

**THE EMBODIED MIND AND ITS NARRATIVE GRAMMAR IN IAN MCEWAN'S  
THE COMFORT OF STRANGERS AND ON CHESIL BEACH**

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**ABSTRACT**

*Consciousness, as both neuroscience and contemporary philosophy of mind suggest, is fundamentally embodied. Among the various ways the body shapes conscious thought, Antonio Damasio's Somatic Marker Hypothesis (1994) offers a particularly illuminating framework. It posits that bodily responses associated with past emotional experiences become automatic signals that guide future choices, often beyond the reach of rational deliberation. Drawing on this insight, the present study examines the embodied dimensions of consciousness in Ian McEwan's *The Comfort of Strangers* (1981) and *On Chesil Beach* (2007). Through close textual analysis, this paper traces the somatic markers that inform crucial decisions made by the protagonists. The visceral sensations of heat, hunger, and disorientation propel Colin and Mary toward their fatal encounter, while the sensory immediacy of the seaside setting shapes the emotional collapse of Edward and Florence. The paper also considers how McEwan's narrative choices — his manipulation of focalization, temporal shifts, and descriptive detachment — are not only informed by an implicit awareness of consciousness as an embodied phenomenon, but they also enact the same. The study thus offers a fresh perspective on McEwan's portrayal of consciousness, and in doing so, it also extends the scope of cognitive narratology, underscoring the profound interdependence between mind, body, and narrative.*

**Keywords:** Consciousness, Cognitive Narratology, Narrative Theory, Somatic Markers, Ian McEwan

**INTRODUCTION**

Among contemporary British novelists, Ian McEwan stands out as one of the most persistent and meticulous explorers of the human mind. For more than four decades, his work has

traced the intricate relations between perception, emotion, and moral awareness. At the same time, his fictional worlds are “grounded not only in the mind but in the body” (Utell 100). This becomes evident in his sentences which capture the finest grains of perception — the way temperature, texture, light, and sound intrude upon thought. This sensory texture is not merely decorative but plays a crucial part in rendering consciousness through the narrative medium. From the unsettling psychological interiors of his early short stories to the ethical self-interrogations of his later novels, McEwan has consistently examined the intricacies of the human mind in relation to the corporeality of existence.

The present article situates McEwan’s fiction within the broad context of embodied consciousness (or “the body in the mind”, to borrow Mark Johnson’s phrase ) as represented in the narrative medium. It examines two of his novels — *The Comfort of Strangers* (1981) and *On Chesil Beach* (2007) — as complementary studies of how bodily sensations guide perception and decision long before rational deliberation begins. In both novels the physicality of the characters is inescapable as they explicitly address sexual urges and the nature of bodily desire, providing a rich substrate for such a study. Drawing on the neuroscientist Antonio Damasio’s Somatic Marker Hypothesis as an interpretive tool, the essay argues that McEwan converts the neurobiological logic of feeling into narrative form, his characters acting out the body’s reasoning. In both novels, seemingly ordinary sensations serve as “somatic markers” that direct conscious choices, often towards tragic consequences. Reading McEwan through this lens allows us to see how he crafts a distinctive literary phenomenology in which consciousness is rooted in affective experience rather than abstract thought.

There have been legitimate concerns about the epistemological challenges of bringing neuroscience into literary study. As Patrick Colm Hogan cautions, literary criticism should not imitate the empirical sciences but should draw upon neuroscience only insofar as it deepens interpretive understanding (302–03). It is worth noting, in this context, that the problem this study addresses is not scientific or philosophical but literary: it investigates how McEwan’s fiction negotiates the relationship between sensory experience and conscious awareness and the specific ways in which this negotiation is inscribed within the narrative medium.

## **LITERATURE SURVEY AND RESEARCH GAP**

In his essay “What Makes a Body” (2008), Mark Johnson identifies five interwoven dimensions of human embodiment: the biological (the body as a living organism), the ecological (the body as interlinked with its environment), the phenomenological (the lived experience of the body), the social (the body as intersubjectively linked with others), and the

cultural (the body as intertwined with cultural products and practices) (164–66). Literary criticism has traditionally privileged (as discussed later) the social and cultural aspects of the body, reading it as a text inscribed by ideology, history, or gender. But in order to understand how the body links up with conscious thought, it is crucial to bring the first three Johnsonian dimensions — the biological, ecological, and phenomenological — into the fray.

