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Politics of Sexual Violence in Ian McEwan's *The Innocent**

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This paper examines the role of sexual violence in Ian McEwan's novel *The Innocent* and its relationship to the author's examination of the boundary between the political and the personal. Contextualizing the protagonist Leonard Marnham's violence against the heat of the geopolitical struggles of the Cold War, this study traces his transformation from an innocent technician to a violent agent of political and sexual aggression, and reads his attempted rape of his German lover, Maria, as a nexus between personal relationships and geopolitical struggles. It highlights how Leonard's violence is a reflection of and at the same time a product of the postwar political landscape. By drawing on the body politic of sexual violence, it analyzes the feminized representation of Leonard, arguing that Leonard is both a perpetrator as well as a victim of the postwar political struggles. Hence the conclusion that sexual violence is employed by the author as a trope to dramatize the invasion of the political onto the personal, and the novel is a political novel that illustrates how the entanglement of international politics and private life can lead to a profound distortion of personal relationships, where the dynamics of power, dominance, and submission that define the public sphere can seep into and corrupt even the most intimate aspect of human interaction.

Keywords: Ian McEwan, *The Innocent*, sexual violence, body politic

Introduction

This paper investigates Ian McEwan's representation of sexual violence in his novel *The Innocent (1990)*, and examines its relationship with the author's exploration of the boundary between the public and the private, the political and the personal. Ian McEwan's historical novel *The Innocent* in 1990 is a typical bildungsroman and relates the protagonist Leonard Marnham's transformation from the titular "innocent" into a double agent, a traitor and a cruel butcher. Leonard, a 25-year-old technician, comes to postwar Berlin to participate in the clandestine Anglo-American operation, Golden Operation, to wiretap the Russians. The operation brings him contact with people from different nationalities, including his German lover Maria, his American work superior Glass, and his compatriot McNamee, and engulfs him in a world of secrecy and conspiracy. After a series of intense adventures culminating in his killing and dismembering Maria's ex-husband Otto, Leonard finally loses his innocence, in both love and the war, and metamorphosing into a "truly grown-up" (McEwan, 2013, p. 377).

Sexual violence plays a pivotal role in Leonard's transformation. One Saturday night, after Leonard and Maria return to their apartment, Leonard aggressively presses the fatigued Maria against the wall, jerks her skirt

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down, and attempts to rape her. This attempt is met with Maria's resistance, as it triggers her traumatic memory of witnessing a Russian soldier brutally rape a wounded German woman during the war. The incident ultimately fizzles out, but it marks a turning point in Leonard's personal initiation, signaling his loss of innocence and preparing him for his later atrocities. From the narrative point of view, this event also serves as a nexus that knots together the personal and political strands: Leonard's sexual violence alludes to the political dynamics of warring nations, where the strong nations impose their will upon the weak.

Most critics realize that Leonard's rape attempt is semantically invested and politically charged, and interpret it against the heat of the geopolitical struggles following World War II. Lynn Wells, for example, suggests that the rape scenario "represent[s] the moral anarchy that entices stronger nations to force their world views on weaker countries" (Wells, 2010, pp. 136-137). Similarly, Dominic Head observes that Leonard's violence "introduces an element of political allegory about the domination of weak nations by strong ones" (Head, 2007, p. 91). These interpretations primarily focus on Leonard's violence itself and read it as an echo of international politics. This paper suggests an alternative interpretation of this incident. In response to the criticism of his graphic representation of violence in the novel, McEwan answers: "The important thing is not what is described but why it is described. I'm interested in how a violent impulse grows inside us" (McEwan, 2010, p. 56). This suggests that Leonard's violence encapsulates the complex interplay between individual actions and the larger political landscape, highlighting not only how the two mirror each other but, more importantly, how they are causally linked—how the geopolitical struggles influence private lives and breed individual violence. In this light, sexual violence—the image of a man forcing his way into the body of a woman—becomes a compelling image for dramatizing the invasion of the political into the personal.

