

Humanism and Climate Change: A Meta-modern Reading of Ian McEwan's *Solar*

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Abstract

This article studies both the humanistic and ecological aspects of environmental restoration with respect to metamodern theory. The concept of conserving ecosystems has long been a hot topic in many forums in the twenty-first century. Metamodernism is a twentieth-century cultural theory that places a greater emphasis on this problem. The concept of 'between-ness', in terms of metamodern theory, foregrounds the oscillation between modernism and postmodernism. The topic of science and scientific inventions determine the modernistic aspects beyond and after postmodernism, in case it proves to be a prominent metamodern element. In the light of this observance, the research article examines Ian McEwan's novel, *Solar* and argues for modern and postmodern features of the novel by emphasising on metamodern ecological concerns. *Solar* is a novel about the human race's obligation to restore nature. Michael Beard, a physicist, represents the contemporary man of the twenty-first century, whose ignorance has been rescued by the author so that he can devote his life to the development of photosynthetic solar panels.

Keywords: Climate change; Ecology; Humanism; Metamodernism, Modernism; Postmodernism; Technology.

Introduction

Ian McEwan is a well-known British author and screenwriter. He was born in Hampshire and spent his early life in different countries. He pursued his higher studies in the University of Sussex where he emerged as a writer. He was awarded the 'James Tait Black Memorial Prize' for the novel *Saturday* and the 'Man Booker Prize' for *Amsterdam*. McEwan's writing has also invariably sparked cultural controversies and ethical outrages. The exploration of strange and horrific topics such as dismantling societal

conventions, rules, and taboos, infidelity, excessive self, abuse, obscenity, and the murder of children in his early work won him the legendary epithet 'Ian Macabre.' McEwan's involvement with the feminist movement in the 1970s and 1980s led to him to be "the masculine feminist". His examination and representation of science and scientists in later novels such as *Enduring Love* (1997) and *Saturday* (2005) elicited harsh comments from his critics and readership, a fire that he fueled through his ideologies that science leaves nothing behind but the splendid art.

Meta-modernism

Modernism established the framework for scientific technology, but in the 1970s, during the postmodern era, it reinforced the role of conforming to technological demands by transforming individuals into radical scientific thinkers. Because of science's achievements in the fields of mobile, internet, computer, and other electronic gadgets, people are influenced to believe that human existence on the planet is only feasible with the assistance of technology. After World War II, individuals began to consider new ideas and identities in fields such as philosophy, politics, the arts, and literature. Theorists considered reimagining a new human desire and a new approach to coping with human life. A number of them abandoned modernism's socio-cultural settings, while others attempted to emulate it while discarding certain of its ideals. Postmodernism emerged as a literary theory in the second half of the twentieth century. The link between modernism and postmodernism was addressed by Ihab Hassan, Lyotard, and Baudrillard. The demise of postmodernism sparked a new wave of cultural theory among theorists.

On this background, it is significant to judge that *Solar* repeats the historiography and ordeals of such scientific institutions as modernistic progress. At the same time, it presupposes that the modernistic approach is still relevant after the death of postmodernism. Climate Change, which is mentioned in the novel, *Solar* is one such example of a scientific holocaust, but there are many more. *Solar* is Ian McEwan's debut novel, which was published in 2010. The plot divides the major character, Michael Beard's personal life over three periods: 2000, 2005, and 2009. The novel's interaction is based on climate change, yet the novel's evolution raises numerous concerns about its method. In the novel, McEwan not only deals with science, but he also expresses his perception of research institutions.

Metamodernism is a literary philosophy that looks at the aftermath of Postmodernism from a different angle. It has also been used in cultural

theory to describe the movement that arose following postmodernism. The fact that postmodernism evolved as a primitive hypothesis before the year 2010 which may be acknowledged by majority of the researchers. It is a manifesto that seeks a central point of authority and acknowledges that fragmentation is no longer a theoretical problem. There is a compelling need to bring all of those fragmented selves together in the direction of social ethics. In the 1990s, the metamodern manifesto began to infiltrate the literary world. It was identified as an orientation on the idea of 'Self-awakening'. According to the poet, William Blake, the notion of "Self" is a mental preoccupation that is related to our sensations of joy and sadness. To put it another way, it is a transition of our "presence" from the substance of reason to the material of imagination.

The term is also known by other names such as post-postmodernism, performatism, and neomodernism, which is defined as a response to post-modernism. It examines the link between postmodern relativism and modernist conviction. Metamodernism is concerned with obtaining the contradiction, rejection, or investigation of contemporary notions or theories, rather than merely replacing postmodernism. Metamodern mentality is seen to be an amalgamation and at times a departure of modernism's rationalism and science, but it also criticises practical criticism in a new way.

