Transition from Modernist to Postmodernist: A Survey of Ian McEwan’s later Fiction

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Abstract: The aim of this enquiry is a survey on the postmodernity that Ian McEwan practices in his later novels. Although a myriad definitions of postmodernism makes this term and its associated epoch to some extent “indefinable,” this study endeavours to freeze and apply one of the exhaustive definitions of postmodernism which is “incredulity towards metanarratives,” a widespread speculation propagated by the postmodernist mapmaker, Jean-Francois Lyotard. Via Lyotard’s definition of postmodern world, this investigation tests the compatibility between it and McEwan’s fiction in order to prove the legitimacy of labelling him as a postmodernist novelist.

Keywords: speculative metanarrative, metanarrative of emancipation, metafiction, postmodernism

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1. Introduction

McEwan is an accomplished architect of fiction who designs a bridge to span the gap between realism and modernism/postmodernism. However, the version of postmodernity which McEwan practices in his later novels including Black Dogs, Amsterdam, Enduring Love, Saturday and Solar does not strictly follow the path traversed by the majority of his contemporary avant-garde novelists who believe, in the words of John Hawkes, “the true enemies of novel are plot, theme, character and setting” (qtd. in Sim 126). Therefore, the reader of the said novels rarely experiences the typical postmodernistic moods such as temporal disorder, pastiche, fragmentation, looseness of association, paranoia, and vicious circles (Sim 126-131). In fact, the point of divergence between McEwan and other postmodernist writers is that he does not push the four conventions of literary cornerstones namely plot, theme, character and setting to oblivion.

Subsuming those select novels under the category of postmodern novels in a Lyotardian sense may lead us to expand the meaning of Modernism. In other words, these novels belong to that kind of modernism that is already passed postmodernism: a fresh periodical compartmentalisation propagated by the French philosopher, Jean Francis Lyotard. In fact, the prominent cultural periodization which begins with realism in nineteenth century and comes to twentieth-century modernism and finally ends with contemporary postmodernism is not accepted by Lyotard. In “Answering the Question; What Is Postmodernism?”, Lyotard argues “a work can become modern only if it is first postmodern.” Thus according to his speculation “postmodernism is not modernism at its end, but in a nascent state and this state is recurrent” (13). It would be better to say, for Lyotard postmodern does not replace a stable modernity, but recurs through modernity as a nascent state of it. Indeed, modernism for Lyotard is a state of constant upheaval because of its continual attempts to innovate and progress. So postmodernism for him is an avant-garde force within the upheavals of modernism that challenges and disrupts its ideas and categories thus forcing new ways of thinking and acting that resist dominant modern themes of progress.

According to Lyotard, this modernism that comes after postmodernism presents the existence of something unrepresentable. Such an idea is derived from Emmanuel Kant’s Critique of Judgment and his discussion of the sublime in which the imagination in encountering with a too large or powerful thing is stretched to the limit trying to represent what is perceived. In this sense, the sublime is the feeling that there is something beyond the limit of experience that we can conceive of even if we can’t represent or know about (qtd. in Malpas 46, 47). Lyotard adopts the idea of the sublime to describe the way in which art and literature can disrupt the established ‘language games’ as also ways of representing the world. Modern and postmodern art, he argues, have the capacity to represent the things which have an unrepresentable existence like the voices that are silenced in culture, or ideas that cannot be formulated in rational communication. As a result, for Lyotard, James Joyce’s Finnegans Wake and Marcel Proust’s Remembrance of Things Past are the best examples of postmodernism and modernism respectively.

This theoretical standpoint that Lyotard adopts in order to analyse the major trends in the contemporary epoch excludes him from the current sceptic thinkers who attack and reject postmodernism. In other words, Lyotard’s epistemology is not arisen either in defence of, or in opposition to, different speculations about postmodernism. In fact, he assiduously avoids a schematization that ontologically deals with doubt and uncertainty about the existence of postmodernism. Although postmodernism as a movement of thought is highly sceptical in its
orientation, Lyotard cautiously selects and uses the word “incredulity” in his widespread definition of postmodernism—“Simplifying to the extreme, I define postmodern as incredulity toward metanarratives” (xxiv). “Incredulity,” according to Stuart “is what marks out the postmodern condition for Lyotard, the general lapse in belief that he argues has occurred in the later twentieth century with regard to political and institutional authority” (Lyotard Disc. 102), and that is why Lyotard saw incredulity as a widespread phenomenon. Lyotard completes his description of postmodern world by elaborating “his incredulity is undoubtedly a product of progress in the sciences: but that progress in turn presupposes it” (xxiv).

