

# **An endless agony : Silence, suffocation and sufferings of women – A study of postmodern consciousness in Ian McEwan’s women in “Sweet Tooth”, “The Children Act” and “Nutshell”**

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## **Abstract**

Postmodernism is a multi-faceted movement which has its effects in all branches of knowledge in the world. Undoubtedly, postmodern literature is a part of socio-cultural and historical development like modernism. It breaks the rules and regulations in all grounds. Postmodernism focuses on the voiceless, mini narratives and marginalized. Ian McEwan a postmodernist in contemporary British world narrates the unfold world of the stories. His fiction opens the stories of women with their suffering with vivid picture. This paper is an attempt to figure out the sufferings, silence and suffocation of women in Ian McEwan’s “Sweet Tooth”, “The Children Act” and “Nutshell”. Ian McEwan’s treatment of women is not conservative but new as well highly postmodern in nature.

**Keywords:** Ian McEwan, Sweet Tooth, The Children Act, Nutshell, Postmodern, Women, Struggles, Sufferings, Silence.

Born in 1948, Ian Russel McEwan has been regarded as a dominated novelist in the contemporary British Literature. Ian Russel McEwan was born in the garrison town of Ableshot, Hampshire, England to the Scotsman David McEwan. He was a soldier and later he had become a major in the British Army. His mother is Rose Lilian McEwan who had lost her husband in the Second World War and by whom she already had two children. As he was the son of military man, he had grown up as a only child on military bases in the United Kingdom and at military outposts abroad as Singapore, Libya and Germany.

During 1959-1966, Ian McEwan was sent from Tripoli, Libya to attend state-run boarding school Woolverstone Hall in Suffolk whilst his parents were living in abroad for their professional duties. Following the school, Ian McEwan between, 1967-70, read English and French at the University of Sussex. Ian McEwan started his writing career during these years. Next, between 1970-71, McEwan enrolled himself for the M.A in English Literature at the University of East Anglia, in which Ian McEwan was the first student on the creative writing

course. The course was taught by MalcomBradburry and Angus Wilson. In this period, Ian McEwen started his primary works on writing his anthology of short stories “First Love Last Rites”. Following 1971, Ian McEwan started his travel to explore new horizons. He spent his part of his post M.A year travelling the ‘hippy trail’ to Afghanistan, the North West Frontier Province, and Greece. During this travel he consumed psychotropic drugs. This travel had some considerable amount of impact in his life in which his first short story, “Home Made” was sold to ‘New American Review’. In 1973, Ian McEwan found a literary agent “Deborah Roger” for representing his literary works. He moved from Norwich to an attic room in Stock well, south London in 1974. The year 1975 was remarkable in the literary corner of Ian McEwan in which his debut collection of short stories or anthology of short stories “First Love, Last Rites” was published. Further he penned a short story, “Conservations with a cupboard man” for BBC radio. In 1976, Ian McEwan won Somerset Maugham Award for his first short story collection, “First Love, Last Rites”. In this year, he travelled to USA. Next, in 1978, Ian McEwan published his next short stories collection, “In Between Sheets” and his first very successful novella “The Cement Garden”. Ian McEwan’s short story “Solid Geometry” was produced for TV but it was halted by BBC over ‘grotesque and bizarre sexual elements in the play in 1979.

In 1981, “The Comfort of stranger was published and it was nominated for Booker Prize. In this year, the television play, “The Imitation Game” also was published. In 1982, Ian McEwan married Penny Allen, a spiritual counsellor and healer, with whom he had two children. In 1983, Ian McEwan’s “Or Shall We Die”?was published. An oratorio included him in Granta’s list of best young British novelists. In the same year he wrote script for “The Ploughman’s Lunch” which won the Evening Standard Award for Best screen play. He was elected to fellowship of the Royal Society of Literature. In the year 1987, Ian McEwan was awarded the white bread Novel award and the Prix Femina Etranger, from France. Ian McEwan was awarded an honorary D.Litt by the University of Sussex, in 1989. In this year, he witnessed the fall of Berlin wall. In 1990, the novel, “The Innocent” was published. Further, “The Comfort of Strangers”, Ian McEwan's novel was adapted by Harold Pinter and released.

