

## GLOBAL DISASTERS AND PERSONAL RESPONSES IN IAN

### MCEWAN'S *SOLAR*

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#### Abstract

Ian McEwan's *Solar* (2010) is centered around a Nobel Laureate Professor of Physics whose peak of academic achievement is thirty years behind him, who is trying to retrieve his reputation by proposing replacement of coal and fossil fuel use by solar power and a planet whose heyday as a nurturing haven for human species is but a fantasy. The protagonist's conspicuous consumption of romantic entanglements also mirrors the daily routines of billions of human beings in overconsumption of commodities and non-renewable planetary resources. His one original contribution is his almost instinctive response to another major factor in climate change: overpopulation. I will focus on our failure to maintain foresight for imminent antropogenic disasters as human species as well as overpopulation as a neglected cause for such disasters, even in *Solar*, since the solution to overpopulation involves a counterintuitive measure: not to have children.

**Keywords:** global warming, climate change, antinatalism, ecocriticism, Ian Mcewan

## IAN MCEWAN'IN *SOLAR* ROMANINDA KÜRESEL FELAKETLER VE KİŞİSEL TEPKİLER<sup>2</sup>

#### Özet

Ian Mc Ewan'ın 2010 yılında yayımlanan romanı *Solar*, akademik başarısının zirvesine otuz yıl önce ulaşmış ve bu tarihten sonra azim ve yaratıcılığı açgözlülük ve bencillik tarafından gölgelenmiş, şimdi de saygınlığını kömür ve fosil yakıt enerjisi yerine solar enerji kullanımını yaygınlaştıracak projeler geliştirerek geri kazanmaya çalışan Nobel ödüllü bir Fizik profesörü Michael Beard'ın hayatının kritik önem taşıyan bir bölümünü konu alıyor. Küresel ısınma ve yenilenemeyen kaynakların tüketimi konularına orijinal bir çözüm önerisi ve bilinçli bir şekilde üremeyerek

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eyleme dökebildiği bireysel katkısı ise iklim değişikliğine etki eden başka bir belirleyici faktör olan aşırı nüfus yoğunluğu konusuna eğilmesi. Bu çalışma, başkahramanın kişisel yaşamı ve insan türünün yakın zamanda gerçekleşecek olan insan kaynaklı felaketlere karşı öngörüsüzlüğündeki paralelliğin psikanalitik tezahürlerini incelerken aşırı nüfus yoğunluğuna karşı içgüdülere ve sezgilere aykırı anti-natalizm önermesini ekoeleştirme bağlamında ve olay örgüsündeki belirleyici etkisini de göz önünde bulundurarak analiz etmeyi amaçlıyor.

**Anahtar Sözcükler:** küresel ısınma, iklim değişikliği, anti-natalizm, ekoeleştirme, Ian Mcewan

### **Introduction**

Although *Solar* has been categorized as a climate change novel, apocalyptic novel, a picaresque and a satire, it is more aptly defined by Evi Zemanek as a risk narrative by pointing to the personal and professional risks the protagonist is taking throughout the story and his disastrous management of them (p. 51). With 5 marriages in his past, he rationalizes his refusal to have children by a formulation for the lack of regret for non-existent pleasure when there is no one to enjoy that pleasure, similar to the asymmetry of pain and pleasure formulated by David Benatar in his *Better Never to Have Been: Harms of Coming into Existence* (2006). Since, “the inseparability of the self from the outside world is also significant because saving the earth must start from rebuilding the self” (Nan Hsu, p. 347). Both regarding existence, and experiencing one with an ability to form relationships, one is reminded of Lord Alfred Tennyson's lines from In Memoriam A. H. H. “I hold it true, whate'er befall;/I feel it, when I sorrow most;/'Tis better to have loved and lost/Than never to have loved at all.” Son of a mother who had had serial affairs to escape a potential psychosis who overfeeds her child with gusto and a non-expressive, fatalist war veteran father who retreats into ignorance rather than confront reality, Micheal Beard becomes an empty, narcissistic shell. His mother, outsourcing approval without investing in a single, stable source determined Beard's personal and professional endeavours. His personal relationships were modeled on double standards; his sources provided him with a supply of approval whereas he was unexceptionally unfaithful and unreliable. And his professional career after his initial Beard-Einstein Conflation Theory, is also based on an intellectual theft from a young and ambitious researcher's notes on artificial photosynthesis who left his notes in Beard's care. Unbeknownst to the young researcher at the time was that he would die as a result of an accident taking place in Beard's home after he gets caught having an affair with Beard's wife. The symbiotic relationship of Beard and his mother showed its signs very early on in his

