

Deterritorialisation of the Family Unit and Discovering New Gender Identities: A Study of Ian McEwan's *The Cement Garden*

Debashis Mitra

PhD. Scholar

Department of English & Foreign Languages

Guru Ghasidas Vishwavidyalaya,

(A Central University)

Bilaspur, Chhattisgarh

debashismitrapr@gmail.com

Dr. Manish Shrivastava

Professor, H.O.D.

Department of English & Foreign Languages

Guru Ghasidas Vishwavidyalaya,

(A Central University)

Bilaspur, Chhattisgarh

manishbilaspur@rediffmail.com

Abstract: *Ideological assumptions and the sanctioned violent apparatuses on the pretext of multifarious institutions concerning class, gender, nation, language and others have always influenced the individual's social behaviour and led to identity issues. Detraditionalization and its concomitant process of individualization have undermined values and identities associated with the family unit, thereby weakening social ties and damaging societal cohesion incisively. Gender, as a flexible category, has been a pivotal concern of literary studies from the late 1960s onwards as the rise of feminist theories precipitated a sea of critical debate around the representation of women and femininity in literature and society as well. Deterritorialization, a concept created by Deleuze and Guattari in *Anti-oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* can be roughly described as a move away from a rigidly imposed hierarchical arborescent context, which seeks to package things into discrete categorized units with singular coded meanings and identities, towards a rhizomatic and contingent zone of chameleon identity where meanings and operations flow freely between said things, resulting in a dynamic constantly changing set of relations with fuzzy individual boundaries. Ian McEwan's *The Cement Garden* focuses on the degradation of an unexpected nuclear family framework and also on the mercurial facets of gender identities and the unnatural sexual behavior of suddenly orphaned children who after the death of their parents build their own incestuous inclination within the family. Julie, Jack, Sue and Tom- all the children decide to encase their mother's corpse in the cellar to hide it from the disciplinary society. There are recurrent references to the binaries between masculinities and femininities. Gender identities refer to the social formation, gendered roles, certain codes that develop through social and cultural hegemony institutionalizing and interpellating the individuals' psyche so that each individual in this androgynous society voluntarily tends to desire self-repression resulting from familial mechanisms of subject-formation instead of being capable of posing any threat to the territorialization or maintenance of the power structures of patriarchy. This paper attempts to unfurl the way the siblings in the family in *The Cement Garden* cope up with the contingent and shifting dispositions of the nuclear family as well as gender identities involved in it.*

Keywords: *Deterritorialisation, rhizome, desire, fluidity of roles, gender hierarchy.*

Despite its overall tone of grim neutrality, *The Cement Garden* explores both titillation and revulsion in its uncanny unraveling of the traditional family unit. The first sentence of Jack makes obvious of which kind the relationship is with his father- 'I did not kill my father but I sometimes felt I had helped him on his way' (McEwan 1) that suggests his egocentric attitude which marks the sign of an isolating, self-absorbed and his schizoid personality. The entire novel is projected

from within the interiority of Jack's psychic tripartite structure, a teenage boy living with his family in a house isolated by its location, aside from distant relatives in Ireland, the parents have no friends or extended family, and there are no visitors to the house. Their residence is situated in a crumbling wasteland between the urban and industrial areas of unnamed city. The unveiling of its dream-like story is eerily impressive. Jack clearly articulates his desire for Julie and her body, regarding her not only as a sister but as a sexual being. While cementing in the garden with his father, Jack tells he needs to go to the toilet and he retreats to the bathroom to get involved in his masturbatory habits conjuring up the same image of Julie's hand between Sue's legs which they played earlier in the novel and can also hear his father mixing cement when he reaches climax. This first ejaculation of Jack is significant as he is stained by the substance of the concrete as well as by the bodily fluid. The image of cement and semen encapsulates Jack's position, caught between the oppression of his father and the dawning sense of his tempestuous period of independent amoral adolescence. The sudden death of the father literally coincides with Jack's sexual and corporeal awakening that result in the beginning of the erosion of patriarchal law and culminates in an utter deterioration towards the end of the novel *The Cement Garden*.