In 1994, Ian McEwan published a novel for children “The Daydreamer”. In the following year, he divorced his wife Penny Allen. In 1997, his most successful novel, “Enduring Love” was published and it was short listed for James Tait Black Memorial Prize. In the same year, Ian McEwan married Annalena McAfee, a journalist as well as an editor of Guardian Review. In the year1998, Ian McEwan won Booker Prize for his novel, Amsterdam”. Ian McEwan was awarded the Shakespeare prize by the Alfred Toepfer Foundation, Germany. In the year, Ian McEwan had a tough battle with Penny Allen for the custody over his sons. In 2001, Ian McEwan was short listed again for the Booker prize, and the Whitbread novel, “Atonement”. The

novel won WH Smith Literary Award in 2002 also. Moreover, the novel, “Atonement”, won National Book Critics’ circle fiction Award and Los Angeles Times Prize for fiction. In 2004, “Atonement” won Santiago prize for European Novel.

The Novel, “Saturday” was published in 2005. It was shortlisted for the Booker Prize. The novel received James Tait Black Memorial Prize. Ian McEwan’s successful novel, “On Chesil Beach” was published in 2007 and in this year Ian McEwan’s “Atonement” was adapted as a movie and it was released. It had seven Oscar nominations. The novel “Solar” was published, in 20210 and won the Bollinger Everyman Wodehouse prize. Ian McEwan was awarded the Jerusalem prize for the freedom on the Individual in society. In 2012, his “Sweet Tooth” a Meta novel was published which was dedicated to his friend Christopher Hitchens who died on cancer. In 2014, Ian McEwan published his next novel, “The Children Act”. The novel’s title had connections to the Children Act 1989, a UK act of parliament. Next, Ian McEwan published a famous novel “Nutshell” in 2016. The novel retold the play; “Hamlet” by William Shakespeare from the perception of urban child. Following the novel “Nutshell” (2016), recently Ian McEwan published his 15<sup>th</sup> novel, in 2019, “Machines like Me”.

Treatments of women representation of women’s problems, projection of womanhood have been varied according to various stages of time. From Chaucer until now, the literature has been dealing with various kinds of women with universal aspects. But each and every women is different and without any doubt they are individuals. The woman, in the hands of men’s production is invariably different in the production of women. This could be the reason for the outcome of various theories on women around the world. The universe of women is highly complex to describe. Women in the hand of Jane Austen in her fiction is totally different in the fiction of recent novelists in the contemporary world. Most of the times, the projection, representation, the presentation of women in incomplete.

Ian McEwan, a successful contemporary novelist, has been an expert in presenting women in various levels right from his first creation of anthologies of short stories. “First Love Last Rites” until his recent fiction, “Machines Like Me”. Women, the creations of, McEwan, Julie in “The Cement Garden”, Mary in “The comfort of Strangers”, Kate in “The Child in Time”, Maria in “Enduring Love”, Molly Lane in “Amsterdam”, Briony Tallis in “Atonement”, Florence Ponting in “Chesil Beach”, Patrice, Melissa and Darlene in “Solar”, Serena Fromein “Sweet Tooth”, Fiona Maye in “The Children Act”, Trudy in “Nutshell” and Miranda in “Machines Like Me” are individual with their own identities. But the world of these women is unfolded by McEwan unusually. The treatment of women in the novels of “Sweet Tooth”, “The Children Act” and

“Nutshell” is unique as well untold. Ian McEwan’s women are individual, filled with potential more over they struggle alone. They are out of the constructed norms.

“Sweet Tooth” (2013) a Meta novel narrates the story of Serena Frome. The nove opens with the voice of Serena, describing her pathetic status.