Recent developments in cognitive narratology provide useful frameworks for returning these aspects of the body to the study of fictional minds. Scholars like Alan Palmer, Lisa Zunshine and David Herman have explored how narrative techniques mirror cognitive and perceptual processes. Palmer’s notion of the “thought-action continuum” (210-214) and Herman’s argument that fictional minds arise from the “interplay between intelligent agents and the environments they must negotiate” (Introduction 9) both resonate with McEwan’s prose. But, as Brian McHale observes, there still remains a gap in scientifically informed researches in the intersecting field of consciousness, characterisation and focalisation (443). By drawing upon Damasio’s somatic framework the present study extends this conversation, showing that McEwan’s narrative realism not only depicts but also enacts embodied consciousness.

Such studies of McEwan are scarce. Despite his reputation as a writer of psychological precision, critical discourse has seldom examined the physiological underpinnings of that psychology. The study of consciousness in his novels has mostly been approached through psychoanalysis, ethics, or gender rather than embodiment. Nor has there been an effort to connect the sensory environments of the novels to the cognitive dynamics of their protagonists. Critics like Kiernan Ryan, David Malcolm, and Dominic Head (Ian McEwan) emphasize the moral and psychological extremities of *The Comfort of Strangers* (henceforth, *Comfort*), reading Robert’s sadism and Colin and Mary’s complicity as allegories of power, patriarchy, and repression. Others, such as Angela Roger and Judith Seaboyer interpret the novel through feminist psychoanalysis. Yet few of these interpretations attend to the more elementary substrate of consciousness in McEwan: the body itself.

Similarly, *On Chesil Beach* (henceforth, *Chesil Beach*) has been read largely as a narrative of miscommunication and sexual repression. Critics such as Dominic Head (“On Chesil”) and Florence Hsu examine the novel’s depiction of Edward and Florence as a study in failed empathy and cultural transition. The emphasis, however, has remained on the social and historical context of the early 1960s — on the constraints of class, propriety, and gender — rather than on the physiological immediacy through which McEwan renders their mental states. The most comprehensive study of the conflicting mental processes of Edward and Florence has been carried out by Karem Nayebpour, who reads the novel within the cognitive narratological framework developed by Alan Palmer, by studying intramental and intermental thought patterns in the novel. He also refers to Lisa Zunshine’s concept of “Theory of Mind”(6-10) whereby one tries to attribute conscious states to others by reading physical and

behavioural cues. Nayeypour's analysis insightfully demonstrates the couple's failures of empathy and mutual understanding, yet his focus remains on the representational structures of thought rather than on their sensory bases. The body as the generative medium of consciousness, and the manner in which McEwan's narrative transforms physical sensation into the grammar of thought remains understudied.

## **RESEARCH QUESTION AND METHODOLOGY**

This study attempts to fill this gap by demonstrating that McEwan's narrative realism functions as an anatomy of embodied consciousness. In doing so it asks and attempts to answer two fundamental questions: how do the novels under consideration represent consciousness as an embodied process in which bodily sensations shape perception, emotion, and decision? And in what ways does McEwan's choice of narrative form and style themselves embody conscious processes?

The key interpretive tool used in this study is the concept of "somatic markers." The Portuguese neuroscientist Antonio Damasio formulated the Somatic Marker Hypothesis (SMH) in *Descartes' Error: Emotion, Reason and the Human Brain* (1994), arguing that rational thought and consciousness arise from physiological states and the emotions they generate. Rejecting the supremacy of "high reason" (172), Damasio posits that emotions, experienced as bodily signals, guide decision-making and reasoning. The brain's emotional centre integrates sensory experience with signals regulating bodily functions, forming "somatic markers" (183–84). These markers manifest as visceral sensations — shift in heart rate, tension, or skin conductance — processed by the rational brain (the prefrontal cortex) as emotional cues. Often operating below awareness, they function as an "automated qualification of predictions" (174), evaluating outcomes through past emotional imprints. Drawing on neurological case studies, Damasio shows that purely rational decision-making is impractical in real-world contexts: somatic markers simplify complex reasoning by providing intuitive, emotion-based shortcuts. Painful bodily responses linked to past punishments help us unconsciously avoid harmful actions, while pleasant sensations reinforce desirable choices (192–95). The SMH thus reveals how emotion shapes conscious thought: by attaching emotional valency to sensory and cognitive experience, somatic markers generate the qualitative texture of consciousness.

