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## Sexual Politics in Ian McEwan's *The Innocent*

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### ABSTRACT

Rape and sexual abuse as a global conflict has always been an inevitable part of war, used as a tactic both for humiliation and domination. Recent studies show that despite several attempts to stop sexual torture as the consequences of war it is an ongoing process in every part of the world. This necessitates an urgent solution for this epidemic problem. As a contemporary author, in his *The Innocent*, McEwan reflects this universal problem and presents the sexual relationships within war circumstances. His well known novel is set in the middle of Cold War and portrays sexual relationship between Leonard and Maria. Leonard's process of transformation from an ordinary person to a real conqueror of the Second World War is investigated to show how war can change individual's attitude toward human. This study is a critical analysis of *The Innocent* in the light of Kate Millett's theory of sexual politics. Millett explicates that sex has political implications, and that it is always under the influence of border issues in the society. By politics she means power-structured relationships between male and female. It reveals the impact of war circumstances on the individual's personality and investigates how wars can change people. This study highlights that as a result of war Leonard, a naïve, innocent, and harmless character of the story transforms to a brutal sexual predator, and acts like any other victor soldiers to dominate and sexually torture women from the defeated country. The findings of the study demonstrate that McEwan's emphasis on war and its destructive effects on civilians, especially women, is his call to invite the world look at wars in a new and different way. Such understanding and demonstration of the bitter condition of women at wartime foregrounds the dire need for certain effective law to prevent sexual crimes and violence that target women during wartime.

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## INTRODUCTION

Wartime sexual crime is still one of the major concerns of human being because it not only affects individuals directly but also ruins the basis of their families and dependents. Such threat has repeatedly been reflected in literature by many authors interested in women's right during war. Ian McEwan has produced a significant literature concerning sexual violence against women and has tried to foreground a threat which is universal and omnipresent. His meticulousness in picturing sexual crimes in various historical situations touches readers of different tastes and milieu.

A survey of his literature shows that rape and sexual violence are among his main concerns. In case of war "He has an ability to visualize the atrocities and brutalities of war" (Abbasiyannejad et al., 2012:57). For McEwan rape and sexual violence in any form is a prominent concern of the contemporary world. Reviewing his fiction shows this clearly. In his short story, *Homemade*, for instance, he pictures rape as a domestic violence (McEwan 1975); in *The comfort of strangers* a sadistic sex is pictured for inhuman pleasure between members of the same nations (McEwan 1981); and in *Atonement* he pictures rape between members of the same social status (McEwan 2001). Although all of the mentioned stories have sexual violence as their theme, none of them presents the relation between sex and politics as it is presented in *The Innocent*. It is not a coincidence that the setting is after Second World War, when world suffers indelible aftermath of war and faces Cold War as another major political conflict of the twentieth century.

European cities, particularly Berlin as a center of conflicts, experienced horrendous sexual crimes by the end of the World War II. After Germany was occupied by allies, millions of women were sexually attacked by

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the conquerors and had to live with these horrific memories for the rest of their lives. McEwan presents the inevitable consequences of the war through his character, Leonard, an innocent of the story. As McEwan says in an interview, "Europeans live this intense double life. They created, for example, the political culture of individuality, and yet they practice genocide on a scale that is unequaled in any other time or place. It's that two-faced nature of European civilization I was trying to hint at in a person, and maybe we can only understand these things if we bring them to a personal level" (McGrath 2010:64-5).

In what follows, we analyze the novel, *The Innocent*, which is in the context of war, to highlight how war can penetrate and change individual's personality. Leonard's personality transformation from the innocent to the predator is gradually portrayed in the course of story. This will be shown through a step by step analysis in different sections. Before that, we will have an overview of the background of the rape during war and discuss the theory of sexual politics.

#### ***A Brief overview of Rape as a War Crime and Sexual Politics theory:***

A short glance at the history of war crimes bring to the surface a range of horrific inhuman acts of sexual violence which was practiced by soldiers. Gottschall (2004) brings evidences which show that rape, as a wartime crime, has an ancient history, and it is not something to occur only in the twentieth century. For instance, he refers to documented instance of rape in Bible. In the same trend, Kennedy and Stanley write in "Rape in War: Lessons of the Balkan Conflicts in the 1990s" that rape in war is not a new phenomenon but has become documented only after the First World War (2000:69). As Gottschall comments on multidimensionality of sexual violence since women are considered as a property, by raping them, in fact, soldiers "destroy the illusion of power and property" of the defeated side. What he emphasizes most is that rape at the time of war is a "political act" rather than "individual acts of sexual violence" (2004: 68).