Highlighting various aspects of postmodern incredulity in terms of those select novels, this study attempts to present those unrepresentable aspects of McEwan’s fiction which thematically connote disbelief to those metanarratives underlined by Lyotard, i.e. “the metanarratives of emancipation” and “the speculative metanarratives.” Jean- François Lyotard basically belongs to the poststructuralist school of thought and, as Brian McHale has put it well, “poststructuralism and postmodernism are more like cousins than parent and child” (Nicol 6). Lyotard’s major contribution to postmodernism is his monumental work, The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge (1984), especially his doctrine of ‘incredulity toward metanarratives’ as a definition of postmodern society. Like Michael Foucault who also upholds local narratives, Lyotard believes that big stories are bad and small stories are good. In fact, for Lyotard the grand narratives have become associated with political programs and parties and small narratives with localised creativity (Sarup 146). In the later stage of his scholarly perusal, he expands his doctrine and elaborates the role of art in modern and postmodern periods. He later comments on justice and truth and introduces the concept of “deferend.”

2. Lyotard’s definition of narrative

For Lyotard, narratives are the stories that communities tell among themselves about their present, their past and their future. Although the term “narrative” is commonly associated with literary fiction, all forms of discourses employ narratives in one way or another. In the same way, scientific statements are presented through certain types of narrative that describe the physical world. Even mathematical sciences are forced to turn their equation into narratives in order to explain the implication of their findings. Therefore, narratives stand at the basis of human experience and society as they tell us who we are, and allow us to express what we believe in and aspire to.

Lyotard constructs his speculative narratives existing in human discourses based on the notion of “language game” formulated by Ludwig Wittgenstein in his Philosophical Investigations ([1953] 1976). As Stuart explains, “for the later Wittgenstein, language was a matter of learning how words are used and then deploying them in the approved fashion (as he saw it, a case of asking not for the meaning but the use).” Therefore, as Stuart puts, “we come to regard this [language] as a fixed system of communication, the natural order of things, but in fact it is only one ‘game’ among many other possibilities that could be instituted. The rules and procedures of any game were to be considered as conventional only.

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1 L’incréduilité à l’égard des métarécits” is the English translation of Lyotard’s definition of postmodernism, “incredulity toward postmodern metanarratives” which is done by Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi in their translation of Lyotard’s The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge.
and could be changed to encompass different worldviews” (Lyotard Dir. 121). Lyotard in The Postmodern Condition makes three significant observations about the activity: “their rules do not carry within themselves their own legitimation, but are the object of a contract, explicit or not, between players”; “if there are no rules, there is no game”; “every utterance should be thought of as a ‘move’ in a game” (10).

In The Postmodern Condition, Lyotard argues that different discourses or language games have different narratives with different rules. In Lyotard’s view, metanarratives set the rules of petit narratives and language games which mean that metanarratives organize language games and determine the success or failure of each statement or language ‘move’ that takes place in them. For Lyotard, the metanarrative of pre-modern culture was based on the relationship between past and present, while the metanarrative of modernity is based on human progress and it points toward the future. In sum, in the words of Stephens and McCallum, “metanarrative is a global or totalizing cultural narrative schema which orders and explains knowledge and experience” (4). In this regard, Lyotard believes that there are two types of modern metanarratives: speculative metanarrative and emancipating metanarrative.

3. Speculative metanarrative and emancipating metanarrative

Lyotard’s “speculative metanarrative” comes from Hegel’s essay “The Truth Is the Whole”, in his Phenomenology of Spirit (1977). Hegel believes that the human life or ‘spirit’ progresses by incremental knowledge and all the different language games can be brought together by philosophy in order to present a “universal history” of “spirit.” In the speculative grand narrative, therefore, all possible statements are brought together under a single metanarrative and their truth and values are judged according to its rules. As a result, the truth or falsity of any system or language game is determined by its relationship to the whole of knowledge and this whole of knowledge is the speculative metanarrative.

