

Postmodern Outlook in Ian McEwan's *Saturday*

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Abstract:

The novel *Saturday* narrates just one day (15th, February, 2003), a normal Saturday of a neurosurgeon, Henry Perowne. Perowne encounters with the injustices of modern civilization violently even at his own living room where the street thug Baxter trespasses into his well-protected house. The present study explores the post modernity of the novel *Saturday* and its adherence of aesthetics of realism. It describes the protagonist's movements without narrating his thoughts clearly. In general, it is regarded as the view of an external observer. It is revealed from the phrase "wakes to find himself already in motion" that the narrator echoes his inner voice as an outsider would not be able to be precise when exactly Perowne becomes conscious. The theme of the novel is predominantly postmodern with its formal traits indicating commitment to realism. Therefore, it is concluded that *Saturday* in its themes and concerns is largely a postmodern novel adoring a function of literature being basically realist with the role of upholding the illusion of unity having been lost in this postmodern society.

Keywords: Postmodernism, realism, love, sacrifice, rationalism, exaggeration

The novel *Saturday* narrates just one day (15th, February, 2003), a normal Saturday of a neurosurgeon, Henry Perowne purchasing groceries, cooking dinner, playing squash and so on. It describes a struggle of accepting the realities of postmodern life of promoting the idea of development among the people being in absolute need of much sophistication and connecting the biologist perception of life with some kind of in-corporeality. Perowne encounters with the injustices of modern civilization violently even at his own living room where the street thug Baxter trespasses into his well-protected house. The present study explores the post modernity of the novel *Saturday* and its adherence of aesthetics of realism. There is a great dissimilitude between postmodernism and realism in view of the function of the aesthetics as the order of the narrative like "chronological plots, continuous narratives relayed by omniscient narrators, [and] closed endings" (Barry 82). The concept of realism is something incongruous to the idea of postmodernism. According to the French postmodern thinker Jean Francois Lyotard, the role of realism is "protecting consciousness from doubt, [...] stabilizing the referent, ordering it from the point of view that would give it recognizable meaning" (374).

The introduction of the protagonist as a neurosurgeon gives an implicit view of identity in the world of the novel as it is described later in the novel, “For certain days, even weeks on end, work can shape every hour; it’s the tide, the lunar cycle they set their lives by, and without it, it can seem, there’s nothing, Henry and Rosalind Perowne are nothing” (23). It is evident that the characters stabilize their perception of the world on the grand narrative of the working life and the identity as a professional. Frida Plasencia Skybäck indicates the work as an influential part of Perowne’s identity without explicating the same in terms of the grand narrative in view of microcosm: “where he feels at home and in control” and stresses the fact that he “find[s] security in his medical identity” (5).

In a nutshell, Plasencia Skybäck observes that “Always focusing on his job and living with the hospital as a blindfold, Henry is secluded from what happens outside of his enclave” (6). Perowne contemplates what there is going on in the world and gets distressed by the happenings. Furthermore, his sensible, research based and positivistic approach owing to his choice of profession as neurosurgeon and the way he manages to save lives underlines something of the admiration of human achievements through growth. Besides, the description of neurosurgery in detail opens up something of a realistic project. In the Acknowledgement Page at the end of the book, the pragmatic objective of the novel is insisted with an observation: “It was a privilege to watch this gifted surgeon at work in the theatre over a period of two years, and I thank him for his kindness and patience in taking time out of a demanding schedule to explain to me the intricacies of his profession” (280).

McEwan cooks up nothing but representing the matter of fact. For instance, the accurate movement- “pushing back the covers from a sitting position” is indicated repeatedly throughout the narrative making the function more realistic and claiming the veracity more trustworthy. It can be compared to the idea of postmodernism to examine the factual claims rather than asseverating then. Rice and Waugh indicate, “The relativization of styles which is postmodernism, throws into doubt the claims of any one discourse of story to be offering the ‘truth’ about the world or an authoritative version of the real” (326). This entire passage seems to be very tangible due to the precise indications. The noun phrases such as his “limbs”, “his back and legs” and “the wintry bedroom air” extended with attributes forge them more specific and concrete.

The objective of fiction is to be concrete as literature is exaggeration of making ideas concrete and specific. Those who associate this to the question of realism and postmodernism, advocate that a concrete text narrates a particular point of reality rather than trying to probe the condition of its conception. Lyotard differentiates a dissimilitude between the sublime and the beautiful with a perspective that the beautiful representation constrains to the conservative realism providing us pleasure without challenging our perception of the world with safe affirmation of reality whereas the sublime offers both pleasure and pain along with how the reality is shown in a negative representation as our mere conception and not our representation. According to Lyotard, the postmodern representation is “that which refuses the consolation of

correct forms, [...] to better produce the feeling that there is something un-presentable” (377-379).