“My name is Serena Frome (rhymes with Plume) and almost forty years ago I was sent on secret mission for the British security service. I didn’t return safely. Within eighteen months of joining I was sacked, having disgraced myself and ruined my lover, though he certainly has a hand in his own doing” (ST: 1). In the same way, “The Children Act (2014) opens with the agony of the protagonist of the novel, Fiona Maye, a High Court judge. After introducing the problems between her and her husband, the novelist unveils the condition of Fiona as follows, “Her personal life was nothing” (CA: 16). Fiona is a famous High Court judge but her personal life was disturbed. “I’m troubled. I’ m hearing pillow talk of deadly intent and I’m terrified by what awaits me, by what might draw me in (NS :1). The above said lines are opening lines

spoken by unborn child, narrator of the novel, “Nutshell” 2016). The unborn child narrated the story of the “Nutshell” to the reader. The narrator introduces the mother of the child / narrator, “My mother is involved in a plot, and therefore I am too, even if my role might be to foil it or if I reluctant fool, come to term tool late, then to avenge it”. (NS: 3). All the three women in the novels are highly disturbed and they are trying to solve the problems in their lives by struggling alone. Moreover, they are never submissive. Most of the places in the novels, these characters suffer and they suffocated and remain silence to the circumstances. Serena, one of the daughters of ‘the Bishop’ wants to do English at Cambridge, but she has to give up her dream for the sake of her father, in “Sweet Tooth”. So I abandoned my ambition to read English at Durham or Aberystwyth, where I am sure I would have been happy, and went instead to newnharn College, Cambridge, to learn out at my first tutorial, which took place at Tirinity, what a mediocrity I was in mathematics”. (ST: 5) Fiona Maye in “The Children Act” also forced to live with her husband without love, care affection and will. “His face had been tight as he shrugged and turned to leave the room”. At the sight of his retreating back, she felt the same cold fear. She would have called after him but for the dread of being bored. And what could she say? Hold me, kiss me, have the girl. She had listened to his footsteps down the hall, their bedroom door closing firmly, then silence settling over their flat, silence and the rain that hadn’t stopped in a month” (CA:8). Trudy, the mother of the narrator, unborn child is also forced to live with John Cairncross.

In “Sweet Tooth”, Serena decides to pursue maths as her family wants but she performs poor in her studies academically. She graduates herself with only a third, the lowest honors qualification. Next she develops a relationship with a student Jeremy but it fails in terms. The relationship ends in failure. “Finals were only weeks away and I had a new boyfriend, a historian called Jeremy Mott”. (ST: 11). After the dysfunctional relationship with Jeremy Mott, Serena meets tony canning. “Suddenly, from out of an alley, there appeared before us under the inadequate street lighting Jeremy’s history tutor, tony canning”. (ST: 13). But, soon, the relationship comes to end where as Serena comes to know that tony canning is a gay and he is having an affair with a male musician. “My affair with tony canning lasted a few some weeks later he had fallen in love with a violinist hold heard one evening at the usher hall playing a bruch concerto, a young German from Dusseldorf with an exquisite tone, especially in slow movement. His name was Manfred. Of course. “(ST: 18). But she is in love with him. Though she knows him as he has married as well as a gay, she surrenders herself to him. But, later, One day Serena leaves a piece of clothing at his house in which, he accuses her of ruining his wedding life. Ultimately he breaks up the relationship with her and leaves her, leaving her heart broken. “But I stood there like a tragic fool and I watched him go. I saw his brake lights come on as he slowed to join the traffic. Then he was gone, and it was over”. (ST: 38). Serena attends the interview at M15 and is offered a junior desk officer position. There she meets a spy, Max and dates with him. But soon she breaks her relationship with him as he has engaged with another girl. Then Serena finds Tom and falls in love with him. Though Serena starts to develop relationship because of M15, finally tom ends up with successful novel and he becomes a popular novelist, M15 exposes the affair of Serena to press. Now Serena is afraid of loosing Tom but Tom knows this a several month ago in which the novel ends with the expectation of the wedding expectation. Throughout the novels, Serena is on individual who suffers alone in all stages. She struggles to cope with life. Ian McEwen, a postmodern portrays the failures, depression, and dejected life of Serena in the novel “Sweet Tooth”.

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