Body Politic of Sexual Violence

In cultural constructions, male and female bodies are often placed in hierarchical dichotomies. The female body is established as soft, weak, and vulnerable, while the male's body is depicted as "hard, full, projectile, and biologically endowed with the strength to commit rape" (Gibson-Graham, 2005, p. 17). This anatomical determinism creates an inescapable construction where man, with his bodily strength and power, is the natural conqueror, and woman is the victim of such conquest. This bodily antithesis permeates artistic and literary works. In ancient Roman visual arts, defeated nations were represented as women posed submissively at the feet of hyper-masculine Roman soldiers, thereby becoming "feminized nations" (Taussig, et al., 2010, p. 63). Gothic novels often feature women victimized by masculinity, a dynamic that generates fear and terror. In Henry James's writing, American innocence and gullibility, when confronted with European sophistication and calculation, are often symbolized through the figure of an innocent child or a woman (Colebrook, 2009, p. 48).

Given this cultural construction, it is understandable that the act of violent sex becomes highly figurative. In the course of violent sex, a woman's body is invaded, penetrated, and conquered as a man forces his penis into her vagina. In this scenario, the woman is rendered passive, stripped of the strength to overpower her male assailant or the physical means for retaliation (Brownmiller, 1976, p. 21). This compelling image lends itself easily to political discourse. Lefebvre's discussion of "Phallus" space, where verticality and intruding visibility tame and intimidate people into submission, bears a striking resemblance to Brownmiller's feminist assertion that man's genitalia itself can be weaponized to generate fear. Frederic Jameson, in his exploration of the expansion of

multinational capital, repeatedly uses terms like "invade" and "penetrate," which heavily rely on the metaphor of a man's violent violating an unwilling woman's body. J. K. Gibson-Graham identifies a gendered grammar of violence in the narratives of globalization, which establishes "noncapitalist economic relations as inevitable and only ever sites of potential invasion/envelopment/accumulation, sites that may be recalcitrant but are incapable of retaliation, sites in which cooperation in the act of rape is called for and ultimately obtained" (Gibson-Graham, 2005, p. 17). This body politic provides a convenient theoretical tool to examine the sexual violence in *The Innocent*.

Rape Fantasy in Warring Time

To understand the significance of sexual violence in *The Innocent,* it is crucial to place Leonard's adventure within the broader historical and geopolitical context of the time. Leonard moves to Berlin at a time when the Second World War has just ended and the Cold War has emerged in its wake—a period marked by immense upheaval and the formation of a new global political order. The Second World War devastated Europe, leading to the collapse of some old empires such as Germany and England and at the same time elevating the United States and the Soviet Union to superpower status. These two nations, with their opposing ideologies of communism and capitalism, soon became locked in a hostile standoff. As smaller countries gathered around the two superpowers for protection and support, the world became divided into two camps, each vying for influence and control. Postwar Berlin, a city where people of different nationalities (Germans, Russians, Americans, French and English) and identities (allies, enemies, competitors, the defeated, and the conquerors) mixed together, bore the brunt of political conflicts and national competition. The city was swept into the violent currents of cross-national conflict, with personal relationships increasingly shaped by the broader power struggles. The lives of the Berliners were entangled in a web of political machinations that left little room for personal agency. This intrusion of politics into private life is most famously symbolized by the Berlin Wall, erected in the 1960s to stop East Germans from fleeing to the West, which tore apart not only the city but the country and the world. McEwan poignantly notes, people in Berlin, whether they liked it or not, had to "steer[ed] their life around it [the Berlin Wall]" (McEwan, 2010, p. 58). For McEwan, post-war Berlin is a constant reminder of the subjection of the private to the political, where "individuals prove to be little more than pawns mired in the cataclysmic struggles of arrogant and unredeemable powers" (Slay, 1996, p. 135).

An incident in the story shows how the politicized "Berlin luft" could shape people's mindsets and change their patterns of behavior. When Leonard visits Maria's apartment for the first time, "he was an intruder" (McEwan, 2013, p. 315): he opens the door of a stranger without knocking. His rude behavior is justly rebuked by Maria: "What does it mean, this 'pop in'? Just to open my door, is this a pop in?" (McEwan, 2013, p. 317). His rudeness even surprises himself. He would not have behaved like this—entering a woman's room without knocking—in other places, as he frankly confesses: "he did an inexplicable thing, quite out of character" (McEwan, 2013, p. 315). This moment of self-awareness reveals that Leonard's act is not just a momentary lapse in judgment but is deeply influenced by the environment he is in. It is logical to assume that the fact England has won the war gives Leonard confidence to act with more freedom and entitlement in this conquered city, making him feel less bound by etiquette when entering a German woman's room.

