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Experiencing Sexuality: The Politics of Gender Identity in Ian McEwan's Fiction

Abstract: Mentalities and taboos concerning class, gender, and nation have always influenced the individual's social behavior and led to identity issues. Both gender and sexuality are important to our understanding of identity. Gender, as an unstable category, has been a central concern of literary studies from the late 1960s onwards, as the rise of feminist theories precipitated a widespread critical debate around the representations of women and femininity in literature and their clashing relationship with patriarchal authority. In his fiction, Ian McEwan attempts to illustrate the way in which the chaotic state of the modern world acts as an obstacle for viable, life-affirming relationships, and how it destroys the individual (Jack Slay). McEwan illustrates traditional male and female gender roles and, by presenting extreme attitudes of control, domination and exploitation toward women, he criticizes the patriarchal ideologies which are created and encouraged by the contemporary society. Moreover, in McEwan's fiction men and women re-evaluate their stereotypical roles: McEwan's female characters break the societal barriers becoming the strength within their relationships. Thus, this paper aims to analyze the way in which McEwan's fiction discusses gender roles, sexuality and identity within the politics of relationships and the impact of the historical and political constructs upon the private sexual life of the individual and private male-female relationships.

Key words: *gender; sexuality; femininity; masculinity; identity*

During the second half of the twentieth century, the English social and cultural scenes underwent important changes brought about by global events such as the two world wars, the disintegration of the British Empire, the expansion of the Commonwealth and the migration of people of different nationalities, languages and cultures. New identities, new and often shocking trends and directions strived to express themselves and to assert their cultural values. The critic Jonathan Culler asserts that "the explosions of recent theorizing about gender and sexuality in the field of literary studies owes much to the fact that literature provides rich materials for complicating political and sociological accounts of the role of such factors in the construction of identity" (106).

Both gender and sexuality are important to our understanding of identity, states sociologist Kath Woodward (17). Our perception of who we are, of our identity, which is strongly connected to the awareness of our identities, as women or as men, has become an

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important issue of almost all papers which inquire or raise concerns about “becoming”, “knowing”, or “discovering” ourselves.

In her investigation of gender identity entitled *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* the post-structuralist philosopher Judith Butler defines gender identity as the gender with which a person identifies, or is identified and states that it also refers to the social roles, standards, characteristics, behaviours, appearances and identities that develop through cultural and social readings of biological or anatomical sex (23-24). Gender categories are, therefore, associated with stereotypically feminine and masculine traits. Nevertheless, masculine and feminine identities are not fixed because identities are multidimensional.

As an author who has persistently analysed issues of masculinity and femininity, Ian McEwan initially gained notoriety as a writer obsessed with violence and sexual perversion (Payandeh 146). His early literature of shock (as the critic Ryan Kiernan labels it), the exploration of grotesque and disturbing themes (such as breaking social conventions, codes and taboos, incest, sado-masochism, rape, pornography and murder) challenge the precepts and determinations of society, questioning and then defying the restraints predetermined by sex and class, by politics, culture and gender.

In his fiction, McEwan attempts to illustrate the way in which the chaotic state of the modern world acts as an obstacle for viable, life-affirming relationships, and how it destroys the individual, explains critic Jack Slay (xi). Gender issues permeate McEwan’s fiction. For instance, the author illustrates traditional male and female gender roles and unequal relationships and, by presenting extreme male attitudes of control, domination and exploitation toward women, he criticizes the patriarchal ideologies created and encouraged by contemporary society. Such examples are the Father’s imposed order in *The Cement Garden*; Robert’s male despotism in *The Comfort of Strangers*; Leonard’s sexual fantasies of submission in *The Innocent*.

However, in the eighties “the claustrophobic menace” of his early fiction (the short story collections *First Love*, *Last Rites* and *In Between the Sheets* and the two novels *The Cement Garden* and *The Comfort of Strangers*) faded away for the sake of the engagement with the wider world of history, politics and society. McEwan’s writing continuously evolved and became more and more involved with historical and social issues, and with their impact on individual identity. The author’s writing is in continuous transformation, with McEwan trying nowadays to deal with contemporaneous universal problems, such as the anxiety provoked by the threat of terrorist attacks (*Saturday*) or the influence that social mentalities and taboos have on individuals and on the evolution of their relationships (*On Chesil Beach*).

