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Human Psychological Conflicts and Responses in Ian McEwan's 'Enduring Love'

Anamika Kamal

*A JRF and currently pursuing M. Phil in English literature at the
University of Calicut, Kerala*

Abstract

The complexities of the human minds have been discussed and debated over for a long time now. This fascination towards the human psyche could also be observed in literature, especially since the early 20th century. Ian McEwan's *Enduring Love* could be considered as one such novel in which the novelist puts in significant efforts to expose the labyrinthine idiosyncrasies of the human mind. The intention of this paper is to study the characters of the novel in order to understand the sinuous functioning of their minds which controls their expressions and reactions to the situations in the novel.

Keywords

Ian McEwan, Contemporary fiction, postmodern literature, enduring love, love and obsession, motherhood and marriage, love and religion, obsessive faith, child neglect, childless marriage.

Possessing one of the most intriguing opening scenes in British Literature, *Enduring Love* unravels the story of how a single defining moment can alter one's life in its entirety. Not just that, the novel also subtly brings out the emotional and psychological complexities of being human. From the extremely traumatic opening to the disturbing appendices, McEwan's novel tells the harrowing tale of love, faith, trauma, and grief and how people deal with these intense emotions and feelings. At the centre of the novel are Joe, Clarissa, and Parry, whose understanding and perspectives of life vastly differ from the others. Peter Childs, in Ian McEwan's *Enduring Love*, writes:

Enduring Love is a novel with one narrator, but it is also a story with three central protagonists who all have different understanding of human reality. Joe Rose is a rationalist who thinks science reveals facts about existence and the universe. . . Clarissa Mellon feels that art, beauty, and happiness, not facts, are at the centre of people's relationships . . . Jed Parry believes that God underpins reality. The three of them thus begin from different premises: cognition, emotion, and faith. (15-16)

In the opening of the novel, we see how the perfectly normal day of Joe Rose turns into a nightmare as he gets involved in the traumatic balloon accident. Typical of the new age man, Joe always maintains a strictly rational view of the world and uses his logic and reason to explain away everything that happens around him, including emotions and feelings. This becomes obvious as he waits for Clarissa at the airport and observes:

If one ever wanted proof of Darwin's contention that the many expressions of emotions in humans are universal,

genetically inscribed, then a few minutes by the arrivals gate in Heathrow's Terminal Four should suffice (4).

This very mundane observation putting emphasis on emotions foreshadows the events to unfold as the same “expressions of emotions” create major upheavals in Joe Rose’s ordered, rationalized world and he struggles to explain them to himself and Clarissa. Joe’s dispassionate and detached observations about the people, and his musings on his reunion with Clarissa also succeed to draw forth his disenchantment with love and emotions in general. This proves itself to be important in the later parts of the novel as Joe and Clarissa’s relationship is threatened. According to Kiernan Ryan:

The true, fateful encounter between Clarissa and Joe has already happened, and Joe is running away from the real catastrophe. The abortive rescue bid supplies a gripping diversion from the actual source of the adversities about to afflict the couple, just as De Clérambault syndrome will later be enlisted to rationalise the threat to their love that Jed embodies. (48)

McEwan draws Joe and Clarissa as a pair of contrasts – science/literature, reason/emotion, and culture/nature. These fundamental differences between them come to the forefront later, as Joe gets increasingly distressed in his obsession over Parry. In fact, even though Parry plays an important role in the marital issues between Joe and Clarissa, the underlying issues have always been there. Parry’s obsession with Joe only triggered these issues to the surface. Byrnes quotes Chang:

“Joe’s relationship with his...wife...transcends the mechanics of the main plot, because even though their marriage is jeopardized by Parry’s obsessions, McEwan shows their problems as arising from murkier depths” (Qtd. in Byrnes 251).