“The metanarrative of emancipation” is based on human freedom. For Lyotard, this metanarrative begins with the French Revolution in 1789 when the idea of universal education was seen as a means for setting free all citizens from the shackles of mysticism and domination. In this metanarrative, knowledge is the basis of freedom from oppression, and development of knowledge is valued because it liberates humanity from suffering. In fact, in this metanarrative, knowledge is no longer the subject but in the service of the subject. This metanarrative has taken multitudinous forms over the last few hundred years. One such metanarrative is the project of Enlightenment which emphasises the idea of the freedom of people from religious superstitions, or Marxism which focuses on the freedom of the workers from exploitation by their employers and on the development of their abilities to control their own destiny. Thus, the aim of this grand narrative is the emancipation of an enlightened humanity from dogma, mysticism, exploitation and suffering.

In his critique of postmodern condition, Lyotard argues that nowadays knowledge is no longer organized towards the fulfilment of universal human goal. Instead, postmodern knowledge is valued in terms of its ‘efficiency’ and ‘profitability’ in a globally market-driven economy. This transformation of knowledge is marked by incredulity towards metanarratives. In “Apostil on Narratives,” Lyotard argues that the global spread of capitalism and the rapid development in science and technology since the Second World War have put an end to the grand narratives and “the project of modernity ... has not been forsaken or forgotten but destroyed and liquidated” (Lyotard 18).
Regarding incredulity toward metanarratives, Lyotard discusses that truth and justice which are the bases of the speculative metanarrative and the metanarrative of emancipation respectively have no longer the universal appeal. Therefore, the identities of individuals are dispersed because of getting located in the multiplicity of language games that no longer follow a single metanarrative. With the destruction of the grand narratives, there is no longer a unified identity for the subject or society. Instead, individuals are sites where ranges of conflicting moral and political codes intersect, and the social boundary is fragmented. The manifestation of this incredulity and fragmentation are traceable throughout the novels of Ian McEwan.

Lyotard’s analysis of the postmodern condition has been criticized as being internally inconsistent. For instance Alex Callinicos in his book *Against Postmodernism: A Marxist Critique* or Jürgen Habermas in his article “Modernity Vs. Postmodernity” argues that Lyotard’s description of the postmodern world bears an “incredulity toward metanarratives”, which in itself can be seen as a metanarrative. According to this view, the poststructuralist thinkers including Lyotard criticize universal rules, yet postulate that postmodernity contains a universal scepticism toward metanarratives. Thus, the postmodern incredulity towards metanarratives could be said to be self-refuting. In other words, they discuss that if we are sceptical of universal narratives such as “truth”, “knowledge”, “right”, or “wrong”, then there is no ground for believing the “truth”, that metanarratives are being undermined.

Setting those philosophical counterarguments aside, Lyotard severely criticises the Capitalist world for judging all knowledge in terms of its financial value and its technological efficiency; however, he is not a Marxist either even though once he joined the Marxist party in Algeria to fight against the French colonizers. In fact, the essence of Lyotard’s argument is the re-evaluation of the “emancipatory” narratives of Marxism and liberalism, and the consideration of new bases for aesthetic, moral, and political judgments and actions. When modernism in art and modernity in technology led to Auschwitz and the Soviet gulags, allegiance to one universal standard by which all are judged generates a murderous hostility towards the different.

In this circumstance, unlike Habermas, Lyotard appreciates and respects diversity, local differences and plurality of ways in which human beings choose to live. Habermas in his essay “Modern: an Unfinished Project” -- like Emanuel Kant’s view in *Critique of the Power of Judgment*-- argues that the aim of art is to bridge the gap between various language games, like epistemology and ethics, in order to achieve the political consensus of rational communication action. However, Lyotard in “Answering the Question: What is Postmodernism?” discusses that Habermas’s view is only a “transcendental illusion” (15-16). He argues that the task of art is to resist the terror of totalitarianism through its employment of Kant’s notion of the sublime.