McEwan’s first novel, *The Cement Garden*, deals with gender issues and the unnatural sexual behaviour of suddenly orphaned children who, after the death of their parents, build their own incestuous version of family. Julie, the big sister, tries to replace the Mother, while Jack, the big brother, strives to play the role of the Father; Tom, the little brother, shows inclinations to transvestism; finally, Julie and Jack succumb to an incestuous behaviour.

Within the novel, there are permanent references to gender roles and the differences between men and women, between masculinities and femininities. At the first glance, *The Cement Garden* presents stereotypical male and female gender roles against the background of a patriarchal society. The Father, the male, is the head of the family, the figure of

authority whom everybody fears and respects, and who demands total and immediate obedience from all members of the family. His older son, Jack, describes him as “a frail, irascible, obsessive man with yellowish hands and face” (McEwan *CG* 2). Father’s position of authority within the family is clearly stated, despite his health problems:

There were a few running jokes in the family, initiated and maintained by my father. [...] Because little jokes like this one were stage-managed by Father, none of them ever worked against him. . . . Jokes were not made against Father because they were not funny. (McEwan *CG* 8)

Despite his hostility towards his father, Jack shares certain ideas and feelings with his parent (Michlová 14). For instance, he is anxious about the idea of pouring concrete over the garden and he seems to feel sympathy for his father: “I was pleased that we knew so exactly what we were doing and what the other was thinking that we did not need to speak. For once I felt at ease with him” (McEwan *CG* 11).

The role of women is also stereotypically defined: Mother is the representative of a female in a patriarchal and authoritarian world. She is described as submissive, gentle and quiet: “My mother (...) was a quiet sort of person” (McEwan *CG* 3), says Jack at the beginning of the novel. She is unemployed and dedicates all her time to housework and the education and care of the children. Mother is silenced by the authority of the patriarchal figure, as she always backs up her husband in front of the children, even if she does not share his view (Michlová 15).

Within the novel, there is one important scene where Jack and Julie have a serious discussions regarding gender. As Julie and Sue dress Tom in a girl’s outfit, complete with a wig, Jack claims he’ll look “bloody idiotic”; Julie’s reaction reflects her disagreement concerning the issue of the stereotypical masculine and feminine traits associated to gender roles within a patriarchal society:

You think it’s humiliating to look like a girl, because you think it’s humiliating to be a girl. (...) Girls can wear jeans and cut their hair short and wear shirts and boots because it’s okay to be a boy, for girls it’s like promotion. But for a boy to look like a girl is degrading, according to you, because secretly you believe that being a girl is degrading. (McEwan *CG* 42)

As already stated at the beginning of this paper gender identity is related to the social roles, standards, characteristics, behaviours, appearances that develop through cultural and social readings of the biological sex. Not only does Julie associate masculinity with stereotypical behaviours such as wearing jeans, cutting hair short and wearing shirts and boots but she also implies that society accepts women who imitate men but is reluctant to accept men who imitate women, considering that the latter situation is humiliating and degrading. It is acceptable for women to cross-dress but not for men. Why? Simply because of the cultural and social mentalities and taboos which influence our everyday lives. When Julie reproaches Jack that he secretly believes that being a girl is degrading, she reiterates the patriarchal belief according to which males are more valued than females, that the masculine gender role is more important than the feminine one. The feminine behaviour leads to a loss of status for a boy, whereas masculine behaviour leads to an increase in status for a girl.

After the parents' death, both gender and family roles change. Julie replaces the Mother and Jack tries to rebel against Julie's authority as his mother, as he wants to become her partner; he wants to play the role of the Father. From the very beginning, the reader is warned about the Oedipian theme of the incest haunting the novel: "I did not kill my father, but I sometimes felt I had helped him on his way" (McEwan *CG* 1). Jack's feelings toward Julie are not only fraternal; they are also sexual, as he is constantly attracted to his older sister. He does not see Julie just as a sister, but also as a mother, woman and lover. Whenever he masturbates, Jack uses, as usual, "the image of Julie's hand between Sue's legs" (McEwan *CG* 12).