Though the metamodern cultural theorists, Timotheus Vermeulen and Robin van den Akker define meta- as "with," "between," and "beyond," opponents argue that it makes sense of the term 'among,' which refers to the material, technological, social, political, and digital interconnectedness of the modern world. These prefixes bring together a collection of distinctions as well as a synthesis of contemporary and postmodern philosophies. Metamodernism bridges the gap between the oldest and the most recent socio-culturalism by focusing on the current technological realm.

Deep Ecology

It is one of the concepts of metamodernism, has its origin and records way back in the 1970's. The Norwegian philosopher, Arne Naess coined the term and framed it as a theory in 1973. Its contrastive discourse with postmodernism's argument on nihilist and cynical philosophy made it possible to be the successor of postmodernism. It is an ecological theory that insists on the acquaintance of humankind with nature. It focuses on the interrelationship between human beings and nature. The philosophy formed a new system to deal with nature by rejecting anthropocentric eco-

systems. Human Beings are a part of nature like any other creature and the environment also needs some rights like human rights. Ian McEwan's *Solar* addresses the onset topic of climate change and the necessity for solar energy, which ensures the traces of Deep Ecology in the novel.

A Call to Return to Nature

The novel, *Solar* insists on the need for safeguarding nature through science and scientific inventions. Modernism encouraged the scientific invention which paved the way to spoil nature, instead, Postmodernism emphasized on the need for sustainability of natural resources and the role of human beings to provide equal priority to nature by demolishing the differences between humans and nature. Metamodernism does not propose human beings to share the agony of destruction of nature, rather it seeks for a resolve, of course it is trying to fulfil certain goals which Modernism and Postmodernism have not accomplished so far, and apply the practicality of preserving natural resources. This notion of metamodern concern is very much evident in the novel, *Solar*. The central character of the novel, Michael Beard is portrayed as a twenty-first century man with all the ongoing issues of an ordinary man of the year, 2000 with family issues, financial issues, economical crisis, unemployment, social instability, unethical human attitude and so on.

Among those issues, McEwan interestingly discusses climate change as one of the primary ecological concerns of the century. He describes the personal lives of scientists because Beard reflects the mind of all scientists and connects their responsibility and inventions towards the serious ecological issue of climate change. The one such evidence in the life of the physicist, Beard who resurrects the invention of his fellow scientist, Tom Aldous's carbon-free photovoltaic solar energy, after his death, to control climate change is not just an revolutionary thinking within him but it represents an address of metamodern environmentalism to science and scientific institutions for a call to return to nature. Beard is unlike other men in the society, though he is a womanizer, he is depressed over his wife's relationship with Tarpin and decides to give up all his research including wind energy. Beard's research on wind energy and later solar energy are all about controlling climate change. Later, when Aldous pleads not to give up the research, Beard goes to the Arctic for a programme on climate change, which proves to be McEwan's ecological concerns towards nature.

The message is accessible that the personal cause for human sufferings are

created by humans themselves and the responsibility to preserve natural resources could not be ignored by such unethical society. On the other hand, Technology, Ecology and Humanism have been stereotyped into a cultural parody. McEwan describes the role of these three entities to go hand in hand for a happy living on the earth. Beard's ecological concern and life tragedy are interconnected with each other. So that such a character like him can live a peaceful and moralistic life with a proper cycling process of these three domains. Simultaneously, McEwan expands his vision on ecology and argues on the limits of technology and hazards of scientific inventions through the character, Tarpin. The novel further moves from technology to nature. As a matter of fact, Ian McEwan makes us realize the vitality of conserving nature. Beard's mind dissolves from being a misanthropist into an environmentalist as he divorces his wife and wants to do research on wind energy to combat climate change after returning from his camp at the Arctic. McEwan indirectly pushes the survivor to relocate himself into a new world for a change to preserve nature. The Deep Ecology is evident in such cases as Beard seeks for a human solution to divorce his wife and his solution as a scientist to control climate change. McEwan approaches human issues and environmental issues with equal parameters so as to focus more on reading ecology in his novel.

He believes in reducing global warming only after sacrificing his married life with his fifth wife, Patrice. Ian McEwan points out that a scientist like Beard must be ready to save the world from climate change at any cost. Human role of preserving nature has been revitalized through the characters, Michael Beard and Tom Aldous, which categorically questions the modern living of human beings on the planet.