The opening of the novel *Saturday* is an external perspective right from the very first sentence. It describes the protagonist's movements without narrating his thoughts clearly. In general, it is regarded as the view of an external observer. It is revealed from the phrase “wakes to find himself already in motion” that the narrator echoes his inner voice as an outsider would not be able to be precise when exactly Perowne becomes conscious. It is evident from the second sentence that Perowne is the point of focalization since his experience of the events is described: “[i]t is not clear to him”. From third to fifth sentences, his pleasant experience is highlighted. The narration in the entire passage is in the present tense making the feeling of instancy and representing a conception or consciousness rather than a written manuscript with a surreptitious narrator. In fact, the narration is concealed without inviting attention by probing a synthesized consciousness and making it of realism. In sentence seven-“He has no idea what he's doing out of bed”- the reader can understand his sense of thoughts and this makes the reader learn that someone is perhaps habitually exploring himself and his reasons. The relationship between cause and effect starts with the absolute physical moving from the phrase “he has no need to relieve himself” to psychological one from the phrase, “nor is he disturbed by a dream or some element of the day before”. This causation is frequently probed and impeded in postmodern narratives trailing around with the realistic logic. In sentence eight, figurative language is applied: “It's as if, standing there in the darkness”.

Indeed Perowne feels that “he has materialized out of nothing” in providing a sense of a birth, a memory-less beginning with the phrase “fully formed” in the end of sentence eight insisting further the feeling of birth; it is certainly noteworthy that someone is born fully formed. The term “unencumbered” indicates that he experiences discharge from his past, his human sensation. The phrase “elated” and “empty-headed” employed in sentence ten correlates with the previous terms “unencumbered” and “materialized out of nothing”. He is elevated without being pushed into the bad condition by anxieties and responsibilities either from the past or from the future. He is absolutely in the moment that is to be analyzed to the greater extent in the novel. Keeping consciousness in the human perception is nothing but the incapability of thoroughly appreciating the moment. It can be understood from the part of dealing with the squash game: “it's possible in a long rally to become a virtually unconscious being, inhabiting the narrowest slice of the present, merely reacting, taking one shot at a time, existing only to keep going” (109).

The reader realizes from this passage of the squash scene that time has become a physical thing. The phrase “existing only to keep going” seems to be well balanced and a piece of cake without questioning anything especially any good reason for one's existence being a chunk of a human or postmodern. The reader relates this in the novel when Perowne reviews his thought on the difference between novels and poetry.

He identifies the distinctions of poetry while fictions and movies mushroom everywhere. “Novels and movies, being restlessly modern, propel you forwards or backwards through time, through days, years or even generations but to do its noticing and judging, poetry balances itself on the pinprick of the moment” (129). It is advocated here that being a realistic genre, novels take us from various times without getting us stopped and seeing the moment whereas poetry is more attention-seeking. This perspective of poetry can be viewed in comparison with the sensation of “inhabiting the narrowest slice of the present” from the squash scene. The readers would be able to rescue the present and attract the attention from the constant flux of media and stories without focusing grand narratives around us with the help of Poetry only. Therefore, the characterization of Baxter is described in a poetic aesthetics whereas Perowne is never like that. Perowne encounters the street thug Baxter on his way to the squash game. He is a chronic neurological patient with ceaselessly deteriorated nerve system. Baxter is in need of a very little moment since for him every while takes to a downward spiral convolution as he is in the ironic reverse of growth.

In the opening of the novel, Perowne expresses that he is not fascinated in dreams in thirteenth sentence, but “there is a richer possibility for this should be real”. The term “real” is here employed in a traditional way depending on its fixed meaning without examining the difference between real and unreal. The expression of one’s view of the world is real employed in a way like this. The term “dreams” are not here either real or the unconscious. It is supposed that the real is nothing but conventionally scientific, corporeal and tactile.

The common sense is apparently reflected in the exaggerated chronology of events and very easy management of time. In her article, Ruth Scurr indicates, “Happiness of a knife’s edge”, the novel is “conforming to the classical unities of time, place and action”. The readers deem that our outlook of the world is not to be questioned in this novel due to these unities and the concealed power structures becomes invisible owing to disruptive power of heuristic art. Keen shows: In general the readers have “common assumption that a disorderly narrative is more subversive than an orderly one” (107). Lyotard regards that a disorderly narrative is more subversive as the power structures become obvious due to that remaining underneath our conception of reality. Lyotard states that realism that might be equated with an orderly narration “can be defined only by its intention of avoiding the question of reality implied in the question of art” (Lyotard LT 374).

