

Dystopian Vision in Ian McEwan's *Enduring Love*

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Abstract

This paper argues that the novel *Enduring Love* projects a dystopian vision through the portrayal of failed and embittered lives of major characters. The novel is about the characters' futile search for utopian life. Joe, through scientific rationalization, Clarissa through literary imagination and love, Jed through religious belief want to live a fulfilling and blissful life but fail due to various reasons related to misplaced values and beliefs or the social realities. None of the ways they adopt, leads them to the fulfillment of utopian ideals. Success through science, religion, or imagination is just a chimera that causes people to hallucinate. The narrative of enduring love interweaves subverted utopian lives of the characters from different fields of life thereby dramatizing the idea that life is dystopian and people's attempt to live an ideal life is only a mirage. This paper analyzes the novel *Enduring Love* with the help of ideas about utopia and dystopia borrowed from writers like Krishan Kumar, R. Carter, Robert C. Elliot, and others.

Keywords: Dystopia, utopia, blissful life, ideals, subversion, mirage, chimera

Introduction

This article analyzes Ian McEwan's novel, *Enduring Love* in the light of dystopia view of life as the novel tries to show the subversion of utopian thinking by challenging scientific rationalism and romantic sentimentalism by Joe who is the narrator and science Journalist, and Clarissa who is Keats scholar and an expert of romanticism respectively. The utopian world of love envisioned by them is brought down by their condition of childlessness which is worsened further due to the balloon accident and other subsequent troubles that lead the protagonists towards a melancholic world of frustration, despair, and overall devastation. Though Jed parry envisions a blissful life through his homoerotic obsession with Joe it doesn't last long due to Joe's indifference and hatred towards him. His apparently religious attachment to Joe breaks into pieces as he ends up in a lunatic asylum. The marriage between Joe and Clarissa doesn't guarantee long-lasting happiness due to hostility and lack of understanding. Thus the novel destabilizes utopian ideals of blissful life and ideal friendship.

Revolving around the tragic balloon accident that brings strangers together, the novel dramatizes the trauma of the characters and presents multiple causes behind the chaotic and disordered life of people. The lives of these characters are marked by various anomalies despite their restless efforts to live a life of joy and hope. The narrative of the novel moves around the lives of three protagonists with three different world views. Joe Rose, the narrator, and the science journalist represents a rational world view whereas his beloved Clarissa, Keats scholar, and professor of literature stands for romantic sentimentalism. Jed Parry, a lonely young man, and a devout Christian represents a religious worldview. Throughout the novel, Joe interprets everything rationally and wants to create a utopian world dominated by science and technology.

Clarissa Mellon focuses on love and a good relationship over everything else for a happy life. As a scholar of romantic poets and literature, she chooses sentimentalism as the

remedy for all kinds of problems. Her view clashes with the rational world view of her lover, Joe. Jed wants to establish a utopian life through his homoerotic relationship with Joe.

Though he is religious, the kind of relationship he wants to create is not sanctioned by his religion. The situation of his life deteriorates due to his own misplaced ideals. Jean Logan's attempt to prove his fatherhood by saving the child results in his own death. In this sense, the major characters' search for utopian life ultimately meets with tragedy, despair, and dissolution. This is a dystopian vision of life as portrayed by McEwan in the novel.

Textual Analysis

This article explores and analyzes the novel *Enduring Love* to show how utopian ideals are destabilized and subverted in the light of the character's aspirations and their subsequent failure to achieve those ideals. The novel thus highlights the impossibility and impracticability of a utopian vision of life. The main characters in the novel - Joe, Clarissa, Jed, and Logan take different things as the ideals of their life. They aspire to achieve happiness and satisfaction through their respective ways and ideals. This subversion of utopian vision is echoed by Krishan Kumar's remark that, "anti-utopia draws its material from utopia and reassembles it in a manner that denies the affirmation of utopia. It is the mirror image of a utopia - but a distorted image seen in a cracked mirror" (100). For Krishan Kumar, anti-utopia is born out of a sense of frustration and thwarted utopianism. It is generally recognized as a distorted reflection of utopia as the utopian promises of happiness and progress are reversed in dystopia.

