

Architecture, Commodity, and Media: A Lyotardian Reading of Ian McEwan's *Saturday*

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Abstract

This paper is an attempt to read Ian McEwan's *Saturday* (2005) against the backdrop of the fundamental definition of postmodernism as offered by Jean-Francois Lyotard, i.e. "incredulity towards metanarratives". Lyotard's definition of postmodernism is altogether distinct from the dominant and the constrained understanding of postmodernism, that celebrates 'discontinuity', 'incoherence', 'popular culture', 'parody', 'metafiction'. The paper engages with the metanarratives of 'spectacles' - 'architecture', 'media', and 'commodity' etched in the novel, revealing how the social authorities manipulate the spiritual life of the contemporary Londoners, deprive the humans of free will, and eventually constrain them through these 'spectacles'.

Keywords: Postmodernism, Metanarratives, Urban, Spiritual.

I

Ian McEwan in his novels after the 1980s tends to move away from the literary techniques adopted by his contemporary novelists, who following John Hawkes' understanding of postmodernism took recourse to 'pastiche', 'fragmentation', 'temporal disorder', 'metafiction', and 'paranoia'. McEwan didn't get away with 'theme', 'plot', 'setting', and 'character', the fundamental determinants of fiction. In the vein of the modernist fiction, James Joyce's *Ulysses* (1922) and Virginia Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway* (1925), McEwan's *Saturday* (2005) observes the space-time classical unity, interwoven characters, and a brilliantly organized plot. Nevertheless, the vibrant omnipresence of metanarratives in the novel, and their attempt to manipulate the spiritual life of the contemporary Londoners (specially, the protagonist Henry Perowne), and the novelist's endeavors to critique them claims the stature of the 'postmodernist' text for *Saturday* (2005).

Jean-Francois Lyotard in *The Postmodern Condition* (1979) and *Answering the Question: What is Postmodernism* (1982, 84), argued that Enlightenment project was an authoritative one attempting to totalize things almost on the grounds of metanarratives or 'super narratives' of Christianity, Scientific Progress, and Marxism that distort opposition, plurality and differences. Lyotard defines postmodernism as "incredulity towards metanarratives" (Lyotard xxiv). Further, Lyotard argued that modernism is the state of upheaval with attempts to 'progress' and 'innovation', and postmodernism challenges and distorts those ideas, enforcing new forms of acting and thinking, resisting the dominant or the established notions of 'progress'. Lyotard claims, postmodernism "is not modernism at its end, but in a nascent state, and this state is constant" (79).

Lyotard divides the metanarratives into two. First, 'speculative' derived from Hegel - the 'whole of knowledge' that becomes the be all and end all of a subject. The provisional,

‘speculative’ or ‘super narratives’ include but are not limited to architecture, media, language game etc. Next, metanarratives of ‘emancipation’ refer to those of Enlightenment or Marxism, suggesting freedom from the religious superstitions and the exploitation. Postmodernism talks about the skepticism for the ‘super narratives’ whether ‘spectacle’ or ‘emancipation’:

In contemporary society and culture – postindustrial society, postmodern culture ... The grand narrative has lost its credibility, regardless of what mode of unification it uses, regardless of whether it is a speculative narrative or a narrative of emancipation. (37)

II

Saturday depicts skillfully whatever happened to the protagonist, the thriving neurosurgeon Henry Perowne within the twenty four hours on one particular day. The day is not any ordinary day but the Saturday when the British citizens raged a war against the statehood by raising their voice against the invasion of Iraq. The novel moves tactfully from the “secret space of the body and the family to the metropolitan area of London, and the public space of the British state, and all of these were deeply involved in the shadow of global terrorism” (Shen and Cheng 48). The whole action of the novel takes place on a single day within the territory of the post-industrial town, where Perowne’s body is associated with the larger outside world, the public space. The protagonist wakes up at four in the morning and gazes on to the street outside just to notice the crashing of a plane amidst the deep woods. Being the temporality of the year 2003, Perowne assumes it as the terrorist attack by Taliban and couldn’t sleep any further:

It’s already almost eighteen months since half the planet watched, and watched again the unseen captives driven through the sky to the slaughter, at which time there gathered round the innocent silhouette of any jet plane a novel association. Everyone agrees, airliners look different in the sky these days, predatory or doomed. (McEwan 16)

The major streets of the town were bombarded with the demonstrators and amidst these national and international tensions, Perowne’s narrative is closely linked to the contemporary events. After being relieved of his threat and anxiety following the news report on the Television regarding the plane crash, Perowne plans to move out and play Tennis, but gets struck with the demonstrators’ parade, as he tries to evade off this crowd and traffic, he meets with the car accident and gets into conflict with the two criminal syndicates, who later follows him, breaks into Perowne’s home, and attempts to kidnap his daughter, Daisy.

Home is a major architectural space or ‘super narrative’ frequently being used as a strategic device to suggest the motif of captivity rather than the symbol of security, shelter, and belonging. Perowne’s house is located in a tall building facing the square and the hotel. Henry muses,

The city is a success, 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. And the Perowne’s own corner, a triumph of congruent proportion, the perfect square laid out by Robert Adam enclosing a perfect circle of garden – an eighteenth-century dream bathed and embraced by modernity, by street light from above, and from below by fibre-optic cables, and cool fresh water coursing down pipes, and sewage borne away in an instant of forgetting. (5)

However, Perowne has to leave this metanarrative of ‘spectacle’ to achieve the ‘male value’ by entering the world of competitiveness – market places, hospital, streets, and the tennis court.