infancy. "Some four decades before he won the Nobel Prize for Physics, he came on top in the Cold Norton and District Baby Competition, birth to six months class" (McEwan, p. 265). Having created no stable image between the overbearing, nurturing mother and the independent woman on the verge of a psychotic breakdown, his lack of object constancy resulted in his own serial relationship failures in addition to his core wound of abandonment. "A fat man who restlessly craved the attentions of beautiful women who could cook" (McEwan, p. 266) and function as narcissistic supplies rather than partners, Beard never loves, and never really loses. His inability to form genuine personal connections, coupled by "manic defenses, an inability to mourn or love, parricidal and filicidal wishes, castration anxiety, fear of death," (Kogan, p. 1299) his dysfunctional relationship with the world, grandiose sense of self and a sense of entitlement to ethical breaches and excessive consumption of things and people renders him the embodiment of the Promethean of the Antroposcene. "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" (Cowler, "Solar by Ian McEwan). Lacking self-reflexivity, he can only define humanity through projection as he is descending on London "...how could we ever begin to restrain ourselves? We appeared, at this height, like a spreading lichen, a ravaging bloom of algae, a mould enveloping a soft fruit –we were such a wild success. Up there with the spores!" (McEwan, p. 152). The answer he refrains from admitting on a personal level is that, he cannot restrain himself, not until his end through self-destruction reminiscent of the fate of the planet. In the end, he refuses to get treatment for his skin melanoma, fails to resolve the tension resulting from his betrayals and refuses to face the revelation and legal consequences of his intellectual fraud.

### **Antroposcene and Prometheanism**

As defined by Paul Crutzen, Antroposcene

suggests that the Earth has now left its natural geological epoch, the present interglacial state called the Holocene. Human activities have become so pervasive and profound that they rival the great forces of Nature and are pushing the Earth into planetary *terra incognita*. The Earth is rapidly moving into a less biologically diverse, less forested, much warmer, and probably wetter and stormier state (Steffen et al., p. 624).

Since the 1960s, the idea of the earth as a planet with finite resources have become widespread. However, Promethean or cornucopian view of the environmental discourses as defined by Paul Dryzek, suggests that the earth is unlimited and history shows that once

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human species run out of an efficient resource, they find another substitute. Eco-system's needs and interests are overshadowed by human interests. The idea of the carrying capacity of the planet is an illusion and population rise also led to rise of quality of human lives as well as longevity. Limits, constraints, boundaries are frowned upon and substituted by an ideological stance backed by scientific evidence, accuracy of which is yet to be seen. Arcadian ecology on the other hand, calls for harmonious coexistence of human beings and nature, grounded on a framework of ethics inviting humility as opposed to the infinite, narcissistic greed that fails to recognize any form of mutuality. As opposed to Prometheanism, Survivalism or ecoauthoritarianism, recognizing global environmental limits and that the myth of abundance of earthly resources can be debunked by science, foresee an imminent collapse of society due to environmental degradation.

A sceptic and a climate change denier, Beard finds himself in a quest for convincing the business world to adopt solar power backed by photovoltaics as head of the National Centre for Renewable Energy. His awareness that only if “the material interests of key players could eventually be brought in line with global environmental concerns” (Dryzek, p. 46) just like international cooperation helped reverse the ozone depletion, would a permanent change in the planet's destiny occur, he admits to a group of investors at a conference that redemption would not result from virtue but the same greed that brought them to the current catastrophic situation to begin with. They would be rich, and save the world at the same time. “Our planet is a finite entity. You have the data in front of you, you have the choice –the human project must be safely and cleanly fueled, or it fails, it sinks. You the market either have to rise to this, and get rich along the way, or you sink with all the rest” (McEwan, p. 207). A scientific expert, Beard, is implementing economic rationalism in order to manipulate the investors into accepting the survivalist narrative because the retrieval of his own reputation depends upon this final quest. This is one of the rare moments in his life when his private benefit is aligned with the public interests. His own disbelief at amelioration and acknowledgment of the impossibility of any positive change in human nature however, makes him physically sick as he is giving his speech and he ends up vomiting behind the curtain later on. Not only he overate as per habit before his speech but for the first time he seems to be distressed by the discrepancy between his genuine thoughts and the distorted expression of them in public.

