



Love in the Age of Anxiety: Intimacy and Alienation in Contemporary Fiction

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Abstract

Love and intimate relations are becoming more complex, delicate and unsure in the contemporary literature. This essay explores the way the subject of love is depicted in the current society, which is psychologically sick due to the general anxiety, isolation and failed relationships. The given work makes use of the works by contemporary writers, such as Sally Rooney, Ian McEwan, and Kazuo Ishiguro, to examine how the characters cope with love but have to address the issues of mental illness, social norms, and technology. A qualitative textual discussion is employed to examine how these books mirror and condemn real life concerns, particularly those that must pertain to being solitary, emotionally aloof and scared of devotion. The paper compares the Freudian and philosophical theories primarily works by Freud, Lacan, Sartre and Kierkegaard to demonstrate how love, which was once regarded as a source of comfort has now turned into a place of battle. In this work, it is possible to see that the contemporary writing does not only display the way intimate relations are frail in a disorienting world, but it also challenges the very nature of human bonding. This paper has demonstrated how the anxieties of the 21 st century have transformed love relationships functioning in fiction by examining character development, story structure, symbolic language, and academic theories.

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1. Introduction

The 21 st century has brought about enormous transformations in the manner individuals think of and experience love. Economic pressures, digital communication, social isolation, and the shifting gender roles have transformed the definition of closeness and made it fascinating and frightening. Love is no longer only presented in modern writing as an idealised saving force. It is also depicted as a location where human beings bargain, fight, and get exposed. The books written during the recent two decades demonstrate the trends in our culture, whereby emotional weakness and fear of genuine connection in relations is highly valued. This paper is aimed at investigating how worry and loneliness transform the manner of expression of love in contemporary books. Unlike the traditional tales of long-lasting love, and faithfulness, it is not uncommon in contemporary literature depicting intimacy as a painful and emotionally exhausting experience. It appears that the characters are torn between their desire to get close to each other and the fear to reveal their feeling. This duality may be regarded in the works by Sally Rooney where the protagonists in the stories of normal people and conversations with friends are emotionally ambiguous and depressingly lonely young adults. In the same way, both "On Chesil Beach" by Ian McEwan and "The Remains of the Day" by Kazuo Ishiguro are about emotionally repressed people who miss out on chances and live with guilt because they can't express their love.

Others have looked at how love is portrayed in modern fiction, but this paper is the first to combine existentialism, psychoanalysis, and social criticism across several writers to make a unique study of literature and philosophy and literature. It looks at different types of literature and how they are used to compare literary methods and show how closeness affects people emotionally and mentally in this time of worry. The following questions are looked into in this paper: How do modern books show love when there is worry around? What writing techniques do writers use to show loneliness and mental pain? How much does modern fiction criticise the psychological and cultural factors that make it hard to be close to someone? The paper attempts to provide the answers to these questions through the close examination of some books and their synthesis with the concepts of Freudian theory (primarily Freud and Lacan), the existentialist theory (primarily Kierkegaard and Sartre) and the social theory.

2. Literature Review

The problems and love have always occupied a significant place in literature since the ancient times, yet its presentation has been significantly altered nowadays. According to some researchers, including Lauren Berlant (2011) ^[1], the concept of closeness in the contemporary world is rather an aspirational norm than a type of emotional experience. Berlant focuses in her book *Cruel Optimism* on how relationships especially sexual relationships can leave people feeling bad and trapping them in relationships that are not gratifying.

Many of the significant social projects by Eva Illouz such as *Why Love Hurts* (2012) ^[2] demonstrate how love relations evolve as a result of modernity, capitalism, and healing culture. He adds that love has been commodified and turned into a psychological concept, and this is to say that one can perceive love in terms of consumerist logic and emotional reasoning. Her work is similar to the fantasy worlds of Rooney, Ishiguro, and McEwan in that in most cases, people do not even bother thinking about other people as they fear the opinion or emotion of other individuals.

The notion of transference introduced by Freud as well as the theory of the other used by Lacan are both useful to consider things in a Freudian perspective. In 1905, Freud explored the relation of the past to the current emotional ties. The mirror stage and the concept of the Real provided by Lacan demonstrate the formation of wants in the absence of the Other. The concept of Lacan about the object of desire that is impossible to reach, the object *petit a*, is quite relatable in Ishiguro in *The Remains of the Day* since the desire of Stevens is constantly postponed.

Existentialists such as Sren Kierkegaard and Jean-Paul Sartre have also contributed a lot of valuable thoughts on love and loneliness. Sartre engaged in the discussion that there is never a lack of conflict between freedom and ownership in relationships, and Kierkegaard interpreted love as a religious risk that touches upon faith and infirmity. These abstract thoughts assist us in cognizing the complex desires that are represented in modern tales.

The research is bolstered by the work on some writers made by academics. The criticism of those who do not like Sally Rooney concerns the characteristics of young characters who cannot be honest about their feelings and have issues related to social anxiety. James Wood (2018) discusses the simplicity in the way Rooney speaks and how the dialogues of her

characters are more than what they specify. Similarly, the studies about Ian McEwan reveal that he was preoccupied with the moral complexity and concealing his emotions particularly in post-war middle-class society. Reading about the repression and the lack of opportunities that people follow, the stories of Kazuo Ishiguro lead you to thinking of how painful it is to remain silent.

When combined, all these theoretical and critical models make it possible to study closeness in contemporary fiction to a greater depth.