The connection between loneliness and technology is traced as a new ideology in the novel, *Solar*, in which Beard connects with technology while attending a climate change retreat in the Arctic, which is an aspect of metamodern reading, due to the depression on Beard's marriage life with Patrice and her affair with Tarpin. McEwan carefully utilised technology to avoid human development, which in turn fetched significance on nature. Human evolution refers to personal growth which occurs in Beard's life differently. Through the failures of his personal life, the metamodern reading of the novel relocates Beard's internal delight to focus more on photosynthesis. As a result, the novel promotes the idea of making personal choices, which seems to be a similar concept of liberal ecology, especially when Melissa refuses to take medication for abortion and becomes pregnant finally. Being a womanizer, he acquires another affair with the waitress, Darlene but she makes a choice to marry him. Both Melissa and

Darlene

have been portrayed as women with their own choices almost equal as nature asks for its own choices to exist. The juxtaposition to seek for a moral with all its rights in the order of nature and human beings are applied vividly in the novel, especially when Beard seeks for morality in the life of his wife, Patrice and his change of mind to control climate change. McEwan makes an attempt for an anti-historical mix in the novel by overlapping history. Beard's character has a great deal of regard for nature due to his feeling about nature as a fellow being which may be trying to console him from all sorts of tragic life that he surpasses in a knowledge based, digital and scientific society. Despite his long-term reliance on technology, Beard sympathises with the environment and global warming in the place of a metamodern theorist insisting on the need for Deep Ecology passively.

On the contrary, climate change, which has been addressed as a universal phenomena in the novel, is an example of a scientific holocaust, but there are many more left behind and caused the human beings to rethink their living on the planet. Beard's endeavours to preserve the globe from global warming, particularly in the novel, are not to discover a solution to the problem, but rather to reaffirm and make others understand the cause for climate change:

"Beard's argument about the correct response to climate change, an argument that McEwan has also made, is that we have no choice but to hope that technological ingenuity, enlightened self-interest and the market's allocation of resources can get us off the hook; personal virtue counts for little" (Tayler, 04).

McEwan clearly confronts the consequences of technology and attempts to solve problems caused by technology using the same technology. What McEwan explores in *Solar*, is a finding that science alone will not be able to improve people's lives, but it requires ethical instincts as well. He demonstrates that science will never be able to restore nature's devastation again.

Beard earned a reputation for developing a low-cost device to combat global warming by stealing his colleague's innovation and he is trying to play the concurrent role of a moral relativist. He also realizes his mistakes as a womanizer, which had been a source of all his problems in life personally. At this stage, McEwan implies that a man's persona, in terms of life ethics, chooses to preserve nature, even if he is a scientist. The notion of focusing on moral life rather than moral relativism reveals a strong af-

finity between metamodernism and the subject matter of the novel, *Solar*. The idea of interconnecting man's venture in every aspects to search for a change of identity and restoration of nature is very significant to explore the metamodern reading of the novel.

It is impulsive that Beard, like many others, is unable to predict alternate forms of climate change. This sends a message to the readers that only nature can restore itself. Beard revitalises the techniques to save nature from such catastrophes. Returning to nature and inventing renewable energy to combat climate change is a universal message to society that something extraordinary is happening to destroy nature. During the course of his narrative, McEwan arouses the reader's self-awakening of the urgent need to rehabilitate nature. Until the end of the narrative, Beard is processing this Self-awakening and proves to be an environmentalist. The metamodern philosophers have always seen dangers of science as an oscillation between modernism and postmodernism, pointing out that modernism's promotion of science and scientific achievements were subsequently questioned by postmodernism. Brent Cooper emphasizes this through the words of Goldman:

"Enlightened modernity had science as its backbone. This is not anti-modernist, nor is it anti-Western civilization, but rather a mature awareness of the exponential dangers that technological 'progress' and population/economic 'growth' have generated and continue to generate" (Borgmannian Metamodernism, 01)

Science and Restoration of Nature

Beard is not only representing the role of a scientist, though failed in his personal life, he also admonishes the entire human society. McEwan urges human society to reconsider the use of sustainable energy like less harmful carbon free photosynthesis solar panels and adjudicates science as a tool for protecting nature rather than destroying nature. McEwan is clear in arguing on climate change balancing the role of human actions and scientific remedies equally. The failure in Beard's life is restored by new scientific inventions. Though he did not listen to the words of Tom Aldous initially, his alter ego allows him to take revenge on Tarpin. Tom Aldous's anguish for a research to invent solar energy and his accidental death effectively changed the mind of Beard to address climate change. Therefore, though science restores nature by the invention of wind energy and solar energy, it is actually, in the novel, nature restores the life of Beard and establishes a close affinity between nature and human beings. McEwan

has established the idea of fostering nature well in the novel. The novel makes us realize that nature and environment create an acquaintance and impacts on familial relationships too as it is a case in the life of Beard, as a scientist, in the beginning, when he did not show any interest for Aldou's invention of solar energy to combat climate change, he had confrontations in the relationship with his wife and other women but everything is restored after he realizes the need for such invention. In the novel, McEwan has portrayed climate change as something vulnerable to human living and disaster. Describing science as dangerous to society has always been a strategy used by the metamodern theorists. In his essay, *Is Metamodernism the Answer to Postmodernism?*, Fish states:

Metamodernism, therefore, understands that criticising the individual choices of others can be necessary for the advancement of humanity, regardless of whether those choices impact the world around them or not (Fisher 3).

The notion of finding a solution to climate change has been addressed on both the reaction from human beings and nature's own remedy (carbon free Fossil fuels) as well. In other words, Metamodernism makes us aware of our limitations in restoring climate change. Therefore, every reaction of the character, Beard, to deflect climate change is regarded as a contemporary issue of every individual in the society. In *Solar*, along with the main idea of a global warming and its connection with logical establishments and mechanical barriers, McEwan discusses a number of various themes, such as the hunting of nature, the interface of relationship and logical interests, the similarities between morals and science, self-awareness and social ethics, politicizing the basic issue of dangers of atmospheric devastation and the possibility of counterfeit techniques for restoring nature. The critic of ecology, Greg Garrad emphasizes on the pedagogy of restoring nature, finding that the role of an critic of ecology includes teaching students about the dangers and complexities of climate change, which McEwan has performed to his enormous number of readers as a social critic and probably as an environmental critic through the novel.

Solar demonstrates that people's non-existence in society means people's reluctance to face evil, here, evil refers to destruction of nature, which, of course, is a failure, but the novel proves that people's co-existence in society is the alternative method to confront the destruction of nature. Beard becomes aware of this co-existence as his popularity as a scientist declines. Beard regains his popularity through the help of Aldous both in his personal and professional lives. Aldous' concern about protecting Patrice, the

wife of Beard from Tarpin, is exceptional, including that he exhibits ethics by saving the life of his master. He also assists his master in the development of his photosynthesis research:

“But no one has thought it through from the angle of applied science, and the crisis in climate change. And I have, I’ve seen the potential of your work in relation to photosynthesis. The fact is, no one understands in detail how plants work, though they pretend they do” (Solar, 88).

Beard is unable to find any alternative sources to control climate change. This imparts the message to the readers that the best option to restore nature is through Science but nature may be restored by itself only. Embracing the practices of saving nature from such scientific holocausts is vitalized by Beard. Returning to nature and inventing renewable energy for the cause of climate change is a universal address to the people that there is something that takes place unusually. Throughout the novel, McEwan wakes up the readers that there is a great need to restore nature. Dangers of technology have been again signified by Michael Beard, no matter how he leads his life as a scientist. The Personal life of a scientist in eating, drinking and womanizing, relocates that science is something ironical in the benefit of knowledge-based society. Again, at this point of discussion, McEwan tries to integrate science and personal life of a scientist in the negative aspects apparently.

Conclusion

In the novel, the integration of the self and restoring nature aids the study of deep ecology indirectly. Deep ecology has also been interpreted in the novel as a paradigm for reclaimingscience and its contribution to humanity in destroying nature. The man’s search for restoring nature has been the discussion of the novel at the core. Other elements of the novel stress on the call to return to natureas the author asserts that nature has to be restored by science to control hazardous consumable energies. So that the role of nature and its coexistence in the society make human living more fruitful on the planet. On the other hand, McEwaninstills in the minds of readers a sense of self-awakening about nature and its correspondence to human relationship. When nature is under any threat of scientific holocaust like climate change, the human relationship also breaks as is the case in the personal life of Beard. His responses to climate change mirror every individual’s need for the integration of the self, technology and nature.

Subsequently, the novel transcends readers' minds towards ecological restoration and stimulates the conscience that the impacts of science on humans are only reflected in nature. McEwan tries to combine nature, scientific advancements, the individual self, and ecology altogether to call for a new metamodern culture. Although it is undeniable that what the earth suffers is also a human suffering, McEwan's case for deep ecology in the novel is extremely purposeful. McEwan debunks technical concerns while he is also highlighting the relevance of our ecological system. Climate change is at the top of his list of human issues, indicating that nature and mankind are both part of the same ecosystem, and that science's brutality to these two is an injustice. In every aspect of the novel, the ideology of integrating nature with human living has been addressed meticulously to fetch the significance and the role of nature in the 21st century.

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