Bound in a childless marriage with such contrasting beliefs and ideals, Clarissa and Joe’s marriage could not have been as stable as

either of them wanted it to be. Elwood Carlson and Kandi Stinson remark:

The old argument that childless marriages are more unstable applies only when much or all of such childlessness is not a deliberate choice. Both childlessness and eventual breakup of a marriage in such circumstances can be viewed as parallel outcomes of an underlying marginality in the marriage. Historically, this condition in fact has prevailed and childless marriages have been less stable. (265-66)

The lack of motherhood affects Clarissa deeply, while Joe seems to do okay without having to experience fatherhood. He is good with children and would have made a great father. But, Joe, like Clarissa, never dealt with the fact that they will not have a family. He employs his ardent rationalism to suppress and avoid his feelings concerning fatherhood. Clarissa employs the same technique, but remains emotional when it comes to children as is clear from Joe's words:

In her early twenties a routine surgical procedure had left Clarissa unable to bear children. She believed her medical notes had been confused with another woman's, but this was impossible to prove, and a long legal action foundered in delays and obstructions. . . . a good friend from her university days, had lost her fourweek-old baby. . . The news of the baby's death cut her down. I had never witnessed such disabling grief. Central to it was not so much the baby's fate as Marjorie's loss which she experienced as her own. What was revealed was Clarissa's own mourning for a phantom child, willed into half-being by frustrated love. Marjorie's pain became Clarissa's. A few days later her defences were back in place, and she dedicated herself to being as useful as she could to her old friend. (31-32)

In the article "Beyond the Mechanics of Infertility", the authors, Anne and Ralph Matthews provide a better perspective to the social psychology of infertility and involuntary childlessness. The authors look at the grief caused by infertility and the emotional and

psychological responses of the couple involved. The eight stages of surprise, denial, anger, isolation, guilt, depression, grief, and resolution are looked at in detail. They identify that "Isolation also appears to result from the inability of infertile partners to be able to confide their feelings to one another" (482-83). They further note that:

Just as the living mourns the dead, so do the infertile mourn the fact that they cannot produce the living. . . . it may be difficult for some to express this grief openly. Their 'loss' is of a potential and not an actual object. Thus, it may not be recognized as a loss either by the infertile couple or those in their support system. (483)

Joe hypocritically recognizes Clarissa's mourning of the "phantom child", but fails to recognize the grief of his own. Clarissa and Joe do love each other, but their love proves to be not strong enough in the aftermath of the accident. Joe projects his distress and blame into Parry, and thereby Clarissa, as she does not take him seriously in the beginning. But, even before that, Joe did lie to Clarissa about Parry's phone call. The basic issue arises from two aspects – Clarissa's infertility and the masculine impotency Joe must be feeling from being unable to give her a child, even though the issue is clearly with Clarissa. Psychologically though, this impotency must greatly disturb Joe. Davies writes: "Joe is a trapped within a void of physical and psychological impotence that terrifies him" (69). A study result showed that "Respondents themselves categorized infertility as discreditable, as something negative, as representing some sort of failure" (Miall 279). When Joe rushes to save the child, it's not just because the triggering of his paternal instincts, but also because it provides him with an opportunity to show off his masculinity to Clarissa. Before the accident and Parry, Joe maintained a calm, quiet life with his scientific lens fixed to see and explain the world through. After the accident though, this changes drastically. Even when Joe tries very hard to present himself as a strong, capable man, undaunted by the traumatic experience he went through, it becomes increasingly obvious that he

was indeed affected, and more profoundly than anyone else, even Parry. Joe's carefully constructed world view comes crashing down around him as he is made to acknowledge his own vulnerabilities. He employs detachment to keep his emotional self composure and takes charge during the ordeal as any strong, scientific, rational man would do. Davies remarks:

With Joe it is exactly such an assumed pose of self management that keeps him going and his feelings of powerlessness at bay. In order to put the accident behind him, Joe shuts off his emotions and builds a wall around him to prevent any self-critical thoughts from creeping in. As he takes cover in the knowledge of his own rationality, it is to the exclusion of all other possibilities. However, despite all these precautions, it is inevitable that the ballooning accident should also trigger in Joe a growing sense of his impotence and powerlessness which begins to trouble his relationship with Clarissa. (69)

