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Ian McEwan's literary approach to feminism: an applied analysis

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In this paper I have tried to explain how Ian McEwan's public and supportive feminist discourse is transplanted into the intricate configurations of his novels. The subsequent but interesting transformations that such a relocation implies consist, in my view, in the challenging of feminism as an ideology but not in the critique of the women's rights to obtain a legitimate equality of chances. Far from representing an artistic unavoidable reversal or a more substantial retraction, the distancing from a dogmatic dimension through the epic facilitates a beneficial encounter between feminism and a version of reality not so amenable to its requests and ideals.

Keywords: *feminism, ideology, novel, Ian McEwan*

Ian McEwan′s position and comments about the feminist cause, well known from his interviews, television appearances and debates, are sufficiently unequivocal as to make any description or analyses superfluous. But despite this frank supportive attitude, his prose is far from being a mere translucent reflection of his public involvement. As I will try to demonstrate, although an authorial adherence to the ideals of the women′s rights movement is discernable, his novels contain difficult questionings of feminism, or even a critique and a caricature of its more inflamed and inauthentic manifestations. But this discrepancy, though just apparent, would require certain explanations. While discussing *The Imitation Game,* in his 2007 study, *Contemporary writers-Ian McEwan*, Dominic Head remarks the author′s awareness of "the necessarily exploratory – or anti-systemic nature of novelistic discourse that is deemed capable of producing something more richly ‹‹political››" (Head 2007, 56) and the partial affiliation to a long tradition of perceiving any form of political partisanship as destructive for the artistic management of literary effects. In my opinion, this partial subscription needs to be reassessed, as for McEwan, the novel seems to represent a much richer and powerful force as to be artistically undermined by the presence of any form of engagement. In other words, the relation of forces seems to be reversed here, as the novel, by its intrinsical characteristics, automatically dominates and subverts ideology:

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> it is precisely its expressive freedom and the capability it has of naming everything, exploring every corner of human experience, that make it a natural opponent of political systems, tyrannies and cant. The successful or memorable novels we think as political are always written against a politics.[2] (Head 2007, 56)

Therefore, the novel is not the inert amorphous material politically modifiable and corruptible, but the genre which decomposes and questions ideology, retaining a political stake only to inexorably become anti-political. Whether McEwan′s opinion is valid or not is irrelevant here. What matters is the choosing of this genre to interrogate some of the flaws of feminism and that these mechanisms of reflection inevitably lead to the consternation of some of the upholders of the cultural movement.

In this light, it is also important to observe that the most empathic and frontal approach of the subject cannot be encountered in his prose, but in one of his screenplays, *The Imitation Game.* Here, McEwan overtly affirms his feminist credo, presenting the story of a young English woman trapped in an intricate web of gender prejudices and obstacles. After successfully trying to leave behind a suffocating small town and a patriarchal family, she joins the British army at the begging of WW2 striving to surmount the trammels of a sector completely dominated by men. A rebellious spirit and unlimited courage engage her in a descendent pathway as she tries to get more involved in the military service only to get rejected because of her gender and suffer continuous decay until she gets imprisoned for a crime never committed. Her reclusion is the consequence of the repetitive refusal of her evolution as a recruit and the denial of her right to be equally treated as a woman. Relegated from the position of an ATS code interceptor for hitting back a man in the groin to the status of a table maid at Bletchley Park (the centre where the system designed to crack the German Enigma Code was created) she is discovered consulting top secret files and imprisoned for the false accusation of espionage. But Kathy is also the victim of Turner, a mathematician puzzled by the intricacies of the imitation game, whose sexual inability transformed in retaliation imperils even more the protagonist′s situation. The game that Turner is so preoccupied with represents a transparent metaphor of the similitude of women′s and men′s intelligence as their gender can be confused by an interrogator, if identities were hidden. The screenplay is as ideologically engaged as to make a critic like Keirnan Ryan state that it "undoubtedly stacks the deck in favour of the female victim of male cruelty." (Keirnan 1994, 31) It is clear that the special treatment that feminism benefits from is strongly related here to the privileged perception of the dramatic subgenre as a

[2] Head cites McEwan. 1989. *A Move Abroad: Or Shall We Die? and The Ploughman's Lunch*, London: Picador, p. 10.

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fertile medium for promoting political, social or moral values. It can also be perceived, I believe, as an intermediary form of expression between the non-literary public interventions and the sophisticated aesthetical forms of the novel. After all, for the British writer, in terms of artistry, a television screenplay is less significant than prose, therefore the subdued ideological refractions and questionings can encourage the propagation of a strong feminist consciousness.