Joe and Clarissa's search for a perfect vision of love and affection is infested by childlessness. Their ideal of living a blissful married life is shattered by the clash of their own ideals, views, and temperaments. Clarissa's sentimental world crumbles with its touch with the rationalistic world of Joe:

Self-consciousness is the destroyer of erotic joy. In bed, only an hour and a half before, we had been unconvincing somehow, as though there lay between our mucous membranes a fine dust or grit or its mental equivalent, but as tangible as beach sand. Sitting in the kitchen after Clarissa had left I conjured a morose causal sequence shading from psyche to soma - bad thoughts, low arousal, minimal lubrication - and pain. (149)

Joe realizes that his rationalistic mind destroys the happiness that he could otherwise experience in his relationship with Clarissa. It has even robbed him of sexual pleasure. This conflict between Joe and Clarissa leads them to frustration as they cannot strike any point of compromise and understanding. It serves to illustrate that utopia is possible only in imagination and speculation, not in real-life situations. It is incompatible with human integrity, individual sanity, and a decent social system since no society can be completely flawless and faultless. This is because utopia entails inherent contradictions and incompatibilities in itself. This kind of dystopian fiction fails to provide “full opportunity to develop an intimate and satisfying personal relationship” (Elliot 130). This failure ultimately becomes the cause of disharmony, lack of uniformity, and disorganization.

Jose Rose is a rationalist science journalist popularizing scientific theories for the general public. His partner, Clarissa is an English lecturer in the humanities and a Keats scholar. Joe meets Jed Parry at the site of the balloon incident. Jed is a religious character who is obsessive and has a psychological disorder called de Clerambault’s syndrome, a symptom of which, makes him believe that Joe Rose is in love with him though there is proof to the contrary. Joe is driven mad by Jed’s relentless pursuit and even goes to the extent of buying a gun to threaten Joe and his beloved. Jed’s dream of developing an ideal friendship with Joe is unrealistic and instead of joy it creates more chaos and despair in his life. Joe cannot understand Jed’s true desire for friendship because he interprets everything

scientifically which blinds him to other possible ways of interpretation. He wants to analyze everything with facts and proofs. For the critic David Malcolm:

Joe is a character who is fact-oriented, materialist, rational, and distrustful of emotions and what cannot be discussed logically, and extremely authoritative and confident in his pronouncements on the world. he is also a character who has a strong sense of failure and disappointment and is prone at times to irrational behaviour and ways of thought. (166)

Joe's scientific materialism and rationalism prevent him from writing love letters to Clarissa, as he says, "all that sincerity would permit me were the facts and they seemed miraculous enough to me" (7). Joe finds it unbelievable that a beautiful lady like Clarissa could love him. Joe always uses facts and empirical data to draw conclusions. He describes Logan's death in a very impersonal manner as the "closing down of countless interrelated neural and biochemical exchanges" (25). It is this obsession with rationalism that prevents him from enjoying a meaningful relationship with both Clarissa and Jed.

Dystopia is generally understood to be a distorted form of utopia as the utopian promises of happiness and progress are reversed in it. Thomas Mautner defines dystopia as "a fictional account of bad political and social conditions. The story is of often one of social or political movements or development which promise utopia and inspire hope, but end up as utopia in reverse" (119). Dystopia is thus presented under the guise of false utopia. The novel *Enduring Love* problematizes the utopian ideals of a happy and harmonious life and presents a dystopian vision of life. Clarissa wants to live a happy and orderly life but fails. The following quote illustrates her despair and frustration:

In her early twenties, a routine surgical procedure had left Clarissa unable to bear children. She believed her medical notes had been confused with another woman's, but this was impossible to prove and a long legal action foundered in delays and

obstructions. Slowly, she had buried the sadness, and built her life again, and ensured that children remained a part of it. (45)

Despite the development of science and technology Clarissa is unable to bear children which creates a kind of emptiness in her life. This is the major cause behind her despair, frustration, and restlessness. To forget the pain resulting from her present state of life she often goes back to the happy moments of her past. She is also traumatized by the memory of her father's death from Alzheimer's disease which weighs heavily on her heart. Since then she has always had a fear that she will have to live with someone crazy.