While Damasio's hypothesis arises from neuroscience, its explanatory power may be beneficially extended to the realm of narrative representation, offering a framework to understand how bodily states and their emotional affect govern fictional minds. Accordingly, this study adopts a qualitative interpretive method combining close reading with selective theoretical application. Damasio's SMH provides the physiological vocabulary for

understanding how bodily states guide decision-making; while works on the philosophy of mind like that of Shaun Gallagher supplement this with a philosophical account of embodiment. Gallagher delineates the centrality of the body in terms of the 4E model of cognition, the four Es being ‘embodied’, ‘embedded’, ‘extended’ and ‘enactive’. It is the idea that the conscious mind and its cognitive processes are generated by the body, is shaped by the way the body perceives its environment, is not limited to the body but extends to the world, and is oriented towards acting upon it (Embodied 5-45). This implies that consciousness and all associated cognitive processes cannot be seen as separate from the body, placing the body firmly at the heart of any critical enquiry into the nature of consciousness. These complementary frameworks are used in this essay heuristically without importing their scientific or philosophical assumptions wholesale.

The analysis that follows is carried out in three steps. First, recurring sensory motifs in each novel are identified as somatic triggers. To avoid impressionistic selection, only motifs that recur in at least two distinct narrative contexts were included. Thereafter, these motifs are read as narrative correlates of bodily affect, tracing how they generate or distort the characters’ judgments. Finally, the study interprets McEwan’s narrative strategies — shifts of perspective, descriptive detachment, temporal looping — as stylistic embodiments of conscious processes. The aim is not to test a scientific hypothesis but to reveal how McEwan’s art gives literary shape to the findings of science.

### **THE DISCOMFORT OF A STRANGE CITY: BODIES LOST, MINDS UNMADE**

Published in 1981, *The Comfort of Strangers* is McEwan’s second novel and it shows early signs of a movement from the “macabre” (Head Ian McEwan, 32) phase of his writing to a more mature handling of complex social, political and psychological themes. In the novel, lovers Colin and Mary wander aimlessly in a foreign city (unnamed, but reminiscent of Venice). They navigate the city, and their relationship, in a disoriented fashion, before getting entangled in a complex relationship with Robert and Caroline, a couple living in the city. Robert insinuates himself into their lives, offering unsolicited guidance and hospitality. This seemingly innocuous interaction gradually morphs into a disturbing power dynamic, as Robert and Caroline exert increasing control over Colin and Mary. The novel culminates in a shocking act of violence by Robert, eventually murdering Colin and (presumably) having some kind of sex over his dead body in front of the drugged Mary, who survives to speculate on the motives underlying this fatal encounter.

Early in the novel, as the couple list through narrow streets, they repeatedly confound simple maps and the sun’s position, and their dialogue betrays frustration at being directionless. While on one occasion, Colin quips that they “should have brought the maps” (10), it doesn’t

help much even when they are carrying one. “Despite the maps, they frequently became lost, and could spend an hour or so doubling back and round... to find themselves approaching a familiar landmark from an unexpected direction, and still lost” (4). The opening chapters of the novel abound in such textual cues that indicate the couple’s uneasy interaction with their surroundings. As Shaun Gallagher observes in *The Phenomenological Mind*, the body is not merely situated in an environment but constituted through it: “the environment directly and indirectly regulates the body, so that the body is in some sense the expression or reflection of the environment... [drive-states and kinesthetic sensations] are partially defined by the environment in which the body must function” (155). Read through this lens, Colin and Mary’s disorientation appears not simply spatial but phenomenological. Their very sense of being-in-the-world is unsettled by an alien urban topology that shapes, and even dictates, their bodily affective states. Their unease is, at least in part, a product of their estranging surroundings. (Malcolm 74–75; Head Ian McEwan 59)

While this sense of disorientation has been noted, what has received less critical attention is the fact that it is compounded by the oppressive summer heat . McEwan repeatedly emphasizes the sultriness of the setting: afternoons are “clouded” (1), days swelter, and Mary and Colin lie lethargic in their hotel, “incapable, in this heat” to even to plump pillows (4). And “when the going was particularly hard, and the heat more than usually oppressive, they reminded each other, sardonically, that they were ‘on holiday’” (4). Till the very end of the novel this heat seems to pervade the environment. The day when the couple would visit Robert’s house for the second and final time is described as “their hottest day so far” (68).