Such entanglement of international politics and private action becomes evident in Leonard's rape fantasy. Notably, the origin of his rape fantasy is inseparable from his participation in the clandestine operation. As he becomes more deeply involved in the Golden Operation—shortly after he is recruited into an exclusive club and becomes a spy for the British government—he notices an element of mind creeps into his thoughts:

> …he started having thoughts that he was powerless to send away when he was making love. They soon grew inseparable from his desire. These fantasies came a little closer each time, and each time they continued to proliferate, to take new forms. There were figures gathering at the edge of thought, now they were striding towards the center, towards him. They were versions of himself, and he knew he could not resist them. (McEwan, 2013, p. 345)

This passage highlights the insidious nature of Leonard's psychological transformation, where the boundaries between his sense of self and these darker, violent impulses begin to dissolve. The "figures gathering at the edge of thought" are not just abstract representations of violence but are versions of Leonard himself—versions that are becoming central to his identity. Earlier, the narrator has stated explicitly that these ideas of violence "were alien to his obliging and kindly nature, they offended his sense of what was reasonable" (McEwan, 2013, p. 317), which serves as a clear authorial intervention suggesting that Leonard's transformation is not purely an internal process but is influenced by external factors. It is the British victory in the war that gives Leonard leverage to become aggressive and violent in his relationship with his German lover.

As Leonard's fantasy intensifies, national political tensions intrude on and colonize his private life, distorting his perception of Maria. Her status as his lover becomes secondary to her identity as a German—an identity that Leonard cannot disentangle from the broader historical narrative of conflict and enmity. His rationalization as he contemplates acting out this fantasy is telling:

> He looked down at Maria, whose eyes were closed, and remembered she was a German. The word had not been entirely prised loose of its associations after all. His first day in Berlin came back to him. German. Enemy. Mortal enemy. Defeated enemy. This last brought with it a shocking thrill. (McEwan, 2013, p. 345)

Here, Leonard's thoughts reveal a troubling conflation of the personal and the political. The trajectory of Maria's metamorphosis from a "German" to his "mortal enemy" and finally a "defeated enemy" is a record of the advances that the geopolitical struggles make in corrupting his relationship. The "shocking thrill" that he experiences at the thought of Maria as a "defeated enemy" speaks of the excitement of a victorious soldier, not the joy of a lover, which underscores the extent to which his violent fantasies are tied to the dynamics of power and conquest that characterize the post-war political landscape.

As he translates the political relationship between warring nations to his personal relationships, their lovemaking naturally transforms into a battle of domination and submission. When he brutally presses Maria against the wall, strips her skirt, and attempts to force himself into her body, Maria becomes a city to conquer, a trophy to claim: "Then: she was the defeated, she was his by right, by conquest, by right of unimaginable violence and heroism and sacrifice" (McEwan, 2013, p. 345). Similarly, when he dismembers Otto's body, he is not dissecting a human body; "it is a city far below he had been ordered to destroy" (McEwan, 2013, p. 434). The politicized space of Berlin has infiltrated his psyche, rendering him incapable of seeing Maria as anything other than an extension of the national conflict. Maria's accusation underscores this conflation. She comments on Glass's speech on their engagement, accusing them of confusing people with countries: "Does he think I'm the Third Reich?

Is that what he thinks you are marrying? Does he really think that people represent countries?" (McEwan, 2013, p. 397). Leonard's violence, in this sense, illustrates how the entanglement of international politics and private life can lead to a profound distortion of personal relationships, where the dynamics of power, dominance, and submission that define the public sphere can seep into and corrupt even the most intimate aspect of human interaction.

The Raped Rapist

As violence takes root in Leonard's mind, his personal life is colonized by the political, rendering him a victim of male aggression, akin to the female body he seeks to violate. In other words, when he attempts to rape Maria, it is his body that is, metaphorically, being violated. To establish this body politic, the text deliberately feminizes Leonard's body. He always wears a red tie, and some German women, seeing the bright color, mock him. In the bar where he first meets Maria, he snaps off the stem of a rose that Russell bought and "lodged the flower behind his ear" (McEwan, 2013, p. 302), giving him a "somewhat effeminate" (Wells, 2010, p. 58) appearance. He often carefully puts up the air of being "unencumbered, manly, serious" (McEwan, 2013, p. 277), to align himself with the model of masculinity represented by such characters as Glass and Blake, which indicates his lack of confidence in his masculine identity, as does his preference for a song with "tough, manly advice" (McEwan, 2013, p. 390). The feminization of Leonard's body culminates in his fight with Otto, during which his genitals are badly injured. Lynn Wells interprets this incident as "a sign of his final emasculation in the text" (Wells, 2010, p. 60).

