
Man and Nature: An Eco-critical Study of Ian McEwan's *Atonement*

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Abstract :

Recently, eco-criticism attracted the attention of many writers. Ian McEwan is one of the brilliant novelists who is interested in ecology mainly because he thinks that the world is swept by technology and consequently man is drifted away from nature. Therefore, *Atonement* (2001) is a call to go back to nature because it is part and parcel of man's life. . Natural environment is the source of purity and inspiration and it has its effect on man's life.

This research is an eco-critical study of Ian McEwan's *Atonement*, one of his early novels which celebrates the symbiotic relationship between man and nature and nature and culture.

Keywords: eco-criticism, natural environment , Ian McEwan

Introduction :

In a world predominated by globalization and overloaded with ecological crisis, the rise of eco-criticism has become necessary. The term eco-criticism refers to the literary study that highlights the relationship between literature and nature.(Arnold 94)

Since existence, man has a symbiotic relationship with nature. It becomes, as a matter of course, part and parcel of man's life. Consequently, it is important to have nature as the main theme in the literary text. The term eco-criticism was coined two decades ago to refer to the focus of the literary criticism on the relationship between literature and environment. This term has been used simultaneously with the studies that focus on the interrelationship between human and non-human life within the literary text. In his book, *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology*(1996), Cheryll Glotfelty states:

"...eco-criticism is the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment. Just as feminist criticism examines language , and literature from a gender conscious perspective, and Marxist criticism brings

awareness of modes of production and economic class to its reading of the texts, eco-criticism takes an earth-centered approach to literary studies." (xviii)

Recently, the interaction between man and nature has been the focus of eco-critical literary approach because it views that nature permeates man's life. Natural environment provides "an insight into human relationships with species and with the world around us" (Meeker 3-4).

As a matter of fact, eco-criticism existed in the sixties of the twentieth century. It is different from other literary approaches of criticism in that it examines the relationship between the author, the literary text, the reader, and the natural world (Glotfelty x). Henceforth, man/nature, and nature/culture are binaries that are well examined by the ecological approach, focusing on their active role within the universal system in which energy, substance, and ideas are involved.

(Estok 41) expresses his outlook on eco-criticism by stating that eco-criticism is not merely the study of nature or natural things in literature; rather, it is any study which deals with the effect of the function of the natural environment or any aspect of it in literary texts that contribute to the material world. This function can be social, historical, theoretical, thematic, artistic, or otherwise. Therefore, eco-criticism deals with the functional change of nature or the natural environment on various levels on man's life.

Atonement is an example of eco-fiction in the sense that it presents the significance of the natural setting on the main characters in the novel. Besides, McEwan raises some moral issues within the context of the relationship between man and his natural environment. Highly interested in ecology, McEwan presents in his early novels *Atonement* and *Enduring Love* the healing relationship between man and nature. In his later novels, on the other hand, such as *Amsterdam*, *Saturday*, and *Solar*, he raises the problem of the destructive effect of man on nature due to moral degeneration and social corruption. Henceforth, he is considered by some critics more than a novelist. He is "a public intellectual- an eminently sane and reasonable man who happens to be a novelist but is finally more concerned to play a broader, edifying role" (quoted in Habibi & Karbalaei 93).

***Atonement* as an Eco-fiction**

"Cherish the natural world because you're part of it and you depend on it".

Sir David Attenborough

As a writer who is pre-occupied with the natural environment and its significance in man's life, Ian McEwan presents nature in all the parts of *Atonement*, showing its effect on the main characters in the novel. The novel falls into three parts and nature permeates almost all the parts of the novel, even in part two which takes place in London. The Tallis live in a state in the English countryside. In this respect, the English garden is used as an image of nature in the novel. Nature is significant in the sense that it has many functions in the novel. First, it is used as a means of introspection rather than as merely a presentation of natural aspects (Beaufils 2). This is very clear in chapter 12 of the novel when everyone has left to look for the missing twins and Briony Tallis is left alone. She starts to think deeply about her life and her abilities. In this way she is led into introspection. This process of internal thinking is shown in a very striking way by assimilating it to the process of exploring a garden: while everybody is set to explore the garden of the house physically, Briony's thoughts are drawn inside to explore herself in an interesting way: "no one else she knew had her knack of keeping still, without even a book on her lap, of moving gently through her thoughts, as one might explore a new garden" (McEwan 150). This internal and unusual image reflects what is going on outside in the garden because Briony Tallis' introspection keeps her from reading the warning signs of Lola's rape. Henceforth, McEwan utilizes nature to refer to an internal quality rather than to the external natural sphere. Though the English countryside is used as a frequent background to the events of *Atonement*, it is also used as a clue to the character's actions and motivations.

