

ISSUES OF IDENTITY IN McEWAN'S FICTION

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Abstract: The social and cultural scenes of the second half of the twentieth century and the beginning of the twenty-first century, as they are given memorable expression to in Ian McEwan's fiction, bear the marks of important historical and political global events, such as World War II, the Holocaust, the increasing political influence of the American nation, the Cold War, the 9/11 terrorist attacks. Within this framework of international conflicts and tensions, new meanings, new person, role and social identity standards radically influenced individual interactions and patterns of behaviour, providing new themes and subjects to be dealt with. This complex system of reciprocal influences between individuals and society is also fictionally illustrated within McEwan's novels. Starting from the premise (asserted in one of his interviews) that individuals "are innately moral beings" whose social behaviour "is an instinct (...) coloured of course by local cultural conditions" (Louvel, Ménégaldo and Fortin 1995 : 4), McEwan's novels fictionally represent social structures which are deeply affected by struggles for power, anxieties, private and public conflicts, political and social tensions, where individuals, interpersonal relationships, social groups, communities, and even nations permanently redefine themselves, their identity standards and the environment they live in.

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The major socio-political events which took place during the second half of the twentieth century and the beginning of the twenty-first century (such as World War II, the disintegration of the British Empire, the expansion of the Commonwealth and the immigration of people of different nationalities, languages and cultures) brought about important transformations on the English social and cultural scenes. The gradual globalising of life, to which the above mentioned events have contributed, "has produced a multi-ethnic Britain, with a plurality of identities and heritages" (Christopher 1999: 1). New identities, new and often shocking trends and directions strived to express themselves and to assert their cultural values in a world influenced by conflicts and tensions and by their political, economic and social consequences.

Ian McEwan's attempts to be a witness of history has made him to focus, within his fiction, and especially within his novels (such as *The Innocent*, *Atonement*, *Saturday*, *The Child in Time*, *Amsterdam*), on representations of major global events and to situate them within a wider matrix of socio-political and cultural meanings (Groes 2009: 2), raising several issues concerning the entanglement of public and private relationships and their impact upon individual identity. Through his works, McEwan provoked cultural debates and moral outcries (Groes 2009: 1). His early literature of shock (especially his short stories and his first novel, *The Cement Garden*), as critic Jack Slay labels it (1996: ix), the exploration of grotesque and disturbing themes (such as breaking social conventions, codes and taboos, incest, sado-masochism, rape, pornography and murder) challenge the precepts and

determinations of society, questioning and then defying the restraints predetermined by sex and class, by politics, culture and gender. His early writing style made critic Jack Slay to claim, in the preface of his book entitled *Ian McEwan*, that the author “confronts the weaknesses and shames of ourselves and of our societies” (Slay 1996: ix).

Studying the relationships between identity and literature, critic Jonathan Culler asserts that “the explosions of recent theorizing about race, gender and sexuality in the field of literary studies owes much to the fact that literature provides rich materials for complicating political and sociological accounts of the role of such factors in the construction of identity” (Culler 1997: 106). Nowadays, identity is a constantly debated topic in the academy, across the humanities and social sciences, influencing even law and communication studies. The constitutive power of gender, race, ethnicity, sexuality, and other dimensions of identity has become an important issue of almost all projects of inquiry, rising concerns about “becoming”, “knowing”, or “discovering” who we are.

The contemporary debates in social psychology (identity theory and social identity theory) have led to a thorough examination of those issues that are particularly prominent in Ian McEwan’s fiction. Nowadays, the main concern regarding identity relies on the way identity is defined, measured, constructed, deconstructed, developed and created. In Urs Fuhrer’s view, identity is also a controversial concept because contemporary efforts to define and study it vary considerably in their scope and in how they address its issues; numerous difficulties also arise when one attempts to integrate the wide range of theoretical perspectives (Urs Fuhrer 2003: 79-80). The use of the term identity varies even when referring to the fields of sociology and social psychology.