A Promethean at heart, with a deep intolerance for optimism or idealism, a nihilist by his own definition, Beard finds himself in the ironic position of preaching sustainable

development when he neither believes in the need for it nor cares for any development worth sustaining or a planet worth saving.

The Gulf Stream would vanish, Europeans would freeze to death in their beds, the Amazon would be a desert, some continents would catch fire, others would drown, and by 2085 the Arctic Summer ice would be gone and the polar bears with it. Beard had heard these predictions before and believed none of them. And if he had, he would not have been alarmed. A childless man of a certain age at the end of his fifth marriage could afford a touch of nihilism. The earth could do without Patrice and Michael Beard. And if it shrugged off all the other humans, the biosphere would soldier on, and in a mere ten million years teem with strange new forms, perhaps none of them clever in an apeish way. Then who would regret that no one remembered Shakespeare, Bach, Einstein, or the Beard-Einstein Conflation? (McEwan, 104).

After all, saving the planet for human survival stems from the same antropocentric motivation that assigns value not to the planet itself but to its inhabitability. His reasoning for the implausibility of regret by the no longer existent is in line with David Benatar's reminder of the "asymmetrical judgments about (a) distant suffering and (b) uninhabited portions of the earth or the universe" (*Better Never to Have Been*, p. 35). We tend to regret the suffering of hypothetical people in distant lands whereas we do not regret the non-existent people's deprivation from pleasure and how they would have enjoyed a life on an uninhabited island had they existed. Same applies to Benatar's asymmetry between pain and pleasure. Absence of pain is good regardless of the existence of a person who suffers from that pain and the presence of pain is good even when there is noone to enjoy it whereas, absence of pleasure is not bad when there is noone to be deprived of this absence. The inference for the argument for not having children in Benatar, is applied by Beard in *Solar* to a possible apocalyptic future when the prodigious human artifacts and inventions disappear as a result of human extinction. Anti-natalist movement permeates in two distinct forms. Philanthropic and ecological. Philanthropic branch, following Schopenhauer's argument that human procreation cannot be an act of reason considering the suffering that awaits a human being, calls for voluntary rejection of breeding on compassionate grounds. Its ultimate purpose is a gradual and voluntary extinction of the human race. Ecological branch foreseeing the depletion of non-renewable sources, calls attention to overpopulation and its repercussions on the eco-system. Both Benatar and Garrett Hardin, the author of "The Tragedy of the Commons" explicitly state that if relinquishing one's perceived natural right to breed was commonly agreed upon to be a virtue and a full scale solution for environmental problems, or in Benatar's case to be

unethical on the grounds that existence is unexceptionally harmful, those who forego their rights would be the most conscientious. Therefore, conscience would be self-eliminating leaving the human extinction issue at a conundrum. Although Beard is not a self professed anti-natalist on ethical or environmental grounds, he counts himself lucky to have escaped all five of his marriages without fathering a child. That however, would not last.

It is quite ironic for Beard to accidentally end up advocating sustainable development and clean energy, since sustainability after all is not his strongest forte particularly when it comes to his relationships with women even after his girlfriend, without his consent, gets pregnant and he becomes a father. Only through the women's own initiative and a constant provision of narcissistic supply and forgiveness towards Beard, do the relationships become stationary if not eternally sustainable. And his daughter becomes a redeeming presence when in the final part of the book, both his debauchery and his intellectual fraud is revealed, he looks at his daughter and feels something resembling love. That resemblance is marred by his conviction that his sentiment will never be acknowledged as genuine by others, including the women who profess to love him.

