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The Cracks Within: Familial Dysfunction in Ian McEwan's *Atonement*

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This paper examines the portrayal of familial dysfunction in Ian McEwan's novel *Atonement* (2001), harping on the impact it has left on the psychological and identity development and the relationships of the various characters in the novel. In the novel, the Tallis household is presented as an emotionally fragmented family. The father is absent and the mother is emotionally withdrawn and this creates an environment that gives rise to insecurity, misunderstandings and psychological issues. Informed by psychological perspectives, the paper tries to show how various issues like discorded family ties, emotional neglect and the absence of parents shape the actions of characters like Briony, Cecelia, Robbie and the like. We see how the various issues like childhood naivety, emotional deprivation and imagination lead to Briony's misinterpretation of adult relationship, her false accusations about Robbie and the lasting consequences of her actions. The familial dysfunctions also affect the secondary characters like Lola and her siblings. The study tries to place the novel within the postmodern framework and argues that the author, McEwan, questions the crisis of the family as an institution in a changing social world and further tries to throw light on how familial discord functions as a critical force in the novel, shaping the characters' destiny and leading to the tragic consequences that unfold with time.

Keywords: *Atonement*, familial dysfunction, postmodernism, identity, family dynamics, trauma.

The dysfunctional family paradigm, which serves as both a shaping and destructive force, has a significant influence on McEwan's characters' behaviour in relationships and on how they evolve as people are significantly influenced by . Every character that we encounter is from a fractured, and dysfunctional family; none of them comes from a perfectly functional family background. These are a variety of distortions. It can be deduced that McEwan's issue of family and ties cannot be explored in isolation; therefore discussing psychoanalysis makes sense given the context of his writing. McEwan continues to have a prominent position as an author whose fiction focuses on both internal psychological concerns and on external political, social, and cultural subjects against the backdrop of a dynamic growth of British fiction in the last two decades of the twentieth century. His early gory fictions, which feature a gallery of psychopathic characters, as well as the structurally sophisticated and emotionally structured later works, which feature well-balanced but psychologically disturbed protagonists, demonstrate his introspective investigation of the human psyche. As critics have pointed out, McEwan's writing is typically driven by a concern for relationships and it is at the heart of his explorations of human nature, gender dynamics, and sexual norms. The theme of family and relations in McEwan's works cannot, however, be studied in isolation and so in the context of his writing, bringing up psychoanalysis seems appropriate.

In this paper, the idea as to how in McEwan's *Atonement*, the issue of dysfunctional or broken families has been a recurring one and has affected an individual's identity will be studied and analysed. We see that the fictional families' causes of disturbance and dysfunctionality are not much dissimilar from those of real families. Regardless of the type of extraordinary journey a character does, the dysfunctional family in which they are raised is the primary cause of their agony and suffering in McEwan's works.

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After writing a few novels that concentrated on individual issues, McEwan returns to more universal socio-historical themes in *Atonement* (2001), which was published just days after the 9/11 attacks. Some see this as evidence of the writer's increasing wisdom and experience, and they think it only makes sense that he "would leave behind the cool analysis of incest, sadism, and abjection that had gained him notoriety and would explore the power of evil in the twentieth century European history. Brian Finney in his paper "Briony's Stand Against Oblivion: The Making of Fiction in Ian McEwan's Atonement" rightly notes: "Instead of the closed claustrophobic inner world of his early protagonists, *Atonement* ranges from an upper-class household in pre-War southern England, to the retreat of the British army to Dunkirk, to a wartime London hospital, ending with a coda in 1999" (Finney 68) And the reason the story, as well as its 2007 film version, appears to be so fascinating to readers and audiences may be primarily due to the novel's expansive scope and its representation of an unhappy love in the internationally shared tragic history. Despite the novel's clear scope, the major theme nevertheless revolves around private human failings that originate in a tiny, close society and are, in addition to the external circumstances and unlucky period, also brought on by the dysfunction and wrongdoings of this society.

