

# *A Study of Ian McEwan's Novels and Their Ethical Values: A Chinese Perspective*

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**Abstract** Biwu Shang's monograph of *A Study of Ian McEwan's Novels and Their Ethical Values* (Beijing: Peking University Press, 2023), the first book-length study dealing with the ethical and moral issues in McEwan's works in China, is a highly valuable and much-needed contribution to world McEwan scholarship. Shang's book starts from the unsettled question of McEwan's status as one of the finest and most controversial writers of his generation: How could a writer have achieved popularity and critical success with his works about paedophilia, murder, incest and violence? Shang finds the very answer in McEwan's claim of the moral role of the novel. In his monograph, Shang provides a comprehensive and systematic survey of ethical issues, as explored in McEwan's oeuvre. More ambitiously, as the author claimed, "the goal is to discover the ethical implications in McEwan's works, reflecting Chinese scholars' critical perspectives of Western literary works through dialectical analysis, thereby offering an alternative interpretation other than following Western scholars' critical approaches and viewpoints."<sup>1</sup>

**Key Words** Ian McEwan; Ethical Literary Criticism; ethical chaos; ethical dilemma; ethical redemption

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In 1992, Ian McEwan's short story "In the Dying Moments" was first translated and published in *Foreign Literature* 外国文学. This British literary genius had hardly imagined that his works would soon be widely circulated and highly celebrated in

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<sup>1</sup> This work was supported by The Ministry of Education of Humanities and Social Science Project (grant number: 20YJC752027, 2020)

contemporary China. In 2018, he visited China for the first time upon invitation to attend the award ceremony titled “The 21st Century International Literature Festival for College Students” at Renmin University of China, Beijing. During his stay, he met with Chinese readers in Beijing and Shanghai and was engaging in discussions on fictional writing with contemporary Chinese writers such as Li Er 李洱, Ge Fei 格非, Xiaobai 小白, and Sun Ganlu 孙甘露. This was one of the highlights in the Chinese literary scene of 2018, additional evidence of McEwan’s popularity among Chinese readers and his influence on modern Chinese literature. Biwu Shang’s monograph of *A Study of Ian McEwan's Novels and Their Ethical Values* (Beijing: Peking University Press, 2023), the first book-length study dealing with the ethical and moral issues in McEwan’s works in China, is therefore a highly valuable and much-needed contribution.

Shang’s book starts from the unsettled question of McEwan’s status as one of the finest and most controversial writers of his generation: How could a writer have achieved popularity and critical success with his works about paedophilia, murder, incest and violence? Shang finds the very answer in McEwan’s claim of the moral role of the novel. He believes that “we are innately moral beings, at the most basic, wired-in Neurological level.”<sup>1</sup> This morality, he further describes, stems from the fact that “our imagination permits us to understand what it is like to be someone else.” In this sense, the novel is “a deeply moral form, in that it is the perfect medium for entering the mind of another.” Shang argues that underneath the disquieting material in his early writing and his varied concerns with marginalized individuals in society, environmental degradation, and human civilization in subsequent writings lies McEwan’s persistent vision of the fiction as “deeply moral form” and force for social good. This is the premise upon which the book rests.

In his monograph, Shang aims principally to provide a comprehensive and systematic survey of ethical issues, as explored in McEwan’s oeuvre. More ambitiously, as the author claimed, “the goal is to discover the ethical implications in McEwan’s works, reflecting Chinese scholars’ critical perspectives of Western literary works through dialectical analysis, thereby offering an alternative interpretation other than following Western scholars’ critical approaches and viewpoints.” To justify his approach, Shang first introduced the theory of ethical literary criticism initiated by Nie Zhenzhao 聂珍钊 and then explained how he was able to provide a textual analysis by examining ethical identities, ethical consciousness, and ethical choices of characters in McEwan’s works. Shang’s book

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1 All the quotations are referred to Shang Biwu’s monograph *A Study of Ian McEwan's Novels and Their Ethical Values* (Beijing: Peking University, 2003).

covers a wide range of materials on the introduction and criticism of McEwan's works. Particular admirable is the author's extensive knowledge of both world McEwan scholarship and Western literary and cultural history, which has enabled him to engage with world McEwan scholarship from a Chinese perspective "rooted in the local while looking at the world" (to borrow remarks from the Chinese scholar Lu Jiande 陆建德) and to evaluate the ethical elements of McEwan's workings that shaped McEwan's reception among critics and readers.

