

Contingency and the Test of Moral Convictions in Ian McEwan's *Enduring Love*

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Abstract

It is widely acknowledged that life takes its own course and it is absolutely unpredictable and uncertain. It does not run as per the plans and preparations of man all the times. It can turn in any direction at any time and tests the character and moral conviction of an individual therein. The real strength and weakness of one can be tested through the ways one deals with the contingencies in life. McEwan weaves compelling plots in his novels where the protagonists are tossed against odd and unexpected circumstances of their lives. "However ordered or rational lives might be", writes Nick Rennison, "in McEwan's fictional world indifferent chance or the hell that is other people can unsettle them in a moment" (88). *Enduring Love* (1997) is one such novel in which the life of the protagonist Joe Rose gets completely disturbed and disrupted when he unexpectedly comes across the balloon accident and the maniac Jed Parry. Throughout the plot, one witnesses the inner drama of Joe trying to overcome it and how he comes out of web of circumstances. This paper is an attempt to study the moral convictions of Joe through the evaluation of the efforts during the rescue, the estimation of the potential threat of Parry and the assessment of Joe's relation with wife Clarissa which makes the core of the novel.

Key words: McEwan, *Enduring Love*, Contingency, Character, Moral Convictions

Ian McEwan (b. 1948) is a widely popular and critically acclaimed English novelist, short story writer, screenwriter and a public intellectual of the UK. In a career of almost five decades, he has penned many award-winning and best seller books including *First Love Last Rites*, *The Comfort of Strangers*, *Enduring Love*, *Amsterdam*, *Atonement*, *Saturday*, *The Children Act* etc. McEwan enters the minds of his characters and records their inner experiences. Like a passionate psychologist, he studies various shades and nuances of human thoughts and feelings and comments on them from an objective standpoint. He has a firm faith in the potential of literature for the unveiling of human nature, and thereby betterment of human life through compassion and understanding.

Enduring Love (1997), adapted into a motion picture in 2004 with the same name is a remarkable novel and a landmark in McEwan's literary career. The story in the novel is centered on a helium balloon which the protagonist Joe comes across while on picnic. The strong gusty winds make the balloon with a ten year old Harry in its basket suddenly soar high and the captain James, the grandfather of the little child is dragged clinging with the rope along with it. Hearing James cry for help, a few men among the onlookers including the protagonist rush towards the balloon and try hard to keep it safe and rescue the child but fail and one of the rescuers John Logan, a doctor and a family man dies eventually.

The unpredictable and uncalled for event of the Balloon Accident gets Joe's peaceful and contented life changed forever and changed for the worst as one of the witnesses of Logan's death, Jed Parry exchanges glance with Joe and takes it as signal of love for him. Jed, a patient of de Clerambault's syndrome i.e., erotomania, starts stalking Joe everywhere and puts his life in great jeopardy. This contingency of Parry's sudden entry in their life shakes the moral

convictions of the rational and scientific Joe. He goes to the extent of hiring a gun and committing crime.

Joe Rose having a degree in physics and a doctorate in quantum electrodynamics is a successful science journalist. Being a man of science, Joe is very calculative, pragmatic and rational in his dealings with the people, things and events. He describes the event of balloon fall precisely and apply different reasons to make up with it time and again. His musings of the event and its aftermath gives deeper insights of the human nature:

Co-operation – the basis of our earliest hunting successes, the force behind our evolving capacity for language, the glue of our social cohesion. Our misery in the aftermath was proof that we knew we had failed. . . . Selfishness is also written on our hearts. This is our mammalian conflict – what to give to others, and what to keep for yourself. Treading that line, keeping the others in check, and being kept in check by them, is what we call morality. (*Enduring Love* 14)

Peter Childs in his study on *Enduring Love* says, “For McEwan, exploring morality is something that can best be done at the extremes of human experience” (6). The extreme situation of bringing the balloon safely down, Joe Rose faces the acute moral crisis. Joe faces the moral dilemma of still clinging to the rope sacrifice himself or just save himself and let go of the rope with potential death of the doctor. He chooses to let go and rationalizes it in Freudian defense mechanism as:

The child was not my child, and I was not going to die for it. The moment I glimpsed a body fall away – but whose? – and I felt the balloon lurch upwards,

the matter was settled; altruism had no place. Being good made no sense.

