



The Negative Class Mentality in Ian McEwan's Atonement

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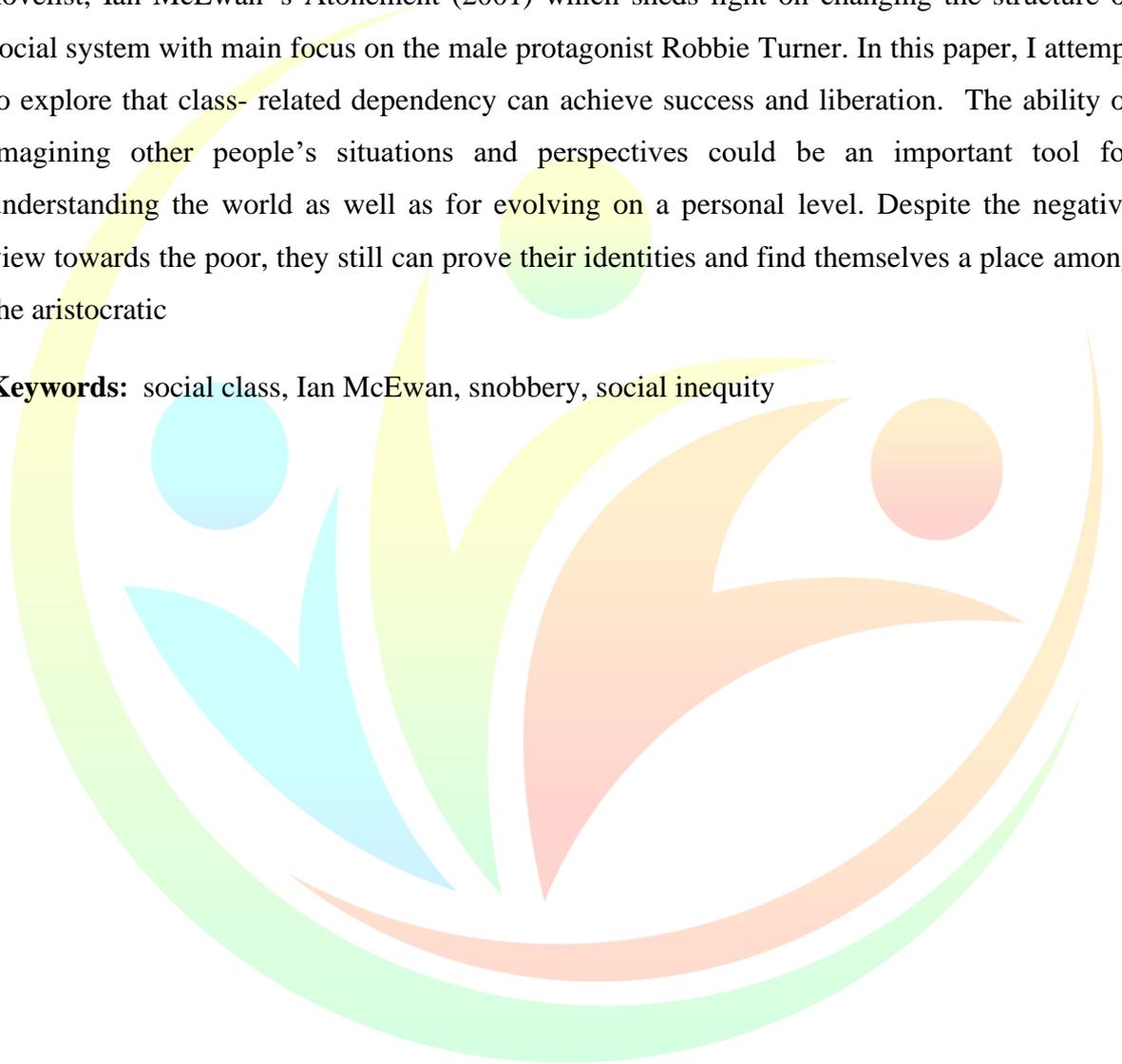
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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses the negative class mentality of the 1930s as it is used in the British novelist, Ian McEwan's *Atonement* (2001) which sheds light on changing the structure of social system with main focus on the male protagonist Robbie Turner. In this paper, I attempt to explore that class-related dependency can achieve success and liberation. The ability of imagining other people's situations and perspectives could be an important tool for understanding the world as well as for evolving on a personal level. Despite the negative view towards the poor, they still can prove their identities and find themselves a place among the aristocratic