Adding to the heat is hunger and exhaustion. Early scenes note that Colin and Mary have gone many hours since a meal — their last being a small plate of fried whitebait — and now desperately seek food. In one scene, Colin’s irritation at walking two miles for hot dogs — “one of the eating capitals of the world... and we’re walking two miles for hot dogs” — is telling (13). In another bout of roaming through the city afterwards they will go without water for hours (33). Their bodily depletion in such moments is bound to create yet another negative somatic marker.

Into this vulnerable state steps the enigmatic Robert, whom they chance upon in a bar. Immediately before the encounter, the ambience of the bar accentuates their discomfort and almost pushes it towards a climactic point. It is a seedy bar, with a jukebox throbbing in the corner and with a few men scattered about the tables. The third-person narrator draws the scene in a voice that is strongly focalised through the sensory perceptions of Colin and Mary. It being “cramped and crowded” (16) creates a claustrophobic and secretive atmosphere. Adding to the unsettling ambience is a juke-box playing a song that is “loud and chirpily sentimental, with full orchestral accompaniment”, the air thick with cigarette smoke, as “everyone appeared to be smoking”, and also the presence of the other patrons who sat at

tables, or stood singly at the bar (17). They were silent, and did not look up as Colin and Mary entered (16). The sense of isolation and suffocation for Colin and Mary becomes evident. As Mary observes later, “[In spite of] All those mountains and wide open spaces... this place can be terribly suffocating sometimes” (34).

So even though it seems reckless to accept a stranger’s offer in a foreign city — especially given indications of Robert’s mysterious intentions in his physical countenance as well as his stories of parental violence and childhood trauma (19-27) — their frustration and physical exhaustion make them receptive. Their nerves slowly unwind as Robert brings them drinks. McEwan writes their relaxation in physiological terms: at the start they feel “unease, a tightening in [Colin’s] stomach, a quickening of his pulse” (16), but as wine is poured, “they settled into the noise and smoke... In less than twenty minutes they had emptied the bottle” (17). Here we see a somatic switch: the anxiety marker — tightening of the stomach — was there, but the stronger cravings won out. Mary exclaims at one point, “we can have a shower, and sit on our balcony and have anything we want brought up to us” and this is soon followed by a wish to “get into bed... close the shutters” (36). These are already early signs of a longing for relaxation and relief from the heat or discomfort of their current environment. They indicate a strong negative somatic marker that has already been created in their minds biasing them away from any situation involving further physical discomfort.

Thus, with Robert’s invitation, the immediate prospect of relief — the comfort of finding food and company — overrides their caution. In Damasio’s words, repeated aversive bodily states (hunger, pain, heat exhaustion) can narrow focus and lock us into avoiding discomfort at the expense of rational choice (Descartes’ Error 173-74). Thus Colin and Mary’s physical distress primes them to grasp at any relief. In Alan Palmer’s terms, their reaction exemplifies the “thought–action continuum,” that gray area between thought and behavior where impulse anticipates intention (213). Their decisions arise not from deliberation but from this pre-conscious momentum toward action, as physiological urges replace reflection and propel them, almost automatically, towards disaster. This, at least partially, answers one of the novel’s most puzzling questions: why they so readily accede to a stranger’s control — what Malcolm calls “their sleepwalking-like acquiescence in Robert’s plan” (78) and Ryan terms “the couple’s passive collusion in this atrocity” (34).