Selecting the most representative works of McEwan, the book is divided into twelve chapters, the first four of which examine McEwan's early works of "Homemade" (1973), "Butterflies" (1973), "Solid Geometry" (1973), and *The Cement Garden* (1978); the next two of which focus on McEwan's mid-career work of *Atonement* (2001) and *Saturday* (2005); and the last six of which are devoted to recent works, including *Sweet Tooth* (2012), *The Children Act* (2014), *Nutshell* (2016), *My Purple Scented Novel* (2016), *Machines Like Me* (2019) and *The Cockroach* (2019). Despite the book's many strengths, one major and noticeable merit is worth special note. The book, though seemingly following the chorological order of McEwan's literary career, is structured on the evolution of McEwan's ethical themes across his novels, which metaphorically make up the three stages of life, namely, youth, middle age and old age. Shang carefully and accurately examined this hidden ethical narrative running throughout his oeuvre from "ethical chaos" of young characters to "ethical dilemma" of middle-aged characters and "ethical redemption" of elderly characters.

In the first chapter, Shang notes that McEwan's early pieces are particularly concerned about the extreme subject matter of the youth, "a period between childhood and adulthood." Notorious for their dark themes such as incest and murder, his early writings about the experience of youth are usually framed within a troubling narrative of a first-person narrator, a young boy/girl with an unusually indifferent tone, narrating their involvement in the crimes they committed. Shang argues that by depicting these perpetrator-narrators' attempts to draw readers into complicity with their ethically questionable behaviors, McEwan mocked and ridiculed their tendency to "skirt around the crimes" when narrating these events. Shang then examines the narrator "I" in "Homemade", recounting an episode of child sexual abuse through the perspective of ethical literary criticism. The narrator, an adolescent boy in the transitional period from "innocence" to "experience," tempted by the "fleshly grail," endeavors to lose their "virginity" as an attempt to enter the adult world and finally rapes his younger sister. After exploring the characters' ethical identity and ethical structure, Shang concludes that the narrator's

attempt to lose “virginity” and “innocence” in a broad sense points to a social issue of morality in which conventional moral principles and rules are disrupted or overturned. Similarly, in the next chapter, Shang claims that “Butterflies” is “a fable about moral failure.” The short story expresses a pervasive craving for “good” in argument by portraying “evil” in the raw material of fiction, thereby demonstrating McEwan’s critical attitude toward moral issues and his commitment to fulfilling the moral function of literature. In the fourth chapter, Shang convincingly provides a reading of the ethical issues encountered by the siblings of Jack, Julie, Tom and Sue in *The Cement Garden*, McEwan’s first novel. With the death of their parents, the family structure collapses, and the siblings fall into a dystopia of ethical chaos with the suspension of standard moral and ethical expectations. Shang discusses the difficulty of characters such as Jack in forming ethical identity and cultivating rationality as a consequence of the suppression of “animal factor” over “human factor.” This unbridled control of animal factor leads to a series of disastrous results, such as confusion about ethical identity and incestuous instincts. Reading the novel against the theory of ethical literary criticism, Shang argues that McEwan reveals the obstacles that adolescents face in forming ethical identity in the transitional period from childhood to adulthood, metaphorically evoking a sense of necessity for “ethical choice” after completing biological selection in the development of humanity.

According to Shang’s analysis, nearly all middle-aged characters are inevitably confronted with ethical dilemmas. Other than assuming the role model of morality, they are consumed by animal instincts when faced with a moral issue. For example, in the third chapter on “Solid Geometry,” the narrator “I” vividly describes his fetishism and the crime of killing his wife, exhibiting no sense of guilt but rather a sense of self-satisfaction for his “unscrupulous behavior.” As Shang points out, in contrast to young narrators, McEwan’s middle-age narrators feature a similar moral tendency to rationalize their crimes while unabashedly expounding their immoral views. Based on his reading of the ethical deficiencies of middle-aged characters, Shang explains how McEwan projects his concerns about the moral decline of humanity through exposing the moral contradiction within the characters’ narratives.