The first McEwan novel challenging feminism is *The Comfort of Strangers*. The work is very controversial because it tackles the sacred feminist representation of the woman as a sexual victim of the abusive male′s violent desires. More precisely, it suggests that, in reality, the idea of a consensual exploration of sadistic and masochistic fantasies is not unconceivable and that the willing acceptance of male sadistic manifestations by women is not necessarily the consequence of a masculine social construct. While explaining his thoughts after the publishing of his work at a Marxism Today conference about eroticism and the Left, McEwan had the terrible idea of claiming that it would be more profitable and honest of women to acknowledge their masochistic desires. To his astonishment, he was blamed for "promoting a rapist′s charter and for poaching on forbidden territory - women′s experience." (Head 2007, 58) Still, the episode presented by Dominic Head in his study should not be perceived as the convincing image of an acute conflicting relation between feminism and the novel′s ideas. In fact, the author depicts misogyny as to be clearly socially inoculated in patriarchal families and sadism as a consequence of *disastrous gender confusion* (Head 2007, 61), irrepressible homosexuality or infertility. Robert, the embodiment of the unfortunate conjugation of all these determinants, detests feminism for perverting the natural and primordial configuration of a world where men, like his father and grandfather, "understood themselves clearly […] who were proud of their sex." (McEwan 2006, 37) In fact, as noticed by the majority of the novel′s commentators, Robert′s failure of not transgressing the gender boundaries is indicated by his attraction for Colin, a man who he also despises for his androgynous aspect and receptivity towards feminism[3]. His pronounced machismo, materialized in the aggressiveness that Caroline seems to enjoy, cannot conceal his sexual ambivalence and the subsequent symptoms of self-hatred. Still, Robert′s conviction that women love to be ruled by men is not presented as a mere projection of social male dominance. In fact this is where McEwan creates a fertile literary ambiguity by refusing to offer us a single or a privileged perspective. As David Malcom correctly remarks, in his study *Understanding Ian McEwan*, the novel "does not illustrate any particular, psychological or social theory very well." (Malcom 2002, 83) The complicity of Robert′s wife in their violent sexual experimentations and even Mary′s and Colin′s

[3] In this light, Head also mentions the gay characteristics of the bar that Robert purchases after the discovery of his infertility.

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refreshment of a relation that "has lost its edge and zest" (Keirnan 1994, 34), after understanding the realities of their host′s marriage, broaden the sphere of interpretation. What McEwan really challenges here is the feminism′s incapacity to modify or control representations of (sexual) relations of power existing at abyssal levels of the human mind. Mary and Colin are a relatively young couple with strong leftist progressive views. Mary used to work for a women′s theatre group and feels excited to discover the women′s demand for the castration of rapists in a message posted by a radical group of feminists. She also strongly believes that patriarchy "the most powerful principle of organization shaping institutions and individual lives" (McEwan 2006, 40) must be eradicated, but the meeting of Robert, an embodiment of everything she loathes, clearly produces the enactment of sadistic and masochistic fantasies that temporary rejuvenate her love for Colin. It might be in McEwan′s intentions here to suggest that feminism, whether devotedly accepted, cannot always act upon the intimate desires; that even its ideological enforcements fail to take control over the inner life. Still, nine years after writing *The Comfort of Strangers*, McEwan publishes *The Innocent*, a novel that completely reverses the representation of women as willing participants in the violent sexual fantasies of men. Maria Eckdorf, the abused divorced wife of an alcoholic ex sergeant, becomes the lover of a younger English man with a *meek and mild* appearance. Only that her *innocent* fiancé is haunted and excited by the same rape desires as Robert. The action takes place in a post War World Two Germany, where local women are still terrified by the presence of the aggressive Russians, Maria herself being traumatised by the memory of a soviet soldier publicly raping a severe wounded woman in an air raid bunker[4]. Although the author suggests, despite Leonard's belated repressing of his violent impulses, that those propensities towards sexual violence and sadism are inborn in men, here, Maria's drastic refusal indicates that women are far from being predisposed to masochism.

In his post 2010 novels, while writing in and about a time when the West has legislatively solved many of the feminism′s major requests, McEwan's interest is naturally relocated to rare cases such as the status of women in religious communities surviving in a multicultural English society or the discrimination of women in professional and scientific fields traditionally dominated by men. In *The Children Act,* one of the secondary characters, Judith Bernstein has to disconnect herself from the Haredim, a strict social and religious Hebrew subset, in order to pursue higher education and professional fulfilment. After just becoming a primary level teacher, an unprecedented case for the ultra-conservative faction of Orthodox-Judaism, she has to fight for the custody of her daughters, Rachel and Nora, for whom she has already chosen a more permissive and tolerant educational medium in

[4] It is interesting to observe that in *The Innocent*, Germans are depicted as victims of sexual brutality, whereas, in his next novel, *Black Dogs,* it is the Germans and their members of the Gestapo who, according to the Mayor of St Maurice, rape and train their dogs as rapists.