The novel is crowded with scenes of sexual tension: for instance, when Jack puts sunscreen on Julie's back and feels "hot and sick in the stomach" (McEwan *CG* 38), or when he is jealous as she dries off a naked Tom and as Tom lays his head on her breasts. Even when he is trying to play a fraternal role in his interactions with Julie's boyfriend, Derek, Jack cannot contain his jealousy. Both Jack and Derek want to play the traditional male role of the head of the family. Julie becomes aware of Derek's intention to move in with her and her siblings, "to take charge of everything" and to become "one of the family, (...) big smart daddy" (McEwan *CG* 129). However, she starts rejecting him when she finds out that he lives with his mother, who "calls him Doodle and makes him wash his hands before tea" (McEwan *CG* 130). It seems that Julie, following the example of her mother, conforms to the stereotype of the dominant role of men. When Derek proves to be unable to play this patriarchal role, he loses Julie's consideration (Michlová 15).

As the story progresses the sexual tension between the two siblings increases. Julie rejects Derek and becomes more and more receptive to Jack's advances, culminating with the incestuous intercourse described in the final scene of the novel (Sgarlata 28-29). When he sees Jack and Julie's incestuous act, the appalled Derek goes to the basement, smashes Mother's tomb and informs the authorities. Then cars pull up outside, hurried footsteps come up the front path and the story ends.

Although at the first sight the novel presents stereotypical male and female gender roles, it may be noticed that, after the parents' death, Julie, the female figure, becomes the strength and the authority within the family. She is the one who controls the household. Jack and not Derek is the one who plays the role of the Father due to Julie's choice. Stereotypical gender roles are thus re-evaluated; Julie breaks the societal patriarchal barriers, becoming dominant in her relationships with both Jack and Derek but also with her other two siblings, Sue and Tom.

McEwan presents a much stronger emphasis on gender issues in his second work, *The Comfort of Strangers*, a novel where a young English couple, Colin and Mary, are on holiday in an unnamed tourist city, and encounter Robert and his wife, Caroline. The latter is a battered and abused woman who becomes complicit in her "torture" by engaging in sadomasochistic sexual activities, leading, at the end, to her transformation from victim into a criminal when she willingly participates in the killing of Colin. The novel challenges the patriarchal and dangerous view in which women are socially bound to be submitted to men, even at the risk of their own physical or psychical safety (Sgarlata 30).

While strolling with Colin on the labyrinthical streets of their unnamed holiday city, Mary reads feminist posters and notices that "women are more radical here" and "better organized" (McEwan *CS* 19). She further finds out from the same posters that feminists want rapists castrated and she views this punishment as a tactic to make people take rape

more seriously as a crime. In his turn, Colin believes that here women “have more to fight for” (McEwan CS 19) but he compares the punishment envisaged by feminists to the one of cutting off a thief’s hand and he refutes Mary’s point of view. This conversation between the two lovers introduces the themes of gender roles and sexuality in *The Comfort of Strangers* and announces the issues of femininity and masculinity to be debated against the background where women “have more to fight for”.

During one of their evening walks, Colin and Mary encounter Robert, a character who shows misogynistic and exacerbated masculine behaviour from the very beginning. When talking about the feminists in the city, Robert argues that they “are women who cannot find a man” and considers them a menace as “They want to destroy everything that is good between men and women” (McEwan CS 23).

Robert is portrayed as a chauvinist who reigns in his traditional patriarchal world. He is described as commanding and influential, but, as he recounts to Mary and Colin, he is the product of a traumatic and agitated childhood, crowded with patriarchal ideas about masculinity and femininity (Hwang 241).

For instance, Robert depicts his father as “a big man” who “all his life (...) wore a moustache (...) and when it turned to gray he used a little brush to make it black, such as ladies use for their eyes. Mascara” (McEwan CS 27). Robert also adds that “Everybody was afraid of him. (...) When he frowned nobody could speak. At the dining-table you could not speak unless spoken to first by my father” (McEwan CS 26). His father’s exacerbated masculinity is in opposition with the feminine gesture of using mascara. Robert goes on to describe his father’s controlling and misogynistic behaviour: he was a very old fashioned man who would not let his daughters wear make-up or go sockless. He favoured his son and taught him that it was important to grow up to become a very masculine macho-man (“Gender Issues”). He also cruelly punished Robert when the latter broke his ban on eating chocolate, arguing that sweet things made boys weak in characters, like girls:

Later my mother came to see me in my bedroom, and in the morning a psychiatrist came and said there had been a trauma. But for my father it was enough that I had eaten chocolate. He beat me every night for three days and for many months he did not speak kindly to me (...) And to this day I never eat chocolate, and I have never forgiven my sisters. (McEwan CS 32)

Robert Nye argues that the gender stereotypes of most societies have imposed what is valued and allowed in the area of sexual identity and behaviour within binary male/ female orders that have reproduced themselves as systems of male dominance (12). Perpetuating the example of his father, Robert displays a masculine and authoritarian image, as shown in the way he dresses, in the way he treats his wife or in his behaviour towards the tourists.