(Enduring Love 15)

However, such reasoning does not soothe his aching soul and he overwhelms with the sense of guilt and to overcome it he decides to visit Jean Logan, the wife of the deceased Dr. John Logan. He blames himself for the choice he makes:

The cause, but not the morally responsible agent. The scales tipping, from altruism to self-interest. Was it panic, or rational calculation? Had we killed him really, or simply refused to die with him? But if we had been with him, stayed with him, no one would have died. *(Enduring Love 56)*

On the prospect of going to Mrs. Logan and confessing his own cowardice, he meditates over the same moral conflict and the question still remains intact:

How was it possible to tell Mrs. Logan of her husband sacrifice without drawing her attention to our cowardice? Or was it his folly? He was the hero, and it was the weak who had sent him to his death. Or, we were the survivors and he was the miscalculating dolt. *(Enduring Love 56)*

Another important debate the novel presents is between reason and faith. The erotomaniac Parry has unwavering faith in God and he strongly believes that it is the duty assigned to him by God to win Joe's love and thereby redeem him through the power of love. He obsessively follows him everywhere and tortures him through phone calls and letters. In one such letter to Joe, Parry writes:

I know that you'll come to God, just as I know that it's my purpose to bring you there, through love. Or, to put it another way, I'm going to mend your rift with God through the healing power of love... Everything we do together, everything we are is in God's care, and our love takes its existence, form and meaning from His love. (*Enduring Love* 97)

Joe, on the other hand is an atheist and a man of scientific temper. He finds him "some kind of vengeful fanatic" (*Enduring Love* 58). In the beginning of the episode, he does not take Parry as some potential threat. Rather he feels sympathetic to him. He says "I felt almost sorry for him again, despite my hostility and revulsion" (*Enduring Love* 91). Later he makes more research about his whereabouts and his mental state as a patient of de Clerambault's syndrome and then gets apprehended about the threat Parry can cause him. He ruminates over the potential threat to life:

Studying Parry with reference to a syndrome I could tolerate, even relish, but meeting him yet again in the street, especially now that I had read his first letter, had frightened me. . . . If a researcher was easy to hire, so too were a few goons to thrash me within an inch of my life. (*Enduring Love* 130 – 131)

Joe even complains to the police but of no use. He gets really frightened when two hirelings of Parry shoot some stranger on the shoulder for Joe sitting on the table next to him in the restaurant. He loses all his rationality and sanity and plans to buy a gun through some of his acquaintance Johnny B. Well. Though, Joe is a responsible and law abiding citizen, yet the course of the events makes him go this far. His conviction on being safe and secure just goes away and he gets ready to undertake any action safeguarding himself and his family. While on

his journey back, he gets a call from Parry that he is at Joe's apartment and has hostaged Clarissa on the knife point. Out of frenzy, he hurries back and shoots Parry on the elbow when he threatens to kill himself.

The arrival of Parry in the life of the protagonist Joe shatters his congenial and comfortable relationship with his wife Clarissa. Clarissa does not accede to his opinions of Parry and says, "Some poor fellow has a crush on you and is trailing you about. Come on, it's joke Joe!" (*Enduring Love* 58). When talking about Parry, Clarissa does not show much concerns and even tells Joe that Parry is nothing but the projection of his own mind. The cold and apathetic response from Clarissa humiliates Joe even further and he feels lonely and vulnerable. He mutters, "Parry of course was to blame for coming between Clarissa and me, but my fury was for them both – he was the affliction she had failed to support me against . . ." (*Enduring Love* 89).

Tension arises in their household to such an extent that both the partners feel estranged and suspicious of their personal and private affairs. Consequently, the warmth and passionate love between the two starts fading gradually. "To her I was manic, perversely obsessed, and worst of all, the thieving invader of her private space," sums up Joe "as far as I was concerned she was disloyal, unsupportive in this time of crisis, and irrationally suspicious" (*Enduring Love* 139). In her letter to Joe at the end, she apologizes to Joe for the misunderstanding and distance the whole Parry episode created between them. She puts emphasis on his lack of communicability to her about the real threat and his excessive solipsistic attempts to sort the problem out on his own. She further writes:

A stranger invaded our lives, and the first thing that happened was that you became a stranger to me. You worked out he had de Clerambault's syndrome (if

that really is a disease) and you guessed he might become violent. You were right, you acted out decisively and you're right to take pride in that. But what about the rest? – why it happened, how it changed you, how it might have been otherwise, what it did to us – that's what we've got now, and that's what we have to think about. (*Enduring Love* 218)

To sum up, it can be concluded that McEwan in this novel explores some of the basic tenets of human nature. All the major characters suffer the aftermath of some sort of contingencies and their moral convictions are tested time and again. But at the end, the central conflicts get resolved and the partners are reconciled, and finally it is the Love that endures. The novel offers great insights about human morality and relationship. It emphasizes on the need to be self-aware and self-controlled for coping with the unprecedented chances and changes in life. It states that character and courage are the strength of man that makes him face the changing realities of existence in the complicated contemporary world. It gives hope for the victory of mankind over all sorts of contingencies and gives the rein in human control to lead meaningful and purposeful life.

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