The parents are aptly known by their subject-positions as 'father' and 'mother'. Father is an irascible, obsessive man, always fixated with order and neatness and a tyrannical patriarch, so to say, whereas mother is soft-spoken, docile and tolerant housewife who forms a perfect match to the authoritative father as felt appropriate in the occidental culture. When the three older siblings played a game in which Julie and Jack were scientists examining specimen from outer space, they faced each other across Sue's naked body. Jack longs to examine his older sister but the game did not allow for that. As the oldest sibling, Julie possesses the power to direct the game and interrupts his attempt to explore her body. The 'imaginary pipe' and 'out of the question' (McEwan 6) are a reference to the way in which their father manipulatively uses his pipe to exasperate their mother, and Jack refuses Julie's proposal of negation by displaying the gestures and expression of his father. Thus Jack and Julie's later usurping of their parents' roles already dawned in the first chapter. When Jack, Julie and Sue later ascend the stairs to their mother's bedroom, Jack thinks of Sue and himself as a married couple about to be shown in a sinister hotel room, an image which suggests the fluidity of familial roles and calls to mind the nuptial tradition of the honeymoon, threatened by invisible surveillance of external forces. After the mother's death, the children, orphaned and isolated, lapse into lethargy and idly spend the whole holiday in the house. Without parental supervision, Jack and other siblings are no longer obliged to abide by standard social practice. As a foil to Jack, Julie's boyfriend, Derek, is appropriately neat and clean in sartorial codes and sophisticated mannerisms. While Julie brings home twenty-three years old Derek, she does so in order to build a bridge to the outer world, but the outsider is felt a threat to this little universe. With the mother's encasement in the cellar and the smell that the cracks produce, the house is fraught with the smell of corruption with utter dilapidation, reminding them constantly of what they have done. Later Julie and Jack will adapt the roles of their parents in order to reterritorialize the lost position of their nuclear family structure perhaps by unknowingly desiring self-repression but still their playing roles do not fix the territory of the family as their adopted roles are shifting, resisting and contingent and flows freely. However, it is not only the conventional practices of cleanliness in the family that disintegrate but also gendered binaries. Earlier in the novel, Tom is involved in a fight at school and coming back home tells Sue that he is tired of being a boy and wants to be girl as he comes to know that girls do not get hit. Sue and Julie are delighted by the idea whereas Jack is horrified and fascinated later since he believes that Tom would look 'bloody idiotic' (McEwan 54). Julie defends Tom's desire to be a girl as follows-'you think it's humiliating to look like 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 you believe that being a girl is degrading' (McEwan 54). Julie's argument derives its force from the disparity between the performances of masculinity and femininity. Tom remains a boy in the meantime, presumably because conventional gender roles are reinforced and encouraged by the mother. After the mother's death, Jack returns home from a walk and sees a little girl, i.e., Tom with Julie and Sue in the living room. Jack recognizes that although the performances or appearances of femininity through hair, gesture and feminine dress codes as cultural markers are purely arbitrary as 'signified' slides in the galaxy of 'signifiers', they do intimate a life quite different to that of a boy. In this scene, Jack no longer finds Tom's cross-dressing humiliating but rather seems fascinated by the prospect of the minor epiphany occurred in his mind that it is possible to be or to

become someone else. This indicates not only the flows and flexibility of the gender performativity but also the arbitrary and constitutive nature of gender and sexual signifiers. The flexibility of roles and signifiers is highly emphasized by Jack's observations regarding the organization of the rooms. He realizes that the functions of rooms are characterized by the object assigned to them and this well-equipped designation is purely arbitrary. Just as there is no intrinsic value that defines the functionality of the each room, the borders that delineate gender and filial structures are also fragile and fluctuating as well as self-repressing and self-expressing.