The majority of *Atonement*, save for a coda of just twenty pages out of almost four hundred, is set up as a fictional story written by Briony Tallis, an aging author on the verge of vascular dementia. This makes *Atonement* the most overtly self-reflexive of McEwan's novels. Briony chooses to finally share with the readers the major work of her life, the work through which she desires to atone for her youthful mistake that devastated the life of her sister Cecelia and her sister's beloved, Robbie, perceiving that she might not have another opportunity to do so.

It is clear that Briony, a talented novelist who is aged 77, crafted the intricate fabric of the story to both make up for her error and win the readers' sympathies. Thus, even though Part I of the novel—which recounts events leading to the disastrous indictment through a third person narration, the point of consciousness alternating in consecutive chapters—might not directly attempt to exonerate the girl, it does present her act as the unfortunate result of childish naivety. The genres and themes she was familiar with at the time shaped Briony's perspective on the world and interpersonal connections, just like the juvenile play she wrote for her brother Leon's homecoming, The Trails of Arabella. Despite having a rare ability for language and being an incredibly insightful and sensitive young woman, she has only lived for thirteen years in a generally pleasing and secure life.

The girl's naïve innocence and idealistic view of relationships are effectively shown by the technique of alternating focalization, which also attests to her ignorance of the problem of marital infidelity. The reader experiences the girl's ignorance of the fact that her aunt is away in Paris with her lover when Briony's cousins remain in the home due to their mother's divorce; we learn about the situation only when the focus shifts to Cecelia in the following chapter. But even the older sister finds it puzzling that adultery occurs far more frequently in their own family. Much later, in the narration that is now mostly focused on Briony's mother, we learn that Mr. Tallis' protracted absences are due to more than just his demanding work for the London government:

> That he worked late she didn't doubt, but she knew he did not sleep at his club, and he knew that she knew this. But there was nothing to say. Or, rather, there was too much. They resembled

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> each other in their dread of conflict, and the regularity of his evening calls, however much she disbelieved them, was a comfort to them both. If this sham was conventional hypocrisy, she had to concede that it had its uses. [….] Even being lied to constantly, though hardly like love, was sustained attention; he must care about her to fabricate so elaborately and over such a long stretch of time. His deceit was a form of tribute to the importance of their marriage. (McEwan 148)

Although the children first appeared to be unconscious of the situation, they soon realized that the family was broken, with the mother always suffering from migraines and the father often traveling for work. Although Briony tries to act like an adult, we can still detect childish traits like naivety, stubbornness, and attention-seeking in her acting. These attributes are things that she herself does not truly admit, but are definitely visible in her deep emotional attachment to her elder siblings, Cecilia and Leon. If we reflect on the certain absence of Briony's mother and father, this attachment is only made stronger. Therefore, it makes sense that a young child who lives in a big empty house without her parents would look to her elder sister, Cecilia, for parental care and love. "When she was small and prone to nightmares – those terrible screams in the night – Cecilia used to go to her room and wake her. Come back, she used to whisper. It's only a dream. Come back. And then she would carry her into her own bed" (McEwan 44) Although one would often anticipate the mother to do this reassuring and soothing function, Cecilia, the family's second-oldest female, clearly fills it in this instance. Along with Briony and her brothers, Robbie, the family housekeeper's son, is the next person we meet. Robbie essentially spent his childhood with the three siblings and Mr. Tallis pledges to take care of the expenses of Robbie's university education. Last but not least, this little social group is rounded out by Leon's buddy Paul Marshall and Briony's cousins Lola and Jackson and Pierrot, who visit the Tallis family for the summer due to their own parents' divorce.