Likewise, Perowne’s perception about himself in this moment is expressed in sentence fourteen: “he is entirely himself”. At this juncture, it is crystal clear that he is not sleeping. In general, being oneself infers indispensable something on account of identity. This indicates about the identity manifesting a substantial and precise entity. Likewise, “finding one-self” is incongruous indicating that one can have lost something existing basically and initially there. The sentence is constructed with several abstract nouns such as “difference”, “boundaries” and “essence of sanity”. The term “difference” expresses an idea of something to be known suggesting to place things pertaining to each other so as to differentiate the one from the other. It

is not easy to define sleep without expressing what it is not; it is not being wakeful. However, this passage infers in this way to define things related to other identifying the acute thin line between white and black by missing the grey areas of constructing language possible. The grey area of language identified depending on difference would always be impossible. It does not mean that there is no grey area at all; it means that it is essential to wipe out the same for realizing the reality.

In the postmodern perspective, a widespread general opinion has arrived that “the postmodern project is a rejection of modernity and the enlightenment project of progress and reason” (Rice and Waugh 325-326). For instance, Lyotard deems that “the idea of progress is just another meta narrative, which it is our duty to free ourselves from because it rests on an arbitrary foundation of power”. Barry elucidates:

“For Lyotard the Enlightenment [...] is simply one of the would-be authoritative ‘overarching’, ‘totalizing’ explanations of things – like Christianity, Marxism or the myth of scientific progress. These ‘meta-narratives’ [...] which purport to explain and reassure, are really illusions, fostered in order to smother difference, opposition, and plurality” (86).

However, Lyotard never dismisses knowledge and scientific exploration totally. He advocates that “postmodernism is not rejecting everything, that it is not an entirely negative school of thought, but one that questions different understandings of reality” (375-377). Perowne is portrayed as a progressive, positivistic scientist in the novel and he is exasperated with his daughter’s university professors who “thought the idea of progress old-fashioned and ridiculous; in indignation, Perowne grips the wheel tighter in his right hand” (77). Anyway, the text itself is more complicated with the view of progress and it is evident that Perowne is conspicuously prejudiced, conservative and benighted in many things particularly literature. The reader learns from this that there is an ironic distance between protagonist and implicit author. This ironic distance possibly includes this prejudiced perception of progress indicated here.

Furthermore, Perowne himself expresses a virtually exaggerated comprehension about readers’ credence in grand narratives without focusing on making science and development as the focal point of his own belief system. (172). In general, postmodernism has greatly probed “the truth-claims made by science as just another grand narrative whose truth rests on rules that it has itself fashioned” (Rice and Waugh 448). Various perspective on city as a product of growth is found while describing city. The description of city varies time to time as perfect invention or something artificial or a nostalgia for simple times with phrases being “baffled and fearful” (4). For instance, in the opening of the first part, there is dingy outlook on city, when Perowne is facing “the night, the city in its icy white light, the skeletal trees in the square, and thirty feet below, the black arrowhead railings like a row of spears” (4).

Indeed, the rhyming couplet “night” and “light” gives here an effect of dissimilitude indicating a concept of the artificiality of the city with the light at night and questioning the binary oppositions of night and day and dark and light. The city is man-made; something different from natural aspects by all means. The “icy white light” in the city is derived from man-made sources; not from natural sources. However, it is generally regarded that everyone is sleeping in the night. At the same time, Perowne is not sleeping so that he thinks from the icy white light that the whole city that is supposed to be sleeping is not sleeping like him. This passage moves from essentially and somewhat theoretical to more concrete and practical. Moreover, the passage continues: “the streetlamp glare hasn’t quite obliterated all the stars” (4) and there is also a sense of contrast of near and far. The phrase “the streetlamp glare” is derived from a kind of source striking out most of the stars, but not all, “above the Regency façade on the other side of the square hang remnants of constellations in the southern sky” (4).

It is noteworthy that the entire constellations named after Gods thousands of years ago are not available now and only parts of the same are found insisting the concept of artificial icy white light of the city that has put an end to the stars regarded as symbolic representation of Gods in the olden days. In this postmodern era, they are no more significant. In this narrative, the reader could hear a lamentation for a pleasant eco-friendly world living very close to nature. Forgetting almost everything made up of nature and skepticism are the root causes for the sleepless nights of a cosmopolitan city.

The technological advancements of the city are not at all regarded as development since the narration of the same looks incoherent and objective. In view of Perowne, a much more positive narration of the city is found in the novel: “a foreshortened jumble of facades, scaffolding and pitched roofs” is associated with a “city” (5). Afterwards, the city is narrated in comparison to “a brilliant invention, a biological masterpiece – millions teeming around the accumulated and layered achievements of the centuries, as though around a coral reef, sleeping, working, entertaining themselves, harmonious for the most part, nearly everyone wanting it to work” (5).