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a mixed Jewish school. The confrontation between parents takes place in a Judge Court, therefore their barrister′s discourses seem direct ways of expressing conflicting worldviews. In this context, the authorial point of view becomes clearer and the reader may easier grasp its interference with Judith′s perspective. The character′s struggle of transcending the limitations that the ancient traditions of the Haredi have appointed for her, the difficult uprooting from a natal community that had assigned her exclusively to the menial duties of serving a husband and his children are magisterially integrated into the secular views of modernity disseminated in her lawyer′s plea. Despite the husband′s speech, which is far from being unconvincing, the judge′s final motivation reinforces the feminist perspective, subtly permeating the illusion of fiction and thus discreetly guiding the reader to the Wright Path of liberal democracies.

Though not as determinative as in *The Children Act*, religion also constitutes an intermediary factor for the discrimination of women in *Sweet Tooth*. The loyal and devoted wife of an Anglican bishop strangely and quietly cherishes a feminist consciousness that she successfully represses only to later project it upon her daughter. But, in this case, the father is as far as possible from being a bigot, his lack of implication in the girls′ upbringing leading to Lucy′s pregnancy and Serena′s detachment from any religious problem. Furthermore, the mother′s soft emancipation is transplanted into the sterile soil of Serena′s ideology. It is a paradox that the progressive flares of the mother are neglected by the young daughter exactly when the second wave of feminism proliferates[5]. It is the time of the Cold War, when, despite her colleagues′ emancipation, Serena feels little to no attraction for her generation′s revolutionary zeitgeist. Unlike her sister, a radical hippie for whom the past is a burden that needs to be completely destroyed, Serena adopts the more conservative position of a right wing intellectual:

> A seedy, careless insurrection was in the air. But thanks to Tony I now knew with what trouble it had been assembled Western civilization, imperfect as it was. We suffered from faulty governance, our freedoms were incomplete. But in this part of the world our rulers no longer had absolute power, savagery was mostly a private affair. Whatever was under my feet in the streets of Soho, we had raised ourselves above filth. The cathedrals, the parliaments, the paintings, the courts of law, the libraries and the labs were far too precious to pull down. (McEwan 2012, 27)

The character′s reactions to the historical events can easily be explained by the nurture of her young mind with important novels like *Animal Farm*, *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, *Bend Sinister*, *The Captive Mind*, *One Day in the Life of Ivan*

[5] We can identify here the intelligent reversal of the stereotyped image of the progressive daughter – conservative mother relation.

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Denisovich, *In the First Circle, Cancer Ward etc.* Her lack of enthusiasm for the women′s movement is of no surprise as, in this context, she naturally perceives it as an epiphenomenon of an adverse political tradition. Her palpable dissatisfaction with the less significant tasks that she had to perform within the MI5 as a modest junior assistant officer, knowing plainly that women were never allowed to make it to the officer level, motivated her only as much as to be one of the last to join the women′s revolt in 1972, when better positions within the Security Service were demanded for female graduates. The prevalence of her authentic devotion for the western cause upon the discrimination that she has to face becomes discernable by her reaction when she is subjected to the *undercover cleaning lady test*: "If my small part in the war against the totalitarian mind was bagging up decaying food and scraping down hardened bathtub scum, then I was for it. It was only a little duller than typing up a memo." (McEwan 2012, 49) McEwan cleverly chooses to place his character in the only public sector where women were professionally discriminated. Moreover, Serena′s access to higher education at Cambridge is facilitated by the institution′s desire to be seen as "opening its gates to the modern egalitarian world" (McEwan 2012, 8), a late sixties tendency that is speculated by the bishop′s wife who wants Serena to study mathematics instead of literature.

Though just a mediocre graduate with an untreatable bulimia for reading novels, the character is constructed by McEwan as a reversed stereotype of the woman whose intellectual propensities lay exclusively in the fields of humanities and art. [6] This feature is emphasized by her lover′s scientific illiteracy and inaptitude to grasp the basic probability theory so eloquently explained by the protagonist. A similar situation can be discovered in the *The Child in Time*, where Thelma, a university quantum physics professor, unsuccessfully tries to initiate Stephen, a children′s book novelist, into the abstractions of her field.

