Sociophobia and Transgressive Sexuality in Ian McEwan's *The Cement Garden*

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Abstract

Ian McEwan's 1978 novel, The Cement Garden presents a family of six in which father and mother die respectively and the children create a community for themselves in which they portray different forms of gender transgression. The characters portrayed in the novel suffer from some sort of sexual disorder which is revealed in the course of their behavior and discourse toward each other. The family's younger child, Tom, who is six years old boy, wears girl's clothes in order to prevent being bullied by his schoolmates. The oldest daughter of the family, Julie, also acts as a father figure after the death of the parents and tries to control all family members in terms of their tasks. The other instance of transgression which is outstanding from the outset of the novel is older son's self-destructive masturbation against the determined sexual principles. The obvious transgression in siblings' relation is that they reject outside society in order not to be taken to foster care, and in their rejection they create a sexual community for themselves in which they gratify their sexual needs with each other by incest. In this paper I will provide psychoanalytic reading of character's melancholic and transgressive acts and supply instances of their behavior and dialogues to prove how the transgression manifests itself in every aspect of the novel and what the reason behind all of their existing behavior is.

Ian McEwan (1948-) is one of the most widely read and internationally recognized authors of contemporary British fiction. Owing to his distinguished works, McEwan has already joined the ranks of classic authors of British literature and, as a result, there have been numerous attempts to define his literary style. The novels of Ian McEwan, as with much great literature, are studies of "melancholy and conflict" (Jensen 2). Not simply human conflict in general, for that is a vast and broad phenomenon, but more specifically the conflicts arising when, as Lee Siegel in his "The Imagination of Disaster" puts it, our "accustomed world is about to fall to pieces", and we are brought into conflict, involuntarily. Most human beings of the western world are quite content with their daily routine, of leading an organized life, and of having a solid overview of what goes on around them. Human beings, by nature, adhere to organization and structure, plain and simple. Jensen believes that if there is a red thread to be found in McEwan's novels, it is the breach of these daily routines, and the effects that follow

as a result (Jensen 2). McEwan, to whom the novel is "an exploration of human nature", uses his protagonists to explore and develop these conflicts. Often, the protagonists of his novels find themselves lost in a world unfamiliar to them, isolated and thus forced to look inwards.

His first novel,*The Cement Garden*, which was written in 1978 concerns a family in which the father of four children dies. Soon after the children's mother dies as well. In order to avoid being taken into foster care, the children hide their mother's death from the outside world by encasing her corpse in cement in their basement. The novel deals with children's attempt to live on their own. The narrator is Jack (15), and his siblings are Julie (17), Sue (13), and Tom (6). Jack describes how, when they were younger, he and Julie would play doctor with their younger sister, although he is aware that their version of the game occasionally broke boundaries. Jack then mentions how he longs to do the same to his older sister but it is not allowed. Sexual tension between Jack and Julie becomes increasingly obvious as they take over the roles of "mother" and "father" in the house, which is gradually deteriorating into squalor. When Julie begins to date a young man called Derek and invites him to their house, Jack feels jealous and shows hostility towards him. Derek gets a hint that something is hidden in their cellar, and becomes more and more interested while the children attempt to hide it from him. When a smell begins to emanate from the cellar, the children tell him their dead dog is encased in the cement. Tom then helps to re-close the cement casing their mother is hidden in. Eventually, Tom tells Jack that Derek has told him he believes their mother is in the cellar. The novel mainly deals with the problems of the children after their parents' death and in depicting their problems it mainly portrays sexual transgression of the family members.

As his debut novel, *The Cement Garden*, reflects much of the "violence and absurdity that characterize contemporary urban existence" (Cochran 389). In most of his novels, Ian McEwan played with gender roles and sexual relationships. To borrow a phrase from Judith Butler's terminology, Ian McEwan "troubled gender" in much of his fiction (Butler 67). McEwan's gender play usually revolves around domestic situations in which the depicted characters are mostly members of a family. Preeminent, however, persistent throughout his career is his obsession with characters who cross-dress and with characters who otherwise resist and disrupt gendered expectations. This essay will focus on instances of sexual and gender transgressions in McEwan's debut novel and to this end psychoanalytic theories of Freud, Lacan and Julia Kristeva concerning sexuality and gender trouble will be employed.

