

**From Ego to Ecology: Satirical Character and Climate Allegory in Ian McEwan's *Solar*****Dr. Rashmi Verma** (Author)

Professor

Department of English

Kurukshetra University, Kurukshetra

**Devilal** (Co-author)

Research Scholar

Department of English

Kurukshetra University, Kurukshetra

**Abstract**

Ian McEwan's *Solar* is an outcry against the emerging threat of global warming poking all humanity to reconsider its relationship with the nature and revamp the ecological equilibrium. But McEwan's tone is not that of a preacher, but rather a realist and satirist; and he presents this burning issue through a self-mocking and humorously comic protagonist Michael Beard, a Nobel laureate physicist whose flawed personal life has been portrayed for allegorising the collective human fallacies and indifference to the very situation caused by our own insatiable over-consumption of all the natural resources up-to the extent that it poses serious existential threats for the generations to come. This paper aims to analyse the character of McEwan's protagonist in light with the climatic concerns shown in the novel from the ecological and allegorical perspectives; and also explores the causes and potential remedies for the rising heat as suggested by the close reading of the novel. It investigates the role of individuals and institutions in dealing with the menace to restore the ecology of our habitable planet.

**Keywords:** Ego, Ecology, Character, Satire, Allegory, Climate Change

*Solar* (2010) is one of the most popular novels of the contemporary British novelist Ian McEwan. It deals with climate change in its backdrop; and McEwan makes the study of his central character Michael Beard in respect to his self-claimed responsibility towards climate change and global warming which McEwan presents satirically as Beard is shown as a typical modern and industrialised man who keeps on consuming everything like food, drinks and even women for his physical gratification without bothering for any moral, ethical and ecological concerns; and his very physique and personality is the reflection of the flawed character that is self-servingly motivated for all sorts of adventures and experiences he gets throughout in the novel. Beard is a "bald, short, fat, clever" (*Solar* 3), seasoned womaniser, and manipulative person who exploits his prize and position as a Nobel laureate to secure himself lucrative and highly paid roles in various research, academic, and administrative institutions; and keeps on pursuing mere physical pleasures irrespective of his self-made mission of fighting climate change. McEwan, here, exposes the insufficiency of science and other institutions in coping with the threat of global warming; and he rather believes that it needs to be acknowledged and addressed through the ethical and cultural steps regulating the otherwise self-centred pursuits of all humans across time and place. Johannes Wally states that Beard is everyman with his flaws:

Beard – this continuously fattening, hard-drinking, much-married womaniser, who shuns any kind of personal responsibility and lives a good life as a result of a onetime research success in his late twenties – is an everyman, representing human nature in general: greedy and egotistic, yet not all bad and capable of something great. (174)

Michael Beard is somewhat sceptic and even cynic about climate change as something apocalyptic; and reacts indignantly when somebody talks of the planet being sick and needs immediate attention for cure believing it as mere foppery and fancy thinking; and rather behaves as a denier of climate change and believes it as one more apocalyptic story. McEwan presents the apathic attitude of mankind towards the growing danger of global warming the world drifting towards so fast. And the narrator aptly and sarcastically expresses Beard's attitude towards climate change and its probable consequences:

And he was unimpressed by some of the wild commentary that suggested the world was in 'peril', that humankind was drifting towards calamity, when coastal cities would disappear under the waves, crops fail, and hundreds of millions refugees surge from one country, one continent, to another, driven by drought, floods, famine, tempests, unceasing wars for diminishing natural resources. (16-17)

However, Beard readily grabs the opportunity for the sake of money and influence when the British government decides to build a centre for renewable energy in Reading and nominates him as its head. As Beard is just coasting on his previous research which he conducted in his 30s and won a Nobel Prize for; he, over past two decades, has not done any serious work and just seeks opportunities for making money and power and remain in limelight. And this centre suits his desires as all the administrative and related jobs are to be done by a senior bureaucrat John Braby; and Beard is merely to be the spokesperson of the government showing climatic concerns that a Nobel physicist is working hard with his team to fight climate change and find alternate energy sources to curb the growing energy crisis. But ironically, this centre is not doing any serious and committed research, and rather wastes the public resources on developing a petty gizmo WUDU (Wind turbine for Urban Domestic Use) believing it would solve the urban energy problem which though was condemned by a fellow Postdoc Tom Aldous who insists on working on Solar energy instead. Thus, it shows the institutional failure in dealing with issues of such a great significance. More than the problem of climate change, individuals like Beard, governments and other political, economic and scientific institutions are merely preoccupied with their own agendas. Beard's disregard for Aldous as a mere useless fellow with eccentric ideas shows his own insecurity as:

The young man was always trying to convince him of photovoltaics, or his quantum explanation of photovoltaics, or to oppress him generally with friendliness and enthusiasm, or seemed oblivious to Beard's surliness whenever he repeated the case for dropping WUDU. Of course it ought to be abandoned, when it was devouring nearly all the budget and growing in complication as it diminished in interest. But it had been Beard's idea, and reversing it would be a personal disaster. (28)

For Beard, therefore, his personal reputation matters more than the commitment for common and collective cause of fighting climate change. Despite knowing and understanding well what he does, he cannot overcome his short-sightedness as his selfishness has blinded him to see a bit farther and assume what is at stake for the petty gains. Jason Cowley sums up his behaviour as a collective human failure:

He rapaciously consumes food, women and drink, with little regard for the consequences. He's a resolute short-termist, fearful of commitment and of becoming a father, living for the here and now. His behaviour is a local example of the more general problem of human over-consumption: just as Beard devours everything around him, so we are devouring our world, with its finite resources and fragile ecosystems.