The tendency of placing his characters in professional contexts where they are seen as an inferior cast can also be encountered in *Solar*. In the 2010 novel, Beard′s uninspired way of explaining the underrepresentation of women in physics is just the starting point for the discussion about the innate different intellectual abilities that separate women from men. The situation of publicly sustaining divergent points of view, as noticed before, a recurrent device in McEwan′s work, takes here the form of the institutionalized academic debate. Beard, a morally rebarbative ex Nobel prized physicist has to present his obsolete perspective in the presence of Susan Applebaum, a respectable specialist in cognitive psychology and in front of an auditorium extremely receptive to the policies of political correctness. McEwan creates a comical effect from letting the reader grasp how inexorable ideological mechanisms of representation of the opponent leave no room for any form of authentic communication. For the physicist, the spectators form a "postmodern crowd with well developed antennae for the unacceptable line" (McEwan 2010, 86),

[6] Serena was also the captain of her chess school team.

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while, for them, he is a potential reincarnation of Doctor Mengele. Here, the belligerent sides are not Applebaum and Beard, but the physicist and the auditorium (which should have played the role of the jury), the Israeli science woman filling the symbolic role of *the judge*, being invested with the precise kind of knowledge and scientific expertise as to offer a relevant *verdict*.

It is important to underline that Beard, though nefarious, is not a sexist. However, he seems a self-sufficient science man with outdated theories and a personal experience that misleads him to the certainty that, despite the falseness of the gender superiority idea, women′s and men′s intellectual skills are just different. He is, on the other hand, the chief of many physics government departments who believes that the male predominance in his field is the natural consequence of the man′s higher possibilities in abstract-reasoning and that efforts to increase the number of women in physics are senseless, since their cognitive abilities should be channelled towards scientific domains where they can perform better than men. Therefore, Beard, far from being a vile misogynist, is an even-tempered supporter of the gender separation in sciences. Hence, it is clear that McEwan intends to construct his character not as a dangerous agent of female discrimination, but as a lazy scientist with risible outdated theoretical background. The press is also ridiculed for its way of speculating the subject, almost inertly adding fuel to the fire, presenting Beard as the neo-Nazi professor, a phrase assimilated and later used by the public at the Contemporary Art Institute. A burlesque effect resides in the physicist′s confrontation with the ultra-leftist defenders of political correctness, whose predisposition to publicly and collectively overreact to everything that seems offensive to their ideology is splendidly depicted by the British writer who epitomizes their disproportionate reactivity by the comical calling of an ambulance after Beard has just thrown back a rotten tomato at one of the women protesters. Immediately handcuffed and flanked by two female police officers he is escorted through placards brandishing incongruous messages like NO TO EUGENICS! NAZI PROFESSOR OUT! all these to be presented at length in an important leftist journal under the sensationalist title *Protester Felled by Neo-Nazi Professor*.

The auditorium in the debating chamber is also discredited by the shifting attitude towards Applebaum. The initial sympathy that she benefits from being a woman and, thus, *a poor hegemon,* is undermined by the Hebrew origin, which transforms her in the eyes of the progressive audience, despite the strong improbability of any political affiliation, into a Zionist Palestinian oppressor. Therefore, her discourse, though consistently in favour of the public′s view, is coldly received by a sceptical-unwelcoming audience which also lacks the capacity to emerge into its technicalities. These mechanical reactions to stereotyped stimuli suggest that the progressive left has reached its stasis and that its followers are trapped in an airless immobile system of thought. But by discrediting the progressive left, McEwan doesn′t underestimate the feminism′s major stakes. What

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he does, I think, is to suggest that their relocation from a highly ideological context to a scientific or juridical one would be more than salutary.

As I have written before, Beard′s vetust and benign biological determinism is just another symptom of his incapacity to cope with today′s science after a long period of intellectual hibernation. In fact, after discovering with the help of his biologist friends that the shadows of Nazism and the social constructivism transformed it, in the seventies, into *an old hat*, he will easily accept to limit his public discourses to the development of artificial photosynthesis. Therefore, the genetic determinism, despite the confrontational formal coordinates, cannot enter in a competition with the contemporary tendencies in science. Beard′s compromised theories can interact solely with the public′s discredited ideology, while Susan′s discourse, in a neutral tonality, ignoring the audience′s inflamed remarks and Beard′s stale ironies, will smoothly describe the latest experiments that she has been a part of and their conclusions matching a social constructivist credo: the most important differential determinants are cultural and social, not genetic. As the refractory receptors (Beard and the audience), for different reasons, are clearly unable/unwilling to accept the Israeli researcher′s ideas, it wouldn′t be inappropriate to conclude that her technical speech functions as a scientific delivered verdict and that a subtle authorial approval may be sensed here. In fact, her introductory self-legitimization from an objectivist tradition, doubled by her detailed analytical approach can indicate, in McEwan′s view, the better solution for the feminist problem: the interference between rationalist empiricism and social constructivism.