For Jacque Lacan "the death of the father is the key to supreme jouissance, later identified with the mother as aim of incest" (Seminar XVII). Psychoanalysis "is not constructed on the proposition 'to sleep with the mother' but on the death of the father as primal jouissance" (Seminar XVII). In its positive form the complex manifests itself as the desire for the death of a rival, the parent of the same sex, accompanied by the sexual desire for the parent of the opposite sex (Homer 52). Keeping Lacan's theory of subjectivity in mind, we begin to survey

The Cement Garden which begins with an amazing depiction of Jack's inner hatred of his father:

> I did not kill my father, but I sometimes felt I had helped him on his way. And but for the fact that it coincided with a landmark in my own physical growth, his death seemed insignificant compared with what followed. My sisters and I talked about him the week after he died, and Sue certainly cried when the ambulance men tucked him up in a bright- red blanket and carried him away. He was a frail, irascible, obsessive man with yellowish hands and face. I am only including the little story of his death to explain how my sisters and I came to have such a large quantity of cement at our disposal. (McEwan 1)

Jack's opening line is unabashed and brings readers straight into oedipal territory. ThisOedipal trope becomes even more prominent as Jack and Julie begin to imitate and assume the roles of their parents. This initiatory paragraph also reveals Jack's indifference and callousness to his father's death and it's interesting that he just mentions the story of his father's death to explain how they came to have cement at their disposal. In the course of the novel except a few initial pages, we never hear anything special about the father and he is totally veiled by Jack's narration.

Father as the patriarchal ruler of the family exerts his power over family members and surrounding by different methods. The first instance of his power exertion reveals itself when he is enclosing the garden with cement so as to gain his zone of dominance separated from outside world and to rule in his own territory. He orders cement to fulfill his gender expectation which makes his wife angry because she believes that they need money for much important matters. His reaction to her debate is not eating supper and using a penknife he scrapes black shards from the bowl of his pipe into the food:

> While my mother talked my father used a penknife to scrape black shards from the bowl of his pipe on to the food he had barely touched. He knew how to use his pipe against her…He replaced the pipe between his teeth like a missing section of his own anatomy and interrupted to say it was 'out of the question' sending the bags back and that was the end of it. (McEwan 4).

Simon Schama in his*The Embarrassment of Riches* notes that "clay pipes began their long career as phallic symbols (to be displaced only by the Freudian cigar) early in 17th century." (Schama 204) The father uses a phallic symbol to make his dominance visible when he notices his wife violating the expected gender role of meekness.

The opening paragraphs of the novel in which the now-dead father is present deals with the expected gendered roles and father acts as a preserver of these expectations. The father also

had some running jokes about the other family members but nobody could utter any jokes against him or even if anybody could make jokes about him it remained unheard and unheeded by other members.

Father's relationship with his younger son, Tom, is also notable because like in the Oedipal drama they are competing for the mother. As Freud in his The Interpretation of Dreams mentions: "It is the fate of all of us, perhaps, to direct our first sexual impulse towards our mother and our first hatred and our first murderous wish against our father. Our dreams convince us that this is so." (Freud 289)

> Tom was scared of his father and kept well behind me. Julie had told me recently that now Father was a semi-invalid he would have to compete with Tom for Mother's attention. It was an extraordinary idea and I thought about it for a long time. So simple, so bizarre, a small boy and a grown man competing. Later I asked Julie who would win and without hesitation she said, 'Tom of course, and Dad'll take it out on him.' (McEwan 6)