Joe's insecurity in their relationship emerges to be the main villain along with mis-communication. When Joe fails in his endeavour to save the boy, it also symbolizes his failure in impregnating Clarissa. Thus, the shame and guilt is double fold and he has but no choice to acknowledge it, which he shies away from. Joe says: "she locked her fingers with mine and squeezed. I wanted to tell her I loved her, but suddenly between us there sat the form of Logan, upright and still" (30). Logan was the father of two children, and died trying to save another child, thus alluding to his masculine victory as a husband and father. Joe though, has failed on both accounts when he let go of the rope. The grief, shame, and guilt emanates from this central conflict. Combined with his insecurity about why a woman as beautiful as Clarissa would want his love, Joe acts out in self defence to protect his own vulnerability, thus alienating Clarissa from him. Perceptive Clarissa deduces that there must be something more going on and she calls Joe out: "He's not the cause of your agitation, he's a symptom" (84), and later "Alone Joe. You're so alone in all this, even when you speak to me about it. I feel you're shutting me out. There's something you're not telling me. You're

not speaking from the heart” (103). Joe's response to this claim is telling. He immediately wonders:

My thought was one I used to have when I first knew her: how did such an oversized average-looking lump like myself land this pale beauty? And a new bad thought: was she beginning to think she had a poor deal? (103)

Apart from dealing with the emotional trauma of the accident, Joe also has to deal with his newfound obsession to expose Parry as a real threat to Clarissa, explain Parry's obsession over himself in a logical manner, and deal with the resurfacing of the old and buried insecurities with regards to Clarissa and himself. Joe's mind is in utter turmoil trying to handle all the overloading issues and he is left with little choice. Their first real fight in the novel turns up as a culmination of all his frustrations.

On Clarissa's part, her suppressed yearning for a child, for motherhood sometimes reflect directly upon her treatment of Joe, her husband. More than once in the duration of the novel, we see Clarissa assuming the role of a mother, trying to understand, reassure, and comfort Joe as she would do a child. After the tragic balloon accident, Clarissa tells Joe: “You're such a dope. You're so rational sometimes you're like a child...” (33). When Joe first approaches Clarissa about Parry being a threat, he simplifies it, as a mother would deem something her child said to be inconsequential. As Joe becomes increasingly desperate, her approach becomes more parental, suspicious and interrogating instead of being supportive. This is not an intentional reaction from her part. For, she too went through the same trauma of the accident as she stood helpless to do anything but watch, and she needs that part to be over. The innate human need to explain away and move on from the unwanted drives Clarissa. Sadly, with Joe's obsession with Parry, that aim remains unable to reach. So, she wants to disregard Joe in order to disassociate themselves completely from the accident. Joe's frustration stems from the fact that instead of being his wife and friends, trying to share his burden, Clarissa only ends up driving him further into crisis mode.

Parry provides Joe with a reason to distant himself from his wife and the conflicting emotions he is going through. Clarissa's need for comfort and love are ignored in Joe's mad obsession over Parry. For Clarissa, all her romantic illusions of their relationship are brought to light, and she still has to get over the trauma of the incident. She struggles to find a balance between the two along with her need to understand her husband. Her conflict with Joe's increasing animosity and distress, and her inability to help – with Joe, and with the balloon accident – make her lash out at Joe. At the end of the novel, McEwan reveals that the separated couple came back together and adopted a child and are living quite happily. This revelation points to the necessity of a child in their family for Clarissa and Joe's marriage to work. The resolution of their marital issues was acquired through adoption.

When it comes to Jed Parry, his beliefs originate from a very strong religious faith. Parry's way of dealing with the accident involves finding a deeper meaning to it all – meeting Joe. Parry wants to justify the tragedy as something meaningful which he does by latching on to Joe. This happened because Joe was the only person to acknowledge him after the accident and Parry, in his adamant belief that everything happens for a reason, construes Joe's acknowledgement as the whole point of the accident. Looking at Parry's background, it becomes unsurprising that he suffered from mental issues.

He has had an “intense and lonely childhood”, had no father figure to guide him through adolescence, his mother never cared about him, he lost contact with his sister, and grew up feeling inferior to the boys at his boarding school. All these together made Parry desperate enough to find at least one thing to belong to, which must have been why he became so ardently religious. Parry never got the opportunity to go through the stages of development as a child, which severely distorted his mind. He gave himself over to his faith in order to be less lonely. For a child who grew up in these

conditions, it would have been astonishing indeed, if Parry had no psychological issues at all.

