



UNNATURAL NARRATIVES AND EMOTIONS IN SELECT FICTION OF IAN MCEWAN

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the use of Unnatural Narratives and emotions in the select novels and short stories of Ian McEwan. The concept of Unnatural Narratives is mostly considered as a postmodern idea but this is very much common throughout the history of literature. The analysis is carried on select works of Ian McEwan - *Nutshell*, *The Cockroach*, and the short story “Reflections of a Kept Ape”. The complex and unique description of the character and the emotions and unnatural narration handled by McEwan is discussed in the article.

Keywords: Complexity, Modern Hamlet, Unnatural Narrative.

Ian McEwan is a British novelist, short-storywriter, screen writer who is known for his prose style that points out the perverse subject matter and he is nicknamed

as Ian Macabre for his bleakness and terrific plots. McEwan is known for his witty creation of characters with extensive and complex descriptions to illustrate their

personalities. He is featured as one among “the 50 greatest British writers since 1945” by “*The Times*” in 2008, and also *The Daily Telegraph* ranks him as number 19 in the list of the “100 most powerful people in British Culture”. McEwan is very much talked for his writing and style of narration. This paper concentrates on his Unnatural Narrative techniques adopted in few of his works.

An Unnatural Narrative violates logical principles, physical laws and the standard anthropomorphic limitations of knowledge through the characters, scenarios, storyteller or spaces that could not exist in the actual world. It is nothing but a talking part of the body, a character that is simultaneously alive and dead, or time-travel. Although impossible in the real world, such narrative elements do appear in the story worlds of McEwan’s novels, short stories and plays. The Unnatural Narrative is the subset of fictional narrative. Jan Alber quotes Brian Richardson in his book *Unnatural Narratives-Unnatural Narratology* that “Unnatural Narratives as anti-mimetic texts that move beyond the conventions of ‘natural’ narratives, i.e. “the mimesis of actual speech situations”, or violate the “established boundaries of realism”(3). Throughout the history of literature these limitations of narrator,

character, time and space are found which is also most commonly identified in the works of McEwan. Jan Alber suggests the definition of Brian Richardson that he describes the unnatural narrators and the voices of postmodernism in a systematic way, thus drawing one’s attention to the different “kinds of posthuman narrators that have appeared in the last several decades”(Unnatural Narrative Impossible Worlds in Fiction and Drama 61). The Unnatural Narrative technique is discussed with reference to *Nutshell*, *The Cockroach*, and the short story “Reflections of a Kept Ape”. Alber in his book *Unnatural Narrative: Impossible Worlds in Fiction and Drama* says,

They “create and explore various nodes of conceptual impossibility” in so far as they belong to two distinct conceptual domains at the same time. More specifically these narrators and storytelling scenarios use categories such as human and animal (animal narrator), human and body part (the speaking breast), and human and object (talking object), or they combine human and super human features (the telepathic first-person narrator, the voice in you- narratives, the omniscient narrator, and the reflector-mode narratives of literary modernism) (61-62)

To begin with the novel *Nutshell*, the whole story is all about the baby-in- waiting that is the unborn foetus. The unborn foetus is the narrator of the novel *Nutshell* which is an extraordinarily smart, knowledgeable, well informed and unorthodox character that corners its mom and her lover for having murdered its father off guard, with its insight. The whole plot pushes the borders of possibility. The very opening description of the novel leads the way through the story that the soon-to-be-born baby is talking about its position and listening to the outside world, the exact lines are “So here I am, upside down in a woman. Arms patiently crossed waiting, waiting and wondering who I’m in, what I’m in for” (McEwan, *Nutshell* 1). His mother and her lover cooked up a story about the murder of her husband which is the reflection of Shakespeare’s classic play *Hamlet*. This can also called as “The Modern Hamlet” or as “Hamlet in uterus”. The whole plot of the novel in the nutshell is that Trudy has betrayed her husband, John. She's still in the marital home which is a dilapidated, priceless London townhouse but John is not there. Instead, she's with his brother, the profoundly banal Claude, and the two of them have a plan to inherit that town house which is worth 7 million, after John’s death. But there is a witness to their

plot who is the inquisitive, nine-month-old resident of Trudy's womb. Like Hamlet, the baby is haunted by its inability to act.