Therefore, the fiction of Ian McEwan comes after the dying embers of the avant-garde, and turns back to the established conventions of fiction like plot, character, theme which have developed from the mid-1980s. A generation of postmodern novelists like Ian McEwan, Iris Murdoch and Martin Amis in British Literature tries to represent the recurrent themes and thoughts of the postmodern milieu like Jean-François Lyotard’s “metanarrative,” or Jean Baudrillard’s “hyperreal” rather than skilfully manoeuvre those stylistic techniques such as ‘cut-up,’ ‘fold-in,’ ‘frame-breaking’ or ‘frame-foregrounding’ practiced by the postmodern avant-garde writers.
4. Postmodern Metafiction and Narrative Unreliability

In his incisive analysis of postmodernism, *The Postmodern Condition*, Lyotard refers to Enlightenment thought as “metanarratives” or grand stories which structure the discourses of modern religion, politics, philosophy, and science. Metanarratives, according to him, are a form of ideology which functions violently to suppress and control the individual subject by imposing a false sense of “totality” and “universality” on a set of disparate things, actions, and events. A metanarrative is like a literary narrative in that it is essentially a means of ordering discrete elements in a particular form and thus presenting a rhetorical case about the way things work or are connected, which legitimises political positions and courses of action (Nicol 11).

Indeed, the extension of Lyotard’s assumption about the incredulities toward those grand narratives in the postmodern era presupposes that literary narratives are never innocent nor natural but always partial, selective, rhetorical and consequently unreliable. One of the ‘realist’ conceits that postmodern writers, including Ian McEwan reject is the impression that narrative somehow unfolds naturally without being shaped by an author, wherein the task of the narrator is simply to present the reader with a coherent narrative, which s/he has, come upon. Instead, narrative is always the result of selection and interpretation and this is something demonstrated repeatedly by the self-reflexive techniques of the “metafictional” writers.

Postmodern fiction which is roughly synonymous with metafiction can be considered as a response to the kind of socio-historical changes of which McEwan’s novels *Atonement* and *Enduring Love* are the symptoms. These wide-ranging cultural changes are the result of the said “incredulities.” Indeed, these two novels debunk the notion that realistic system of belief, resting on the conviction that the work of art reliably replicates the “sensible” world, is no longer validated. In other words, these two novels scrutinize the crucial criteria of realist ideology which asserts, “art and literature should reflect life and the world soberly, in precise detail, so that we can learn from or analyse it rather than swept over by idealistic and escapist flights of fancy (Nicol 18).

Focusing on the fact that the act of representation cannot be performed as unselfconsciously and wholeheartedly as it was in the nineteenth century, McEwan targets the modernist tents too. Indeed, for McEwan, the modernist novelists such as Virginia Woolf or James Joyce who believed that subjectivity ought to be portrayed more accurately than it was in the nineteenth-century novels, followed the realist novelists’ fallacy. Even for McEwan, modernists’ narrative technique of “stream of consciousness” which is an unmediated presentation of the contents of a character’s conscious mind “directly” is a realistic depiction in the extreme. That’s why McEwan makes a detour from realism and modernism and finally ends up with metafiction in his *Atonement*.

The unreliability of narrative *per se* in a metafictional context is another significant dimension which McEwan adds to the corpus of contemporary narrative fiction, carrying the postmodern tag of “incredulity towards metanarratives.” His *Enduring Love* demonstrates the overall functionality and partiality of narrative, while the fact that the narrative process is always a matter of man’s desire, always subjective, is suppressed or disavowed by realism and to some extent by modernism. Narrators, for McEwan in the postmodern era, select and interpret continually: no matter how objective a narrator claims to be, he or she is inevitably partial and his/her narrative is subject to “essential” unreliability.
Atonement and Enduring Love can be the complement of each other in the sense that the former raises the question on the aspect of fictional verisimilitude in a broad sense and latter subjects the reliability of narrative under the acid test. These are the major points which are highlighted in the two following sections

5. Contesting History and Science as Signs of Authority

To put together and complete the puzzle of McEwan's exposition of heterogeneous aspects of incredulity in the postmodern epoch, there are two other pieces: history and science. In respect to the reliability of narratives in historical discourses in the postmodern era, McEwan in Black Dogs (1992) concentrates on the role of memory in reconstructing the past events in those narratives and scrutinizes the trustworthiness of them. As far as scientific discourses are concerned, McEwan focuses on increasing incredulity toward international summits (e.g. the Copenhagen talk on global warming) conducted for solving the global issues. Portraying the reality of these benefit-oriented congregations in Solar (2010), McEwan attempts to depict how impractical and inefficient they are.