Analysing the psychological and sociological approaches to identity, social psychologists James E. Côté and Charles G. Levine state that, in spite of their common roots, over the past several decades, these two approaches (i.e. sociological and social psychological) have constituted independent frameworks and have become increasingly isolated from one another, partly because of professionalization and specialization. On the one hand, psychologists are more interested in what happens inside individuals (at the level of personality- mental processes and related individual actions) and, on the other hand, sociologists are more interested in what happens inside societies (at the level of social structure- social structures and related individual actions) (Côté, Levine 2002: 12). Consequently, the body of literature on identity is fragmented and is deeply affected by the absence of a unifying taxonomy or common terminology.

In their turn, sociologist Peter J. Burke and sociological social psychologist Jan E. Stets, in their *Identity Theory*, deal with the term of identity taking into account the existence of three main elements: role, group and individual particular characteristics:

An identity is the set of meanings that define who one is when one is an occupant of a particular role in society, a member of a particular group, or claims particular characteristics that identify him or her as a unique person (Burke and Stets 2009: 3).

Therefore, the two identity theorists emphasise that there are three bases of identities (role, social group and person) and, accordingly, they make the distinction between role

identity, social identity and person identity. Role identities are based on the various social structural positions individuals hold (such a fictional instance is given, in McEwan's *The Child in Time*, by Stephen who has the role identities of father, husband, son, writer), social identities are related to individuals' memberships in certain groups and are based on group categorization and group evaluation (within the same novel, Stephen is a member of a committee on childcare, and his friend, Charles is a politician; in *Black Dogs*, it is mentioned that Bernard and June were, in their youth, members of the Communist party) and person identities are based on the perspective according to which each person is a unique entity, distinct from other individuals (in this case the focus being on the features individuals internalize as their own, such as being more (or less) controlling or more (or less) ethical). All these three types of identity have a series of identity standards that function as reference and guide patterns of behaviour in different situations: individuals act to control the perceptions of who they are in a situation in order to match the feedback they receive in the respective context (Burke and Stets 2009: 112).

In one of his interviews, when speaking about the social behaviour of individuals, McEwan stated that they:

are innately moral beings, at the most basic, wired-in neurological level. We've evolved in society. (...) We have shaped each other. (...) Social behaviour is an instinct with us, coloured of course by local cultural conditions (Louvel, Ménégaldo Fortin 2011).

Consequently, in McEwan's fiction, the characters are assigned diverse role, social and person identities, and are also placed against different cultural and social backgrounds (such as the city of Berlin during the Cold War in *The Innocent* or the World War II society in *Atonement*) in order to underline the tight interconnection between individual social behaviour, identities and the constantly challenging social conditions.

Trying to integrate role identities and social identities, Burke and Stets draw the attention to the situations in which certain role identities (which refer to the self as an individual "me" and which therefore are individual-level identities) may be converted to social identities (which involve identification with others who belong to the same category or social group and which are collective-level identities); for instance, in McEwan's *The Innocent* the fictional reflection of the role identity of soldier becomes, in certain contexts, group identity: "This is a war, Leonard, and you're a soldier in it" (McEwan, *The Innocent*. 1990: 41). Glass tells Leonard, casting him in the role identity of soldier. On the other hand, Leonard's sudden apparition to Maria's apartment stirred in her mind memories of the social (group) identity of "soldiers, usually in pairs, pushing open doors unannounced" (McEwan, 1990: 50).

However, the two identity theorists provide for the means of distinguishing between social identities and role identities, by taking into consideration the psychological state that is activated (me or we) and the social functions it provides (an ego function that satisfies the needs of the self or an inter/intragroup function that satisfies the needs of the group) (Burke and Stets 2009: 122-123). Thus, attention should be paid when trying to distinguish between a person who is acting in a role on the basis of a role identity or who is part of a collective or

group and acting on the basis of the social identity. In *The Innocent*, the fictive role identity of soldier becomes social identity when it acquires a collective meaning, when it refers to soldiers as a group of men having certain characteristics which distinguish them as such.

It should be also mentioned that, unlike role identities but like social identities, the person identity is viewed as functioning across different roles and situations. Person identities are more likely to be activated across contexts than role identities because they are related to important aspects of the individual. The set of meanings contained by the person identity would influence the meanings within the individual's role and social identities (Burke and Stets 2009: 125). Such a fictional illustration may be given by the character of Leonard Marnham in McEwan's *The Innocent* whose behaviour within the role identity of Post Office engineer within the army is influenced by his person identity as an inexperienced, idealistic and naïve young man: he is awkward in his interactions with his colleagues and he is dithering when talking to his American superior.

