

A STUDY OF IAN MCEWAN'S ENDURING LOVE AS A POSTMODERN GOTHIC TEXT

Aadil Zeffer

Ph.D. Scholar, Department of English,
Lovely Professional University,
Jalandhar, India.

Abstract

This paper intends to study Ian McEwan's (1948-) Enduring Love (2004) as a Postmodern Gothic text. The novel contains many Postmodern Gothic elements, thus building the overall fearful atmosphere of the novel. The novel is a daunting exploration of the conditions of fear, terror, horror, alienation and death as represented in the novel. The reader is strongly immersed in a gothic world in which the horrendous events abound everywhere. The world is involved in evil deeds and bloody crimes, it seems possessed by devils and evil ideas. The condition of life in such a culture suffers from oppression, deprivation and terror. There are stimulating fears projected in the novel which affect the characters psychologically. As a representative of the Postmodern Gothic, this novel has come to typify all the human wrongs; it is an objective correlative of the inhuman cruelties. Through this novel, McEwan focuses on fears, death and alienation of the modern world.

Keywords: Ian McEwan, Postmodern Gothic, Enduring Love, fear, death, critique.

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Introduction

E*nduring Love* (used as EL in contracted form) is one of the primary novels in which McEwan merges horror, the macabre, fantasy and science fiction. McEwan's novel is at the heart of discourse as representative of the postmodern times in which we are exposed to a world of dilemmas and ethical questions. The text demonstrates that there is no escape from the gothic nightmare, only the waking into another form of the horrid dream. This haunting tale of fear, terror, death and alienation fits perfectly the postmodern scenario. In one aspect, the novel can also be taken as a critique of the postmodern scenario. When considering the fears in the novel, as humans we have the tendency to analyze own behaviour and the people around us.

Enduring Love as a Postmodern Gothic Text

The novel begins on a cloudless day when a middle-aged couple choose to celebrate their union with a picnic at a park in the English Countryside. Joe Rose and his girlfriend, Clarissa Mellon look around and find a hot air balloon with a ten-year-old boy trapped inside a basket. An old man, the boy's grandfather, drags himself after it by holding on to the rope of the blazing balloon. Joe immediately joins several other people in an effort to bring the balloon to the ground. Just as they secure the balloon, they see the old man, hanging by the rope of the balloon, fall to his death. In the novel, Joe asserts:

He might not be dead,' I said . . . As I was saying this I became aware of the tremor in my legs . . . I did not trust my balance . . . A man dying in the field and no one was stirring . . . Also there was the fear . . . in the field spread like a mist, and sense to the core. As the euphoria lifted, so the fear seeped in. The

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dead man I did not want to meet was waiting from in the middle of the field.

Even worse would be finding him alive and dying (EL 21-22).

In this ballooning accident, the death of a man triggers a tale of fixation, erotomania and stalking. The incident disrupts normalcy of a number of lives. The novel mentions that 'the thoughts scrolled across: that man is dead . . . The corollary seemed to be: and I am alive. It was a random matter, who was alive or dead at any given time' (EL 19). According to Joe, our thoughts were up there and we were in shock. Surprisingly, to everyone's shock 'Even with a dead man sitting between us, the rules of social engagement prevailed. As I heard it later from Clarissa, Parry had come over to her to introduce himself . . . ' (EL 24). Ironically, the balloon landed safely and the boy was found physically unscathed but the sight of old man's body position after the fall is ghastly and the novel highlights the grotesque sight of death. In the novel, Joe recalls the death of the Mr. Logan in the most vivid terms as:

In the second or two it took for Logan to reach the ground I had a sense of deja vu, . . . The setting varied, but the essentials never did. I found myself in a prominent place watching from far off the unfolding of a disaster- an earth quake, a fire in a scrapper, a sinking ship, an erupting volcano. I could see helpless people . . . certain to die. The horror was in the contrast between the apparent size and the enormity of their suffering. Life was revealed as cheap; thousands of screaming individuals . . . were about to be annihilated . . . terror, guilt and helplessness were the components (EL18).