Considering McEwan’s emphasis on the moral function of writing and his shifting moral concerns within the larger context of the stages of humanity, it is important that Shang also focuses his attention on the narrative of elderly characters. As he argues, after experiencing ethical chaos in youth and ethical dilemmas in middle age, the elderly narrator “I” in McEwan’s works seems to have gained a renewed understanding of ethics and morality, attempting to achieve life’s

redemption through this regained awareness. In his analysis of *Atonement*, to which he turns in the fifth chapter, Shang examines McEwan's shift of emphasis in moral instruction of fiction. Briony, nearing the age of eighty, in her fiction goes to great lengths to clear Robbie's name, who she wrongly identified as a rapist of her older sister Cecilia. In her attempts to both restore the truth and atone for ruining their love, Briony rewrote the story at the expense of distorting the historical facts of Robbie and Cecilia's death. By portraying the conflicting moral positions of the narrator "I" (the elderly Briony) and the character "I" (the precocious thirteen-year-old Briony), as Shang observes, McEwan aims to emphasize the importance of ethical consciousness in individual growth and character development. While promoting *Atonement*, McEwan explained fiction as the "penetration into other consciousness lies at the heart of its moral quest." Indeed, in contrast to the first two stages of life, the moral transformation of the narrator "I" is largely ascribed to the awakening of ethical consciousness.

Much of the discussion on the complexity of moral responsibility will be illuminating for readers and critics who are interested in McEwan's work. However, Shang moves beyond his research scope and attempts to bring the book to a higher level of richness of critical perspectives by commenting on McEwan's craft of narrative. In the third chapter on "Solid Geometry," Shang revisits the much debated issue of the conflict between female emotionalism and male rationality by combining the theory of ethical literary criticism and the conceptual system of unnatural narratology. Focusing on the mystery of character M's disappearance, Shang examines the story's three impossible events hidden within the multiple narrative layers of the text centering around the mathematician Hunter's geometrical discovery of the "plane without a surface." It is believed that, though generally considered impossible, Hunter makes oneself disappear by applying this discovery. Another series of impossible actions involves the narrator's great-grandfather reconstructing Hunter's geometrical findings in the manuscript and making his friend M vanish by applying this geometrical principle. The narrator happens to learn of this geometrical discovery and make his wife disappear. This is the third impossible event. The merit of Shang's reading is that he goes beyond the current model of naturalizing reading vs. unnaturalizing readings and shows how the concepts of ethical identity and ethical choice could provide new insights into the dynamic relationship between reality and fiction in work. Similarly, in the twelfth chapter on *The Cockroach*, Shang focuses on McEwan's narrative of the unnatural events of the human-cockroach transformation and the Reversalism. Creatively contextualizing his reading of McEwan's *Cockroach* within the literary

tradition of human-insect transformations tracing back to Kafka and Bruno Schulz, Shang suggested that the unnatural acts of characters (including the cabinet's metamorphosis, Jane Fish's mastery of politics and people's frenetic support) together with the unnatural mind of the protagonist (a transgression of humanity) point to McEwan's political satire of turmoil and division as the consequences of Brexit. Nevertheless, Shang also emphasizes that McEwan does not intend to participate in the ongoing debate on Brexit in Britain. His satire and criticism are more directed toward British politicians whose political commitment is nothing more than a farce.

In the tenth chapter on *My Purple Scented Novel*, Shang couples event theory with ethical literary criticism with the aim of reconstructing and evaluating a storyworld of ethical chaos. In the text, if viewed from the perspectives of Slavoj Žižek, Badiou, and Alain Badiou, the scandal of plagiarism involving Parker and Jocelyn is the most important event that drastically change the lives of the two characters. A close examination of Parker's narrative judgments of this event shows that he only makes interpretive and aesthetic judgments while deliberately avoiding making ethical judgments. Shang raises the following question: What factors account for his avoidance? Shang then examines this storyworld of ethical chaos: the plagiarized is seemingly found guilty, while the plagiarizer is seen as a hero. His argument is that Parker's avoidance of ethical issues can be attributed to his fear of breaking up the ethical order and his guilt of betraying his friend. In this sense, Parker's confession reveals the discontinuity of his ethical consciousness.