Cecelia and Leon refer to their parents as 'Emily' and 'the Old Man' when they discuss them, but not out of disdain or patriarchal bias; rather, this mode of communication simply reflects their mother's weakness and detachment in the symbolic parental role: "Whenever Mrs. Tallis exercised authority in the absence of her husband, the children felt obliged to protect her from seeming ineffectual." (McEwan 127-128)

Although Emily wants to be a loving and caring mother, Cecelia finds Emily to be distant, even unfriendly due to her weepy and self-indulgent demeanor. Two years prior to the events of summer 1935, Jack Tallis began working covertly for the Home Office, and as a result, the Tallis house, with the mother dormant in "an invalid's shadow land," (McEwan 123) has remained in a withered condition of interregnum, devoid of the symbolic organizing force. Briony sees an out-and-out difference in the brief intervals of her father's presence:

> When her father was home, the household settled around a fixed point. He organised nothing, he didn't go about the house worrying on other people's behalf, he rarely told anyone what to do- in fact, he mostly sat in the library. But his presence imposed order and allowed freedom. Burdens were lifted. When he was there, it no longer mattered that her mother retreated to her bedroom; it was enough that he was downstairs with a book on his lap. When he took his place at the dining table, calm, affable, utterly certain, a crisis in the kitchen became no more than a

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> humorous sketch; without him it was a drama that clutched the heart. He knew most things worth knowing, and when he didn't know, he had a good idea which authority to consult, and would take her into the library to help him find it. (McEwan 122)

It is obvious that the father she imagines, a savant curled up with a book in the library, those obvious signifiers of knowledge, is completely idealized and, rather than referencing her actual memories, indicates the shortcomings she wishes an imaginary figure of authority, such as Jacques Lacan's Name-of-the-Father, "the symbolic function [of] the figure of law," (Écrits 67) would fill. It is seen that Briony is still innocent and feels unrecognised and neglected because she just wants advice and guidance, while seeking approval from her indifferent mother seems far from sufficient.

As readers we realise that with so many imperfections and faults, it is obvious that the characters sketched by McEwan in his novel *Atonement* are affected by their disturbed familial background and it impacts their ideas , judgements and behaviour to a great extent. A quick look at the character Briony reveals that she is somebody who can easily be labelled as a spoilt, indifferent and bored child. She is used to having everything that she wanted and grew up in a large, lavish but empty home. Her father is a busy person who is always working and her mother spends most of her time in her bedroom, coping with recurrent headaches.

Briony's material wealth and some sense of grown up freedom make up for her parents' absence in her life to an extent, yet it is seen that she ends up becoming an obstinate, attention seeking and misinformed girl who is hardly aware of the adult responsibilities. She considers herself as her sister's guardian and defender against Robbie and in that pursuit, her fictitious precociousness makes her take erroneous assumptions about what is happening between Robbie and her sister Cecelia. This is in fact acknowledged by Richard Robinson, who clearly writes about Briony as: "She is complicit with the adult codes of her social class but does not possess an instinctive knowledge of what is really happening: a deadly combination" (Robinson 486). Briony fails to interpret the entire incident due to her overactive imagination and believes that Robbie is a pervert and an abusive figure who exploits both her sister and poor Lola. Consequently, Finney also harps in his paper how Briony's "equally over-active imagination leads her to tell the crucial lie" (Finney 70).

Her paternal absence is the reason why Briony is unable to resolve her Oedipus complex and this is evident in the way her obsession with her father is depicted. She portrays bitterness against her father for helping Robbie, which Letissier connects to both her Oedipus complex and her sibling rivalry. Briony redirects her Oedipal attraction away from her father , who is a detached figure, towards other older males. Her brother Leon is the first clear object of her "luminous, yearning fantasies," (McEwan 32) in which he is greatly admired even as resentment lingers. Robbie is also a subject of this infatuation. It is seen that in the second part of the book, Briony's affection is revealed, when the focus is on Robbie's audacious escape in Dunkirk in May 1940. He recalls an event which happened three years before to the calamity as he ponders over the circumstances of the sad occasion and tries to point to the reason for his adversity. For absence of better explanation, Robbie accepts this as an explanation for the girl's false accusation: "For three years she must have nurtured a feeling for him, kept it hidden, nourished it with fantasy or embellished it in her stories." (McEwan 76) However, in Part 3 of the book, which focuses on Briony, a nurse in a hospital in London, the girl has an unexpected memory of a passion she had for