The other male character, Colin, deeply contrasts with Robert. Colin displays more feminine than masculine traits. He is physically described more as a woman, with “slender, hairless legs”, “feet, abnormally small like a child’s”, “narrow waist”, “smooth white skin”, and his hair “fell into curls onto his slender, womanly neck” (McEwan CS 45). On the other hand, Robert is described as muscular with exceptionally long, hairy hands.

Robert’s misogyny is emphasized when he talks of how men are not like they once were (“The Comfort of Strangers and Gender”) and how women still want to be dominated:

Now men doubt themselves, they hate themselves, even more than they hate each other. Women treat men like children, because they can't take them seriously (...). But they love men. Whatever they might say they believe, women love aggression and strength and power in men. It's deep in their minds. Look at all the women a successful man attracts...even though they hate themselves for it, women long to be ruled by men. It's deep in their minds. They lie to themselves. They talk of freedom, and dream of captivity. (McEwan CS 58)

Robert's discourse, containing the binary oppositions of "conquest/submission", "activity/passivity", "masculinity/ femininity", describes heterosexual relationships as the inescapable male domination and female submission, as the imminent and ancient authority of men over women.

The issues of gender roles and inequality take their extreme forms in Robert and Caroline's sado-masochistic relationship. Colin and Mary suspect Robert of abusing his wife, who behaves in a submissive and passive manner. Towards the end of the novel, Caroline reveals her own point of view towards her relationship with Robert and tells Mary of her strange pleasure in being beaten and humiliated by her husband:

Robert started to hurt me when we made love. (...) One night I got really angry at him, but he went on doing it, and I had to admit, though it took a long time, that I liked it. (...) It's not the pain itself, it's the fact of the pain, of being helpless before it and being reduced to nothing by it. It's pain in a particular context, being punished and therefore being guilty. We both liked what was happening. I was ashamed of myself, and before I knew it, my shame too was a source of pleasure. It was as if I was discovering more and more. I needed it. Robert began to really hurt me. (...) I was terrified, but the terror and the pleasure were all one. (McEwan CS 88-89)

Caroline contributes to her own abuse by means of her masochistic desires which are, nevertheless, indirectly derived from her society's patriarchal views according to which heterosexual intercourse is synonymous to male domination and female submission: the man "mounts" and penetrates; the woman spreads her legs and "submits" (Segal 209). Therefore, Caroline's masochistic sexual pleasure is induced by patriarchal ideas of domination and control, encouraged by the society she lives in, combined with isolation and Robert's desire of power recognition. Caroline tells Mary that "To Robert's friends I was just another beaten wife, which was exactly what I was. Nobody noticed. It gave Robert some status round the places where he drank" (McEwan CS 89). Robert not only terrorizes but also isolates Caroline. After breaking her back, Caroline becomes unable to leave the house; moreover, Robert does not let any of the neighbours come near his wife without his permission. In her isolation, Caroline starts to see and to accept her situation as normal, as she concludes that, all in all, "It hadn't been so bad" (McEwan CS 91).

Caroline also explains to Mary that, from her perspective, true love means that "you'd do anything for the other person and (...) you'd let them do anything to you", even being prepared "to let them kill you, if necessary" (McEwan CS 51-52). Furthermore, this freedom to do anything is of a patriarchal nature as it is restricted to men doing anything they want to a woman, and not the reverse.

After meeting Robert and Caroline, Mary and Colin's conversations focus on the idea of masculinity and femininity and on gender roles: the two lovers talk about their parents' lives and relationships, about men and women's sensations during orgasms, patriarchy and the politics of sex. At first, they believed they were against Robert and Caroline's sado-masochistic behaviour, but, soon afterwards, they began joking and fantasising about handcuffs, amputation, being locked in a room to be used exclusively for sex; these sado-masochistic fantasies aroused Colin and Mary and made them experience a renewed passion for one another (Sgarlata 34).