In a dystopian society, people cannot live a fearless and free life. Different kinds of anxieties and problems torture them. For R Carter:

the whole society is in fact an illusion of a perfect world .. which is maintained through .. scientific methods or religious ideology. The dystopian inhabitants constantly try to escape this world in which they feel trapped; they do not trust the social and the political system, which, in their opinion, promote wrong values and ideas. (129)

Dystopia is a bitter satire on modern people who unquestionably believe in the comforts and benefits given by science and technology ultimately losing their individual potentials and capabilities. Dystopia foregrounds different hazardous conditions of life like danger, threat, insecurity and crimes, etc. In the novel, Joe's rational and scientific world crumbles with a decline in utopian thinking. His rationalism is undermined and overpowered by the sentimentalism of Clarissa and the religious belief of Jed Parry. Throughout the novel, there is a conflict between science, religion, and literature represented by Joe, Jed, and Clarissa respectively. Though, Joe is firm in his belief in the beginning, he becomes unreliable as the plot unfolds. He slowly loses his grip and starts praying with Jed and becomes confused in his ideas of science:

For a moment I thought I wouldn't answer him. I wanted him to know that his faith laid no obligations on me. But then I changed my mind and said, nothing. Nothing is standing in my way . . . I hesitated and almost said nothing. But I decided he ought to know the truth. 'Because, my friend, no one is listening. There's no one up there.'

(37)

Joe cannot reject the belief of Jed for long as he comes to realize that his own belief in science has proved to be hostile and starts believing in the ideas followed by Jed Parry. He starts considering praying as a kind of duty. Jed's stubbornness and determination make Joe question and rethink his own thinking and beliefs. He realizes that his own world is crumbling down. His thought of utopian life fades away. For Arthur O. Lewis this kind of dystopian world means many things like, "reverse utopians, negative utopias, inverted utopias, dystopias . . . nasty utopias" (27). Adding to this life of denotations of dystopia, Aldridge remarks that these kinds of worlds are, "sour utopias in the apocalyptic mode" and "negative quasi-utopias" (5).

Enduring Love subverts utopian vision of life and underlines dystopian realities. The 'enduring love' of the title has multiple meanings. It may refer to strong and lasting love between Joe and Clarissa which ultimately erodes due to pressure from outside. It may also mean unrelenting passion Parry feels for Joe which is a kind of obsessive affection that Joe must endure for a long time. The novel dramatizes an intriguing tension between science and religion, logic, and emotion. The fiction of anti-utopian type represents a disruption of various kinds as "dystopian literature refers to the decadence of people reflected in acts of violence, sexual immorality and use of drugs" (Whissen 65). The behaviour, actions, and thought patterns of the main characters provide testimony to it

Conclusion

McEwan's *Enduring Love* looks critically at different kinds of obsession and the resultant failure of characters to achieve a blissful and successful life. Joe's obsessive belief in science and rationalism separates him from others and creates anxieties for himself. Clarissa's study of romantic literature and sentimentalism cannot bring her the kind of life she desires for herself. Jed Parry's unrelenting passion for Christ and religion lands him into unwanted trouble and leads to wretchedness. Logan's desire to prove his fatherhood by rescuing a child results in his own death. In this way, the novel subverts the utopian ideals of the main characters and presents a dystopian vision of life. It is a portrayal of the condition of a modern people destined to live in a world devoid of meaning, joy, and purpose.

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