Throughout, Shang has never missed the chance to reinforce a key point: McEwan believes that the moral power of literature could be displayed in the real world. Shang reminds the readers that the writer's ethical role in political and social discourse corresponds to McEwan's repeatedly declared moral manifesto for the novel: "Ian McEwan desires to witness history, record the present, and closely follow significant events worldwide." Since the 21st century, McEwan has consistently responded to current political and social issues covering the "9/11" event in *Saturday* (2005), global warming in *Solar* (2010), the "Surveillance Gate" in *Sweet Tooth* (2012), the "Ashya King" case in *The Children Act* (2014), and artificial intelligence in *Machines Like Me* (2019). In his book, Shang's transdisciplinary approach allows him to best address McEwan's moral imagination of historical and social issues. Take *Atonement*, for example. As Shang points out, by juxtaposing the contradictory narratives of the novelist Briony and a historian, the novel reveals a morality and shows it to be the one which literature can access. Although both the novelist and the historian strive to "get close to the truth," the

primary responsibility of a novelist, as McEwan emphasizes, is to reveal an ethics of history rather than to recreate the details of historical accuracy. In the seventh chapter on *Sweet Tooth*, Shang discusses the association between *Sweet Tooth* and *Atonement* on the shared ethics of history. In *Atonement*, the novelist Briony informs readers that the act of writing fiction is her personal effort at atonement. Similarly, in *Sweet Tooth*, Tom Haley's letter to the readers indicates that the novel is both a recollection and a record of his shared life with Serena. As Shang points out, hovering over the historical narrative of spies and the Cold War is McEwan's vision for his fiction as a vehicle of the ethics of forgiveness—the word of forgiveness appears more than twenty times in the novel.

Shang turns to the issue of the child's welfare in McEwan's *The Children Act* in the eighth chapter. Shang examines the various legal cases processed by the British High Court judge Fiona Maye and the blood transfusion case of Adam Henry in particular. He argues that Maye adopts ethical criteria throughout the cases she deals with. More significantly, Adam's blood transfusion case and his consequential death lead Maye to her ethical epiphany related to the child's welfare: life is the fundamental welfare of the child, and protecting the child's welfare is, first and foremost, to protect and sustain his life, and a judge's duty should not end in the courtroom walls but be extended to the entire society.

In the eleventh chapter on his recent work *Machines Like Me* (2019), Shang attempts to account for the conflicts and contradictions in the wake of a machine's engagement with the life of humans raised in McEwan's text. Within the conceptual framework of ethical literary criticism, he especially examines two episodes of the story, namely, the tasting of the "forbidden fruit" by Adam, the robot, and Miranda, the heroine, and the destruction of Adam. Shang contends that human beings are products of natural selection and ethical selection, while machines are products of scientific selection. As a machine, Adam has no biological brain text like humans do; rather, it contains only electronic text used for storing and processing information and commands. Therefore, he has no ethical consciousness of telling the good from the evil. To a large degree, artificial intelligence is a type of electronic text in nature and cannot replace brain text armed with ethical consciousness, which accounts for Adam's failure to address ethical issues in the world of humans. In a way, the conflicts between robots such as Adam and humans such as Charlie and Miranda can be seen as the conflict between scientific selection and ethical selection, and the death of Adam signals the failure of machines to engage with the ethical issues of humans.

Shang's *A Study of Ian McEwan's Novels and Their Ethical Values* is a well-

researched study with interesting and insightful textual analysis. Those with an interest in McEwan and his literary creation will find much in this book to engage them. Shang's book—which includes a comprehensive list of primary and secondary sources on McEwan—is an indispensable reference resource for academics working in the fields of McEwan studies and ethical literary criticism.

### **Work Cited**

Shang, Biwu. *A Study of Ian McEwan's Novels and Their Ethical Values*. Beijing: Peking UP, 2023.