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Violence And Gender Conflicts in Ian Mcewan's Novel the Comfort of Strangers

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Abstract

This essay examines the themes of violence and gender conflicts in Ian McEwan's *The Comfort of Strangers*, emphasising the ways in which conventional gender roles and power dynamics add to the unnerving atmosphere of the novel. The novel, which takes place in an unfamiliar and enigmatic city, centres on two couples: Robert and Caroline and Colin and Mary, whose interactions highlight the damaging effects of patriarchal norms. Robert, a character in the novel who represents the dehumanising impacts of inflexible gender standards by his cruel actions towards Caroline, serves as a critique of toxic masculinity. The novel's depictions of psychological and physical violence highlight the risks associated with relationships in which power is unequally divided. The way in which McEwan depicts victimisation and complicity in love relationships provides a disturbing critique of the social institutions that support and condone gender-based violence. In the end, the essay makes the case that the novel is a potent indictment of the ways in which patriarchal beliefs influence and frequently twist interpersonal relationships.

Keywords: Ian McEwan, violence, gender conflicts, gender roles, power dynamics, toxic masculinity, patriarchal norms, victimisation, complicity.

Ian McEwan is one of the more controversial writers of contemporary English literature. He gained notoriety as a writer obsessed with violence and sexual depravity after his fiction novels were first published in the 1970s. McEwan is known by the nickname "Ian Macabre" because to the vivid portrayals of physical violence in his novels and short tales. But others assert that he writes in order to frighten and distress his audience. The release of McEwan's second book, *The Comfort of Strangers* (1981), sparked a heated discussion regarding his depictions of violence. Because the book included elements that are characteristic of McEwan's work, such as a graphic novel, sexually provocative characters, and a frightening environment, it caused an unprecedented clamour of criticism, some of whom even morally denounced it. *The Comfort of Strangers* was deemed "definitely diseased" by a critic who wrote in *The New York Times*, claiming that McEwan's sexual imagination had its "bloody excess" and that all facets of sensuality in the book were "sick" (Leonard 14C). According to another, *The Comfort of Strangers* responds, "Not Yet," to the commonly posed query regarding McEwan's writing, "When is he going to write something other than filth?" (Jones 24). However, Douglas Dunn was the only critic to clearly state the nature of the "moral" criticisms levelled against McEwan. His comments are worth mentioning in full because they summarise a common criticism of McEwan's work that is levelled against *The Comfort of Strangers*:

The menace in Ian McEwan's new novel is entirely sexual. Admiring McEwan's writing is one thing – his ability is beyond question – but the subjects which obsess him strike me as absolutely unwholesome. . . . [*The Comfort of Strangers* is] an exercise in minority sexual behaviour, and I do not think I can be the

only reader of his novel who found himself in the unwilling role of voyeur of abnormality. . . . I do not believe that the people characteristic of his novels and stories exist in any way that makes his writing socially informative. McEwan's novel offers a kind of negative stimulus: it is to read a story about people one would run a mile from. . . . Most of the writing is beautifully taut and conducted with conspicuous skill, but extraordinary gifts, it seems to me, are being squandered in a search for sexual rarities. (51)

Though Dunn's comments do not specifically address the threat in McEwan's book, they could be taken to allude to it. Because reading makes the reader an "unwilling voyeur," exposing him to the odd and often unpleasant sexual activity of a minority, McEwan's placement of his readers in relation to the invented cosmos he constructs poses a threat. Dunn therefore suggests that understanding the minority sexual reality of *The Comfort of Strangers* and reading it are incompatible. To put it another way, McEwan's works of fiction are criticized for tackling subjects that were chosen from the forbidden territory of adult sexual conventions. Like with many of McEwan's comments, the true criticism of the book is usually subverted into condemnations of taboo-breaking. It seems unnecessary to examine in detail how McEwan interprets moral criticism in relation to his analysis of his concerns. The purpose of this essay is to disprove the assertions that McEwan engaged in senseless acts of violence. I argue that criticisms of his depictions of violence often fail to take into account the different ways in which his work explores the fundamental essence of violence in all individuals, rather than merely describing it. Consequently, I propose that the emphasis be changed to how McEwan may offer a convincing critique of sadomasochism by relating it to patriarchal ideas of sexual dominance and subservience and by showing it as a potentiality that every individual possesses.