The phrase “the belief in progress” is collocated and differentiated with religion and creator: The terms “invention” and “masterpiece” give inference of a creator, an agent whereas the term “biological” gives different idea. The “accumulated and layered achievements of the centuries” provides a crystal clear perspective being attributed to the idea of development – which civilization is progressing logically like a fortunate tycoon amassing opulence. The simile of the coral reef infers something different from the previous terms “masterpiece and invention”. The coral reef is understood of a group of animals with instinct of “sleeping, working, entertaining themselves”. This outlook reflects Darwin and *The Origin of Species*, also named in the novel as of Henry’s reading list. Besides, the term “harmonious” contextually means positive thing in terms of development. Prownw’s daily routine is challenged and destabilized with the protest-ridden urban environment and the thugs braking into his home. In

spite of contrast of the home and the city, Perowne shows pleasant emotions when he gets up abruptly and catches an early morning glimpse of the city:

The humanity moves forward into the quintessential world with the help of modernity despite its remote possibility of holocaust of nuclear or bio war. The phrase “Cool fresh water” definitely implies something, not to be taken for granted. Prowne’s city, world and also family is fortunate and advantaged. In a patriarchal society, head of the household, the fathers of families take control over most of our part of the world. Perowne is familiar with his privileged circumstances.

In the novel, *Saturday*, McEwan highlights sense or “consciousness” of an individual as moral “conscience.” Andrew Foley indicates these words exceptionally take place on both the first and last pages of the novel (Foley, 2009, p. 244).

In the novel, *Saturday*, McEwan describes anthropological, racial and historical perspectives of humanity, their cultural and rational worldwide outlook and national or religious identity. McEwan’s universal logical outlook is contradictory to other ideologies or belief systems including Islamic fundamentalism. Islam suggests fulfilling a specific role in society being conditional since it is a cosmic fact that is what you must be (Cox & Marks, 2006, p. 21). As they are cosmic facts, there is no other way but carrying out these roles in society. Like Sartre and Levinas, McEwan also dismisses any possibility to know external ontology confining his concept of reality to self-perception:

What I believe but cannot prove is that no part of my consciousness will survive my death. I exclude the fact that I will linger, fadingly, in the thoughts of others, or that aspects of my consciousness will survive in writing, or in the positioning of a planted tree or a dent in my old car. I expect that many contributors to *Edge* will take this premise as a given: true but not significant. However, it divides the world crucially, and much damage has been done to thought as well as to persons by those who are certain that there is a life-elsewhere. That this span is brief, that consciousness is an accidental gift of blind-processes, makes our existence all the more precious and our responsibilities for it all the more profound (Brockman, 2005, p. 36).

Henry Perowne perceives life to be out and out capricious and fortuitous as a supporter of evolution (p. 55-56), along with future feasibilities to be “equally real” as he refers to Schrödinger’s Cat (p. 18-19). Prowne’s way of thinking is completely contradictory to the rigid ideologies representing religions such as Islamic fundamentalism:

The random ordering of the world, the unimaginable odds – against any particular condition, still please[d] him. Even as a child...he never believed in fate or providence, or the future being made by someone in the

sky. Instead, at every instant, a trillion trillion possible futures; the pickiness of pure chance and physical laws seemed like freedom from the scheming of a gloomy god (p. 128).

As a humanist, McEwan “denigrates God and sees the belief in God as human weakness, advocating rationalism” (Brockman, 2006, p. 36). McEwan conveys his views and beliefs through Perowne finding Islam “distasteful” (p. 124), like any other religion. McEwan projects Islamic fundamentalism as a hostile ideological contrast to liberalism and humanism since “Radical Islam hates your freedom” (p. 191). Perowne’s belief is similar to that of Sartre’s perception on religion implicating self-deception:

That it should be him and not someone else is an ordinary matter. A simple anthropic principle is involved. The primitive thinking of the supernaturally inclined amounts to what his psychiatric colleagues, call a problem, or an idea, of reference; an excess of the subjective, an ordering of the world in line with your needs, an inability to contemplate your own unimportance. In Henry’s view such reasoning belongs on a spectrum at whose far end, rearing like an abandoned temple, lies psychosis (McEwan, *Saturday*: 17).

The novel is basically not questioning the concept of reality as a whole in its form, but it discusses a clear cut postmodern, investigating perspective of reality. Leah Wain expresses: “Postmodernism responds to reality, not unlike its treatment of history, as a myth which is perpetuated in order to sustain political ideologies” (367)

The theme of the novel is predominantly postmodern with its formal traits indicating commitment to realism. Therefore, it is concluded that *Saturday* in its themes and concerns is largely a postmodern novel adoring a function of literature being basically realist with the role of upholding the illusion of unity having been lost in this postmodern society.

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