Again, Beard avails one more opportunity when he is called for accompanying a fully funded six days expedition to the Arctic for observing and studying the consequences of global heat in form of retreating glaciers in the Norwegian Spitsbergen. Beard, who is undergoing a tense relationship with his fifth wife Patrice, takes this opportunity to just get out of his turmoil and find ways to come out of toxic relationship with her. Despite having no concern for climate change, he accompanies the group of artists and scientists as a sort of adventurous journey to the farthest north. And there he just morosely spends his days, but one thing that surprises him the most is the boot room, a room in the ship where they keep their outing stuff, and its messy and chaotic condition caused by the well-intentioned and serious and sombre men and women who meant to address the great issue of climate change. He observes that the twenty of them has just self-servingly messed up everything in the boot room; and asks how billions of us could keep the earth intact and maintain the ecology:

Everyone, all of us, individually facing oblivion, as a matter of course, and no one complaining much. As a species, not the best imaginable, but certainly the best, no, the most interesting there was. But what about the general disgrace that was the boot room? Evidently, a matter of human nature. And how were we ever going to learn about that? Science of course was fine, who knew, art was too, but perhaps self-knowledge was beside the point. Boot room needed good systems so that flawed creatures could use them properly. . . . Only good laws would save the boot room. And citizens who respected the law. (79-80)

So, the boot room is a perfect allegory for human failure in fair distribution and management of the natural resources given in abundance; and it clearly reflects that our own self-centredness hinders our vision for a just, equitable, and empathetic society where everyone has an equal share and equal responsibility in conserving the ecology. Johannes Wally rightly says:

Yet, arguing that Michael Beard allegorically stands in for planet earth on the one hand and for human nature on the other might be too limited an interpretation. Although *Solar* certainly casts a satirical eye on the behaviour of *homo sapiens*, its ultimate target is the behaviour of – to borrow a term from Bardieu – *homo academicus*. (174)

Michael Beard is a sly, shrewd and selfish person, and can easily exploit any situation for his personal gain. As when he finds Aldous at his house upon his return from the Arctic,

he threatens him of firing from the centre for transgressing and having illicit relation with Beard's wife. Aldous just seeks pardon and requests him for just looking into the research he has conducted on artificial photosynthesis and solar energy, and kept it in the office for his approval. But, tragically he just slips over a rug and strikes against a coffee table and dies instantly. However, Beard cunningly uses his death as an opportunity to clear out his wife and her former lover Tarpin, the builder; and thus he frames Tarpin into murder charge of Aldous and divorces his wife Patrice thereafter. And so, keeping them out of his way, he grabs the file containing Aldous's research on solar from the centre; and gets many patents on his own name and starts working on rejuvenating his research profile. Along with his American business friend, he establishes a solar plant in Mexico for demonstrating the world the future of solar energy and the potential therein for making huge money by convincing the energy companies and investors. Beard, the creepy and abominable physicist exploits climate change for his own gain; and McEwan, thus, satirizes him and his likes such as the selfish businessmen, the flawed scientists, power hungry governments, above all the collective humanity that fail to recognise the menace of climate change and treat it as such. McEwan satirises Beard when he, for convincing the investors on his solar project, addresses the energy conference sermoning on being selfish and greedy:

Virtue can motivate individuals, but for groups, societies, a whole civilisation, it's a weak force. Nations are never virtuous, though they might sometimes think they are. For humanity en masse, greed trumps virtue. So we have to welcome into our solutions the ordinary compulsions of self-interest, and also celebrate novelty, the thrill of invention, the pleasures of ingenuity and co-operation, the satisfaction of profit. Oil and coal are energy carriers, and so, in abstract form, is money. And the answer to that burning question is of course exactly where that money, your money, has to flow – affordable clean energy. (149-150)

It, thus, can be concluded that McEwan's hero is the representative of the common mass that just thinks about fulfilling their needs anyhow; and the novel is an allegory that critiques that indifference and apathy towards the ecological disturbance caused deliberately or indeliberately by the human society in order to satisfy its insatiable and ever-growing needs. The self-centred and morally flawed protagonist Beard has been satirised for just opening the eyes of humanity at large that the unscrupulous exhaustion of natural resources would cause the existential threats for our upcoming generations; and it is ethically imperative to make the planet more habitable and sustainable. McEwan is of the opinion that science and technology do have potential to curb the sprawling menace of climate change undoubtedly, but more than that the human society needs to reconsider our collective human responsibility in tackling it as it is primarily anthropogenic in nature and hence needs to be resolved by our concrete, collective and concerted efforts. According to Zemanek:

[McEwan] creates an ambivalent, complex protagonist who publicly puts on the mask of a warner, but truly is a sceptic and anti-environmentalist: a bad guy fighting for a good cause, but with immoral motivation and wrong means. (58)

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