

**Narration vs. Metanarrative in Ian McEwan's *Atonement* Rasool Rahimi**

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**Abstract**

*Ian McEwan (1948- ) is a well-known British novelist and screenwriter who was listed among fifty greatest British writers since 1945. His writings revolve around controversial issues of postmodern society and they are abundant in topics such as murder, death, incest, rape, sado-masochism, and violence. His 2001 novel, Atonement, presents an aura of trauma for the reader. It depicts how various traumatic events disrupt civilization by questioning the basic tenets of social relationships in postmodern and post-World War era. This essay delves into various aspects of rejecting the idea of survival in the world and absolute failure of the civilization which leads to the importance of individuality rather than nationhood. This paper reveals that how McEwan challenges the metanarratives of pre-war era to convey the fragility of postmodern individual. The characters in Atonement are striving to fashion a unity and integration beyond the disordered world and this paper depicts how narration and story-telling act as redemptive tools to escape the horrors of the post-World War period and its violent consequences by creating the happy union of characters in the story. The paper also delves into the idea of life as narration and analyzes how narration casts doubt upon the foreclosure and truth of the narrative. The metafictional technique employed in Atonement by McEwan is also studied in terms of its effect on both characters and readers' misapprehension of the story to depict that subjects are created in narration and metanarratives such as salvation are no longer tenable in the post-World War aura of Ian McEwan's Atonement.*

**Keywords:** Ian McEwan, Atonement, Salvation, Metanarrative, Metafiction, Postmodern, Narration, Subjectivity.

Ian McEwan's novels are directly linked to major events occurring in everyday life and the attitudes of the novels' narrators are in line with these events. He is one of the recent novelists whose works extensively allude to the horrors following the Second World War. In

an interview with Hunt, McEwan claimed that he is “interested in relationships not only for what they do in themselves, but how they absorb outside pressure, influence politics and, again, history” (48). This notion is exactly correlated with Edward Said’s concept of “worldliness” which is “concerned with the materiality of the text’s origin, for this material being is embedded in the very materiality of the matters of which it speaks: dispossession, injustice, marginality, subjection” (Ashcroft 16). McEwan’s *Atonement* is no exception and the story starts in a hot day in summer of 1935, exactly four years before the initiation of the Second World War. It begins with a brief description of Briony having designed the posters for a play which she had written the script in two days:

The play—for which Briony had designed the posters, programs and tickets, constructed the sales booth out of a folding screen tipped on its side, and lined the collection box in red crêpe paper—was written by her in a two-day tempest of composition, causing her to miss a breakfast and a lunch. (McEwan 3)

The initial pages of the novel describe Briony Tallis’s maternal cousins visiting of the family and revolves around the issues narrated and misconstrued by her who is a 13-year-old English girl with a hand in writing. Since the beginning, her insatiable desire for composition delineates itself in her interest to write plays. She has finished writing her play named *The Trials of Arabella*, which acts as a simulacrum, to borrow a term from Jean Baudrillard, who believes that “signs no longer correspond to, or mask their ‘real-life’ referent but replace it in a world of autonomous ‘floating signifier’” (Selden 201) and Briony’s play foreshadows the coming events of the rest of the story. These initial hints of the story portray how intertextuality works through the threads of the novel and makes the reader doubt the narrative’s authenticity in terms of truth. The use of an unreliable narrator has been a practice of McEwan in order to convey how Lyotardian petit-récits govern the world of narrative. Petit-récits for Lyotard characterizes “the postmodern episteme, where the totalizing narratives of legitimation of knowledge have been replaced with ‘little narratives’ which he sees as the quintessential form of imaginative invention, most particularly in science” (Pilz 23). Besides *Atonement*, McEwan has utilized the motif of an unreliable narrator in *The Cement Garden*, in which Jack recounts the whole novel in order to gratify his incestuous desire for his sister. The demise of hope in any metanarrative to decipher and govern the world in the postmodern period is directly aligned with the narrative trend of Briony. She subdues life to a narrative in which she controls every aspect to overcome the horrors of the Second World War. She also makes her cousins take roles in the play in order to rehearse it before the main performance. This rehearsal is also a proof of her desire to witness the fulfillment of her desires. She is the most organized and well-ordered member of the family and the ability to create a tidy environment is a task which can be done by no one better than a writer:

Briony's was the only tidy upstairs room in the house. Her straight-backed dolls in their many-roomed mansion appeared to be under strict instructions not to touch the walls; the various thumb-sized figures to be found standing about her dressingtable—cowboys, deep-sea divers, humanoid mice—suggested by their even ranks and spacing a citizen's army awaiting orders. (McEwan 5)

Her arranging of the toys like an army provides an entry into how she manages her characters in her fiction. These issues signify her tactfulness in terms of arranging her surroundings. The arrangement of a surrounding by a 13-year-old girl delineates how metanarratives are replaced by *petit-récits* and the metanarratives are succumbing to the subjects who can devise the world as they wish.

The negation of metanarratives also delineates itself in the second section of the novel in the notion of survival and salvation. The second section of the novel progresses with the story of Robbie Turner, who is the son of the Tallis family's housekeeper and was accused of rape. This section begins with his provisional release from the prison at the time of Second World War. He is released on the condition that he enlists in the army and he goes to war in France. It delves into Robbie's experiences in France while travelling to Dunkirk. His contemplations on the way to Dunkirk revolve around the idea of survival. It is Robbie's key feature in his experiences during the war in France: "He didn't owe them explanations. He intended to survive, he had one good reason to survive, and he didn't care whether they tagged along or not" (McEwan 181). But as the ensuing chapters of the novel represent, Robbie doubts the notion of survival and he meditates on the notion of extinction. His skepticism is revealed in his solitary cerebrations about how poets have rendered the notion of survival: "But what did the poets know about survival? About surviving as a body of men" (249). Survival which played a central role in his beliefs was doomed to failure and it was giving way to the notion of extinction due to his witnessing of the destruction of the city in the course of the war. Here the idea of 'extinction' is foregrounded and replaces the notion of survival: "And what success! It was the sound of panic itself, mounting and straining toward the extinction they all knew, individually, to be theirs. It was a sound you were obliged to take personally" (222). His witnessing an irritant scene in which the mother was "vaporized" in her attempt to protect her child during the Stuka attack acts as a turning point in Robbie's faith for survival (226). The word "extinction" replaces the "survival" which was reiterated in his speech and it portends that he does not believe in any metanarrative of salvation and survival which western thought has long been implicating in the minds of its subjects. Salvation, according to Ayars (2015), "is the story of God's single plan to rescue the creation from the oppression of sin and death by reestablishing his righteous governance (the kingdom of God) over creation through his chosen human agents" (Ayars 17). The phrase emphasizes the intertextual

nature of death of all metanarratives and the disbelief in any form of life beyond death. For Robbie, death signifies the annihilation of the subject. The scenes portrayed in the novel reiterate his realization. The notion of survival is hinted shortly after he witnesses a severed leg:

The leg was twenty feet up, wedged in the first forking of the trunk, bare, severed cleanly above the knee. From where they stood there was no sign of blood or torn flesh. It was a perfect leg, pale, smooth, small enough to be a child's. The way it was angled in the fork, it seemed to be on display, for their benefit or enlightenment: this is a leg. (McEwan 180)

The scenes he witnesses are direct portrayal of wartime violence that make subjects understand the idea of "extinction" and the inevitable doom which is awaiting the human subject. The fear hovering around the country during the war was not eliminated and the recurrent shocks were hindering any hope of survival: "When it did not come, the trial had to be lived through all over again and the fear did not diminish. For the living, the end of a Stuka attack was the paralysis of shock, of repeated shocks" (McEwan 225). This reiterates the condition suggested by Paul Gilroy in his *Postcolonial Melancholia* as the side effect of the twentieth century, and Gilroy renders that the postmodernism "reverberates with the catastrophes that resulted from the militarized agency and unprecedented victimization of racial and ethnic groups" (29).