Once again , nature is employed in the novel to participate in the process of characterization of the characters in their relationship with nature. The best example of this is Robbie's character. He is introduced in the novel as a gardener or landscape designer. According to Cecelia's words, his beloved, "Since coming down, landscape gardening has become his last craze"(p.18). He is always seen in nature, in the countryside. This reminds the reader of his indefinite social class: "Beyond the compass were his copies of Auden's *Poems* and Housman's *A Shropshire Lad*. At the other end of the table were various histories, theoretical treatises and practical handbooks on landscape gardening"(p.82). In addition to being a gardener, Robbie is an

intellectual who is occupied in the theoretical knowledge in his passion for nature. It is always noted that he is engaged with the natural things around him because usually his theoretical knowledge is related to the practical application of things. This leads the reader to notice the relationship between gardening and literary creation in the novel, as something soothing and stimulating which is called by (Price 115) "the soft and pleasing repose" created by the picturesque.

Again, nature exists in the first part of the novel and in this time it is employed by McEwan to signify the English nationality, or as it is called by (Cavalié 11) "the Englishness." The English pasture is rich with various plants such as wildflowers, the rugosa hedge, red French poppy and Cecilia's bunch of flowers which contains different kinds of flowers like the irises, and rose-bay willow herb. The fields are lavish with green grass and French red poppies. Furthermore, the garden of the Tallis has different kinds of medical herbs like feverfew and chamomile which are traditionally used for alleviating aches and migraines. Therefore, McEwan idealizes the natural setting by celebrating the wealth of English pasture as both ornamental and medicinal. Besides, the English garden, a trope of nature, represented in the novel by the Tallis' garden, stands for the traditional English garden, and it shows McEwan's deep interest in the botanical accuracy (Beaufils 3).

Some natural elements are used precisely in the novel by the author as symbols such as the oak tree which is present frequently in all parts of the novel. In the first part of the novel, the oak tree symbolizes Briony's imagination: in a state of self-pity, Briony imagines herself as a heroine of a Pre-Raphaelite painting:

**"Her only reasonable choice then would be to run away,
to live under hedges, to eat berries and speak to no one,
and be found by a bearded woodsman one winter dawn,
curled up at the base of a giant oak,..."** (14-15)

Again, the symbolic use of the oak tree continues in the second part of the novel when Robbie found the twins under a big tree, which is probably an oak tree. The oak tree is pursued again to signify a visual image that characterizes the fact that the natural setting follows firmly the two rules of the traditional English garden; that are diversity and prospect as it is implied in "oak woods" (p.18), "the thick crested oaks" of the "Surry Hills" (38) surrounding the fountain scene. And Briony Tallis' attitude towards the garden: "from most perspective the row pillars and

the pediment above them were charmingly half obscured by the elms and oaks that had grown up around" (72). Thus, the recurrent existence of the oak tree signifies the matters of perspectives and its traditional representation of the Englishness or the traditional English garden as well.

Towards Nostalgia

"A sense of the universe, a sense of the all, the nostalgia which seizes us when confronted by nature, beauty, music- these seem to be an expectation and awareness of a Great Presence".

Pierre Teilhard de Chardin

Nostalgia, looking back in memory to the past, dominates the postmodern novels including *Atonement*, which seems to sum up the position of the novel as far as nostalgia is concerned, and the strange feeling it arouses in the characters as well. McEwan states in an interview with Jeff Giles in *Newsweek* that he considers the novel "his Jane Austen novel,... his country-house novel" (Giles 62). He conjures up the luxurious country-house and the English countryside before the outbreak of the WWII. The memory is made vivid and alive to support its ghostly existence in the present.