3. Previous Studies

Quite a bit of work has been conducted on how contemporary writing reveals how the feelings of people have been transformed due to the development of societal transformations. The belief of contemporary fiction in showing philosophical doubt in love relationship is examined by the author of *Postmodern Love: Romance and Anxiety* (Johnson, 2017). Johnson states that the characters of the postmodern books tend to believe that love is unsure and incomplete since it is influenced by bigger concerns about the nature of that identity and the purpose why they are there. A paper that examines how young people feel lonely in the modern world has been written by Davis (2021), in her paper entitled *Emotional Minimalism in Sally Rooney Fiction*. The author believes that the absence of emotionality is a commentary of the difficulty of loving in the era of information, self-awareness and false sincerity.

Affective Repression in McEwan and Ishiguro" (Li, 2020) examines how the two authors demonstrate the theme of emotional repression by being silent and controlling. It is a study that concentrates on the way social norms and ego pride can make individuals fail to utilize love opportunities and make regrets that transform their lives. More recent articles such as Al-Saadi (2022) also indicate that the narrative retrospection employed by Ishiguro focuses on the contrast between the current clarity of emotions and their clarity in the past.

All of these works allow us to grasp the image of love, as it is represented in contemporary literature, yet most of them consider it in relation to a single author. The current paper attempts to identify bigger trends in the displays of intimacy by contemporary authors by integrating these concepts across literary sources and scholarly theories.

4. Methodology and Data Analysis

The study is conducted by a qualitative, analytical approach, which implies close reading and topic analysis. Sally Rooney wrote the book *Normal People* (2018), and Ian McEwan wrote the book *On Chesil Beach* (2007). These two works were selected as principal readings in the present study.

3. *The Remains of the Day* by Kazuo Ishiguro (1989) These texts were selected as they contain a lot of various themes and styles, yet they are all related to the weakness of emotions and broken relationships. To take some examples, emotional undercurrents of interactions are strong in the simple conversation Rooney has with his employer, the narrative space of the novel is limited to highlight the sexual and emotional repression as described in the book by McEwan, and the backwards narrative of Ishiguro reveals the psychological price of being unable to express emotions.

The key concepts of the research are three:

1. Psychology of characters: examining the impact of inner

issues, traumas, and concerns of the characters on their capacity to interact with others. Indicatively, in normal people, Connell is unable to tell what he requires because he does not believe that he is good enough. Individuals regard Stevens as having an emotional detachment in the *Remains of the Day* as indications of suppressed desire.

2. Narrative Structure: The dynamic of the time, memory and point of view in depicting love and loneliness. This approach by McEwan in *On Chesil Beach* to a single day is unlike in the book where Ishiguro is retrospective over a period of years. This demonstrates the impact that your time frame has on your perception of time.

Patterns of language, such as silence, letters, and misunderstandings, were patterns in language that demonstrated, emotionally distanced or emotionally longing. Unread letters, embarrassing silence, postponed conversations turn into the continuous reminders of the forgotten relations.

Some of the tools employed in understanding are Lacan's objet petit a, Kierkegaard leap of faith and Sartre gaze. These theoretical concepts are related to what the characters do and do not do as an indication of their concealed fears and desires. In each of the three books, the concept of fear defines love: the fear of non-acceptance, the fear of weakness, and the fear of dependence. To illustrate this, in normal people Connell and Marianne continue to misinterpret and separate each other, which only leads both of them to feel worse about their inadequacy. The protagonists in McEwan are trapped due to their arrogance and lack of knowledge in the field of sexuality. Their relationship is ended in one night of silence. Stevens in the story of Ishiguro misunderstands emotional signs and values honour more than honesty and only later on realizes that it cost him so much to suppress his emotions. These are the illustrations of how characters desire and attempt to escape intimacy, which demonstrates that literature is very conscious of the emotional inconsistencies of modernity.

5. Discussion and Conclusion

Contemporary fiction is an emotional one to read. Rooney, McEwan, and Ishiguro express the fragility of modern relationships through love by presenting the issue of concern and loneliness. The discomfort of the characters about being emotional is revealed by the fact that they do not share and even acknowledge love. This image concurs with the criticisms that philosophers such as Zygmunt Bauman and Eva Illouz offer that late modernity promotes short-lived relationships and ambivalent feelings.

One thing that is similar in all these various works is that they all demonstrate love to be both a need and hard to locate. Rather being a proponent of old concepts of love, they challenge the reader to consider the individual and social barriers that pose between intimacy. They include the digital world, social standards and psychological defence mechanisms, which are more likely to make a person feel connected with other people but isolated.

Besides, both books are reviews of the popular culture of illustrations of love. Normal people depict the way Connell and Marianne are the embodiment of a generation that is too conscious of everything and incapable of experiencing anything. In *On Chesil Beach*, McEwan uses a couple to demonstrate how unfortunate it is not to know how to cope

with your emotions. In *The Remains of the Day* Stevens represents mute love and rigid social conventions. The love to each character is not something that is definite, but hard. This paper will enhance our understanding about the expression of love in modern literature since it will focus on it using various disciplines. It desires further research to be undertaken on how books would assist people in handling their own feelings and perhaps even demonstrating them on how to interact with others in a much more realistic manner. The world where people tend to be disconnected with one another makes literature still a significant venue of mental reflections, acceptance, and renewal.

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