The belief in survival remains a secret for him and he doesn't speak to anyone about it and we only hear the word in his ruminations. He attempts to forego the events by leaving the "corporals to their fate," since he believes that they are obstacles on his way to Dunkirk, which he thinks of it as a passage to his home (McEwan 191). But he fails to keep up with the good hope of salvation and he focuses on the individuality of the subjects rather than contemplating the fate of the nation:

Being here, sheltering in a barn, with an army in rout, where a child's limb in a tree was something that ordinary men could ignore, where a whole country, a whole civilization was about to fall, was better than being there, on a narrow bed under a dim electric light, waiting for nothing. (McEwan 190)

Furthermore, the phrase "civilization" refers to the acts done by Nazi party which attempted to kill Jewish people for their beliefs. The word also signifies imperialism's metanarratives aiming at civilizing all indigenous people. These metanarratives were subverted as a result of the Second World War which engendered an aura for the particularity of the individual subject. Gilroy (2006) also believes that these events "tell us something fundamental and useful about the potential of 'individual experience' and the shifting quality of political life, about the objects of government and the nature of subjection" (7). Robbie's ideas are in line with the notion that "civilization" was undermined by the time Nazis began sending Jewish

people into jail, and the notion of civilizing the indigenous people was halted by the violence enacted by Hitler. Since Robbie's senses are being narrated and actually made up by Briony, we can infer that her belief in futility and hopelessness of the human condition is projected onto Robbie's story. Narration is the only way to escape the horrifying conditions of post-war period and Briony redeems her terror by making up a story based on her own fantasies. As said earlier, *The Cement Garden's* narrator, Jack, also uses his narrative skills to render the story in way so as to gratify his own incestuous desire for her sister. Real world deprives Briony of any hope of reconciliation for Robbie, Cecilia, and herself. Following passage is a proof of Briony's anxiousness: "Her secret torment and the public upheaval of war had always seemed separate worlds, but now she understood how the war might compound her crime" (McEwan 272).

The only solution available for her is writing the story with a reconciliatory happy ending; and her crime alters from naiveté to that of romanticism and adheres to the romantic conceptions. The idea of narration and storytelling within a novel is a sign of McEwan's ingenuity in metafictional techniques. In line with issues discussed earlier, Mark Currie notes that "contemporary metafictional writing is both a response and a contribution to an even more thoroughgoing sense that reality or history are provisional: no longer a world of eternal verities but a series of constructions, artifices, impermanent structures" (44). The story made up by Briony serves as a metafiction and undermines all metanarratives naturalizing social and economic inequalities that were widespread during the 1930s. Metafictional narrative of the novel delineates that human subject is narrated and the subject enters a preexisting narrative at birth which provides a palimpsest on which he/she carves out his/her own life as a narrative. As Beth Newman contends in her *Subjects on Display*, the present condition "constructs a narrating subject entirely different from the conventional ones" (77). McEwan's use of metafiction in *Atonement* is to convince the reader that life is totally determined by narration and the notion of metanarrative is dead as the consequence of the Second World War.

Narration is the direct result of how one sees the world and it's a rendering in textual or vocal format of what he/she believes to be true. Hence, we can put narration and interpretation on the same grounds. According to Lacan, interpretation paves the way for a potential misinterpretation, which was entitled as *méconnaissance* in Lacanian terminology and it is defined as "the illusion of autonomy to which it entrusts itself" (Lacan 6). Ian McEwan's employment of metanarrative technique and also his playing with narrative structures emphasizes Briony's misapprehension of what she had witnessed at the first part of the book, as well as her misconception of Robbie. The novel's title portends that Briony is writing to

atone for her fallacies, and it also emphasizes reader's misapprehension of what they have read when they reach the end of the story made up by Briony.

### **Conclusion**

The issues depicted in the novel are in direct correlation with the terrors enacted by the World Wars not only on fiction of the era but also the second half of twentieth century, and it changed the way human subjects perceive the world. The terrorist attacks also showed the violence of the world and people came to understand the fragility of human condition in the post-war era. Post-war atmosphere of Ian McEwan's *Atonement* shows how human subjects are dissuaded from the promise of salvation and turning to their own individuality. This paper also delineated how metanarratives are replaced by narration as an act of subject formation. Briony's narration is the direct aftermath of the Second World War which casts doubt upon foreclosure of meaning and the novel acts as a portrayal of how life itself is a narrative with differing misapprehensions.

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