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## **Portrayal of men and women in Martin Amis's and Ian McEwan's fiction**

The aim of this article is to present complex, difficult, gender relations in the selected works of the contemporary British writers, Martin Amis and Ian McEwan. The author of the article would like to compare the novelists' distinctive worldviews on the roles of men and women in late 20<sup>th</sup> century as well as their changing attitudes and opinions on male-female relations during the process of their writing career. The problem of masculinity and femininity delineated by Amis and McEwan will be examined from the point of view of psychology as well as socio-cultural changes that occurred in British and world society in late 20<sup>th</sup> century and at the turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

Masculinity and femininity have always been debating and sensitive issues in British and American literature. Various writers and critics presented different aspects of male-female relations, devoting a special attention on gender problems and conflicts which were invariably related to social, political, cultural as well as philosophical and ecological spheres of life. There is no denying that such a frequent depiction of strained, tempestuous relations between men and women in Anglo-American literature reflected profound social and political changes that occurred in the world, especially in western countries in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, in particular in the last decades of the second millennium. Writers such as Martin Amis, Paul Auster, Julian Barnes or Ian McEwan, to name but a handful, thoroughly examined troubled male-female relations, particularly changing positions and statuses of men and women in the era of globalization, information technology and mass-media culture. One cannot fail to notice that in the post-war, post-colonial contemporary world where the increasing number of women occupy prominent, invariably leading positions in professional life and quite often play key roles in politics, business as well as in private spheres of life, more and more men feel insecure, dominated by the "feeble sex", attempting to defend and regain their previous privileged status in society. In view of that numerous writers, especially male novelists and critics, focused on the tempestuous gender relations, emphasizing, on the one hand, dramatic, inevitable changes in men's and women's positions, yet, on the other hand, searching for the inter-gender dialogue and compromise.

It is probably the British authors, most notably Martin Amis and Ian McEwan, being brought up in the island, beyond the European continent, yet belonging to great extent to the European cultural and literary heritage, who most visibly showed their insular distance and constraint in portraying male and female characters, their roles and relations. Thanks to the novelists' emotional detachment and reticence/taciturnity their

books, though examining and exploring invariable gender conflicts and problems, could be as well interpreted as the quest for male-female discourse and agreement. Both Amis and McEwan, albeit their disparate/dissimilar delineation of gender issues, particularly their dissimilar depiction of violence, sadism and moral indecency, endeavour to highlight the need for rapport/understanding and harmony between men and women.

Martin Amis, the first of the above-mentioned writers, is frequently considered a controversial novelist, largely due to his allegedly negative, stereotypical, highly ambiguous portrayal of women. Such is the view of some feminist critics and reviewers, like Maggie Gee, Helen McNeil or Mira Stout who openly accuse the British author of misogyny and obscenity. On the other hand, the scholars such as Brian Finney or James Diedrick draw the attention to Amis's complex, profound analysis of gender relations, the changing roles of men and women at the threshold of the third millennium which mirror the crisis of masculinity in the descending patriarchal society and the objectification and exploitation of women in postmodern consumerist media-pervaded culture. The writer attributes his depiction of tempestuous gender relations and sexual issues to the contemporary era. Quoting Bellow's statement that "ours is a sclerotic Eros" – an Eros that has grown unaffectedly hardened over time – he still holds the view that romantic love "will always be true, but it's harder for it to flourish (Stout 48). Moreover, he is strongly convinced that in our media-saturated culture it becomes increasingly difficult to find any authentic experience. The British novelist also believes that sex offers him as a writer a tool "for revealing characters 'when they're not just going through the motions.' It's an idea where need and greed converge, and where tenderness is accidental, a rare thrill" (Stout 36). Similarly to drink, sex is an "area where people behave very strangely and yet go on being themselves" (Haffenden 6). Nevertheless, Amis's assertion of his writer's right to employ sex for its psychological analyses could be understood as idiomatic of the male writer's use of the pen as a phallic weapon (Finney 139). It is worth stating that sexual matters and gender relations delineated by this author are constantly filled with authorial distance, irony and black humour which makes his works demanding, challenging, multidimensional and ambivalent. However, it is the ambivalence and variety of interpretations of his texts that closely reflect equivocal and labyrinthine male-female relations in contemporary world.