The English pasture is portrayed in the novel with a touch of nostalgia accompanied with a sense of sadness and loss. This happens when Briony in the coda comes back home to celebrate her seventy-seven birthday with her family. She discovers that the countryside has changed; the well -designed natural landscape has turned into an urban landscape: "the island has become a barrow." The trees, especially the oak trees, have been "cleared to make way for a golf course". This scene arouses nostalgia inside Briony along with the feeling of loss, for she "felt a dreamy nostalgia, a vague yearning for a long-lost life". The pasture has been replaced by a golf course, electric lights and benches, and the country estate, which was bought by her grandfather, has become a hotel. Therefore, the fresh English pasture has been changed for the purpose of utility rather than of view. Thus, for Briony, the Edenic pasture has become a place of storing memories of the long inspiring days of childhood innocence that are no more. It "beckons as a zone of magic, mysticism, inspiration and holy conversion." (Dian Ackerman 3). Briony's nostalgia is not only aroused by the changes she discovered in the house, but also in the interference of man in changing the design of

the countryside; for nature became part and parcel of Briony's life and the source of inspiration of her writings. The nostalgic power Briony experiences is related to her desire to go back to the innocence that is no more. Consequently, it presents the Kantian explanation of nostalgia as illustrated by Jean Starobinski:

What a person wishes to recover is not so much the actual place where he passed his childhood but his youth itself. He is not straining toward something which he can repose, but toward an age that is forever beyond his reach. (quoted in Delesalle-Nancy, p.105)

The nostalgia experienced by Briony does not belong to the traditional romantic notion of nostalgia which is an exile from the miserable condition of the present; rather, it falls into what is called the reflective nostalgia, a notion that is interpreted by (Boym 41):

"Reflective nostalgia dwells in *algia*; in longing and loss, the imperfect process of remembrance." Boym continues by stating that reflective nostalgia

"cherishes shattered fragments of memory and temporalizes space. ...Reflective nostalgia also can be ironic and humorous. It reveals that that longing and critical thinking are not opposed to one another, as affective memories do not absolve one from compassion, judgement or critical reflection."(ibid 49-50)

Consequently, the nostalgic impulse within Briony, the protagonist and the narrator of the novel, centers on her longing for the days of her innocent self of childhood before the crime, the days that are out of reach represented in the novel by the English pasture, and invites the reader as well to revisit the past so as to cast a critical eye on both the past and the present.

However, Briony's longing for the countryside landscape does not only apply to that missing place of innocent childhood she has experienced, but also refers to the landscape that is buried within her, and through which she can experience the fresh sensuous days of the past even when she encounters a new setting (Mda 6).

Water Imagery "Forgiveness doesn't change the past, but it does enlarge the future." Paul Boese

The most dominant natural element in *Atonement* is water. Water is an essential element in the life of human beings as an important part of the complex ecological order. McEwan is cunning enough to use water

throughout the novel. Traditionally, water is used for cleansing and washing. The novel involves many scenes in which water is used repeatedly like the fountain scene, the rape of Lola which takes place next the lake, and Robbie and the other soldiers' attempt to reach the seaside at Dunkirk. Briony and Robbie are essential characters in the novel who are associated with water mainly because they have to atone for the sins they have committed. Briony accused Robbie of raping Lola. As a result of her accusation, Robbie spent five years in the prison, and therefore she has to atone for her false accusation. Robbie, on the other hand, is the reason behind Cecilia's cutting ties with her family. As much as it is a means of cleansing and drinking, water is used by both characters as a means of washing away their sins. Thus, water, as a natural element, is used for both moral and tangible cleansing (Plant 3). In part three of the novel, Briony works as a nurse; she washes her hands constantly, sanitizes the hospital, and washes the wounds of the injured people. Likewise, Robbie and his team reach the Dunkirk beach and desires water not only for drinking, but also for washing the dirt and sanitizing his injuries.