### **Optimism and Meaning**

Beard's disdain for optimism and idealism is exemplified during an expedition to the North Pole he attends to witness the impact of global warming firsthand along with a group of artists concerned with climate change. His failure to share the cheerful prospects of the group makes him realize how cynical he is for commitment to any cause grounded in a belief in the capacity for change and how incapable he regards people of cooperation. The boot room a microcosm for him of the planet that the group shares rapidly becomes chaotic and although Beard is one of the culprits, habitually he takes no responsibility for his own actions.

Four days ago the room had started out in orderly condition, with all gear hanging on or stowed below the numbered pegs. Finite resources, equally shared, in the golden age of not so long ago. Now it was a ruin...how were they to save the earth -assuming it needed saving, which he doubted- when it was so much larger than the boot room? (McEwan, p. 108-109)

David Benatar explains his choice of the term human predicament as opposed to human condition by the futility of human escapism in the face of human insignificance "in a vast universe that is utterly indifferent to us. The limited meaning that our lives can have is ephemeral rather than enduring." (*The Human Predicament*, p. 2). Given various conflicts throughout *Solar* from the protagonist's framing his fifth wife's boyfriend of murder, his lack of remorse and inability to love, to refusing to get vital treatment for cancer, one can safely

assume *Solar* is also a novel about human predicament rather than human condition. According to Benatar there are various orientations of optimism. The first one is future oriented, when the optimist and pessimist might rely on the exact same facts but disagree on the possibility of occurrence of the negative outcome. In this sense, Beard is a nihilist since he is indifferent to the planet's and his own personal fate as also exemplified by his lack of a punitive superego regulation in his affairs with others. The second one is a variance in perception of past or present facts otherwise characterized by assuming the best or the worst of a range of outcomes. Thus, this entails prediction of facts rather than their evaluation. Third one pertains to the evaluation of facts that are unquestionable. Although Beard rests his reputation on the cooperative possibility between science and business to redeem environmental damage on a grand scale, his lack of ingenuousness places him on the pessimistic spectrum. Consequently, Beard lacks the first basic tenet required alleviating the afflictions leading up to the looming planetary tragedy.

The horror vacui experienced by Beard is intensified by his narcissistic core and a grandiose sense of self entitled to ethical transgressions only reserved for himself. The question then becomes: if meaning is to be found in "working for a transcendent cause that is, a cause that extends beyond the boundaries of the self" (Singer, p. 218) can the narcissistic protagonist ever attain meaning? Or if the narcissist is immutably incapable of transcending himself in order to form genuine connections by shifting the affective preoccupation with himself and psychological essentialism from himself to others, can he ever contribute to saving the world? Beard's efforts at attaining meaning can be formulated by using Benatar's diagram that presents various perspectives human beings use to ask whether life in general or their lives in particular have meaning. More expansive perspective includes cosmic meaning, on whether or not an individual's meaning can be evaluated on a universal scale. More limited perspectives include terrestrial meanings, such as the perspective of humanity, human groups of various sizes such as nations, tribes, communities, and families and the perspective of individuals. (*The Human Predicament*, p. 21) Without referencing to the distinction between the perceived and actual meaning in Beard's life, his climb on the ladder of meaning and impact is arrested on the first step. After facing the decision to stay and report the accidental death of Tom Aldous to the police or to arrange the scene to frame his fifth wife's boyfriend for the postdoc's murder, he comes to the bitter realization that: "Only those who loved him would believe him. And no one loved him." (McEwan, p. 126). If we envision the meaning ladder as each step constituting a prerequisite for the next, Beard's ascent from the individual perspective to the community seems hardly feasible. In that sense, Beard's life neither has any

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subjective nor objective meaning since it is not a meaning that goes unrecognized by the individuals around him or the community as a whole but it is one which he himself feels devoid of. As his ethical and legal transgressions gradually come to light, his only chance at redemption, a possibility of bypassing the ladder of meaning and attaining a cosmic significance, reversing climate change and saving the planet is rendered implausible. He finds himself at the bottom of the ladder again, the narrative that starts with deep feelings of shame and humiliation ends with semblance of love and affection for his daughter where he will have another attempt at reconstructing individual meaning before he moves on to the communal and the universal.



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