Another metanarrative of ‘spectacle’, Fitzroy Square is one that is always within the eyesight of Perowne and provides him the aesthetic pleasure as well as the spiritual comfort:

He sees the paving stone mica glistening in the pedestrianised square, pigeon excrement hardened by distance and cold into something almost beautiful, like a scattering of snow. He likes the symmetry of black cast-iron posts and their even darker shadows, and the lattice of cobbled gutters. (4-5)

This square is also a metaphor for freedom and democracy where people move out of their office buildings happily and confidently. In utter contrast, old people’s home reflects the shallowness of these spectacular sites of architecture. The homogenization of the building style does not allow the residents of the old people’s home to engage in a lively dialogue. It accommodates the elderly but at the same time they remain bereft of quality life, private space, and family warmth. To sum up, old people’s homes remain “indifferent to their residents’ conception of home, ignore the emotional appeal of the residents and their desire for home, and make up for their spiritual emptiness with inadequate subsidies” (Shen and Cheng 49). Another public space in the novel and a site of architecture, the narrow alleys, become the spot for the suppression of the demonstration against the Iraq war and the police and the army, and the state agents are therein ready to curb the active civil unrest.

III

Commodity fetishism and market culture has led to the accelerated urbanization process. While there is a drastic increase in the number of the architectural sites and the buildings, the authorities and the state do not care a jot for the aesthetic and the spiritual perspective of these ‘spectacles’ of architecture, and neglect the residents’ inner feelings. In such a society people reserve their attention toward the material culture for the momentary pleasure and the enjoyment. Perowne likes window shopping but abhors reading literary masterpieces. He cannot afford to read, though he may devote consecutive long hours for the surgery and the London Marathon:

Daisy, the arbiter of his literary education, would never agree. She wrote a long undergraduate essay on Henry James’s late novels and can quote a passage from *The Golden Bowl*. She also knows dozens of poems by heart which she learned in her early teens, a means of earning pocket money from her grandfather. Her training was so different from her father’s ... At her prompting, he tried the one about the little girl suffering from her parents’ vile divorce. A promising subject, but poor Maisie soon vanished behind a cloud of words, and at page forty-eight Perowne, who can be on his feet seven hours for a difficult procedure, who has his name down for the London Marathon, fell away, exhausted. Even the tale of his daughter’s namesake baffled him ... he stoops to the tap to rinse his face. Perhaps he’s becoming, in this one respect at least, like Darwin in later years who found Shakespeare dull to the point of nausea. Perowne is counting on Daisy to refine his sensibilities. (McEwan 58)

The novel well illustrates that “commodities in their various forms have already pervasively permeated our lives, and people are powerless to change their destiny, also have no way to escape but only yield to spectacular commodities” (Shen and Cheng 50). In part three of the novel, McEwan well delineates Perowne’s fetishism for commodities and temptation towards market culture,

He joins one briefly, then turns west and then north again and soon he’s where Goodge

and Charlotte Streets meet – a spot he’s always liked, where the affairs of utility and pleasure condense to make colour and space brighter: mirrors, flowers, soaps, newspapers, electrical plugs, house paints, key cutting urbanely interleaved with expensive restaurants, wine and tapas bars, hotels. Who was the American novelist who said a man could be happy living on Charlotte Street? Daisy will have to remind him again. (McEwan 122-23)

When the neurotic criminal Baxter enters into Perowne’s house, threatens his daughter Daisy, and attempts to rape her, Arnold’s poem (apparently Daisy’s) with its opening lines, “The sea is calm tonight” evades off the tension and the horror, and prevents a crime. While Perowne’s fetishism for commodities is confiscating, Daisy’s passion for literature turns out to be liberating:

Daisy recited a poem that cast a spell on one man. Perhaps any poem would have done the trick, and thrown the switch on a sudden mood change. Still, Baxter fell for the magic, he was transfixed by it, and he was reminded how much he wanted to live. No one can forgive him the use of the knife. But Baxter heard what Henry never has, and probably never will, despite all Daisy’s attempts to educate him. (278)

Saturday builds up an interesting contrast and coexistence between the real and the literary or the cultural world. While the protagonist Henry Perowne is a doctor, a neurosurgeon, people in his family are mostly, the art lovers. His daughter, a poet; son, a jazz player; and his own father, a university professor, and an acclaimed poet. His son’s musical compositions work as relieve and bring relaxation amidst Perowne’s stressed medical profession. The poetic works of his father and daughter again help him to relieve off the stress.

The novel etches out brilliantly that contemporary Londoners lie under the influence of media which cannot be controlled or averted. Henry Perowne to get rid of the threat caused by the plane crash, and anxiety due to the news report related to the America-Iraq war planned to relieve himself by playing the squash, but even at the squash court he cannot escape from the “dissemination of those annoying news” (Shen and Cheng 51).

Various architectural sites – the city square, the nursing home, the alleys, and Perowne’s own house depict the strained relationship amidst the individuals and their surroundings. The dominance of the media in covering up the national and the international tensions depicts how these sites of architecture and ‘spectacle’ are fraught with anxiety, tension, threat, and chaos. The metanarratives of commodity also underscores the psychasthenia of the protagonist and the intangible mental control. The plot of the novel revolves around the neurasthenia of the protagonist and the antagonist, Perowne and Baxter. The ‘super narratives’ of ‘spectacles’ mirror the dearth of security amongst the urbanites or the contemporary Londoners following the 9/11 attacks. The metanarratives of ‘spectacles’ communicate to the readers the discontented restlessness beneath the easygoing and the composed surface of the contemporary urban life.

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