Keywords: social class, Ian McEwan, snobbery, social inequity

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INTRODUCTION

Ian McEwan is born in 1948 in Aldershot and most of his early life is spent abroad, in the district in which his father serves his post in army. In an interview with Kate Kellaway, he mentions how he 'grew up with the detritus of war around him.' (2001). He grows up after the horrific atmosphere of war, and he has been told stories about war by his father, and we could see this obvious especially what is reflected by Robbie during the retreat of Dunkirk. He is one of the most well-read novelists of contemporary literature. His career has started from 1970s. His works are highly regarded before his publishing of *Atonement*, but this novel continues to be regarded as one of the great contemporary novels in the literary establishment. (Ellam, 2009)

From 1959 to 1966, he attends Woolverstone Hall, a bordering school in Suffolk, and this school is specialized to children who are, as Matthew Kibble describes it in Literature Online 'a place where working class children from central London were taught alongside those who, like himself, came from Military families', and it is also a school for which writers such as Rudyard Kipling attend. After that, he goes on to study English and French at Sussex University from 1967 to 1970. (Kibble, 2000)

In *Atonement*, social classes are a central part of daily life for the Tallis family. Two classes are presented throughout the novel: the upper and lower classes. These two classifications are best represented by: Paul Marshal and Robbie Turner. Both of these characters are subject to, or display, discriminatory treatment because of their place in the social hierarchy. In *Atonement*, Ian McEwan utilizes social class in the main characters to demonstrate that class defines individuals by governing their potential opportunities.

In this novel, the main protagonist, Robbie, the housekeeper's son is able to find himself a place in the English society which views the poor people as inferior to them. Robbie has always been treated as a the housekeeper's son and he had no right to to ascend the place the strict society had dedicated for him. But Robbie's dreams are larger than remaining only a housekeeper's son. He dreams of pursuing his education and becoming a doctor. Therefore, he joins the University of Cambridge where he gets in touch with various norms and political theories: "He liked people to know he didn't care – there goes my mother's employer's daughter, he once said to a friend. He had his politics to protect him, and his scientifically based theories of class, and his own rather forced self-certainty. I am what I am" (79)

It is unjust if he deprived of his ambition. But the bourgeois see it is unjust if he is given this opportunity to compete with their children. Lower middle class or working-class people should never have access to education. But Robbie's ambitions and dreams are larger than the unjust laws of his society. He should fulfil his aspirations regardless of the negative views of people in his society. He believes that there should be no discrimination and no inequality, and no prejudice against the working classes. Robbie Turner liberates his mind through literature and this enables him to make "his own decision" (91) about his aspirations in life. Literature also serves as something that will make him a better human and more skilful in his medical practice. Robbie concludes that writing will assist him in his future efforts:

"For this was the point, surely: he would be a better doctor for having read literature. What deep readings his modified sensibility might make of human suffering, of the self-destructed folly, or sheer bad luck that drive men towards ill health! Birth, death, and frailty in between. Rise and fall – this were the doctor's business, and it was literature's too". (93)

Literature, as Wall observes, can actually help narrow the divides between people and thus create a community: "There is a correspondence between aesthetic unity and human community to engage in a conversation about the role beauty plays in helping us to see what we value in common" (780) Stories are thus used to glue things together, provide explanations to the world's irrationalities and uncertainties and make our existence more intelligible

Wall writes: "with stories, they can negotiate and act in concert, create a community, possibly even endorse or create a change" (783).

In Ian McEwan's *Atonement*, Robbie Turner belongs to the working class, joining school with Tallis children and at the same time he is preparing to join Cambridge University to study Medicine. What is different in this situation is that his mother is the housekeeper of Tallis family, and his father has deserted his family when Robbie was about six years old. It rather seems abnormal that such a marginalized individual in a society suddenly becomes one of the aristocratic class. The World War I have affected the structure of society a great deal. Robbie falls in love with Cecilia who belongs to the aristocratic class, love which is requited between these two young, something which could be

weird in the nineteenth-century and previous centuries where we see rigid class systems where one is not able to ascend his social class easily.

Atonement becomes famous for his stories about Dysfunction experiences. Starting from what it seems like an idyllic country setting in English, where it appears that privilege dominates. Slowly, the author introduces his readers to the darker side of a case, one in which all things have been flipped upside down, in which innocence is entangled with guilt, and falsehood makes the truth obscure. A 13-year-old girl is at the root of this trauma, Briony, the elderly girl, the youngest of all Siblings from Tallis. Briony likes to impress and is anxious to draw attention to herself. Also, she uses her broad imagination for circumstantial twisting proofs of allegations against her enemies. Her twists would cause the life of an innocent man to be destroyed, who is Robbie. On the other hand, the real guilty man is Paul Marshal who will not be judged for his crime, which is raping of the young girl Lola, Briony's cousin due to a wrong accusation from Briony to Robbie. (Constantakis,2010)

Robbie is a victim of both class difference and the war, which are the reasons for all of the calamities in the novel