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Robbie when she was younger. However, she remembers that it only lasted a few days, and that after she confessed it to him one morning in the garden she immediately forgot about it. Although they have different main points, parts 2 and 3 are eventually related to the 1999 novel by Briony Tallis, which the reader may see as being inconsistent. Here, it seems reasonable to choose Bentley's interpretation, in which the contradiction is only apparent: "Several years later, when Briony witnesses Lola being attacked, her subconsciously suppressed desire of a connection with Robbie resurfaces. The more mature Briony seemed to comprehend that the thirteen-year-old's unconscious response to Robbie's rejection of her adolescent romantic desire for him was what drove her. Rancor toward a former object of affection is an often seen behavior, according to Freud, who described it as a "change of the content of [a drive]." (Bentley 99) the change of love into hate is "observed in a single instance only," (Bentley 99) the author adds.

Cecelia also goes through the same level of unease and sense of disquiet at home like her young sister. She was even more restless than Briony and spent the majority of her summer days in her bedroom reading and smoking. She feels she is at the crossroads and is restless thinking about her future. She eventually feels that something is pulling her back and that pulling factor might be Robbie, her childhood friend with whom she shares a relationship which is beyond simple. In fact, if we delve into their past, we realise that with their shared times and interests, it is very obvious for two close friends to fall in love with each other. Moreover, sadly enough, their different socioeconomic background may create many unfavourable traits in such a relationship. Robbie is a housekeeper's son and his lower social level than Cecilia will inevitably create problems and will manifest at some point. In this instance, we cannot overlook the fact that Mr. Tallis' affection for Robbie and his generosity actually serve to nourish them. The former's act of helping him and paying for Robbie's schooling irks his wife, Mrs. Tallis and also causes his elder daughter to feel uneasy. Finney writes that "The difference in social class accounts for the early misunderstanding between Robbie and Cecilia" (Finney 76) and employs a scene where Cecilia "mistakes his removing his boots and socks before entering her house for an act of exaggerated deference, 'playacting the cleaning lady's son come to the big house on an errand" (Finney 76). However, it is seen that though Cecelia represses her emotions, allowing them to bubble to the surface once in a while, her mother's smoldering anger for Robbie drives her to voluntarily support Briony's version of the plot. This leads to Robbie's imprisonment, leaving a profound impact on Robbie and Cecelia's love and their lives, ultimately bringing their relationship to a close.

It is seen that, though the primary focus of the readers is on the main characters like Briony, Cecelia and Robbie who come from dysfunctional families, the other secondary characters like Lola and her identical twin brothers, Pierrot and Jackson are also stark examples of individuals portraying the effects of family discord. They arrive at the Tallis house at the beginning of the novel to escape from their parents' fights. They are very depressed and preoccupied and their behaviour made their fractured family background quite apparent. This, eventually, creates the ideal circumstance for their sister to have a violent confrontation. Additionally, Paul Marshal, who rapes Lola is never convicted and instead Robbie is wrongfully charged and imprisoned. Consequently, we see that due to this wrong decision, Paul is even permitted to marry Lola a few years later. Although it is not very clearly presented if Lola is aware of the actual rapist's identity, Briony later alludes to it during the wedding that she is. Thus, it is revealed

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that the entire story of the wedding that takes place subtly points at the bitter secret that all of them will maintain till the last breath of their lives.