McEwan’s narrative technique amplifies this bodily logic. The uniqueness of the narrator lies in his selectively limited omniscience. It is a third-person style that is careful to detail the characters’ sensory environment, but never fully merges into interior monologue. Instead, the narrator describes majority of the scenes from the couple’s viewpoint, registering sounds, smells, and textures around them. The city’s living bustle — the sounds of cleaning barges, the kiosks, the shop-window displays, the orchestras on the great square, the sea-side and its visitors — is painted in vivid strokes even as Colin and Mary feel lost under this sensory

overload. At the climax, as Robert attacks Colin, Mary hears “neighborly sounds” of the city continuing outside (90). This detached “matter of fact voice” (Cardullo 376), focusing relentlessly on physical reality, forces the reader to piece together the characters’ states from an assessment of their environment. The mention of the minutiae of the physical world the characters inhabit gives the reader a decent idea of the sensory inputs experienced by them. The attentive reader can then recreate, in a vicarious substitution, the same set of sensory data in his mind to arrive at a close approximation of the conscious thought processes going through the fictional minds.

By foregrounding sensory detail instead of narrative interiority, McEwan also ensures that the body becomes the foundation of meaning. We never read extended metaphysical reflections from Colin or Mary; instead, we learn them through the shape of their bodies’ responses. This amounts to a kind of phenomenological realism. Even in episodes of extreme duress, the characters’ consciousness emerges as a mosaic of sensory inputs, not as abstract ideas, their thoughts, desires, and even moral errors being rooted in how their bodies feel. A case in point is the scene where the couple scour the city streets in search of water and a place to sit. Their fatigue and frustration is captured through Colin’s “bloodshot eyes” and “cracked lips” amidst a “sea of paying customers” and the “dissonances and cross-rhythms” of orchestras playing nearby (33). As Gallagher reminds us, the posture and sensations of the body themselves constitute the mind’s way of responding to the world (Phenomenological 155) — a principle that McEwan translates into narrative texture throughout *Comfort*.

In his work *Embodiment and Cognitive Science* (2005), Raymond Gibbs argues that imagination and language comprehension are rooted in sensorimotor simulations that allow readers to internally recreate the bodily dynamics of experience (6–13). In translating the physiological logic of somatic markers into the texture of narration, McEwan makes the reader’s experience itself bodily. The detached, sensorial prose invites a form of vicarious cognition in which perception precedes comprehension. In other words, we read as the characters try to feel, mapping the same oscillation between bodily unease and moral blindness that defines their tragedy. In this way, McEwan’s narrative style enacts the very embodied consciousness it depicts.

### **THE SEA OF TUMULT: SOMATIC MEMORY AND INHIBITION**

*On Chesil Beach* (2007) presents a more nuanced scenario where the body acts as an obstructive veto, inhibiting both reason and romance. Published more than two decades after *Comfort*, the novel covers the wedding night of Edward and Florence, two virginal newlyweds, and the tragic misfire of their sexual expectations. The narrative unfolds over the course of an evening in 1962, beginning with dinner and climaxing, literally and figuratively,

with sexual embarrassment — the groom’s “arriving too soon” (7) all over his horrified bride. The novel ends with the just-married couple parting forever on Chesil Beach as a result of the humiliation, and the resultant guilt and anger, as night descends on the strand. Unlike *Comfort*, which spans a limited few days, *Chesil Beach* moves back and forth in time to childhoods and unformed desires, indicating long-standing bodily memories underlying the couple’s present. At the centre is the hotel bedroom by the seashore: a site where the bodies’ impulses and fears clash.

The seaside setting has been repeatedly pointed out by scholars as a symbolic or metaphorical space (Cavalié 3-5; Mohácsi 210-16). The beach, with its shifting pebbles and unyielding waves, is seen as symbolizing the couple’s tumultuous relationship and their inability to find solid ground. However, seen through the current lens, it becomes more than just a symbolic backdrop that reflects the story’s underlying themes. Like the city in *Comfort*, it is an agent that actively contributes to the conscious thoughts of the newlyweds by drawing discordant traces of memories from the past as well as projections into the future. Within the novel, this intricate relation between feelings and the surroundings is acknowledged, in a different context, when Edward, reminiscing the early days of his romance with Florence in North Oxford, realises that during that summer, “his desire for Florence was inseparable from the setting” (120).