Except the father and mother who are descendants of the last generation all the other members of the family portray different layers of gender and sexual transgression. Our first glimpse of this exteriorization of transgression happens when the children go upstairs while their father and mother are debating upon the cement issue. It is the moment when Jack and Julie strip sue of her clothes and are playing doctor with her. These short plays trigger the incest instinct within Jack and Julie. Julie who is the oldest wants Jack to be analyzed which he rejects by saying "out of question" through an imaginary pipe. Pipe which is repeated here again demonstrates the male notion of dominance. This instinctual desire makes Jack to retreat into bathroom to masturbate several times during the day. His obsession with masturbation makes his mother to warn him against his deed by saying "Every time... you do that, it takes two pints of blood to replace it" (McEwan 23). It's worthy to note that his obsession resolves and he quits masturbation only when he is in incestuous union with Julia at the end of the novel. In her book, *Black Sun*, Julia Kristeva believes that melancholia or depression is mourning for something lost and the lost object is an "Internal Object." This lost object initiates two form of depression: Objectal Depression and Narcissistic Depression. The Objectal Depression is related to the child's losing his/her mother in the Thetic phase while Narcissistic Depression is the feeling of hostility to some internal object and the depressed person feels flawed, incomplete and wounded. This type of depression results in non-communicable grief so the depressed becomes wrapped up in his/her sadness and loneliness. This sadness and grief ends in the depressed person's suicidal and self-destructive attempts. In the course of the novel, Jack is the most melancholic subject. He is most of the time lonely and lethargic. His lack of speech is demonstrated in the way that he just narrates

in the novel and there are only a few instances of his own speech with other characters in the novel.

In both sexes, the Oedipus complex can be called the climax of infantile sexuality; the erogenous development from oral eroticism via anal eroticism toward genitality, as well as the development of object relationships from incorporation via partial incorporation and ambivalence toward love and hate, culminate in the Oedipus striving, which as a rule are expressed by guilt-laden genital masturbation. According to Fenichel, an overcoming of these strivings, to be replaced by adult sexuality, is the prerequisite for normality, whereas an unconscious clinging to the Oedipus tendencies characterize the neurotic mind (Fenichel 80). Sigmund Freud proposed that if the child experienced sexual frustration in relation to any psychosexual developmental stage, he or she would experience anxiety that would persist into adulthood as a neurosis, a functional mental disorder. In Oedipal complex the object of desire is the parent of the opposite sex but for Jack the object of desire is not the mother but his sister Julie.

In the second chapter of the novel Jack describes Julie as a domineering figure who unlike his mother is totally subversive and demanding. "She dominated her group and heightened her reputation with a disruptive, intimidating quietness" (McEwan 14). She is described as a ruler and her silences made all of them afraid of her. Being the oldest of the children, she played the role of a Father-figure and tried to dominate others. Her description by Jack also reveals her domineering trait and she is compared to a wild animal:

> Julie had a high ridge of cheekbone beneath her eyes which gave her the deep look of some rare wild animal. In the electric light her eyes were black and big. The soft line of her mouth was just broken by two front teeth and she had to pout a little to conceal her smile. (McEwan 4)

Jack also likens Julie to his mother by saying "Her back, like Julie's, was very straight" (McEwan 21). This foreshadows Julie's later adoption of maternal role but her role is not as meek and submissive as her mother's and unlike her she is so imperious. "Like my mother, Julie made remarks to me about my hair or my clothes, not gently though, but with scorn" (McEwan 23).

As Emily Sgarlata argues, Jack "never views Julie as just a sister, but an Other, something more: sister, mother, woman, and sexual being. He often notices her physicality and is continually drawn to her" (Sgarlata 28).

The other character who depicts sexual transgression to a great degree is the youngest member of the family, Tom. Tom who is six years old regresses to a toddler after the parent's death. He is among one of the characters who changes radically in the course of the novel. He sleeps in a cot, sucks his thumb, speaks in a "baby voice", and insists that Julie mother him. His transgression reaches its zenith when he wants to change his gender and become a girl so

as to avoid being bullied by his friends at school. He talks to Sue about his desire to become a girl:

> And he said he was tired of being a boy and he wanted to be a girl now. And I said, "But you can't be a girl if you're a boy," and he said, "Yes I can. If I want to, I can." So then I said, "Why do you want to be a girl?" And he said, "Because you don't get hit when you're a girl." And I told him you do sometimes, but he said, "No you don't, no you don't."
> So then I said, "How can you be a girl when everyone knows you're a boy?" and he said, "I'll wear a dress and make my hair like yours and go in the girls' entrance." (McEwan 41)

Julie and Sue are for Tom's becoming a girl but Jack is against it because he thinks that he will look "bloody idiotic" (McEwan 41) and this engenders a discussion on the topic of gender between Jack and Julie. Julie believes becoming a male for a female means promotion while the vice versa means degradation. With this conception and knowing that Tom's change of clothes will make him degraded, she assents to his change.