One of the central themes of the novel is Jed Parry's unrequited and frankly psychotic love for Joe Rose. Before meeting Joe, Parry lived in isolation, with only his relationship with God as a substitute for all other intimate relations. Then the ballooning accident happened, and Parry's life was forever changed. In the discussion of Parry's condition, it says:

Such a transformation, from a 'socially empty' life to intense team-work may have been the dominating factor in precipitating the syndrome, for it was when the drama was over that he became 'aware' of R's love. (239)

Defining love in Sorokinian terms, Jeff Levin and Berton H. Kaplan explain:

For Sorokin, religious love referred to experiencing the love of God or the Absolute; ethical love referred to identification of love with values such as goodness, truth, and beauty; ontological love referred to the instrumentality of love or loving to unify, harmonize, elevate, enrich, and empower; physical love referred to love expressed through affirmation of the unifying, integrating, and ordering energies of the universe; biological love referred to love expressed sexually and romantically and through passion; psychological love referred to love experienced emotionally through giving or receiving empathy, sympathy, kindness, and benevolence; and social love referred to love as manifested in meaningful interactions or relationship with others, as driven by sharing, helping, and altruism. (383)

If defined in this frame, Parry's love for Joe fits into all domains, but one – biological. In fact, Parry positively abhors the idea of a physical relationship with Joe. Parry's love is cemented by his unshakeable religious faith. Explaining Hackney and Sanders, John M. Salsman and Charles R. Carlson write:

[Hackney and Sanders] Identified three general categories of religiousness: "ideological religion," which emphasized beliefs involved in religious activity (e.g., attitudes, belief

salience, fundamentalism); "institutional religion," which focused on social and behavioral aspects of religion (e.g., extrinsic religiousness, attendance at religious services, participation church activities, or ritual prayer); and "personal devotion," which was characterized by aspects internalized, personal devotion (e.g., intrinsic religiousness, emotional attachment to God, devotional intensity). (202)

Parry's faith falls into the third category, a deeply personal relationship. By choosing this form of religion, Parry could overcome the sense of alienation, loneliness, and anxiety by uniting his ego to an omnipotent and omniscient power. This belief acts as the mental crutch he needs to survive in the world. So, the driving force behind Parry's actions remains his passionate belief that Joe and his being together is the will of God. He suffers repeated rejections and mockery from Joe and still continues to love him with zeal. Parry writes:

Accept me, and you'll find yourself accepting God without a thought. So promise me. Show me your fury or bitterness. I won't mind. I'll never desert you. But never, never try to pretend to yourself that I do not exist. (138)

But, he also manages to remind Joe of the darker side of God's love – his wrath:

God's love. . . may take the form of wrath. It can show itself to us as calamity. This is the difficult lesson it's taken me a lifetime to learn. . . . His love isn't always gentle. How can it be when it has to last, when you can never shake it off? It's a warmth, it's a heat and it can burn you, Joe, it can consume you. (152)

By doing this Parry assimilates himself to God, and his love to that of God. But, there's another letter, in which the Godly power is transformed into Joe as Perry pours his heart out: "I stand before you naked, defenceless, dependent on your mercy, begging you for your forgiveness" (93). Joe's love, and thereby Joe becomes that power which can bring salvation to Parry. In this very first letter, he opens himself up to Joe with such abandon in the hope and strength of Joe's perceived love for him. Parry becomes the sinner, and Joe,

his saviour. Combined with Parry's mania, these strong religious undertones make his love even stronger and consequently, the resentment, even more vehement. So much so that Parry intended to kill Joe. Woolston, in his study notes: "The evidence of pathological conditions shows the connection between exaggerated religious emotion and diseased nervous states" (75). About intense religious emotions, he further states:

A man feels that his will is identified with God's will; that his plan is a part of God's plan. And such a rapport with the source of all power gives a man immense energy to suffer or to do. The religious emotion especially arouses the expansive manifestations of love, to which it is very much akin. (79)

Parry's aversion a sexual relationship with Joe could also be attributed to this religious faith as homosexuality is not endorsed in Christian faith. In addition to that, Godly love does not need sexual expression to find fulfilment. Thus Parry's love remains chaste and pure. For Parry, his love for Joe and Joe's for him is a blessing, a saving grace. Not just from a religious aspect, but from the isolation he has been suffering since childhood. In Joe, Parry sees the biological father who abandoned him, – which is apparent from the age difference – thus balancing his troubled psyche regarding father figures, and also the manifestation of the heavenly Father – his only intimate relationship – and his love and acceptance of Parry. Parry takes so strongly to Joe because he needed a father figure in his life, and after God, Joe was the only one who came close. Parry thirsts for Joe's approval and acceptance, for which he writes him letter after letter, waits on him hand and foot, and remains utterly devout to Joe even after his blatant disregard to Parry and his claims.

