy draws him closer to June, his mother-in-law and Bernard, his father-in-law. In his attempt to write June's biography, Jeremy spends most of his time with her, who is bed-ridden, listening to her past life and about her marriage to Bernard.

By their similar political values and principles of communism and rationalism aspiring to have an egalitarian society, June and Bernard are attracted towards each other. Their happy married life is intervened by a terrible incident breaking the happiness and also the marriage bond of the couple once for all. June's encounter with the wolf like black dogs and her struggle to save herself brings a remarkable mental transformation in her mind. Having

caught in such a horrifying experience, June undergoes complete mental transformation thereafter as she views the black dogs as an incarnation of evil. She comes out of her rational principles and becomes a person looking for ‘Spiritual awakening’. But for Bernard, strongly stuck with his communist thoughts, the black dogs and the story that they having been once used as Gestapo guard dogs to intimidate the French prisoners, as June informs him, are all mere illusion. As a result of this conflict between Bernard and June, they happen to live apart. But the haunting memory of the beasts still remains in June’s memory, even after a few decades, as she related her experience to Jeremy. In the end, for Jeremy, as well as the readers, the story of black dogs and their haunting memories still remain unfathomable, even after June’s death, in the novel,

‘fading as they move into the foothills of the mountains from where they will return to haunt us, somewhere in Europe, in another time.’

(Black Dogs 174)

John Harrison praises the novel as “Ian McEwan’s most human work” and he acknowledges the novel compressing in the character of June, “the disease of the human imagination” (Harrison 20).

Harrison observes that the novel, **Black Dogs**,

‘... is compassionate without re-sorting to sentimentality, clever without ever losing its honesty, an undisguised human work.’

(Harrison 20)

McEwan encompasses the inevitable necessity of a search for value in human life and society, through the novel **Black Dogs**. It is of course the widely discussed, and criticized among his fictions for its intensity of thematic contention. McEwan’s concern with the metaphysical elements and questions on the enduring power that keeps the world going is remarkable and that is perceived as the basic structure of the thematic content of the fiction. Focusing on the terrible experience of June Tremaine that she had undergone a few decades before, McEwan presents her personality in the light of spiritual enlightenment. She begins as an individual attempting her spiritual revival and security and views good and evil in society to be beyond the pragmatic, materialistic world.

On June’s day with the huge, donkey-like black dogs, she fights in isolation, to save her life, missing her husband somewhere on their way. June realizes that her own incredible moral courage has fought to save herself from the ferocious animals, and she comprehends that it is this inherent moral force that she feels now within herself is a sign or a beginning for her spiritual awakening. She starts believing, as she says that the inward presence of spiritual power and the presence of God has changed her pre-condition as a person of reason. When she acquaints herself with the history of these dogs, her intuition strengthens and she argues that spiritual serenity among human kind is vital than any other in the world as it would turn everyone to be naturally human by getting hold of the ‘Good’, which she terms as God. June adds relating her story to Jeremy,

‘I came face to face with the evil... Human nature, the human heart, the spirit, the soul consciousness – itself call it what you like.’

(Black Dogs 172)

‘Her expression relates the incredible impact that had occurred within her soul which turns her religious person. Even after a few decades, as she says, she could sense the black dogs proof of a malign principle, a force in human affairs that periodically advances to dominate and destroy the lives of individuals and nations’

(Black Dogs 59)

Standing in front and haunting her, the black dogs stand for the incarnation of evil, in June’s mind as she adds,

‘I haven’t mythologized these animals. I’ve made use of them. They set me free. I discovered something’

(Black Dogs 59)

With June’s awakening and search for value, McEwan also presents Bernard, totally different from June, as a “Voice of reason” with his modern and technical view of life. Through the Character of Bernard and June, McEwan represents two groups of people in the society, one standing for rationality, intelligence, power and self-confidence, the other of spiritual purity and reawakening. In the fiction, it is noted that the author’s concern is more on the character of June than Bernard and it can be interpreted that McEwan reflects his belief in the existence of Good and Evil in the world, even though there are no direct indications to it.

In a way, June’s argument predominates Bernard’s rationality in the narration. Man’s belief or disbelief in God, in religious terms are much to be discussed. At the same time, the birth of the existence of Good in the form of our own moral ways, compassion, and basic human values, and evil as well are present in the society, now and then unleashing itself from ourselves. According to our established trends in the society, the incarnation of Good takes up the role of God whereas of evil, the role of devil. It can be perceived from the novel that God serves as a Central point for men’s concentration on Goodness in life. The devilish force of evil intrudes in men’s life, leading to a path of decay and calamity and however is defeated by the pre and ever existing serenity of Goodness, ultimately.

Thereby, McEwan makes a humble attempt to expose that the evil force is capable of vulgarity and disastrous impacts. He does create awareness about this cruel presence of evil, not outside the society but within ourselves and our mind influenced by the evil force which is waiting to attack us at any moment. Thus, emphasizing on the need of compassion and consideration which is the very need of the hour and also on the concept of general human nature, McEwan has attained universality about his writing in his fictions. Analyzing the unique nature of his writings, this places him apart from his contemporaries, Bradbury states,

‘McEwan now becomes the latter day humanist, concerned for the need for the human spirit to confront its own

dangerous impulses. The writer's task becomes a form of fragile modern science and the novel is the book of modern life; as a work unfolds, it teaches you its own rules, it tells how it should be written, at the same time, it is an act of discovery, in a harsh world, of the extent of human worth. '

(The Modern British Novel, 1878-2001)

Thus, with the growing appreciations from notable critics and recognition from the readers, Ian McEwan is staunchly acknowledged as a trend setter of the contemporary literary world. At this time when all other literary works from writers concentrate on transnational features such as identity crisis, multilingual, multicultural concepts, Ian McEwan, representing British writings, as a senior postmodern novelist, has come a long way in the literary field with his novels with diverse themes and contents, revolving around individuals and their inner selves.

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