Jack's notion of cross-dressing also changes when he notices that Tom's change of clothes hasn't affected his playing with other children outside. Jack no longer finds Tom's cross-dressing humiliating, but rather seems fascinated by the prospect that it is possible to be or become "someone else" (De Coning 98). Moreover, he recounts how, following this episode, "Tom played in the street in Sue's skirt" quite often, and that "none of the other children teased him like he thought they would. They did not even seem to notice" (McEwan 78). This indicates not only the flexibility of gender performativity, but also the arbitrary nature of gender and sexual signifiers: the other children have not yet been socialized to believe that it is inappropriate for Tom to wear a skirt, and thus do not take his dress as remiss.

The last instance of transgression to be found in The Cement Garden arises when Julia dates with a boy named Derek. Jack becomes jealous of his object of desire's dating with someone else and directs his hatred toward Derek who now means a rival for him. In the final climactic scenes of the novel Jack forgets his enmity because he is much approached by Julie after Jack's hygienic attempts to wash himself:"But Julie came and put her hand on my shoulder and admired the colour in my face. 'You look so much better,' she said, 'doesn't he?' Derek was knotting his tie with quick, sharp movements" (McEwan 120).

Upon Jack's change of appearance and behavior, however, Julie no longer sides with her boyfriend: she mocks the latter's aspiration to be their "big smart daddy" (McEwan 129), as well as the fact that he still lives with his mother and lacks authority of himself and still in the confines of the expected societal role of boy of the family. Thus Derek, although ostensibly a figure of masculine authority, is treated as a juvenile by his mother and lacks power within his own household. This could also account for his wish to move into the children's house

and play the role of surrogate-father, thereby gaining the power and authority he desires (De Coning 100).

As noted earlier, besides children's lonely living apart from the society, their house is also located in an empty land: "Our house had once stood in a street full of houses. Now it stood on empty land where stinging nettles were growing round torn corrugated tin. The other houses were knocked down for a motorway they had never built" (McEwan 16).

The house is the only place that allows them to enact their self-governed society of sexual freedom and its aloofness makes their task easy to handle. The house is located at the end of a road where there isn't any neighbors. The existence of a neighbor or anyone near the house is considered a threat because their interference prevented them from resumption of their incestuous relationship. The threat is realized when an outsider, Derek, enters the secluded community of the family and his entrance divulges all the secrets. Derek doubts the cement enclosed in the basement and several times tries to enter there in order to find out what they are hiding from him. Finally they tell him it's Jack's dog which he buried there because he was so much attached to her (dog being a female dog). The final scene of the novel is in correspondence with Jack's desire for his sister because they retreat into a room and they are having sexual intercourse. Here is the moment where there no longer exists any hierarchy between Jack and Julie and their relationship is not of the sort of exploring a body as they played with Sue but it's a mutual exploration and satisfaction. During their intercourse Derek enters the room and sees them but despite being seen and interrupted by Derek they continue their intercourse. Derek leaves and after a few minutes they hear slow thuds coming from the basement and it is the noise of Derek's destroying the cement by a sledge-hammer:

> As I sucked and that same shudder ran through my sister's body, I heard and felt a deep, regular pulse, a great, dull slow thudding which seemed to rise through the house and shake it. I fell back and Julie crouched forwards. We moved slowly in time to the sound till it seemed to be moving us, pushing us along. (McEwan 133)

De Coning also assimilates the thud with Jack and Julie's movements in their intercourse. The sound also indicates the end of their created union with each other and the secret, mother's corpse in the cement, which held the family together, was being demolished and the children all gathered in one room and they notice a blue light spinning patterns on the wall.

All being said, we can conclude that parent's death engenders a free scene of sexual turmoil in which all characters play their pseudo-role against the expected gender and societal principles. Like most of McEwan's novels, The Cement Garden exposes the tenuous nature of the traditional family and reveals provisionality of gender roles. The novel challenges the established impression of social institutions establishing and maintaining rigid identities and

relationships by portraying how the boundaries between self and other, masculine and feminine, proper and improper are all ephemera and transient.

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