The deja vu is a French phrase for already seen. The whole event presented a horrible sight in which the old man was seen approaching his death and both the child and old man were in need of help. A group of people were seen running towards the unfortunate balloon. Joe says that 'as I began to circle the corpse. It sat within a little indentation in the soil. I didn't see Logan dead until I saw his face, and what I saw I only glimpsed. Though the skin was intact, it was hardly a face at all, for the bone structure had shattered' (EL 23). This accident disrupts the normal life of all of them- a get-together party of Joe and Clarissa, Dr. Logan's travel to London, Joseph Lacey and Toby Greene's farm work and Jed Parry's simple life is thoroughly disturbed. Joe adds that the thumping of the boy who was tossed from one side to another produced a feeling of inarticulate fear

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which can't be normally defined (EL 9). All this created a feeling of terror and horror in the onlookers who were present at the sight. In the novel, Joe asserts:

My hand was trembling badly . . . Being out of view was physical relief, like being shaded from a desert sun” as I was conscious of the position of Logan but I kept him at the periphery of my vision. “I knew he was not flat on the ground and his skeletal structure had collapsed . . . The quietness was that of the animate and I understood again, because I have seen dead bodies before, fear and awe still surprise us in the presence of the dead (EL 22-23).

The sight of the Dr. Logan's fall to death is terrifying as can be better understood from the quote above. This accident disrupts the normal life of all of them- a get-together party of Joe and Clarissa, Dr. Logan's travel to London, Joseph Lacey and Toby Greene's farm work and Jed Parry's simple life is thoroughly disturbed. Moreover, it also changes the lifestyle of Mrs. Logan and her children. This moment was responsible for the complete transformation of Joe, Clarissa and Jed Parry. Joe says that we had never thought the entanglement this grief would bring (EL 1). Joe's premonition later on proves utterly true. The accidental death of Dr. Logan has been deeply rooted in the mind of Joe. Joe recounts the horror of the incident in vivid terms. He actually described that how from a small distance, we watched the horrible incident Logan falling to his death. For, Joe it was an extraordinary and a unique experience. Logan's fall to death has left an indelible marks on the mind of Joe. He asserts in the novel:

He was two hundred yards away now, and perhaps three hundred feet above the ground. Our silence was a kind of acceptance, a death warrant. Or it was a horrified shame, . . . We watched him drop. You could see the acceleration. No forgiveness, . . . or kindness. Only ruthless gravity . . . I've never seen such a terrible thing as that falling man (EL 16).

So, the quote above adds further details into the incident of death of Mr. Logan and according to Joe, such a terrible thing, I have never seen before (EL 16). The scene is quite horrible and there is no mercy and no forgiveness. It is only terror and horror of ruthless gravity. Perusing dreadful and horror stories like the ones we are dealing here, instructs us about the darker side of humankind. Bloom says that like classical tragedy, the horror

story, frequently educates us morally and suggests vicarious methods to avoid a tragic fall in our lives (EL 62). The best classical tragedies and horror tales affect a catharsis on the audience. Watching or reading the protagonist's experience helps the audience work through their fears and helps them avoid the same pitfalls. According to Joe, we 'could think of nothing but chaos . . . It was rationalism gone berserk. It is the new fundamentalism' (EL 70).

Jed calls and tells Joe that he is at his place with Clarissa. As soon as he reaches his apartment, he rushes in to see Jed sitting on the sofa with Clarissa. Before Joe could say anything, Jed takes a knife and points it at his own neck in a threatening gesture. Then his attention shifts to Clarissa and he tries to stab her with the knife. To prevent Jed from killing Clarissa, Joe shoots him in the arm. Joe details the incident of terror and horror in the following words:

I was going to ask him again to let Clarissa move away, when he turned towards her . . . and pulled out a short-bladed knife which he drew through the air in a wide semi-circular motion . . . he was about to slit his throat in front of us presented itself with numbing slowness . . . He . . . seemed to press harder. A plumb line of blood ran down from the knife's tip. Clarissa too seemed paralysed (EL 212).