Subverting history’s hegemonic primacy as the way to “record the past” Kerwin Lee Klein in his article “On the Emergence of Memory in Historical Discourse” tentatively points to the recent rise of memory studies as a signal, if not the end, of reconsideration of history: “It is no accident that our sudden fascination with memory goes hand in hand with postmodern reckonings of history . . . as an oppressive fiction. Memory can come to the fore in an age of historiographic crisis precisely because it figures as a therapeutic alternative to historical discourse” (qtd. in Jenkins and Munslow 328). Pinpointing a major shift in the potency of history, Klein believes that history finds its meanings in large part through its counter-concepts and synonyms, and so the emergence of memory promises to re-work history’s boundaries . . . increasingly [functioning] as antonym rather than synonym, contrary rather than complement and replacement rather than supplement” (330). For Klein “the use of memory as a frequent replacement for history reflects both an increasing discontent with historical discourse and a desire to draw upon some of the oldest patterns of linguistic practice (Jenkins and Munslow 328).

In line with Klein who remarks, “memory is replacing old favourites--nature, culture, language--as the word most commonly paired with history, and that shift is remaking historical imagination,”(330) McEwan in Black Dogs represents his logic for being sceptical about this leading term and endeavours to show his suspicion and uncertainty about the accuracy of memory in recording the past. Creating a narrator-author in the act of writing a memoir, McEwan addresses the use of memory as a supplement, or more frequently as a replacement, for history which reflects both an increasing discontent with historical discourse and a desire to draw upon some of the oldest patterns of linguistic practice.

Indeed, memory plays a significant role in the historical discourses and its affiliated disciplines such as memoir, biography or autobiography. So far as memory is considered a “reproductive mechanism” in the sense that the information through its three stages (storage, encoding and retrieval) is recalled as it was recorded, the question of reliability of the narratives originating from it does not come to the fore. However, since the theory of reproductive memory has been debunked, the theory of “reconstructive memory” takes the centre stage and it consequently engenders the doubtfulness about the reliability that the narratives derived from it. This reconstructive nature of memory in the radical state transforms to an abnormality called “confabulation” and it can permeate in various
disciplines, including literature and its adjacent categories such as memoir, biography or autobiography writing. What brings McEwan’s *Black Dogs* to the postmodern discourse on the phenomenon of incredulity is the compatibility between mnemonical confabulative mechanism in *Black Dogs* and its metafictional narrative structure.

The metanarrative is at work in science too and it can be traced, for instance, in the tendency to legitimate a scientific discovery by recounting it in the form of ‘epic’ narrative. By this means science can sustain its powerful position in the social and political system. As Lyotard puts, “the state spends large amounts of money to enable science to pass itself off as an epic: the State’s own credibility is based on that epic” (28). Incredulity towards the legitimacy of accumulation of these “epics” under the cover of international summit held for solving a cosmic disastrous issue such as Global warming is the major theme which McEwan depicted in his *Solar*.

The root of this postmodern distrust in the legitimacy of these science-oriented international congregations is that science *per se* in the postmodern milieu has tilted to “performativity.” In other words, these gatherings are no longer organized towards the fulfilment of universal human goals since according to Lyotard the postmodern knowledge is valued only in respect to its “efficiency and profitability in a market-driven global economy” (Malpas 28). Focusing on the current terrible predicament, Global Warming, McEwan attempts to portray how man’s selfishness and personal benefits act behind the curtain of those international gatherings eventually leading to impracticality of their supposed solutions, while accelerating the speed of global ecological crisis.