The novel examines the way in which Briony faces the consequences of her false accusation to Robbie of raping Lola, and how she carries the weight of her wrong actions to her lifelong and how would she atone for her wrong doings which consume the life of two innocent people who are Cecilia, her sister and Robbie, their gardener. (Constantakis,2010)

Marwick states that wars stick in the memories of ordinary human beings, especially those who are engaged directly in it, war would offer new experiences to those who become acquainted with it, and it would give them new sense of purpose and self-esteem and all these experiences and sufferings would lead to the creation of a better world. (1988). Long ago, Virginia Woolf states in her essay *Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown* "On or about December 1910 human nature changed "she continues" All human relations shifted, and when human relations change there is at the same time a change in religion, conduct, politics, and literature."(p.13) The current situation of the twentieth century is different, and of course any change, as Virginia Woolf suggests, would change the social class, which is fundamental part of human race .

Lola's rape was a climax for both characters, but they both continued their

life in their class. Marshal goes on to marry Lola, representing that he had lost nothing from the event. Robbie dies as a grunt in the war; righting wrongs that he had never committed. McEwan's commentary on class based on these two characters is that class defines them. Life is not based upon fairness and righteousness, but the resources that a person can provide

In the twentieth century, after the World War I, England has been deficiently homogenous, whether geographically or in social status. In the sociological analysis of the General Election of January 1910, J. A. Hobson states that "English social structure is divide into two parts: the north, a producer's England dominated by heavy industry and having a robust working class; the south, a consumer's England dominated by a rentier middle-class with a servile working-class."(p.2) After 1900, there is a class conflict over political authority, in which some of the dimensions of social status are ignored as it is acknowledged by people of that time. Political affiliation plays an important role in social class, attitudes toward poverty, trade union organization, and education limitation which could be equally regarded as a function of social class. (Waites, 1976)

The difference between manual and non-manual workers at first sight appears to suggest a stagnant culture, bolstered by social immobility. Instead of social institutions, constituting a fundamental societal framework the system is an educational pyramid that allocates a certain kind of education for each class of society. Disturbing the pyramid, for instance by rising the number of state-aided working-class scholarship children (the educational preserves of the lower-middle class) Class animosity was brought into harsh focus.)

...In an old country like England, where lines of social distinction are sharply drawn, they cannot be ignored or set aside in practice . . . many (secondary schoolmasters) are alarmed lest, if it be known. that the numbers coming up from below are large enough to affect the tone and character of the school, the parents of paying pupils will hold aloof and the finances of the school become disorganized .

In the twentieth-century, there is a shift in thinking about social class and the look toward lower classes seems to have new turning. When Robbie starts his post in French as a soldier during the World War II, we see the two soldiers who accompany him, Mace and Nettle show him respect and even call him "governor"

this respect is devoted to Robbie in the basis of his intelligence, education, reading maps, and his ability to speak French. Despite the fact he is a private without officer rank. In the previous centuries, respect could only be gained by social status and the amount of money the one possesses, as much as he has, he would gain respect, while the lower classes are seen as something lower than human. Briony has learnt that the modern world enables opportunities regardless of background, something that was not common in the 1930s.

We live in a world of ethnic diversity, mixed cultures and new values. Inequality in society still exists but it looks quite different.

Despite the fact that McEwan offers many images of the changing look toward the working classes and the kind of respect they start gaining, one of the issues is that the accusation of Robbie of raping Lola. Though Briony knows that Robbie is not the really guilty of the action, she accuses him rather than accuses Paul Marshal, the real guilty. In this scene we see Tallis family tend to prefer Paul Marshal over Robbie because the first is an aristocratic man. This issue which is explored in the novel suggests that class distinction has not ended. The police arrests Robbie and puts him in jail according to an accusation

put forth by a teenager of 13 years old. What is the effect of this accusation on this innocent man? What is the real guilt he has committed? The effects of such accusation are vast to the extent they bring the misery and death to an innocent man who has done nothing wrong.

Brian Finney suggests :”he attempt to imagine the feelings of others is perhaps the one corrective that we can make in the face of continuing human suffering” (82)

McEwan is very clever in exploring the theme of social class in the beginning of twentieth-century to compare it with the social structure of the late twentieth and beginning of twenty first century. At the end of the novel, the greatest transformation in England society of its own day, is the struggle of country with its identity as a nation. What makes this transformation of English society of current day (the time in which he writes his novel) is what comes to be known as ‘Globalization’, which leads to the emergence of different kind of society. In this new society, live people of mixed cultures, new values, and of ethnic diversity, these qualities are responsible for judging man’s value without any regard to his social status. (Lupton, 2009)

McEwan sheds the light in this issue in his novel through the character of Robbie. During his study time at Cambridge,