Ian McEwan's *The Comfort of Strangers* is a terrifying investigation of the darker sides of human interactions, with a special emphasis on the convergence of violence and gender problems. The novel, set in an undisclosed foreign city exuding mystery and bewilderment, centres on the experiences of Colin and Mary, a British couple on vacation who become embroiled with Robert and Caroline, a local couple whose relationship is entrenched in sadism and domination. Through these exchanges, McEwan explores the terrible truths of power dynamics, gender roles, and the appearance of violence in intimate relationships. He establishes the mood for a tale rife with uncertainty and unease right away. The city, which is never given a name, serves as a stand-in for the unknowable and the menacing. A certain level of complacency in their routine that has started to feel monotonous in Colin and Mary's relationship leaves them open to the attraction of something new and risky. Their yearning for change brings them to Robert, whose warmth and charm first conceal his ingrained misogyny and need for power. As the story goes on, it becomes evident that Robert and Caroline's relationship is based on violence, with physical and psychological abuse being used to firmly enforce gender norms.

Robert's misogyny stems from his childhood, as he tells tales of his father's authority and the rigid upholding of gender norms in his household. This history gives his actions a terrifying context and implies that his violence is not only a personal defect but also the result of a patriarchal culture that values male dominance. McEwan exposes these harmful ideas of masculinity via Robert's character, demonstrating how they can cause women to be victimised and dehumanised. Caroline is not only the victim of Robert's physical abuse but also contributes to the continuation of these violent dynamics, so the way he treats her is worth mentioning. Caroline's submission and even encouragement of Robert's sadism point to the internalization of patriarchal values, where suffering and control are accepted as the norm in a relationship (McEwan 45). Gender conflicts in society are also reflected in the power dynamics between the two couples. Although there is no overt violence in Colin and Mary's relationship, there is a subtle imbalance. Mary is more emotionally committed to preserving their relationship, whereas Colin is shown to be apathetic and lost in his own world. When they come across Robert and Caroline, this disparity becomes even more apparent. Colin and Mary's relationship is more egalitarian than Robert and Caroline's, but

precisely this contrast pushes Colin and Mary deeper into the perilous orbit of Robert and Caroline. Robert's overt dominance and Caroline's subservience. According to McEwan, even people who actively reject traditional gender roles can be drawn to them because of their attractiveness and distinct power dynamics. Childs offers a summary of the various critical stances taken on McEwan's writing, which includes *The Comfort of Strangers*. He talks about the novel's examination of violence and its disconcerting depiction of gender dynamics, highlighting how McEwan uses the relationships between the characters to critique patriarchal structures.

The psychological as well as physical forms of violence in the book highlight the pernicious effects of power dynamics in interpersonal relationships. Robert can clearly manipulate Colin and Mary psychologically by making them feel uneasy and making them doubt their own desires and perceptions. The city itself is involved in this; the characters' sense of vulnerability and confusion are heightened by the city's claustrophobic atmosphere and winding streets. The shocking climax, where the distinctions between coercion and consent, victim and perpetrator, are blurred, marks the culmination of the violence. Hidalgo explores the theme of intimacy, focussing on how it relates to violence and gender issues. She contends that McEwan presents closeness as a potentially harmful force, particularly when it's impacted by power disparities and traditional gender norms. The novel's examination of gendered violence culminates in Colin's murder at the hands of Robert; it is a vicious display of power that renders Mary utterly helpless and traumatised. Unflinching in his portrayal of violence, McEwan utilises it to highlight the damaging effects of inflexible gender norms. The book depicts a world in which violence is always a possibility, especially in relationships where power is unequally distributed, rather than providing simple answers or obvious moral lessons. In addition to being physical, this violence also shows up in the way the characters interact with one another, in the gender-based expectations they have of one another, and in the social norms that control their behaviour. Robert and Caroline's relationship is portrayed by McEwan as a microcosm of the larger societal issues at hand, where men are encouraged to assert their dominance, sometimes through violence, and women are frequently expected to be submissive.

The novel also poses issues with agency and cooperation in the continuation of violence. Caroline has a particularly complicated role because she helps Robert's sadism happen as well as being a victim of it. Her readiness to take part in the abuse and draw Colin and Mary into their web further muddies the reader's perception of victimhood. McEwan contends that it is possible for someone to be both helpless and complicit in violent systems, and that the distinction between a victim and a perpetrator can become hazy. This ambiguity makes the reader uncomfortable and forces them to confront the unpleasant realities of gendered violence, adding to the unsettling atmosphere of the book. It is also possible to interpret the book as a critique of the fetishisation of violence and dominance in romantic relationships. McEwan looks into the ways that society norms romanticise the idea of the domineering male and the subservient female, a dynamic that is easily abused and violently resolved. The book's title is ironic because the "comfort" that Robert and Caroline offer is actually a false comfort that undermines safety and autonomy and is based on the upholding of harmful gender norms.