Another taxonomy regarding identity belongs to Côté and Levine and, similarly to Stets and Burke's identity theory, it focuses on the distinction between three main types of identity: ego identity (term inspired by Freud's structural model of the psyche and coined by psychologist Erik Erickson), personal identity and social identity; this taxonomy is derived from the personality and social structure perspective, which tackle three levels of identity analysis: personality, interaction and social structure.

The notion of "ego identity" refers to the more fundamental subjective sense of continuity that is characteristic of the personality, which involves the intrapsychic factors and biological dispositions, traditionally studied by psychologists and psychoanalysts. The sense of ego identity is thus strongly affected by self-relations (especially in terms of basic mental health requirements), but is also predicated on primary and secondary socialization and enculturation or coercively through force (Côté, Levine 2002: 8). The term "ego identity" was first used by Erik Erikson (1963) when he tried to describe the central means by which individuals come to experience a sense of being "at home" in themselves, in their own bodies, with their own unique blends of psychological drives and defences, and in their own cultural and societal neighbourhoods, recognizing and being recognized by others "who count". Ego identity, for Erikson, is a tripartite entity, an interaction of biological givens, idiosyncratic personal biography and societal response within a broader historical frame that optimally gives coherence, meaning and continuity to one's life and to one's life experiences (Kroger 1993: 1-2).

"Personal identity" is similar to Stets and Burke's notion of "person identity" and it differentiates the unique self from all other selves and denotes the more concrete aspects of individual experience rooted in interactions. A personal identity is based on different characteristics including appearance, abilities and traits, a set of values and beliefs, and personal experiences. Such an instance is given in *The Innocent*, where Leonard's personal identity includes features such as youth, timidity, naivety, awkwardness and lack of life experience.

Regarding personal identity, individuals find a fit between the prescriptions of their social identity and the uniqueness and difference of their life or learning history. Personal agency and biological dispositions (such as potentials, desires etc.) can create an identity "style" at this level, producing an individuality, within the limits allowed by the society and

one's place in it. Personal identity, which is situated at the micro-sociological level of analysis, is most affected by primary relationships, but it can also be affected by secondary and self-relationships and interactions (Côté, Levine 2002: 8). For example, in his interactions with his American colleagues and with his German lover, Maria, the person identity of McEwan's Leonard Marham suffers a series of transformations: he becomes more confident, more sociable and he acquires more experience both in the intricate world of espionage and in the world of romance and sexuality.

While personal identity belongs to the micro level of interactions, social identity is placed at the macro-sociological level of analysis. The term social identity (which is more widely understood by Côté and Levine than by Burke and Stets who use it only to refer to the membership in social groups) designates the individual's position(s) in a social structure (the political and economic systems, along with their subsystems, that define the normative structure of a society) and the subjective meaning associated with this knowledge (how individuals perceive and present themselves, as well as how they perceive and treat others) (Côté, Levine 2002: 7).

Regarding social identity, the individual is most influenced by cultural factors and by the social roles that he or she occupies and enacts during a given stage in life, with varying degrees of pressure to fit into the available identity "molds" created by these influences. Social identity mostly concerns secondary relationships, although it can also be affected by primary relationships (often social roles are granted on the basis of an individual's "personality" or personal style), and self-relationships (the individual must sustain a personal sense of continuity to maintain social roles) (Côté, Levine 2002: 7). Therefore, Leonard's position in the social structure he was cast within McEwan's novel is framed both by the wider context of the secret Operation Gold and the Cold War and also by the narrower field of primary relationships and self-relationships, as his ego and personal identities play an important role in his assignment of different social roles (such as the role of Post Office engineer within the secret operation).