Robbie defends his class background and does not look for compromise to his colleagues of upper classes. When others trying to mock his lower social class, he does not give any attention stating that his father has deserted him, and his mother works as a cleaner to gain some income to improve their life and that he is proud of his mother, what he tries to emphasize is that, what matter is the amount of culture you possess, your education, and above all humanity. These what determine one's personality not his social background. (Fraser, 2013) Finally, Cecilia summaries the scene:

" Now that I have broken away, I'm beginning to understand the snobbery that lay behind their stupidity. My mother never forgave

you your first. My father preferred to lose himself in his work. Leon turned out to be a grinning, spineless idiot who went along with everyone else". (209)

CONCLUSION

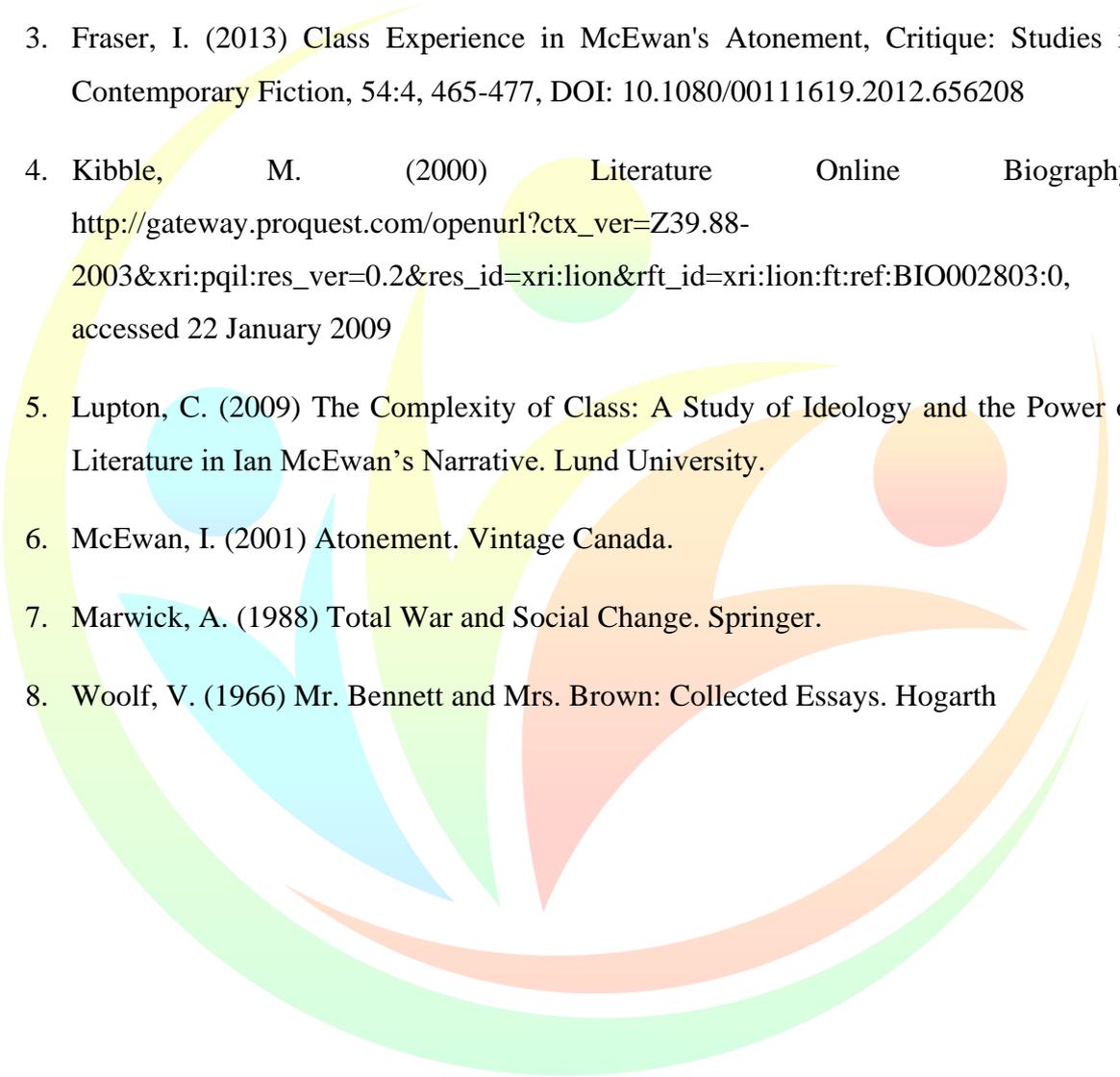
This paper explores the features of social inequity after globalization has influenced and segregated social groups in a 'backward' way, instead of getting people closer to each other.

The aristocratic views the lower-class people negatively and they believe that they have no right to live and act like they do because these lower-class people do not have what they have. Despite this negative view, the lower-class people assert themselves a place in society and gain liberation and class related dependency.

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