Back in their hotel room, Edward experiences the pebbled shore as freedom and possibility. He feels the wind and waves and imagines liberation, fantasizing about kissing and dancing on the beach in wild joy (18). The narrator observes that he notes the geological detail — “thousands of years of pounding storms had graded the size of pebbles” — and wishes to be “trudging along the beach” instead of sitting in the hotel room (19). Florence, by contrast, feels the sea as threatening. The same waves that intrigue Edward stir in her “a visceral dread, a helpless disgust as palpable as seasickness” (7). The sound of waves and bed-springs makes her painfully aware of sex; she thinks of other honeymoon couples and feels ashamed and nauseated (96). And soon afterwards this unease is heightened by the smell of the sea that summons an indistinct shame from the past (99). These reactions are not arbitrary: they are somatic memories triggered by the immediate surroundings. As Damasio posits, perception of a stimulus (here, waves or bed-squeak) can trigger secondary emotions rooted in past experience (Descartes’ Error 133–35). For Florence, the wedding-night stimuli recall a childhood (49-55) of strictness and guilt, giving her body a preloaded “disgust” marker. Edward, lacking those associations but carrying his own restlessness, feels a sense of anticipation instead.

In his essay on modernist narratives “Re-minding Modernism”, David Herman’s postulates the storyworld as cognitive environment. Herman seeks to replace the internal-external scale with a continuum stretching between agent and environment. From this perspective, the

seaside setting and its sensory stimuli construct what Herman calls a distributed field of consciousness, where “minds at once shape and are shaped by larger experiential environments, via the particular affordances or opportunities for action that those environments provide” (248-49). This distributed cognition, however, is experienced differently by Edward and Florence because of their divergent somatic traces. This underscores the importance of the body’s past experiences alongside its present perceptions in the shaping of consciousness. Even when the external stimuli are the same, the nature of perception may differ. Damasio notes this phenomenon in *A Feeling of What Happens* (1999), “When you and I look at an object outside ourselves, we form comparable images in our respective brains... But that does not mean that the image we see is the copy of whatever the object outside is like” (320). The narrative illustrates this divergence through contrasting thought reports and psycho-narrations. When Florence suggests going to bed to counter Edward’s embarrassing idea of going downstairs to listen to the strangers’ conversations, Edward interprets it as willingness for intimacy and is overjoyed by the “thrilling fact” (28). Or when Edward hears her uneasy moan during his attempt to kiss her, he “knew that his happiness was almost complete” (30).

Thought reports of such contrast, juxtaposed with irony, highlight the failure of the characters to read each other. More significantly, they serve as a self-reflexive commentary on the limits of using the theory of mind technique of consciousness attribution (as discussed by Nayeypour in his analysis) when reading people, real or fictional. Edward cannot guess why Florence freezes up, and she misreads his eagerness as assault. Only the detached, near-omniscient narrator perceives, in parallel, Edward’s burgeoning ecstasy and Florence’s mounting panic. Their inability to read one another thus becomes all the more pronounced and, to an extent, insurmountable.

Beyond alternate focalisation, McEwan’s manipulation of narrative time further embodies this process of conscious thought formation. Not only does the narrative oscillate between the ‘present’ moment of the honeymoon and the past, there are passages where the narrator connects the recent past, the distant past along with the present and the future. The following passage gives us an excellent illustration of this technique:

The anxieties she would face were still far off, though occasionally she wondered what it was she was heading toward. A month ago they had told each other they were in love, and that was both a thrill and afterward, for her, a cause of one night of half waking, of vague dread that she had been impetuous and let go of something important, given something away that was not really hers to give. But it was too interesting, too new, too flattering, too deeply comforting to resist, it was a liberation to be in love and say so, and she could only let herself go deeper. Now, on the riverbank in the soporific heat of one of the last days of this summer,

she concentrated on that moment when he had paused at the entrance to the meeting room, and on what she had seen and felt when she looked in his direction. (59)

The superimposition of the present “on the riverbank” with the analeptic recent past of “a month ago” and distant past “when he had paused”, and the proleptic future “she would face” allows McEwan to map the contents of his characters’ conscious states by linking them up with past emotions and future anxieties. Their somatic markers thus become clearly pronounced throughout the novel. Stylistically, McEwan’s omniscient shifts and penetrations allow this dual-presentation.