Not only does Colin's murder represent the culmination of this sado-masochistic turn, but it may also be viewed as the exacerbation of the patriarchal values of authority, domination and control. Feminist Jessica Benjamin states that violence is a way of expressing or asserting control over another, of establishing one's own autonomy and negating the other person's; in erotic fantasy, this recognition is achieved metaphorically by violating the other's will or submitting to the other's will, in asserting the self-boundary of control (Benjamin 295).

Robert murders Colin because of his own doubts about his masculinity. He must prove that he is not weak, he must achieve recognition, he must show that he is as strong and as "masculine" as his father was. Moreover, by exposing more feminine than masculine traits, Colin is seen by Robert as an instance of "gender confusion" that floods and disrupts patriarchal culture and so-called values, that "hides an unconscious desire of humiliation, domination and obedience" ("The Comfort of Strangers and Gender") and that, therefore, has to be destroyed, at all costs.

McEwan's second novel, *The Comfort of Strangers* therefore presents, underneath the haunting theme of sado-masochism, concerns about gender roles and extreme instances of patriarchal dominance and assertion, born from and encouraged and perpetuated by social acceptance and parental education.

Moving on to *The Innocent*, one can also notice McEwan's recurrent exploitation of femininity and masculinity and his engagement with the politics of gender roles (Kiernan 57) and sexuality. This time, however, these exploitations are strongly connected to and reflected by the public sphere, with intricacies even at the level of international political relationships between powerful countries.

Therefore, in *The Innocent* the motifs of masculinity and femininity are to be found in both private and public/ political space. On the one hand, the novel portrays the main character, Leonard, as a young man gaining life experience and trying on and testing out styles of masculinity (Kiernan 57). He is presented during the process of accommodating himself to the model of maleness, a process which, at first, involves comic scenes; for instance, shortly after his arrival in Berlin, Leonard fills out his first shopping list, and this makes him feel "manly, serious".

In the public sphere, down in the secret Golden Operation tunnel where he was sent, Leonard is introduced to a "virile cult of competence" (McEwan *I* 19). Leonard's night out with his boss – Glass – and Russell makes him feel that he belongs to a group of responsible and knowledgeable men, which strengthens his sense of "maleness".

Later in the novel, Leonard's fantasies of male domination over women culminate in his absurd attempt to rape Maria, his German lover, an attempt which also has political dimensions, if related to the public sphere of international relationships (as it hints at the British bombing and occupation of Germany). Judith Butler, in her work, *Gender Trouble*:

Feminism and the Subversion of Identity, introduces the concept of “gender performativity” and asserts that the performance of gender, sex, and sexuality is about power in society. She locates the construction of the “gendered, sexed, desiring subject” in “regulative discourses” (187).

When Leonard sees Maria for the first time after having met her, not only does he remark her femininity and vulnerability, but he also observes her from a patriarchal point of view, announcing his subsequent sexual fantasies and desires for power recognition: “It was the sort of face, the sort of manner, onto which men were likely to project their own requirements. One could read womanly power into her silent abstraction, or find a childlike dependence in her quiet attentiveness” (McEwan *I* 44). Eventually, this initial impression transforms itself into an obsessing fantasy of male dominance and submission, a rape fantasy.

Leonard’s sexual fantasy goes beyond power relationships within male and female tensions. Leonard, to his surprise and guilty pleasure, begins to discover that he is excited by “the soldier fantasy” in which he casts Maria as a spoil of war, a woman of the defeated German nation whom he has the victor’s right to ravish, juxtaposing thus “the perversions and fantasies of politics and sexuality” (Pegon 115). From this point of view, Leonard and Maria’s relationship may be interpreted as an allegory of the international power relationships and tensions between Britain and Germany: “He looked down at Maria, whose eyes were closed, and remembered she was a German. The word had not been entirely prised loose of its associations after all” (McEwan *I* 78).

In his sexual fantasies, Leonard becomes a conqueror, a bloody soldier, and he even uses his army greatcoat as an instrument building up the scenery of his private battlefield: “It helped him when he pulled his greatcoat further up the bed so that by turning his head to the left or to the right, he could catch sight of the dark green” (McEwan *I* 79).