When it comes to the relationship between Joe and Parry, the conflict arises from Parry's steadfast belief in his delusions and Joe's vehement rejection of those notions. He agonizes, apologizes, pleads, and rages for his love, and ultimately becomes resentful of Joe for failing him. Parry's constant apologies and tears results from his guilty conscience over the love he and Joe shares as Joe is

married to Clarissa. This is explained by Behrendt and Ben-Ari as they quote: “a person who feels guilty [tries] to ameliorate their predicament by confessing, apologizing, or otherwise repairing the damage done” (1118). Parry tries over and over to win Joe’s love, to convince him of the truth of their love, but these deluded beliefs fail to impress Joe. But, at the end of the novel, it is seen that even after three years, Parry remains dedicated and faithful to Joe. Joe explains this accurately when he says:

The pattern of his love was not shaped by external influences, even if they originated from me. His was a world determined from the inside, driven by private necessity, and this way it could remain intact. . . . He crouched in a cell of his own devising, teasing out meanings, imbuing nonexistent exchanges with their drama of hope, or disappointment, always scrutinising the physical world, its random placement and chaotic noise and colours, for the correlatives of his current emotional state – and always finding satisfaction. (143)

He further adds:

He was inviolable in his solipsism. . . . The logic that might drive him from despair to hatred, or from love to destruction in one leap, would be private, unguessable, and if he came at me there'd be no warning. (144)

Paul Edwards talks about this solipsism in terms of human psychology and classifies them into two categories:

One version would be a feeling or conviction that reality (including other people) depends on me for its existence. . . . More subtly deranged is the version that affects Jed, where what he takes to be a shared, public world (in which Joe is in love with him) is actually a private delusion. (79)

As Parry obsesses over Joe, Joe in turn gets obsessed with Parry, but in a non-romantic way. Joe grows desperate to discredit Parry, and Clarissa’s suspicions of himself. In this mad mission, Parry becomes the one he constantly thinks about. Clarissa’s exclamation “The rationalist cracks at last!” (35), acts as a warning to what comes later

in the novel as Joe is driven close to insanity over Parry with his neurotic, paranoid behaviour. Greenberg curiously remarks:

A Lacanian analysis of Joe's pathology, a pathology in which the facts will always confirm the symbolic fantasy structure, suggests de Clerambault's syndrome itself, the illness with which Jed is diagnosed. For in de Cleambault's cases, we learn, the obsession of the patient is completely invulnerable to any response he or she might receive from the object of the obsession. (112)

Even though Joe is proven right in his deductions and suspicions about Parry, the obsessive compulsive way with which he pursued the matter turns Greenberg's point to a very valid argument, as nothing Clarissa, or the police officers said or did were enough to convince Joe that Parry is harmless. All of this disturbs him to such levels that he wanted Parry to be dead as is seen in the novel: "There was just a chance he could have fallen forwards under a passing set of wheels, and I wanted it, the desire was cool and intense, and I wasn't surprised at myself, or ashamed" (90). For Joe, Parry stands the root of all his problems – his recently awakened frustrations at himself, the deterioration of his relationship with Clarissa, and his own peace of mind. His relentless pursuit for a scientific reason to Parry's behaviour only highlights how much Joe relies upon science to protect him as a shield. But, he childishly believes that if Parry dies, all his frustrations will go away with him. He could go back to his ordinary, logical life. This conflict ultimately ends in violence as Joe gets a gun, Parry breaks into their home and threatens Clarissa, and later threatens to self-harm.