There aren't many characters in the novel, and the story is told in a very short length of time. The story, about a young English couple named Colin and Mary, centres on an undisclosed vacation spot. Colin is a publisher and has never been successful as a performer or vocalist. Mary has two children from a previous marriage and was an actor with a women's theatre group. Even after seven years of dating, the two don't seem to be very passionate about each other. They frequently become lost in the winding lanes of the beach resort, searching for their lodging or even a restaurant. They meet Robert, a local, late one night, who takes them to dinner at his place. Following that, Robert takes the two to see Caroline, his semi-invalid wife. Caroline's sadomasochistic marriage to her violent husband is the cause of her handicap, as the story reveals. Colin and Mary experience a sadomasochistic turn in their sexual lives as a result of

their interactions with the strangers. Just before the book closes, there is a graphic account of Robert killing Colin. After striking Colin, he gives him a passionate kiss on the lips, slashes Colin's wrist with a razor, and then spreads Caroline's cut lip fluid over his lips.

The novel's two epigraphs summarise its central concepts. McEwan begins by expressing her feminist concerns in the line, "How we dwelt in two worlds/ the daughters and the mothers/ in the kingdom of the sons". This section is from Adrienne Rich's poem "Sibling Mysteries." The book's opening few chapters, which introduce Colin and Mary, highlight how women's lives are fundamentally different from men's. They sleep in separate beds and don't get along despite spending a lot of time together. They are unable to combine their disparate discourses into a cohesive discourse when they try to speak. The end effect is a series of monologues in which they both listen to each other's dreams "patiently," but only "in exchange for the luxury of recounting their own." Colin and Mary have different dreams. Mary dreams of her two children complaining that she has left them behind. Mary also dreams of her ex-husband patiently teaching her "how to operate his expensive Japanese camera, testing her on its intricacies at every stage". Meanwhile, Colin dreams "of flying, . . . of crumbling teeth, of appearing naked before a seated stranger" (12). By contrasting their fantasies, McEwan draws attention to how estranged his characters are from one another. McEwan appears to be drawing attention to the couple's particular concerns by interpreting Freudian dreams: Colin is more concerned with satisfying his erotic appetite than he is with understanding Mary's anxieties about becoming a mother or her feminist outrage at being treated like a fool. Their dreams thus serve as a representation of the different worlds they live in.

Colin and Mary cannot decide how to navigate the winding streets of the tourist city together to find a spot to satiate their most fundamental human need—hunger—which serves as an example of how alienated their worlds are from one another. Because they either misplace their street maps or cannot read them when they do have them, the couple is always getting lost: "It was easy, Mary and Colin had found, to get lost as they walked from one page to another" (10). McEwan, however, makes it clear that the couple's uncertainty should be seen as a representation of the more serious gender conflict that they are experiencing. Taken together, they moved clumsily and slowly, making lugubrious compromises and repairing breaches while also paying attention to subtle mood shifts. If they had been left alone, they could have freely roamed the city, indulged in impulses, ignored plans, and thus relished or overlooked getting lost, as the storyteller explains. (14–15). Contrary to what some critics have claimed, their inability to read street maps is a symptom of their underlying incompatibility rather than "incompetence" or "ineptitude."

In contrast to feminist Mary, the other main female character in the book is named Caroline. In the opening scene, Caroline—a symbol for a woman who has experienced abuse—is welcomed warmly as a phantom, characterised as "a small pale face watching... from the shadows, a disembodied face" (60). The idea that Caroline is a partial human being limited to specific aspects of her physical appearance is reinforced by another sentence that characterises her features: "Her small face... was featureless in its regularity, innocent of expression, without age" (67). Caroline is a miserable, obedient wife who endures frequent abuse at the hands of her husband, who has dehumanised her and turned her into a mere object to satisfy his twisted desires. As the story progresses and we learn more about Caroline, it becomes clear why McEwan gives her a character description that emphasises her deteriorating physical characteristics. Caroline says that Robert has mistreated her badly; she broke her finger, cracked three ribs, knocked out a tooth, and left her in the hospital for months after breaking her back. Caroline is consequently essentially a semi-invalid who is unable to bend over. She is so miserable that, paradoxically, happiness hurts her: "It hurts when I laugh" (68). In Robert's terrifying home, Caroline notes that she is "just another beaten wife" and "a virtual prisoner" (109, 111).