The text demonstrates that there is no escape from the gothic nightmare, only the waking into another form of the horrid dream. Joe felt cramped by the accumulation of horrible certainties borne out by events (EL 213). According to Joe 'my score was depressingly high' (EL 215). Life seems at the worst end, full of torture and 'sad dry thoughts' (EL 133). In such a condition we can ask God to deliver us from this meaninglessness. We should order our troubled lives, the anger, upheaval, turmoil, curse, difficulty, pain, despair, rejection, fury and bitterness etc. all showing the despair and meaninglessness (EL 138). We are living in the times that 'sink into the darkness . . . neglected, badly drained . . . where thick iridescent mosses covered the rotting tree trunks' (EL 6).

The world is collapsed and people are in the gloomy recesses and begging for mercy. We are living through the tragedies, the terrible loss, the ferocious gaze, the extra pain and the incarnation of worst fears (EL 227). There is a touch of sadness everywhere.

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Apart from the fears and deaths mentioned above. There are more deaths mentioned in the novel such as the death of a 'policewoman, Yvonne Fletcher' who was shot dead from a window by a Libyan (EL 44). Then there is a mention of 'a mass grave in a wood in central Bosnia'(EL 46). Jed also gives an account of deaths in his family to give some impression to Joe 'my mother who died from cancer four years ago . . . My father died when I was eight. I've got an older sister in Australia, but we weren't able to track her down when my mother died' (EL 95). The novel also mentions some deaths of scientists like Franklin who dies of leukaemia and of the famous poet, Keats (EL 166-169). The novel is full of gothic imagery and we can find words like gloom, delusion, forlorn, embittered, obsessions, perturbed, fear, terror, horror, deaths besides others which reveal the condition of the present world.

We see that the postmodern world confronts death and alienation on a daily basis and the fundamental role played by the gothic in the expressing the postmodern experience through literature such as lack of meaning and authority, darkness, confusion and chaos etc. (Beville 53). The readers of the Postmodern and Gothic genres indicate similar experiences because of the similarities of the two genres, and one finds them together also in the hybrid genre of Postmodern Gothic as we find in the works of McEwan. According to Joe, we as a society are disintegrating. We work selfishly, always keeping in mind self-interests only without giving a thought to the larger good of society or other people. In the novel, Joe aptly asserts that we as a bad society are disintegrating. We have become too selfish and look only for ourselves. We are not ready to help those who are in need of it and we don't take even serious situations seriously. The novel mentions:

All around us there are knots, tangles of horror and we are the like prisoners in a cell, who run and beat the walls with their heads. This prison is growing larger day by day. The shocks have dulled our response and everywhere there are shivering and shaking stories. The darkness beyond the gloom of the bedroom was infinite and cold as death (EL 34).

The above quote vividly represents the gloom and horror of the present day world. It further highlights that the situation is deteriorating day by day. It is through

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such incidents that we interrogate our own unconscious fears, anxieties, terrors and horrors. The Postmodern Gothic helps us to find new ways to represent them and the primary task of postmodernists to construct a route to unrepresentable aspects of self and the unknown as they try to habitualise their effect. The Postmodern Gothic fiction is more focussed on the unconscious fears or the traumas of modern age. It usually reflects the feelings and ideas of its own time and the terrors. The world is becoming so much cruel that some of the cruelty is willingly accepted even by the fellow members. In this regard, Jed says to Joe, 'You can be cruel to me - but not too much' (EL 97).

According to Beville, in postmodern societies, the sources of terror are much more alarming and the physical terrors of previous eras have not more profound resonance than metaphysical terrors of the present times (49). Instead of actual physical threats the postmodern terrors are more of the mind. The whole world seems to be engulfed by the feeling of terror. The inhabitants feel choked and disintegrated. The moments of calm and peace seem evasive, a whole range of terrors and horrors appear before us. Joe in this connection says: 'As I settled back to calm myself . . . I projected all kinds of inarticulate terrors' (EL 69). The life has been 'dwindled to almost nothing' we could have never guessed at (EL 217).