Encouraged by “the virile cult of competence” from the tunnel, Leonard moves from being a simple observer of victory over the Germans to being an actor in the conflict, by transferring it into his private life (Pegon 116). The soldier fantasy becomes so strong that soon Leonard’s thoughts of forcing himself on Maria (just as Britain forced itself on Germany) “grew inseparable from his desire” and “he knew he could not resist them” (McEwan *I* 83). Leonard ingeniously thinks that it is harmless to render Maria “defeated” rather than “liberated”, as he considers that it is only sexual play (Seaboyer 28).

On the one hand, Leonard had not been affected by the atrocities of war. On the other hand, in what concerns Maria, by the time the two lovers meet, she has survived the horrific nightmares of sixteen years of war and occupation, the Blockade and the subsequent division of her city into two occupied zones, as well as a violent marriage, and divorce.

Moreover, Leonard does not know that in fact it is his vulnerability and lack of aggression that attracted her. This also frees her of the social constraints and expectations and she is willing and anxious to guide Leonard into the world of sexual experience, the world of love:

She would not have to adopt a conventional role and be judged in it, and she would not be measured against other woman. Her fear of being physically abused had receded. She would not be obliged to do anything she did not want. (McEwan *I* 54-55)

Although Leonard realizes that his thoughts are horribly against his nature, the fantasies of power continue to consume him, influencing every move he makes with Maria. They also represent male sadistic desires of power and control echoed at the level of the public and political sphere, within the supremacy game: Leonard “wanted his power recognized and Maria to suffer from it, just a bit, in the most pleasurable way” (McEwan 84). The power in society, the British-German tensions and their conqueror vs. vanquished relationships transfer themselves into the private sexual realm, transforming it into a battlefield.

When Leonard tries to impose his domination desires on Maria, he faces feminine denial. Furthermore, at first, Maria is surprised and a little amused by Leonard’s “expressionless” order: “Take off your clothes!” She is even ironical by telling him: “You’re drunk. You drank too much at the Resi and now you are Tarzan” (McEwan 181).

Although her laughter and refusal to obey irritates Leonard and makes him act more violently, this time the woman is the empowered one. Maria refuses to submit, she refuses to obey the concepts and archetypes of patriarchy. She refuses to enable him; she grows stiff, cold, staring at the ceiling, all desire and trust abandoning her and, in turn, their relationship.

Leonard’s power game reactivated in Maria’s mind the rape scene which she witnessed during the Russian occupation. Leonard’s domineering soldier fantasy rises in Maria’s mind the really memory of the subdued and raped victim.

If the memory of the raped woman is related to male aggression and violence, this time it is the woman who has the power to undermine male agency and control. The denial of Leonard’s domination and Maria’s empowerment are symbolised by her throwing of his military greatcoat at his feet: “She pulled Leonard’s greatcoat off the table and let it fall at his feet. He knew he was going because he could think of nothing to say” (McEwan 184). This time it is he, the powerful British male conqueror, who is silenced and muted by the German woman, on the private sexual battlefield.

Leonard will quickly become aware of his mistake and he will realise that his attack on Maria was a childish, a brutish and a stupid one: “As more time passed, the more unbelievable his attack on Maria seemed, and the less forgivable” (McEwan 188). Leonard also learns that relationships imply reciprocity and each participant in a relationship should take into consideration both his own desires and those of the other individual involved, and he or she should also take into account the other’s perspectives and the implications of these desires upon the relationship. McEwan notes that this moment is the true initiation into adulthood for Leonard, the real moment when he finally reaches the stage of manhood (Slay 137).

On the one hand, *The Innocent* discusses gender roles within the politics of relationships and the transfer of the historical and political constructs upon the private sexual life of the individual. The novel analyses the negative consequences that this invasion by the public sphere has on private male-female relationships, and warns against the dangers of this mixture of spheres. On the other hand, the novel may be read as a story of gathering experience at the costs of innocence and as the loss of male sovereign powers on the background of feminist upheavals.

Although McEwan uses in his early texts horrific and repugnant subject matters, such as incest, sado-masochism, rape, pornography and murder, his fiction is reflective of the world itself, asserts Jack Slay Jr. The same critic also agrees that McEwan is “a chronicler of the true nature of humankind and their frequently confused, often perverse societies” (3), and that the author writes “not only to entertain but also to warn his readership concerning the weaknesses and shames of our selves and of our societies” (ix). In the novels discussed in this paper McEwan presents stereotypical gender roles and extreme situations of domination and control against the background of a patriarchal society and also delivers a warning message to his readers.

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