As far as morality is concerned, water in *Atonement* is used for gaining forgiveness or atonement and washing away the sins. It stands for purity and freshness. Therefore it is used to purify one's soul from the sins to obtain atonement. The title of the novel itself is vital to the theme of atonement in the novel. Atonement can be defined by OED as "the condition of being at one with others; unity of feeling, harmony, concord, agreement." (OED, "atonement"). To atone is to cleanse one's soul of sins. In this sense, water and atonement are related to each other. As human beings, water is essential in our life; it is within us and around us. Similarly, atonement is essential in man's life because man seeks atonement and forgiveness for any sin he commits. Briony and Robbie are the main characters who are associated with water mainly because they have sins to atone for. Consequently, McEwan uses water imagery in an interesting way throughout the novel as a means of atonement and forgiveness. Morally speaking, water is used in the novel as a spiritual cleansing after any sinful action done by the characters. Briony has a big sin to atone for which is accusing Robbie for raping Lola while she knew he is innocent and as a result he was put in a jail for five years for a wrong accusation. Afterwards, She starts to feel guilty and desires to atone for her guilt by using water. Washing "her cracked and bleeding chilbained hands under freezing water" refers probably to her desire to

wash away her sin. She washes her hands "a dozen times a day" but her attempts of cleansing are futile because her hands are still chapped and bloody, a matter which refers to her sin. Similarly, the unbridgeable gap she caused in her relationship with her sister Cecilia and Briony remain the same. Again, when she decided to work as a nurse, she serves water for the wounded soldiers and cleanse their wounds and dresses with water in an attempt to help Robbie and make him forgive her sin. Besides, water is used obsessively by Briony in cleansing the hospital equipment in an attempt to wash away her sin.

Once again, Robbie's character is associated with water as well. He desires water for drinking and cleansing especially when his team retreat to the Dunkirk beach to drink water and cleanse their wounds. He uses water frequently as a means of cleansing his sin. He is guilty of deserting Cecilia and letting her cut her family ties with her family. As a result, washing his face and cleansing his wound constantly stands for his attempt to wash away his guilt. Later on, Robbie washes his face with water to clean the dirt "changing the water to rusty brown". Unlike Briony, McEwan uses water in this scene to show that Robbie is successful in in cleansing his face while Briony washes her hands excessively but with no use at all, for her hands remain bloody and chapped, a painful reference to her sin. Perhaps Robbie is successful in attaining atonement as McEwan writes : "when he was done, he felt a pleasing lightness in the air around him which slipped silkily over his skin and through his nostrils" (266).

McEwan argues that water is a permanent element in our life. It is used excessively by the characters for cleansing, but this does not necessary mean that the sins they committed are washed away as long as the effect of their actions are still present. They are responsible for their actions and cannot change their harmful past. It is true that Robbie succeeded in cleansing his face but he is unable to clean the dirt of his past. Similarly, Briony is unable to wash away her sins in spite of her frequent cleansing of her chapped hands. She cannot change her sinful past but can move forward to the future. Her sin, memories and the past are still living with her. Although the past cannot be changed, and atonement cannot be achieved, one can move forward to the future and makes use of the mistakes of the past in order not to be repeated again.

Conclusion :

Existence in this world is not merely human. Man is fully aware that his existence is related to his natural environment which is essential for the continuity of his life. As far as ecology is concerned, literary studies are concerned with the interrelationship and the co-existence between man and nature; and nature and culture within the context of the literary text. Literary Critics highlight the important role of literature in revealing the interconnection between man and his natural environment. For this reason, eco-criticism is developed to raise the ecological issues into consciousness.

McEwan is one of the brilliant writers who is concerned with ecology. He is aware of the importance of the natural environment in man's life. In *Atonement*, he presents nature in relation to the moral sense of the character. Nature is connected to the inner conflict of some characters like Briony and Robbie. Both characters seek atonement through water as a means of washing away their sins. Hence, water is a natural element used cunningly by McEwan throughout the novel as a symbol of atonement and redemption. Besides, the natural backdrop provides an insight into the character's inner life. This is evident in Briony's situation in the novel when she was left alone in the garden and she started to think about her life and thoughts. This offers an introspection. Besides, it arouses nostalgia deep inside her and creates fresh memories in her mind. Robbie is very close to nature and it is part of his job, for he is a gardener as well as a soldier. McEwan reveals that nature is still part and parcel in man's life and it stands as a healing factor in his life no matter how far he gets from it.

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