There is no escaping the fact that in the majority of his works, especially those written in the early and middle phases of his literary career, Martin Amis depicts his characters from a male perspective, he writes prevalingly about male protagonists, addressing an implied male reader, deriving the inspiration from male novelists, like Dickens, Ballard, Roth, Bellow and above all Nabokov. His female protagonists are by far less conspicuous and recognizable than their male counterparts and therefore they are frequently regarded as types, predominantly negative ones, rather than genuine characters. The novelist confirms such a view of his heroines, asserting that he can see no place for a positive female model, a genuine heroine in his fictive, comically-imbued world, but instead he presents "vamps", "ballbreakers" and "golddiggers", who are types, the subjects of fictional narratives, genre-specific (Finney 141). In this regard, feminist

critics' objection to Amis's seemingly black and white portrait of female protagonists could be to a great extent justified, yet having analysed painstakingly his fiction and literary criticism, particularly those of his works in which homicide, violence, victimization and atonement come to the fore, one can notice that female protagonists are enigmatic, unpredictable characters who successfully manage to outwit their male persecutors, all the more to release themselves adroitly from an apparently absolute control of the narrators or the author's alter-egos. This is especially visible in such novels as *Other People* (1981), *Money: a Suicide Note* (1984) or *London Fields* (1989) where women, albeit being depicted as victims, sexual objects, manipulative puppets of men in their male hegemonic, hermetically closed social, cultural and literary world, are in fact stronger, more shrewd and cunning than their oppressors and therefore they not only manage to escape from their physical and mental confinement but also contribute to the downfall and moral ruin of their male persecutors.

In numerous interviews and conferences Martin Amis stresses the importance of female protagonists in his fiction and highlights his fascination with women, thus rejecting the charge of misogyny and prejudice against his heroines (Finney 141). Still, one can easily observe that Amis's female narratees, particularly those from his early works, function as types rather than fully developed characters. On the other hand, it also becomes noticeable that although his male protagonists come to the fore, they are by and large presented in a negative light, usually pitilessly caricatured and ridiculed. Hence, it seems that the author purposefully marginalizes, or delineates the schematic image of women and foregrounds the wicked, degenerate male characters as the exposition of the villainous, corrupted side of the contemporary society. At the same time he shows the crisis of masculinity, whereas the distorted, lampooned picture of his male protagonists reflects the dilemmas and fears of contemporary men being overwhelmed by the invasion of feminist culture, the augmentation of women's role in every facet of life, prevailing in the realm of business industry, entertainment and media communication. In this respect reality depicted by the novelist in the aforementioned *Money*, *Other People*, *London Fields* or *Information* (1995), could be interpreted as the utopian vision of the patriarchal world where women are but male erotic fantasies, the figments of their artistic imagination or platitudinous companions to their lives. Needless to say, such images shortly turn out to be misleading and delusive since most of Amis's heroines surpass or fall short of the expectations of the heroes, all the more, they flee from the control of male narrators, which marks the irreversible process of changing gender relations at the turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century and the unfeasibility of returning to male paternalistic culture.

As was previously pointed out, Martin Amis's writing is characterized by a constant fluctuation, change, both with regard to his subject matter and the tone, style and narrative mood. As for gender issues, particularly the portrayal of the heroines, in his later and recent fiction we may perceive a gradual shift or alteration from the novelist's perfunctory picture of female protagonists towards their more mature, complex and more elaborate images. Thus, in the novels like *Night Train* (1997) or *The House of Meetings* (2006), the books utterly dissimilar in terms of genre, theme,

structure and narration, female protagonists are portrayed as complex, mature, unforeseeable, changeable and enigmatic figures who no longer serve the comic or satirical purposes of the author or narrator, nor they are the figments of the male protagonists' artistic imagination or sexual objects. More importantly, in these works, especially in *Night Train*, the novelist highlights the female viewpoint, he writes from the perspective of a woman and therefore identifies and sympathizes with her. This alteration, or shift of perspective in Amis's fiction initiates a profound constructive dialogue between men and women, especially men's gradual understanding and acceptance of women's changing position and status in the society as well as the author's highlighting feminine independence and autonomy rather than focusing on female victimhood, alienation and confinement.

The issues related to sex, gender, tempestuous male-female relations also pervade the works of Ian McEwan. One may perceive some similarities between this writer and Martin Amis with reference to gender subject-matter, in particular the author's gradual changing outlook on the role of men and women in his early and late fiction. On the other hand, however, McEwan's language, style and narrative mood seem by far more tranquil, peaceful, less aggressive and dynamic than Amis's. Contrary to the author of *Other People, Money* and *London Fields* who invariably depicts the world full of violence, sadism, physical abuse, mental derangement and physical torture, McEwan, while delineating the tense, stormy male-female relations, family problems, highlighting its pathological dimension, mostly incest and moral debasement of family members, concentrates on the internal conflicts of male and female protagonists, their personal bedlam, hell and alienation. That is why violence, wickedness, and brutality are not so vividly presented or exposed, they rather occur in the minds of the characters, in their inner individual frantic struggles.