But besides the complete poaching of feminism by the radical left, the author raises the stakes and questions some of its blatant manifestations in the late sixties, the time of Beard′s intellectual efflorescence and maximal scientific creativity. Only this time, the object of McEwan′s sharp irony is the young physicist′s first wife who decides to leave her husband (only to his immense relief), to join a fresh hippie community in the moisty hills of Wales. Despite her initial intention to write a Ph.D. thesis about Aphra Behn, one of the first British women to have managed to earn a living as a writer, Maise′s metamorphosis can be considered a spectacular one. Her diffuse intellectual predisposition towards the feminist cause is not supported by the realities of her social, professional and marital situation. Maisie quits her job and gives up the idea of her doctoral studies, only to apply for a social security benefit and become the member of an emancipated group conducted by a few Californian feminists. McEwan′s cruel authorial irony could not be suppressed by the refusal of following the favourable and natural trajectory inscribed in her condition: “In another century she would have been considered a woman of leisure, but in the twentieth she was ‹‹active››.”(McEwan 2010, 126) Furthermore, Beard is the total opposite of the oppressive or the abusive husband and their family is extremely remote from the traditional patriarchal pattern. In fact, at the time, Beard was the solipsistic science man, his ears stuffed with wads of blotting paper being the caricatured image of his unidirectional interest in the

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scientific theoretical speculations that later made him the Nobel Laureate. Therefore, Maisie having nothing to free herself from, becomes the subject of an artificial appropriation of the feminist cause. Her orthodox identification with the oppressed or discriminated women is subtly depicted by McEwan as fictitious and absurd:

> [...] within a short time she confronted the blatant fact of patriarchy and her husband′s role in a network of oppression that extended from the institutions that sustained him as a man, even though he could not acknowledge the fact, [...] his failure to listen, to hear, really hear what she was saying and to understand how the system that worked in his favor in both trivial and important ways always worked against her. [...] There were other ways of knowing the world, women′s ways which he treated dismissively. Though he pretended not to be, he was squeamish about her menstrual blood, which was an insult to the core of her womanhood. (McEwan 2010, 126)

The inflamed and paranoid discourse, hastily rolling up all major feminist′s topoi, indicates Maisie′s ideological blindness. Her progressive decay continues with a move to India where she lives in an ashram only to return after three years with her head shaved and a nose piercing. The later death of cirrhosis represents the culmination of her portrayal as a victim of the over-contamination with an ideology that can also be pernicious. Feminism is, thus, perceived as a pharmakon, having both potential beneficial and lethal consequences. This implies that especially its more radical and ostensive occurrences are not just incapable of solving the problems that women have to face even in modern secular societies, but also mislead younger minds living in environments where the obstacles are less prominent or inexistent.

After understanding McEwan's epic treatment of feminism, some inter-related questions rise. Is his status of an authentic public supporter of the women's cause somehow imperilled? Is this consistently different approach a symptom of artistic schizoidism? Did inevitably the inner features of the novel distort a genuine feminist consciousness as much as to make it less recognisable? Did McEwan understand the novel's ideological subversive capacity and willingly sacrificed his credo for the love of the epic? Firstly, a substantial different literary treatment does not necessarily and, especially in this case, imply a divergent view. In my opinion, McEwan perceives in the novel a beneficial dislodgement from the dogmatic side of feminism, an extremely fertile soil for questioning its ideological character. His novels are not disapprovals of the legitimate right of women to fight against their discrimination, nor are they denials of the pursue to obtain equality of rights, but the narrative disclosing of every ideology as inapt of capturing and presenting the contradictory, mixed and fluid character of reality. The depiction of feminism as a matter of secondary importance in a context of war between capitalism and

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communism for an anti-leftist female character, despite her own professional discrimination, or the displaying of the pernicious following of a feminist lifestyle for someone whose needs are genuinely different, or even the representation of an authentic feminist as sexually vulnerable to the male fantasies of dominance should not be interpreted as manifestations of an anti-feminist creed, but as attempts to indicate that feminism's interests would be better served if kept apart from its ideological character and confronted with reality's fluctuations and nuances. This is why, in my opinion, McEwan's genuine interest and sympathy for the women's cause are not distorted by his prose.

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