> Poor vain and vulnerable Lola with the pearl-studded choker and the rose-water scent, who longed to throw off the last restraints of childhood, who saved herself from humiliation by falling in love, or persuading herself she had, and who could not believe her luck when Briony insisted on doing the talking and blaming. And what luck that was for Lola – barely more than a child, prised open and taken – to marry her rapist . . . By any estimate, it was a very long time until judgment day, and until then the truth that only Marshall and his bride knew at first hand, was steadily being walled up within the mausoleum of their marriage. There it would lie secure in the darkness, long after anyone who cared was dead. Every word in the ceremony was another brick in place. (McEwan 324-325)

Paul and Lola got married and this marriage not only makes their shared future strange and painful, but it also prohibits Briony from putting things right legally or, if nothing else, from making amends before the public through her book. As mentioned in the last chapter of *Atonement*, Briony is unable to publish her book while Lola and Paul are still alive because it would contain their personalities. Furthermore, as Briony is rapidly deteriorating and running out of time, McEwan ends the book by at least allowing Briony to atone for her actions through the act of writing her book: "I like to think that it isn't weakness or evasion, but a final act of kindness, a stand against oblivion and despair, to let my lovers live and to unite them at the end. I gave them happiness, but I was not so self-serving as to let them forgive me. Not quite, not yet" (McEwan 372).

In her book titled *Ian McEwan*, Lynn Wells claims that: "McEwan was strongly influenced by the postmodernist techniques of contemporary novelists in England, such as Iris Murdoch and John Fowles" (Wells 16). The term 'postmodernism' is often employed by critics to describe McEwan's writings, albeit frequently with a certain amount of caution. Briony's purported authorship in the conclusion of *Atonement* is an example of metafiction, while the character Jack in *The Cement Garden* depicts a classic postmodern unreliable narrator. Beyond any doubt, in all of McEwan's novels, we see a postmodernist approach to literature. But this approach is not just about intertextuality, metafiction and the other textual experiments that McEwan undertakes, it is about the subjects and the themes that exist in his novels. Ian McEwan's prose complies with John Lye's definition of post-modernist literature as "the challenging of borders and limits, including those of decency" and "the exploration of the marginalized aspects of life and marginalized elements of society" (Lye). This approach, as described by Lye is, "the exploration of the hidden, unpleasant, or taboo aspects of humanity." The individuals, we see in his works, are portrayed in circumstances and behaviours that stand on the periphery of some kind of societal behaviour and reflect an air of oddity. That said, they also form an integral part of what it means to be human. Issues like incest, rape, murders, brutality were portrayed and accepted with some amount of caution and disguising in traditional culture, but in McEwan's works these subjects are quite gripping.

In the postmodern era, dysfunctional family dynamics has caught the attention of most of the writers and they depict various forms of it and the novel we discussed here clearly presents this dysfunction. In this chapter an attempt was made to study the form of dysfunction, the reason for dysfunction and the effect of it on the characters. After the analysis it is seen that in the novels of McEwan, the main reason of the

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anguish and trouble of the characters, is the dysfunctional family in which he or she is brought up, no matter whatever type of extreme journey the character takes up. Nevertheless, it becomes clear from examining the dysfunctional dynamics in the books that we are not dealing with a postmodernist society in the strictest sense of the word. The novels that were analyzed still have many aspects of modernist family dynamics and experiences. The characters are not depicted as being as free to choose as postmodernism and its detractors have claimed. Characters' lives and decisions are still heavily influenced by structural elements including race, gender, and socioeconomic class. Even while the female characters in the novels are given more latitude to follow their own paths, we nevertheless observe that they adhere to certain conventional family norms, such as having children.

McEwan attributes the dysfunctionality in family life and structure to Postmodern ethos. It seems as if he is interrogating the family dynamics and the reasons of the chaos within it and the disturbances in the disturbances in the society. The chaos we see in the lives and the families in these novels is not just because the characters try to follow or are guided by a postmodern psyche. In fact, after the analysis it is deduced that the dwindling of the family structure is due to the characters' attempts to hold on to the traditional family norms and thus failing to keep pace with the changing time. This leads to confusion and ultimately again results in chaos. Thus, McEwan interrogates the predicament of the family structure in the face of postmodernism.

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