Throughout the novel, the narrative repeatedly flashes back to childhood and adolescence to show how somatic markers were laid down. Edward’s impatience (and ultimate “arriving too soon”) stems from a lifetime of repressed urgency — caring for an impaired mother (67), fantasizing about sex during masturbation (20), the impatience to begin life as a grown-up (75) — which left him with a rush-to-act marker. Meanwhile, Florence’s traumatized reactions spring from rigid parenting (55) and the dominant disgust marker associated with modesty and shame (100). This creates in her a strong aversion to sexual penetration, which she is repeatedly reminded of by physiological states acting as somatic markers.

The omniscient narrator depicts them in unambiguous terms, using a distinctly physiological vocabulary. When Florence’s “thoughts turned toward a close embrace [...] her stomach tightened dryly, she was nauseous at the back of her throat” (7). Or when she hesitantly places the back of her hand on Edward’s trousers, “she felt a stirring and hardening beneath the gray flannel of his trousers. She experienced a living thing, quite separate from her Edward — and she recoiled” (23). Elsewhere too, while depicting scenes of brief romance or arousal, McEwan uses a register that is almost anatomical. When Edward kisses her, she feels the intrusion of the tongue as the “hard tapering tip of this alien muscle” moving “inside the teeth of her lower jaw” or “in the hollow of her gum” (28-29). Later when Edward caresses her thigh, she feels his thumb pushing against a single strand of hair “that curled out free from under her panties” and later feels the sensation moving to the roots “along the nerve of the follicle” (87). The vocabulary here is clinical, suggesting an unusually extreme awareness of her body that Florence experiences. It takes centre stage in her consciousness, almost against her will. As when Edward begins to caress her legs:

She was doing all she could to prevent a muscle in her leg from tightening, but it was happening without her, of its own accord, as inevitable and powerful as a sneeze. It was not painful as it clenched and went into mild spasm, this treacherous band of muscle, but she felt it was letting her down, giving the first indication of the extent of her problem. (85)

In his essay “Reimagining the Body”, Gallagher observes that “The body tries to stay out of our way so that we can get on with our task... We do not normally monitor our movements in an explicitly conscious manner” (164). But, with Florence, this is precisely what happens: her somatic markers become overpowering.

The use of such an anatomical register to describe moments of intimacy also extends perception beyond the storyworld, and draws the reader into an embodied awareness of their experience. As Utell rightly observes, the characters’ bodies “actually serve as a site for connection, not with each other, but with the reader” (95). This connection is achieved through the narrator’s knowledge of their intimate bodily details which is shared with the reader in due course. It is also worth noting that McEwan’s precision in tracing each spasm and recoil effectively, often in long sentences punctuated with hesitant breaks, encourages the reader to perceive continuity between the physical and the formal: Florence’s bodily hesitation is echoed in the prose’s own pauses and reversals. In re-inscribing physiological inhibition within narrative structure, McEwan transforms bodily failure into aesthetic form: the narrative itself hesitates, revises, and recoils, mirroring Florence’s embodied consciousness.

McEwan’s narratorial choicetoo plays a significant factor in consolidating this sense of embodiment. The greater omniscience and more intimate register of the novel contrasts with the limited third-person voice of *Comfort* where it is left to the reader to connect the dots and vicariously recreate the characters’ minds. In *Chesil Beach*, McEwan’s shifting time frames and greater number of thought reports make the conscious processes and their underlying somatic markers more evident. This shift marks McEwan’s increasing narrative sophistication and his versatility in rendering psychological depth.

## **CONCLUSION**

Taken together, the analyses reveal how both *Comfort* and *Chesil Beach* dramatise McEwan’s persistent inquiry into how consciousness emerges from the body’s sensory life, yet they do so through markedly different narrative orchestrations. Read through the lens of Damasio’s SMH, both sets of protagonists are seen as enacting the principle that experiential affect lies at the centre of conscious thought processes that guide the course of action. What also distinguishes McEwan’s achievement as a writer is the way he translates this neurobiological insight into the grammar of narration. His narrative detachment and accuracy coupled with his masterful shifts of focalisation and temporality make the reader experience consciousness not as a reflective commentary but as a process unfolding through sensation.