Later on in the novel *The Cement Garden*, with Julie as a surrogate-mother, the children eventually clean the house and again begin to imitate a more traditional family structure. Upon

Jack's change of appearance, Julie no longer sides with her boyfriend, Derek, who can be addressed as a person of a protracted adolescent state and Julie passes comments on Derek who still lives with his mum and is treated as a juvenile by his mother and lacks power within his own household. This could account for his latent deep-seated urge to move in the children's house and play the role of a surrogate-father, thereby gaining power and authority he desires but on the other hand tends to desire self-repression in the lap of his mother that suggest his shifting, resisting and latently expressive self and also it makes obvious of the power strategies of the regulatory process of interpellation in which he gets curbed down slowly but steadily.

Towards the end of the novel, the crib scene is highly resonant with symbolic overtones as it flows into the focal point of incest scene that builds the climax as well as the end of the dreamlike escape for the siblings. Analyzing the final episode that is initiated by Derek, it becomes clear that Derek seems to have an almost grown-up and authoritative personality and at the same time he reveals himself at somewhat infantile-narcissistic psychic disposition. McEwan perhaps chose him to end the matriarchal dreamtime suggesting the deterritorialization of currently gaining matriarchy. When Julie comments on Derek derogatively as 'he still lives with his mum and she calls him Duddle and she irons fifteen shirts for a week' (McEwan 147), remembering this criticism on him Derek now seems to function as a representative of the patriarchy but perhaps is chosen to destroy the tomb and this symbolic freeing of the mother is less a patriarchal restoration, but more as Derek's ways of articulating his suppressed oedipal and incestuous drives. The subversion and suspension of conventional family values reaches its apex in the sexual climax between Jack and Julie and the resultant anticlimax intimates the intrusion of the reality with the arrival of the police at the end of the novel. From outside, Jack and Julie at their sexual union hear 'the sound of two or three cars pulling up, and through a chink in a curtain a revolutionary blue light made a spinning pattern on the wall' (McEwan 153). It is clear that the surreal limbo in the worn-out house is disrupted by an outsider, Derek and upon waking the children discover that the police is present, symbol of law and order and enforce the maintenance of territorialization of hegemony with its institutionally ideological-repressive process of interpellation. Reminiscent of mother kissing Jack's cheek earlier in the novel, the final line describes Julie bending down to kiss Tom-'There! She said, wasn't that a lovely sleep!' (McEwan 153), an expression which implies that as if the children now have awoken from temporal sleep into the drudgery of grim reality envisaged by the teenage siblings in the novel.

Having all said, *The Cement Garden* lays bare the asymmetry of the traditional nuclear family framework and exposes the contingency and provisionality of gender performativity. It can be interrogated that why do men fight for their servitude as stubbornly as though it were their salvation. To address this question, it can be examined through Deleuzo-Guattarian lens that the relationship between social organization, power and desire particularly in relation to the Freudian oedipal complex and its familial mechanisms of subject-formation goes hand in hand. The nuclear family is the potent agent of psychological repression under which the desire of the child and the adolescent are oppressed by society and thereby tend to be self-repressed. Critiquing Lacanian standpoint of the desire as nothing but lack, it is a bundle of shifting desires with its full 'presences' remains prevalent explicitly or implicitly in the tripartite structure of the human psyche but rigidly oppressed by societal arborescent hierarchies. Such social constructs form docile individuals that are the easy targets for social formation. The utter squalor and sordidness within the family deteriorates and debilitates the filial structures. With the arrival of police at the end of the novel a number of certain social forces of territorialization imposed a fascist

framework of metanarratives with its hawk-like panoptic gaze or its surveillance upon each action of the individual lest they can bypass. The inherent instability of the territory of any sort with its flux and contingency and the rhizomatic zone of desire in most of the schizoid teenage characters undercuts the inculcated binaries of the familial knots and discourses of the gender hierarchy and utterly blurs the borders of dominant hegemonies of circulating the power strategies of the autocratic patriarchy.

REFERENCES

- McEwan, Ian. *The Cement Garden*. London: Vintage Classics, 2004. Print.
- Dorhmann, Elena. *The Developing of Regressive and Matriarchal Structures in Opposition to the Patriarchal and Authoritative Society in The Cement Garden by Ian McEwan*. London: Auflage, 2013. Print.
- Barry, Peter. *Beginning Theory: An Introduction to Literary and Cultural Theory*. New Delhi: Viva Books, 2008. Print.