Despite constant attempts for stopping this inhumane action recent researches show that sexual violence is still a nasty phenomenon which continues to grip human beings even in civilized societies. To bring some instances from around the world, UNICEF described how sexual abuse from Rwanda to Congo turns to a rape epidemic which victimizes both women and children in the conflict zones, as a systematic strategy (Jaleel 2013:115). That is why Congo carries the name of the "rape capital of the world" recently (Brown 2012:24). On the same trend the recent cited statics show that almost 75% of women were raped during the Liberian conflict (Cohen 2012:445). Reviewing Great wars shows that during the Second World War Norway had experienced horrific mass rapes by German soldiers who had occupied the country (Ericson 2011:68). Bosnia is another example of such horrendous sexual crimes. It has been estimated that during the 1990s war in Bosnia, twenty thousand women have been raped in the war camps in 1993 (Simic 2012:132).

In her theory of sexual politics Millet explains that sexual relationships are deeply influenced by broader issues and that coitus rarely occurs in the vacuum in spite of being a "biological and physical activity"(1971: 23). She believes that sexual activity is not merely a physical activity but a political one. She explains the role of patriarchy in sexual relations and discusses how sex relates to politics. She writes that "The term politics shall refer to the power structured relationship arrangements whereby one group of persons is controlled by another" (23). In her explanation of the theory she refers to power as the essence of politics. She explains that almost all institutions "such as military, industry, technology, universities, science, political office and finance-in short every avenue of power within the society, including the coercive force of the police, is entirely in male hands" (Millett 25).

According to Millett, it is the conqueror's attitude which allows them to justify their vicious crimes during the war. They consider the defeated one an object without a soul, or to put it in her words "inferior species or really not human at all" (Millett 46). To Millett patriarchy originates from family. Violence within family represents a larger violence in the society. In her explanation regarding patriarchy she writes that "patriarchy's chief institution is the family". In addition she connects patriarchy to a larger society. To quote her exact words:

It is both a mirror of and a connection with larger society; patriarchal unit within a patriarchal whole. ... As the fundamental instrument and the foundation unit of patriarchal society the family and its roles are prototypical. Serving as an agent of the larger society, the family not only encourages its own members to adjust and conform, but acts as a unit in the government of the patriarchal state which rules its citizens through its family heads. (33)

Millett acknowledges the affect of circumstances on individual relationships. *The Innocent* which is within the particular time of history provides us ample examples of such connections. Maria is treated unfairly by her husband within the family, her lover, and society. In conclusion, Millett's theory of sexual politics is an appropriate system to interpret the relationship between lovers who belong to different war zones.

#### ***War and The Innocent:***

*The Innocent (IN)* is McEwan's successful historical novel during Cold War in Berlin, Germany. There is a cooperative project between American and British named, Operation Gold, to tap the Russian's communication system. Leonard, the main character of the story, works with Glass who is a sophisticated American fellow. He

is pretty older than Leonard and is fully absorbed in the tensional circumstances in Berlin; therefore, he continuously warns Leonard to understand that they are living in the battlefield. In his early conversation with Leonard he says "I want you to get into a whole new state of mind on this. Anything you're about to do, pause and think of the consequences. This is a war, Leonard, and you're a soldier in it" (*IN* 49). This shows how all dimensions of their lives were under the influence of war.

While walking in the streets of Berlin, Leonard observes how city is rebuilt to remove the signs of war. As he walks, hearing the voices of his English fellows makes him share the same feeling of pride that belongs to the conqueror of the Second World War. The extract below shows that clearly:

As far as he could see, the restoration work had been intense. The pavement had been newly laid, and spindly young plane trees had been planted out. Many of the sites had been cleared. The ground had been leveled off and there were tidy stacks of old bricks chipped clear of their mortar. The new buildings, like his own, had a nineteenth-century solidity about them. At the end of the street he heard the voices of English children. An RAF officer and his family were arriving home, satisfying evidence of a conquered city (*IN* 5).

Leonard even seems to be pleased by observing the depth of disaster in the city. These sentences indicate Leonard's true feelings toward Berlin devastations. He not only feels no regret, but also approves and enjoys what he sees.

The door, which must have been massive, had been blasted clean away allowing a view of the occasional car headlights in the next street. It was hard not to feel boyish pleasure in the thousand pounders that had lifted roofs off the buildings, blown their contents away to leave only façade with gaping windows. Twelve years before he might have spread his arms, made his engine and become a bomber for a celebratory minute or two (*IN* 5,6).