What emerges from this comparison is a unified view of McEwan's narrative practice as an enactment of embodied cognition, that is richly informed by the neurobiological findings on human consciousness. The study reveals that McEwan's "interest in science, and especially in scientific explanations for consciousness and emotional response" (Head Ian McEwan, 18) is masterfully translated into the narrative medium. And his realism, often praised for its "scientific rigour" (Zalewsky 26) attains a new significance: it is not descriptive excess but a cognitive device that simulates the somatic grounding of thought. The reader, positioned within this dense sensory field, experiences perception as preceding comprehension, just as Damasio's theory predicts. Moreover, the results of this investigation open possibilities for extending such neuro-narratological inquiry. Concepts like V. S. Ramachandran's "body-image" (357-62) or Gerald Edelman's "re-entrant reactions" (113-24) could illuminate further how McEwan's characters embody the recursive and adaptive processes of consciousness. Applied to McEwan's fiction, these frameworks may yield an even more comprehensive understanding of the embodied mind at work in his narratives. Finally, these findings suggest that McEwan's exploration of embodied consciousness and his narrative politics open productive intersections with adjacent fields — gender and ethics, for instance — since bodily awareness in his fiction always carries moral and affective consequences. Yet the larger implication is narratological: that contemporary fiction, through such precision of sensory rendering, can model the dynamic interface of body, environment, and mind as effectively as theoretical discourse itself.

## **ENDNOTES**

1. This oft quoted phrase is believed to be first used by Johnson as the title of his 1987 work.
2. The choice of Damasio's hypothesis is not arbitrary. McEwan himself is familiar with his work, as is evident from his citation of Descartes' Error in the "Acknowledgements," section of *Enduring Love*. Dominic Head acknowledges this connection: "it is Damasio who seems to be the key inspiration behind the dismantling of the emotion/reason dichotomy" (Ian McEwan, 133). Moreover, Damasio's hypothesis has been echoed and corroborated by several other neuroscientists and thinkers. See Andy Clark *Being There*, 136-48 and *Surfing*, 233-34, Joseph Ledoux 253-54.
3. These terms refer to individual thought and collective thought respectively. See Palmer 161.
4. The ventro-medial pre-frontal cortex (vmPFC). Damage to the vmPFC can impair decision-making, leading to difficulties in learning from past mistakes and making choices that align with one's long-term goals. Damasio's work with patients with vmPFC lesions

provided crucial evidence for the somatic marker hypothesis. These individuals often exhibit normal intelligence and cognitive abilities but struggle with real-world decision-making. They seem unable to anticipate the emotional consequences of their actions, leading to impulsive and often self-destructive choices. See Descartes' Error, 192-95.

5. In doing so this essay assumes an epistemological middle ground between scientific positivism and literary constructivism. F. Elizabeth Hart, in her essay "The Epistemology of Cognitive Literary Studies" (2001) calls this "constrained constructivism" and goes on to argue that this approach effectively reshapes the relations between the two "from a binary structure to an epistemological continuum on which realist and relativist positions occupy opposite — but not all-encompassing — ends" (320–321).

6. Interestingly, a hot weather, or heat in general, plays a crucial part in several stories of McEwan's first two collections of fiction. See for example "Butterflies", "Conversation with a Cupboard Man", "Last Day of Summer" (McEwan First Love, Last Rites) and "Psychopolis", "Two Fragments March 199-" (McEwan In Between the Sheets). His childhood in the warm climates of East Asia and North Africa might be a factor behind this.

7. The word is used repeatedly in the novel to denote Florence's feeling. See McEwan On Chesil Beach, 7, 9, 23, 84, 104, 105, 157.

8. The narrative technique whereby the third person narrator summarises and conveys the mental states of a character in his own voice rather than presenting them verbatim as in Free Indirect Discourse or Interior Monologue. According to Courtney, "psycho-narration, through phrases such as "she was pleased with herself" and "amazed by her own boldness", is the most common form of focalized, third person-narrated character consciousness throughout the novella." (191)

9. Prolepsis and analepsis are narrative techniques of manipulating the temporal order by forward projections and flashbacks respectively.

10. I am working on the application of these concepts in my ongoing doctoral thesis.

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