Life is being threatened and invaded on many fronts. There is ache, desolation and panic. The dreaded scenario is 'whirling our lives apart.' (EL 222) We should try to get over these ghastly things, the distress that concern us. We are "in a terrible state" and it is panic really, we should try to calm ourselves and think what to do. (EL 229) . Everybody is 'very frightened,' while some scream in terror (EL 211). It looks as if there is a 'permission to kill' (EL 206). It can be inferred that McEwan is trying to bring home the idea of destruction, terror, horror and other mishappenings which is happening around the world and thereby giving a message to the reader to act before it is too late. There is a suspicion, a 'cry of loneliness' and 'there is no happiness' in this time of crisis. 'We had lost heart, we had lost our heart. We are loveless, or we had lost the trick of love' (EL 135-140).

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Conclusion:

Ian McEwan has concentrated on the contemporary social and cultural issues. In the present scenario, instead of ghosts the creations of modern technology are actual terrors. The reader is strongly immersed in a gothic world in which the horrendous events abound everywhere. The world is involved in evil deeds and bloody crimes, it seems possessed by devils and evil ideas. The condition of life in such a culture suffers from oppression, deprivation and terror. The writer's view of the future is overshadowed by the stimulating fears of the ugly consequences of present day behaviour. We linger on the expressions of frustration or accusations. Our suspicion is alive and sooner or later we become the part of this harm. Such a logic drives one from love to destruction and from despair to hatred in one leap. At times, it seems 'we are finished. Don't you?' (EL 145).

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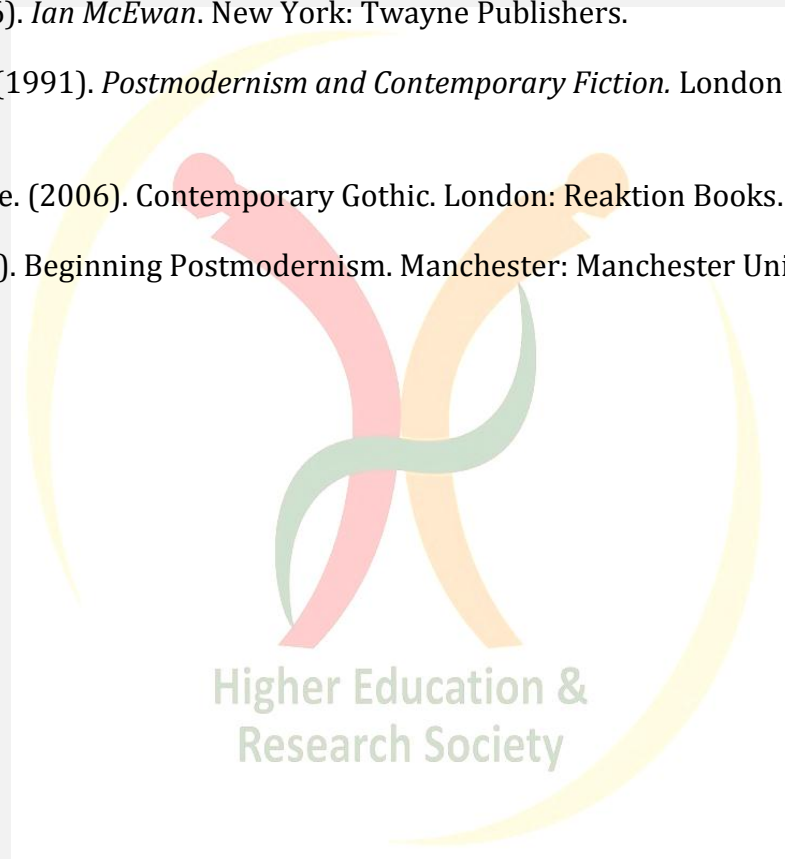
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