As McEwan is known for his witty use of words he also uses some of his words for pun and it is very much interesting when it is heard from the mouth of the foetus. It explains the awful situation that the foetus’s father’s rival’s penis is just inches from its nose. It delivers mixed feelings throughout the novel. The unborn narrator is so clever, undeniably knowledgeable and cultured, as it even knows that the Sancerre is from Pinot Noir, and has its own opinions about Higgs Boson and even mentions interesting quotes about Darwin and Hobbes. The Foetus’s thoughts about Trudy and Claude’s relationship and its revenge plan to be executed are surreal happening that one can empathize with because of McEwan’s narrative technique and descriptions. McEwan’s development of the character not only helps to understand the plot of the story but also provides an image for the reader to comprehend which then aids the reader to empathize with the character. McEwan’s Foetus has the rich background of unexpected narrative voices and unusual point of view all of which gives a unique perspective to the plot.

In Between the Sheets is the second collection of short stories and also McEwan's second book, where in the short story "Reflections of a Kept Ape" portrays an ape that interacts with his keeper Sally Keeper, makes coffee, cleans plates and does other house chores and also possesses many other human qualities. This is the story that shows the devastated relationship of bestiality between a writer and her ape. He has the best eight days of his life as he is raised to a lover status by his owner. And now he just reminisces about his sexual affair with a female writer who now ignores him as she is busy writing her second novel. The ape, the narrator of the plot makes a detailed and painstaking depiction of his own feeling and mood, which is a combination of confusion, despair, shame and uncertainty. "Reflections of a Kept Ape" has been written from the point of view of a non-human which is unusual, off beat, and also funny at times. Existential ennui, sexual perversion and absurd relationship are built on the non human, that the story becomes surreal, unique and introspective. It clearly points to the traditional genre of the beast fables, in which animals embody the human qualities and have an ability to speak.

Furthermore another important work by McEwan is the novel *The Cockroach*, which is the modern version of Kafka's *Metamorphosis*. It is a satire on Brexit and Trump. Gregor Samsa is replaced by Jim Sams who undergoes the metamorphosis. One morning Jim becomes a cockroach and he is the Prime Minister of the country and his mission is to carry out the will of the people. And he introduces the new economic concept called "Reversalism". This fictional idea involves the reversing of the money, which is that the people are, paid to go to shopping and in order to work they pay for it. Sams is so relieved that all his Members of the Parliament are cockroaches like him. Eventhough the story has an omniscient narrator; the cockroach is presented as a human and also as the Prime Minister of a country and that reiterates the idea of Unnatural Narrative in *The Cockroach*. Richardson argues that the degree of unexpectedness the text produces, which may be a surprise element or a shock, anything that is a different and unique representation at work. According to him, the proper unnatural narrative is antimimetic and the beast fables, fairy tales are not unnatural and calls it nonmimetic. He defines unnatural narrative as "An unnatural

narrative is one that contains significant anti-mimetic events, characters, settings, or frames. By antimimetic, I mean representations that contravene the presuppositions of nonfictional narratives, violate mimetic conventions and the practices of realism, and defy the conventions of existing, established genres”. (Leo 48)

In *Unnatural Narratives, Unnatural Narratology* there are different aspects of unnatural narrative theory, and fall into four categories, “(1) synchronic and diachronic perspectives; (2) unnatural narrators and minds; (3) unnatural time; and (4) unnatural worlds and events”(Alber 12). The idea of unnatural storyworlds can also be applied in this work. An unnatural storyworld contains physical or logical impossibilities that concerns the represented world’s temporal or spatial organization. (Alber, *Unnatural Narratives, Unnatural Narratology: Beyond Mimetic Models* 116). It can describe an unnatural situation that even challenges one’s thinking about narratological concepts. In this story, the story world is that a country is ruled by a cockroach and its members of the parliament are also cockroaches which represent the logical impossibility of the narrative.

McEwan’s descriptive literary style and richly detailed works of fiction captures the attention of the readers and leaves the reader to yearn for more. The unborn child, an animal and an insect who are the protagonists of the stories are quite unnatural but very much convincing. McEwan’s word play and description of the character and unnatural narrative leaves the legacy of narrative elements to be carried out through generations.

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