When Caroline discusses her early marriage and childhood in a different conversation between the two main female characters of the book, McEwan illuminates the reasons behind Caroline's submission to

patriarchal dominance. For Caroline, her early years were "happy and dull." She was raised in Canada by diplomats, and her father showered her with love and affection. She "worked hard looking after Dad, 'backing up the ambassador,'" along with her mother. She married Robert at the age of twenty, not having had sex before, and she had this submissive attitude. Caroline shares the following horrific tale of love and hate regarding her married life:

Robert started to hurt me when we made love. . . . One night, I got really angry at him, but he went on doing it, and I had to admit, though it took a long time, that I liked it. . . . It's not the pain itself, it's the fact of the pain, of being helpless before it and being reduced to nothing by it. It's pain in a particular context, being punished and therefore being guilty . . . . It was as if I was discovering something that had been with me all my life. . . . Robert began to really hurt me. He used a whip. He beat me with his fists as he made love to me. I was terrified, but the terror and the pleasure were all one. . . . Instead of saying loving things into my ear, he whispered pure hatred. . . . He made love to me out of deep loathing, and I couldn't resist. I loved being punished. (108-110)

The sequence in which Caroline describes her early childhood and marriage foreshadows a different conclusion: it shows how Caroline's complicity in cruel mistreatment was motivated by the patriarchal notion that women should be devoted to men. Caroline learnt this belief from her parents. Caroline had been taught that a wife should thank her husband for the treatment she receives, and that this appreciation mainly consists of encouragement and subservience. With this mentality, Caroline finds it easy to succumb to Robert's sadism. When one feels ashamed and hesitates to submit to the strict demands of the patriarch, the desire for punishment increases even more.

Through an imagined series of relationships presented in *The Comfort of Strangers*, McEwan represents the most extreme forms of sexual subjugation and control. The story and the characters do a good job of illustrating how patriarchy still has an impact on society, even on those who reject it. A thorough synopsis of McEwan's novels, including *The Comfort of Strangers*, is given by Lynn Wells. She talks about how the book explores misogyny, sadism, and the complexity of gender dynamics, and she gives us an understanding of how McEwan challenges the conventional roles that are assigned to men and women while maintaining a gripping story. Even though Colin and Mary tell the story of the book, how Caroline and Robert's relationship is portrayed is essential to McEwan's plot. Thus, before talking about Caroline and Robert, we will talk about the relationships between Mary and Colin, Robert and Colin, and Caroline and Mary. McEwan examines the central theme of sadomasochism as the ultimate goal of sexual relationships through the characters of Robert and Caroline. Numerous instances of the complementary nature of activity and inactivity are shown in *The Comfort of Strangers*, including the roles of host and guest, physician and patient, and master and slave. However, there are issues with this representation for giving Caroline the appearance of mindless obedience. Although McEwan presents Colin and Mary as the predatory targets of the main antagonist Robert, he also presents them as ungrateful victims who are oddly unresisting, undermining the equation's apparent equilibrium. According to McEwan, Colin and Mary actually want punishment because they are confused, incapable of making decisions, and have an underlying desire to be controlled.

The dynamic between Robert and Caroline's submission and dominance is the main theme of the novel. Robert's portrayal within the relationship particularly supports the Freudian theory that he is sadistic because of his obsession with the anal phase. He recounts how his father beat him and emotionally rejected him after his sisters played a cruel practical joke on him: "he beat me every night for three days and for many months he did not speak kindly to me" (39). Another example of the resulting anal fixation is his meticulous arrangement of his father's belongings on the sideboard, which is an obsession with neatness. The sideboard is described by McEwan as a "monstrosity of reflecting surfaces," hinting at Robert's impending death (60). The "cut-throat razors" ominously foreshadow the heinousness of the deed they

will perform when they slit Colin's wrists (62). More proof of Robert's dominant character is offered by McEwan, supporting Tolstoy's dictum that a gun on the wall shouldn't be shown if it won't be used in the narrative. Colin's non-adherence to patriarchy makes him unbearable to Robert. "Relations between men, which have a material base and which, through hierarchy, establish and create interdependence and solidarity among men that enable them to dominate women" is how Heidi Hartmann defines patriarchy (Hartmann 14). The patriarchal idea that "my father and his father understood themselves clearly" is explained by Robert's persona. They were proud of their sex and they were men. Women were also aware of them... There was no misunderstanding... Men now have self-doubt and despise themselves even more than they do one another (75–76). As a result of his lack of desire to exercise control over women, Colin is portrayed by McEwan as someone who yields to their influence. Robert also berates Colin for being unsure of himself and not standing up for himself.