According to identity theorists, the notion of identity can be understood as the connection and the tension between the personal and the social, between how much control individuals have in constructing their identities (agency) and how much control or constraint is exercised over them (constraint) (Jenkins 2004: 18-19). Moreover, it should also be taken into consideration that people possess multiple identities because they occupy multiple roles, are members of various social groups, and claim multiple personal features, and the meanings of these identities are shared by the members of society (Côté, Levine 2002: 3). This can be also fictionally illustrated in McEwan's novels. For instance, in different contexts within *The Innocent*, Leonard is son (a role identity acquired when interacting with his parents), lover (when interacting with Maria), soldier (within the context of the Cold War and the secret operation), British (social identity activated in his interaction with the Americans, Russians or Germans). Another fictional representation in this sense is given by Briony, in *Atonement*: she is presented, within different circumstances and interactions, as daughter (role identity acquired in the interactions with her mother), sister (in her relationship with Cecilia and Leon), nurse (role identity activated at the London hospital, during her wartime experiences), writer (role identity which clearly surfaces at the end, when she is revealed as the author of the novel).

Therefore, McEwan's literary work is closely related to social and personal identity issues, fictionally reflecting the tensions between the personal and the social spheres. In another interview about his fiction, the author said:

I have contradictory fantasies and aspirations about my work. (...) I value a documentary quality, and an engagement with a society and its values; I like to think about the tension between the private worlds of individuals and the public sphere by which they are contained (Matthews 2009).

Ian McEwan's fiction depicts dark portraits of contemporary society, in order to expose the degradation, the absurdity and the cruelty hidden under the appearances of an ordinary world. By means of his mordant views on modern society, McEwan protests against "the disgrace that is innate to patriarchy", objects the excessive use of power by "unchallenged governments", presents the terrors and anxieties of wars and terrorism (Slay 1996: xi), which create turmoil and affect different dimensions of identity and patterns of behaviour. The author's novels also draw attention to the political chaos of contemporary society, showing how this disorder influences not only entire nations and countries but also individuals and their personal relationships (*The Innocent*, *Black Dogs*, *Amsterdam*, *Atonement*). Identity constructions provide thus narratives that explain the links between group historical memory and individual contemporary experience.

Social organization is important in shaping one's identity. Class, gender, nation, time and place are important dimensions of identity and they illustrate the tension between the personal and the social, between the individual's control and that of social structures (Moya, Hames-García 2000: 4). Society is seen as a mosaic of relatively durable patterned interactions and relationships, differentiated yet organized, embedded in a great variety of groups, organizations, communities and institutions, and intersected by crosscutting boundaries of class, ethnicity, age, gender, religion, and other variables. In addition, persons are seen as living their lives in relatively small and specialized networks of social relationships, through roles that support their participation in such networks (Stryker, Burke 2000: 285). By placing their characters within the wider social and political frameworks, McEwan's novels illustrate fictional representations of different role, social and person identities, of their interconnections and dynamics against the fictive reflection of contemporary times.

Regarding the public and private spheres, Paula M. L. Moya and Michael R. Hames-García also make the distinction between public and "subjective" identity. Public identity is defined as that identity which one has in a public space, and by means of which one is hailed, interpellated and categorized. This identity is external, visible and under only limited individual control. It is used by those around the individual, consciously and unconsciously, in order to interpret the meanings of his or her actions and utterances. Subjectivity refers to the individual's own sense of himself/herself, his/her lived experience of his/her self, or his/her interior life. Public identity and the lived self may be at some significant odds from each other, causing disequilibrium (Moya, Hames-García 2000: 335-336).

McEwan's fiction renders convincing fictional illustrations of much of the characters' internal world as well as of their external one, in an attempt reminiscent of the major

undertakings of the masters of realism. Thus, McEwan's reader is party to the characters' thoughts, viewing their reactions to each event and their weighing up of various actions and consequences, of right vs. wrong. In order to exhibit different aspects of society and its values and to underline the tensions between the public and the private worlds, McEwan's novels deal with issues such as innocence, experience, guilt, morality and taboos, against the broader historical and political background.