### 6. Ethical and Political Disbelief in the Postmodern Era

Moving from the manifestation of postmodern incredulity in the realm of historical and scientific discourses in McEwan’s novels in the previous section, there are two other fields in which McEwan attempts to reveal the existence of incredulity in them through his fiction: ethics and politics. Setting aside those thinkers who perceive ethics and politics as “oxymoron” –summarized in Jonathan Swifts remark: “Politiks, as the word is commonly understood, are nothing but corruptions”—the argument in this chapter is based on the high integrity between these two disciplines, a fact which can be inferred and substantiated by Emanuel Kant’s and Jacque Derrida’s observations.

In “Toward Perpetual Peace” Kant justifies the relation between morals and politics and declares that morals, in terms of right, should be taken much more seriously in political decisions; in other words, the morals, according to him, should be the overriding consideration: “all politics must bend its knee before right” (347). In line with Kant, Derrida in his *Adieu to Emmanuel Levinas*, accentuates the necessity of relationship between ethics and politics thus, “This relation is necessary, it must exist, it is necessary to deduce a politics and a law from ethics” (115). In other words, according to Kant, ethics and politics do not come into conflict because ethics places limits on what can be done in politics or as Derrida discusses similarly ethics must always take precedence or that politics must be derived from ethics (La Caze 782). In sum, the presupposition here is that there is no potential conflict between ethics and politics: a point which elsewhere Kant addresses too:

> No conflict of politics, as doctrine of right put into practice, with morals, as theoretical doctrine of right (hence no conflict of practice with theory); for if there were, one would have to understand by the latter a general doctrine of prudence, that is, a theory of maxims for choosing the most suitable means to
one's purposes aimed at advantage, that is, to deny that there is a [doctrine of] morals at all. (338).

Kant’s outlook in which politics is the application of morality (that aspect of morality described in the doctrine of right) puts forward the hypothesis that any conflict in the application would undermine the idealism of morality and make it egoistic or self-interested. In other words, according to Kant, any attempt to make morals conform to political interests undermines the concept of right altogether and replaces it with force, so that it is no longer morals at all.

The strong connection between ethics and politics underlined by Kant and Derrida’s standpoints justifies the turn that they take in the postmodern discourse on incredulity towards metanarratives: the deterioration in ethics ends inevitably in the corruption of politics. In other words, the distrust toward these two interrelated disciplines takes place when decadence of the first one (ethics) infects and debases the second one. Lyotard shares the sceptical turn of mind of the postmodern movement in respect to these two issues and there is a definitely anti-foundational character to his thought, especially when he remarks, “there is no metalanguage, and by metalanguage, I mean the famous theoretical discourse that is supposed to ground political and ethical decisions that will be taken as the basis of its statements” (Lyotard and Thébaud 28). The manifestation of this phenomenon is traceable in later fiction of McEwan where initially the moral decadence is portrayed in his novel Amsterdam; then it moves to the other novel Saturday where this corrupt politics defines a simulative democracy for the third world countries such as Iraq and Afghanistan: a remedy which is achievable only through war (e.g. Iraq war).

Narrowing down the broad category of ethics-politics relationship to the postmodern era, McEwan’s response to these issues is in accordance with Stephen K. White who argues that between modernists who emphasize a "responsibility to act" and postmodernists who insist upon a "responsibility to otherness,” the former dominates the Western formulations on ethics and politics (80). In fact, following the direction of postmodernist agenda of “responsibility to others” in his political scheme of thought, McEwan tries to expose the moral deterioration that he found infecting all layers of British society in 1990s (a theme which is compatible with Deleuze and Guattari’s rhizomatic diagram of the postmodern world) in Amsterdam. Later, in the next step, McEwan extends the realm of his exposition to Saturday where he traces the roots of incredulity to the metanarrative of human emancipation—an apparatus which manages the small narratives around the world in the guise of democracy—which is after all another instance of the Baudrillardian “simulacrum.” To put it in another way, if questions of ethics and politics can be categorized into within the state, between states, and between individuals and states, McEwan begins with “between individuals and states” as well as “within the state” in Amsterdam and then he focuses on “between the states” in Saturday.

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