Leonard's feminized portrayal extends to his subordinate role in his relationship with Maria. Both Leonard and Maria are aware of traditional gender roles, but their relationship consistently subverts these norms. In their love-making, Maria, more experienced, guides Leonard, a virgin, on how to be a man in bed, effectively "usurping the traditional role of the man's sexual superiority" (Roger, 1996, p. 24). This dynamic is even more pronounced during the scenes where they kill and dissect Otto. Everything Leonard proposes is vetoed, and finally, Leonard is coerced into compliance with Maria's ideas. Leonard complains: "Everything I say, you're against it. You tell me" (McEwan, 2013, p. 424), to which Maria responds: "I don't want to tell you. I want you to see it for yourself" (McEwan, 2013, p. 425). The undertone of Maria's response is clear: he plays the role of the decision-maker, but she does the decision-making. Their relationship is best illustrated through their practice of dancing: "There was tacit agreement that Leonard should lead and that Maria, by her own movements, should indicate just how he should do so" (McEwan, 2013, p. 389). After killing Otto, it is again Maria who decides how to dispose of the body, and Leonard takes a passive and subordinate role in executing Maria's will, acting as if he were a soldier taking command from his general. In her letter in the postscript, she tells Leonard that she has been annoyed by Leonard's irresponsibility and cowardliness, accusing Leonard of being "So male!" (McEwan, 2013, p. 491)

> If you felt betrayed you should have stood your ground and fought for what was yours. You should have accused me, you should have accused Bob. There would have been a fight, and we would have gotten to the bottom of it. (McEwan, 2013, p. 491)

Maria's accusation is ironic, as it inverts the traditional association of masculinity with strength and assertiveness. Leonard is "so male" not because he embodies these traits, but because he retreats—choosing to escape, avoid confrontation with Glass, and give her up to his American rival. In this context, being "so male," according to Maria's reversal of gender roles, actually implies a feminized passivity. In this complex reversal, Maria assumes a traditionally masculine role, taking on the attributes of assertiveness, decision-making, and control. Leonard, by

contrast, is feminized, who, positioned in the "virile cult of competence" (McEwan, 2013, p. 277) in the city, waits to be victimized by male aggression and incisiveness.

Conclusion

Ian McEwan's *The Innocent* offers a profound exploration of the intersections between the political and the personal through the lens of sexual violence. The boundary between the political and the personal, and their conflicts, are recurring themes in McEwan's novels. McEwan says in an interview:

> I've never really been interested in anything other than trying to find connection between the public and the private, and exploring how the two are in conflict, how they sometimes reflect each other, how the political invades the private world. (McEwan, 2013, p. 76).

In another interview by Jonathan Joakes in 2001, he stated: "I suppose I have been interested more generally in how private fates and public events collide" (McEwan, 2013, p. 80). This collision is a key motif in many of his novels. In *Black Dogs*, for instance, individual fates revolve around and are shaped by the Second World War and the fall of the Berlin Wall. *Atonement* underscores the historical impact of the Dunkirk retreat and the London Blitz by intertwining these events with a tragic love story. S*aturday* uses London's largest protest in history to emphasize the need to "seal private space off from the corruption of public politics" (Ryle, 2010, p. 28). In *The Innocent*, this dynamic is most strikingly expressed through the image of violent sex. Leonard's attempted rape not only mirrors broader geopolitical conflicts, revealing how the political shapes, corrupts, and often destroys individual lives, but also serves as a metaphor for "how the political invades the private world" (McEwan, 2013, p. 76). McEwan's depiction of Leonard as both victim and perpetrator, feminized and emasculated, serves as a critique of how political systems and conflicts dehumanize individuals, stripping them of agency and distorting their most intimate relationships. By illustrating the violent convergence of public events and private fates, *The Innocent* stands as a powerful political novel, urging readers to reflect on the moral and psychological consequences of political domination, not just on nations, but on the very fabric of human interaction.

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