Based on the evidence provided so far the aftermath of the Second World War is visible almost everywhere, and Cold War is the continuation of conflicts among the nations. Leonard is struggling with two different aspects of personality. In his first one he is a young innocent man, and in the second one he is a dominant champion who entertains his parade of authority as a Second World War victor. This shows an imminent impact of war that generates new sort of conflict, firstly on individuals and secondly between the nations. What follows here sheds light on Leonard's relationship with a German girl as an enemy.

#### ***Sex and the Enemy:***

The fact that Leonard has never touched a gun and has had no soldier experience does not change the idea that he is a typical masculine conqueror.

He had spent the war with his granny in a welsh village over which no enemy aircraft had ever flown. He had never touched a gun, or heard one go off outside a rifle range; despite this, and the fact that it had been the Russians who had liberated the city, he made his way through this pleasant residential district of Berlin that evening –the evening had dropped and it was warmer-with a certain proprietorial swagger, as though his feet beat out the rhythms of a speech by Mr Churchill. (*IN* 5)

The extract from the text reveals how Leonard feels toward Berlin as a defeated city. His feeling can certainly generalize toward Berliners as well. They are still the enemy. This gets more important and telling when we find him having his first love relationship during Cold War, in the vicinity of Germany and with a German girl. After meeting Maria and having an affair things are about to change, but the question is that has he really changed deep inside? The following sentences demonstrate his gradual change from seeing German as pure enemy to something slightly different. "Leonard teamed up with an older German, one of Gehlen's men whom he had seen as on his first day driving forklift truck. Germans were no longer ex-Nazis, they were Maria's compatriots." He starts working with a German man "in a comradely silence. Leonard took it as a sign of his new maturity that he could work contentedly alongside the man Glass had described as a real horror" (*IN* 63).

Leonard starts his relationship with Maria, a German girl, with an unsuccessful marriage. She is five years older than Leonard, and like most German women, has witnessed the brutalities of the Second World War. There is an indication of women's hardship at that particular time. "A young single woman was vulnerable in those days, and she had wanted protection" (*IN* 120). Maria and generally women at that time suffer from marriages which were as a means of protection and later led to marital discord. So in the case of Maria, her marriage was anything but love; a powerless who seeks security through marriage. She has been maltreated by her ex-husband, Otto, who has enjoyed exemption from punishment because of being introduced as a war hero. Maria feels insecure, because even police takes Otto's side and leaves Maria unprotected. She has been repeatedly beaten and harassed by her husband and informs Leonard that "only two months ago he had hit her round head twice with an open hand and demanded money. This was not the first time he had intimidated her, but the local police would do nothing. Otto had persuaded them he was a war hero" (*IN* 57). Surprisingly, a war hero is allowed by the police to ill-treat a woman, beat her and take advantage of her even in financial terms. Maria is oppressed doubly, both by family and society. This goes well with Millett's contention that attributes

the origin of patriarchy to the family; Maria is oppressed both in the microcosm (family) and macrocosm (society).

The feeling that Maria has after she finds out that Leonard is a virgin, indicates her fears and concerns of sexual abuses which are applied to people. This indicates her constant fears of being sexually misused. She feels that she can do whatever she likes and not whatever her partner wants. The feeling of safety and protection comforts her in such a way that she comes to trust him instantly.

For hers was the laughter of nervous relief. She had been suddenly absolved from the pressures and rituals of seduction. She would not have to adopt a conventional role and to be judged in it, and she would not be measured against other women. Her fear of being physically abused had receded. She would not be obliged to do anything she did not want. ( *IN* 53)

At a time when Berlin is still overshadowed by the war atmosphere, Leonard is asked from the very beginning to act like a soldier. This is an instruction that remains with him until the end and overshadows his love relationship with Maria too. His love relationship with Maria seems quite normal in the beginning, but Leonard turns to a sexual maniac gradually and starts to take pleasure of violating his sex mate. While making love with Maria he looks at his sex mate with obsession. "It began on the third or fourth time with a simple perception. He looked down at Maria, whose eyes were closed, and remembered she was a German. The word had not been entirely prised [Sic] loose of its associations after all. His first day in Berlin came back to him" (*IN* 77). Again there is an indication of his pride like feeling of being the victor of the war.