McEwan incorporates the travel motif into his analyses of how patriarchal principles and sadomasochistic behavioural patterns are internalised. The second epigraph of the book, "Travelling is a brutality." It makes you lose sight of the comforts of home and friends and forces you to trust strangers. You are unbalanced all the time. The way that Cesare Pavese portrays travel as a situation in which people have to rely on strangers is particularly pertinent to Colin and Mary's situation. After their first encounter with Robert, the couple is unable to get back to their hotel and ends up spending the night on the streets. The next morning, they can't find their hotel or a glass of water because they are tired and dehydrated. When Colin and Mary run into Robert again, they find it hard to turn down his repeated offers to take them to his flat so they can rest. The couple choose to put their trust in Robert after he assures them, saying, "I will make you so comfortable you will forget your terrible night" (53). Colin and Mary choose to rely on the comfort provided by the strangers even though there are obvious indications that their friendship with Robert and his wife could put them in grave danger. For example, when the two wake up in Robert's guest bedroom, they are startled to see Caroline silently staring at them while they are nude. Caroline won't take their clothes back unless they agree to stay for dinner. The gold replica razor-blade that Robert wears around his neck is similar to “several cut-throat razors arranged in a fan” that Mary sees in the “family museum” that Robert maintains of the belongings of his father and grandfather (59, 60).

In this scenario, Caroline also says that if she were a man, she would be willing to kill her beloved. Robert also speaks negatively about women. During their first meeting, Robert had already stated, “These are women who cannot find a man. They want to destroy everything that is good between men and women. . . . They are too ugly” in reference to radical feminists calling for the castration of rapists (28). Subsequently, he speaks contemptuously about women in general, saying, “Whatever they might say they believe, women love aggression and strength and power in men. It is deep in their minds. . . . women long to be ruled by men. . . . They talk of freedom and dream of captivity” (72). Interestingly, Robert continues “massaging Colin’s shoulder gently” and delivers a forceful hit to Colin’s stomach, “expel[ling] all the air from Colin’s lungs” while he says this, all the while winking at Colin (72, 73). McEwan suggests that there may not be as much of a divide between the two spouses as there seems to be by having his characters accept all of the obvious instances of misogyny and violence in Robert and Caroline’s speech and actions.

In the end, Wells presents *The Comfort of Strangers* as a critique of the social institutions that support and tolerate violence against women. She underlines that McEwan's work questions the underlying norms that permit such violence in addition to just showing it. McEwan highlights the perilous effects of inflexible gender norms by explaining Robert's actions as the result of his upbringing and cultural norms. Wells emphasises how these criticisms culminate in the novel's climactic violence, which shows the unavoidable devastation that arises from unequal power dynamics in relationships.

The Comfort of Strangers has every characteristic that McEwan is known for. His story of a terrifying atmosphere, odd characters, and graphic incidents shocks and disgusts readers. The book is violent and

macabre, just like his previous works. It's understandable why a lot of McEwan's detractors claim that his writing is shocking on purpose. It would be incorrect, though, to assume that there is only violence and morbidity. In this novel, McEwan offers a sharp critique of how patriarchy distorts our conceptions of sexual pleasure by drawing on harsh, sometimes fatal paradigms of dominance and subservience. The majority of McEwan's earlier works, including *The Comfort of Strangers*, are infused with a pessimistic view of human nature. He demonstrates in this book the universality of evil and the shared nature of evil impulses among all people. Despite the fact that McEwan crafts ugly characters, his work emphasises the difference between people's private lives and public personas. Sensitive enough to recognise this disparity, McEwan exposes the pain behind the seeming simplicity. *The Comfort of Strangers* is ultimately about identifying this contradiction and beginning the process of resolving it.

To sum up, Ian McEwan's *The Comfort of Strangers* offers a compelling examination of the relationship between gender conflicts and violence. McEwan explores the nuances of power dynamics in relationships through the characters of Mary, Robert, Caroline, Colin, and Caroline. She emphasises how conventional gender roles can result in control and violence. The novel depicts violence as both psychological and physical, illustrating the widespread impact of patriarchal norms on interpersonal interactions and individual behaviour. McEwan's frank portrayal of these problems functions as a critique of the ways in which society upholds strict gender norms, which in turn helps to justify and perpetuate violence. In the end, the book serves as a terrifying reminder of the risks present in partnerships where there is an unequal distribution of power and where violence is accepted as the norm.

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