The author gives shape to a wide range of characters, such as orphaned children who isolate themselves from the rest of the world and create their own, corrupted version of childhood, where their freedom and guilt send them into a descending spiral of bizarre behaviour (*The Cement Garden*); individuals who have to come to terms with the tensions between their difference and the very different natures of the people around them, between their opinions and mentalities and the very different opinions and mentalities of those they interact with (*The Innocent*, *Black Dogs*, *Amsterdam*); couples descending into nightmares, concluding either in murder (*The Comfort of Strangers*, *The Innocent*), miscommunication and/or separation (*On Chesil Beach*, *Black Dogs*, *Enduring Love*) or, on the contrary, in reconciling their differences and miscommunication (*The Child in Time*, *Enduring Love*); individuals who misunderstand each other's intentions and actions, who misinterpret the events they witness to (*Amsterdam*, *Atonement*) or who struggle in order to cope with situations such as loss, trauma, anxiety and change (*The Child in Time*, *The Cement Garden*, *The Innocent*, *Black Dogs*, *Atonement*).

Similarly to other social identity theorists, Richard Jenkins, Jane Kroger and Kath Woodward profess that both as individuals and through collective action it is possible to redefine and reconstruct identities and, therefore, individuals can negotiate and interpret the roles they adopt. Important events in one's life, in the domestic environment, in communities and at the level of the nation and its place in the world have been translated into questions of identity.

All these theorists are fully aware that identity is not fixed and unchanging, but it is the result of a series of conflicts and of different identifications. Identities constantly change and this implies that the meanings held in the identity standard are changing. When the nature of individuals changes the nature of society also changes. Similarly, changes in the nature of society lead to changes in the nature of individuals, as their identity and behaviour are dependent upon the social structural positions in which they are located. However, the changes in identity meanings take place extremely slowly and, therefore, are not noticeable except over longer periods of time (Stets, Burke 2009: 4).

Struggles about identities are struggles within the individual and, moreover, between the individual, on one hand, and the society and the time he or she lives in, on the other hand (Kroger 1993: 2-3). Who we understand ourselves to be will have consequences for how we experience and understand the world. Fluid and changing, identities have consequences for the kinds of relationships and communities human beings form and the sorts of activities they engage in.

Social changes taking place at global and personal levels can produce uncertainties in relation to one's understanding of his or her multiple identities or to his or her positioning into different types of social structures. Change is characterized by uncertainties and insecurities as well as by diversity and opportunities for the formation of new identities.

In Ian McEwan's novels, dominant political ideologies of 1980s Britain (*The Child in Time*), reconstructions of mid-1950s Berlin and of an English frame of mind from that time (*The Innocent*), depictions of the Cold War and of the power and dynamism of the mid-twentieth-century U.S. popular culture and of the U.S. itself as a political entity (*The Innocent*), post-war British communism (*Black Dogs*), the legacy and the horrors of World War II (*Black Dogs*, *Atonement*), the fall of the Berlin Wall (*Black Dogs*)- all act upon individual's identities. Within this eventful world's "heart of darkness", the individuals' identities change and their patterns of behaviour are corrupted, degraded: "innocent" young men became vicious murderers and body dismemberers (*The Innocent*), adolescent and apparently "normal" children isolate themselves from the world and become incestuous (*The Cement Garden*), successful musicians and newspaper editors kill each other in the name of friendship (*Amsterdam*), young 13 year old imaginative girls destroy genuine love relationships and send innocent servant's sons to prison and then to war (*Atonement*), mysterious encounters change one's view upon the world and lead to the separation of just married couples (*Black Dogs*), social mentalities and taboos put an end to naïve marriages (*On Chesil Beach*). Individuals and groups have to negotiate both the uncertainties of social change and the constraints of inequality and they seek to challenge social expectations about identity.

Although McEwan's desire to fictionally represent in his fiction different aspects of post-World War II history has spurred him on to chase major global events and to situate historical events within a wider matrix of socio-political and cultural meanings (Sebastian Groes 2009: 2), studies of his novels do not entirely tackle the questions raised by his novels, concerning public and private relationships and their impact upon individual identity. Private or public, political, social or sexual, tensions and conflicts are likely to be a part of human nature, life and history, creating the dynamics on which both individuals and nations are dependent.

The interconnections and the tensions between individual and society, against the modern historical and social background presented in Ian McEwan's novels, reveal how the latter affects one's identity and how identity, in its turn, reflects mentalities, social constraints, and the never-ending struggles between the personal and the social, within a modern and troubled society.

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