Taking into account his first short story collections, *First Love, Last Rights* and *In Between the Sheets* as well as his most popular novel from the early phase of his literary output *The Cement Garden*, one may notice the writer's immature, almost adolescent perception of male-female relations which are inextricably linked with the author's exploration of the effects of power and obsession on the human psyche. At this point we may see a lot of similarities and analogy between McEwan and Amis, especially with respect to their exposition of sexual abuse, debauchery, crime and use of black humour. Analogously to Amis's *Success*, McEwan's *First Love, Last Rights*, mainly the story "Homemade" which are concerned with coming-of-age and the process of male growing-up, raises the issue of incestuous relationship and rape in the family. Moreover, another story of McEwan's afore-mentioned collection, "Butterflies", which centres on a tale of sexual predation, makes even more horrifying by the inclusion of matter-of-fact murder, whilst "Disguises" raises the issue of debauchery and licentiousness at school. Subjects alike are thoroughly examined and explored in Martin Amis's second, popular yet controversial novel *Dead Babies*. By exhibiting this immoral, violent, criminal side of male youth the writers underline the corrupted, degenerated facet of maturity, particularly the brutality of young men's world. One is prepared to concede that the British novelist, despite his addressing challenging issues in these stories as well as in

the novel *The Cement Garden* the British novelist, aimed mostly at shocking the audience, especially the young readers, and this is what gained him popularity. More importantly, these books reflected the author's search for more mature, complex and profound examination of male and female world, their relations and roles in the contemporary society as well as the quest for new literary path and creating some more challenging and ambivalent prose.

It comes as no surprise that Ian McEwan's later works, especially those written and published after *The Child in Time*, like *Amsterdam*, *Atonement* or *Enduring Love* brought him not only the world-wide popularity but above all the critics' recognition, marking a more mature stage in the author's literary career. Miscellaneous critics and scholars argued that these McEwan's works focus much more heavily on elements of psychological depth, moral complexity, social, political or even ecological awareness than his early-phase books. The same applies to his exploration of gender issue, an in-depth analysis of men's and women's world, their psychological portraits, relations and social roles. *The Child in Time* and *Amsterdam* vividly illustrate strained, tense yet very mature relations between men and women in contemporary world, the emphasis being placed on mental and physical spheres of their lives. In case of the former the problem concerns rebuilding marital relationship after the loss of the couple's child and regaining their mutual trust after the family tragedy. The latter mirrors the aspect of death and difficulty of living after somebody's loss. What comes to the fore in this novel, however, is the problem of mutual understanding, compassion, the need to be loved experienced by a woman in the face of death. Moreover, in this work McEwan placed the emphasis on the aspect of space, depicting it as enclosure, solitude, imprisonment, connoting with anti-conviviality, danger and isolation. Here, space relates to the woman's disease but also to her alienation from her husband. The enclosed space is a sign of her illness, physical and mental suffering, chronic pain, it is very subjective and relative, multiple and moving (Chetrinescu 2001). The novel graphically illustrates the link between mental chaos and physical agony.

*The Child in Time* and *Amsterdam* indeed mark a breakthrough in Ian McEwan's literary output in terms of presenting enigmatic, labyrinthine, highly ambiguous male-female relations facing modern problems, dilemmas and fears, such as the process of ageing, civilizational illnesses, suffering from incurable diseases, experiencing alienation, isolation, mental and physical confinement. More importantly, however, these works show a desperate need for the human dialogue, men's and women's strenuous yet successful attempts to build harmonious, amicable and intimate relationship as an antidote to the callousness and emotional apathy of contemporary world.

Next to the social and psychological dimension of gender subject-matter one cannot fail to notice its literary or artistic facet, namely the relationship between the characters, narrators and the author of the book. This is best illustrated in *Atonement*, the novel written from the perspective of a young adolescent girl, Briony, being simultaneously the narrator of the story who dexterously and unscrupulously manipulates other protagonists, particularly the main male character, merely to gain

broad writerly experience. Interestingly enough, this teenage girl is already committed to the life of a writer and at the early age she ruthlessly subordinates everything the world throws at her to her need to make it subserve the demands of her own world of fiction. Brought up on the readings of imaginative literature, she is too young to comprehend the dangers that can ensue from modeling one's conduct on such an artificial world. When the protagonist publicly confesses her confusion between life and the life of fiction the consequences/repercussions are tragic and irreversible, bringing about the destruction of the protagonists' love relationship (Webb 2010). Significantly enough, *Atonement*, which is concerned with the perils of entering a fictional world and the compensations and limitations which that world can offer its readers and writers, constitutes a painstaking analysis of a female psyche, an intriguing portrait of a young ambitious feminine writer who callously manipulates other characters in order to achieve her childish artistic goal. With this respect the novel bears much resemblance to Martin Amis's *Rachel Papers*, the story that also depicts the process of artistic development, yet here the main protagonist is a teenage boy who takes advantage of other characters and unscrupulously plays with the feelings and emotions of the others merely to gain experience as a writer. Notwithstanding these two books' stylistic and structural differences and dissimilar generic traditions, they both expose difficult, complex gender relations during the process of adolescence and the youth experience with art, particularly their confusing reality with fiction.

All things considered, male-female relations remain a debating issue in the works of Martin Amis and Ian McEwan. In their almost every novel one may witness references to gender matters. Interesting as it may seem, both the novelists, considered 'typical' masculine writers, especially the first one, excel at portraying men, and particularly women, with great psychological and sociological depth, especially when the undergo profound mental crisis, yet, despite it endeavour and finally manage to overcome it building a constructive, fruitful interpersonal dialogue and reach a compromise.

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