Parry's undeterred pursuit of Joe only results in his alienation from his wife. As Joe understands that he had no control over Parry, just as he had no control over the accident, or Clarissa's infertility, his insecurities evolves into such tremendous proportions that he becomes suspicious of his own wife having an affair behind his back. His anger manifests as an outlet of his inner emotional turmoil, which again only widens the gap between Clarissa and

himself. Parry's anger on the other hand, stems from the fact that he is denied the love he deserves, and he lashes out by hiring a hit man.

Joe's fear of Parry's advances also arises from a fear of the homoerotic. Clark and Gordon note:

It is as if the "relationship" with Jed has called Joe's sexuality into doubt. In desperation, he is driven to take matters into his own hands, and he sets out to find a gun, a crude symbol of male potency. . . . If Jed's attentions have turned Joe into a passive victim, if not actually feminizing him then at least depriving him of masculine power, this sounds like an exchange of a feminine situation for a masculine situation. (50-51)

The ballooning accident has already exposed Joe's insecurities about his own masculinity and potency, which he has been suppressing for so long in his marriage with Clarissa. On top of this, Joe attracts the romantic attention of another male, which further threatens his masculinity. Joe fears Parry's attraction towards him and is ashamed for eliciting it in the first place. Contrary to Parry's guilty response, Joe reacts from a place of shame and falls right into the classical behaviour of people who feel shame:

People who experience shame feel more threatened than those who experience guilt and are more concerned about others' negative evaluations of them. Responses to shame can range from directing anger, aggression, and blame toward other person, to avoiding the other and directing anger toward oneself. (Behrendt and Ben-Ari 1118)

Together, this shatters whatever sense of self he had left, pushing him into a frenzied state of mind, to calm down which, he is propelled to take drastic measures. Davies rightfully states: "McEwan's hero could be diagnosed as suffering from an onslaught of feminization, which not only emasculates him, but moreover threatens to dissolve the very foundation of self" (72). To substantiate this observation, she quotes Byres:

The extreme form of this [male] fear of "feminization" is the homophobic's paranoia about homosexual rape . . . a fear of violation of the masculine body that, in a heterosexual

economy, sees itself as inviolable, as hard and sealed off rather than soft or opened, as the penetrator, rather than the penetrated. (Qtd in 72)

Parry succeeds in penetrating Joe's hard shell of clinical rationality and logic and disturbing his imperturbable mind. His influence only urges Joe to take more actions to prove his own masculinity and self-worth and discard the doubts and insecurities roused by Parry's intrusion in his life. Even Clarissa hadn't managed to draw such strong emotions from Joe as Parry does. Joe is terrorized by Parry and his unwavering romantic interest in him. Combined with his pre-existing insecurities and newfound guilt and shame from the trauma, Joe's psyche breaks into pieces affecting his family life. His fanatic need to win over Parry, to prove him wrong becomes an obsession of another dimension. Clark and Gordon discuss the way Byrnes interpreted Parry and Joe as they write: "Jed represents the darker, repressed "shadow" side of Joe's seemingly enlightened rationality – an increasingly hostile mirror-self that exposes the instability of the ego" (83). This approach seems to be true as Parry and Joe indeed seem like "the hostile brethren", with their vastly opposing beliefs and worldview.

Throughout the novel, Joe, Parry, and Clarissa are dealing with issues of their own, and emotions ranging from one end of the spectrum to the other. These constant battles taking place between each other and within their own minds make them all extremely susceptible to danger. Parry is in danger of losing himself over his love for Joe, Joe is in danger of losing his own self-worth and his wife, and Clarissa is in danger of losing her husband, whom she loved and trusted. All three characters had unaddressed issues which only came to the front after the ballooning incident. The trauma from the accident and their need to deal with it and put it behind them drive their actions. But, this proves to be a hard endeavour considering the accident also triggered suppressed and repressed emotions to the surface – Joe's insecurities and fear, Clarissa's grief and helplessness in their inability to build a family, and Parry's loneliness and lack of a father model which made him religiously

devout, a devotion, which reflects in his love for Joe. McEwan cleverly portrays how humans respond when put under a situation of great emotional distress and the long-term effects such incidents could have in one's life and relationships.

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Anamika Kamal

Anamika Kamal did Master's degree in English Literature from The English and Foreign Languages University, Hyderabad in 2019. She qualified for NTA NET with JRF in the same year and is currently an M. Phil research scholar at the University of Calicut, Kerala.



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