The fantasy of acting like a victorious soldier who invades a vanquished city never lets him alone. However, Leonard manages to hide his brutal side, control his thoughts, and act as a true lover: "They make love merrily enough and rarely miss a day. Leonard keeps his thoughts under control" (*IN* 109). He is quite aware of his position as a master in Germany since he thinks he has won the Great War. These details and the like can be used as the ground to argue that sexual relationships, as the most intimate relationship, can be used as a means of domination or subordination. Such argument is well in parallel with Millett comment on domination that "in the quite general sense of power, i.e. the possibility of imposing one's will upon the behaviour of the person can emerge in the most diverse forms" (25).

### ***Sex, Position, and Power:***

Occasions like what was discussed so far become more meaningful when they are looked upon through the lens of sexual politics which explains the way that political power and domination lead to sexual subordination. This explains Millett's perspective, which indicates the relationship between women and men is a power-structure relation. As she puts it herself:

The word "politics" is enlisted here when speaking of sexes primarily because such a word is eminently useful in outlining the real nature of their relative status, historically and at the present. It is opportune perhaps today even mandatory that we develop a more relevant psychology and philosophy of power relationships beyond the simple conceptual framework provided by our traditional formal politics. Indeed, It maybe imperative that we give some attention to defining a theory of politics which treats of power relationships on grounds less conventional than those to which we are accustomed (Millett 24).

Being repeatedly violated by her ex-husband, Maria loves Leonard because she thinks he has not have a domineering personality like her ex-husband, and this is the reason that she feels safe with him. Ironically, she is unaware of the soldier figure that is hidden in Leonard's character and is responsible for the domineering characteristics Leonard does possess. Leonard thinks that belonging to England, one of the winners of the Second World War gives him the required power to easily control Maria. This is where we can clearly see politics intruding the private life of people touching their most intimate relations and interactions.

Gardner explains that in the feminist context, power is the reflection of all economic, social, political, material, ideological and psychological things that may lead to the oppression of one by the other (2006: 165). It is highly astonishing when we find Leonard entering Maria's apartment without knocking the door and informing the owner that he is coming in. This is telling because before that we know Leonard as a very calm and polite man, but as it appears Leonard has this in his unconscious reservoir that he is the real owner who needs no permission. The way that the narrator describes the occasion leaves no doubt about such interpretation: "he did an inexplicable thing, quite out of character. He took hold of the handle and pushed. Perhaps he expected it to be locked. Perhaps this was one of those meaningless little actions with which daily life is filled" (*IN* 47). This is a metaphoric action of invaders who break into people's houses during war time. This is an indication of how Leonard feels in the defeated country; he acts like a soldier who permeates himself to the people's house.

### ***Sexual Assault and Rape in The Innocent:***

Interestingly enough, this feeling of being a conqueror never leaves Leonard alone, and exist even when he is making love to Maria, through the narrator's description we see Leonard "[looking] along his own arms stretched before him, pushing into the mattress, at where the gingerish hairs were thickest, just below the elbow.

He was powerful and magnificent. He was victorious and good and strong and free" (*IN 77*). He wants his power to be acknowledged by Maria even if it is "just a bit"; it is to satisfy this need that he plays a game, as he calls it. He plays the role of a rapist and while Maria is preparing for bed he drinks and waits in the sitting room struggling with the idea that if he plays a role of rapist with confidence he won't fail (*IN 80*). The following extract shows Leonard's imagination of war surrender.

Lying on her back, for they were what she had taught him to call auf Altdeutsch... her arms were thrown up behind her head, with the pals spread, like a comic book representation of surrender. At the same time she was looking up at him in a knowing, kindly way. It was just this combination of abandonment and loving attention that was too good to be looked at, too perfect for him, and he had to avert his eyes, or close them, and think of...of, yes, a circuit diagram, a particularly intricate and lovely one he had committed to memory during the fitting of signal activation units to the Ampax machines (*IN 58*).

This perfectly described picture of Maria and Leonard's love making is the manifestation of a bigger picture of the world. Maria's body comes to be as a representative of Germany's land that is succumbed to and penetrated by an English man who is powerful and up on her. She looks at Leonard out of desperation and has no other choice rather than being kind to her aggressor. There is an indication of abdication and giving up that can be interpreted as a metaphor for Germany's surrender to power and control of the victorious allies. Leonard's pleasant feeling of a being ruler who has the upper hand gives him the opportunity to enjoy his occupier feelings. The connection he makes between his love making and the Ampax machine at work reveals the existing direct relation between his personal life and his job, which both represent war. Millet is right to argue that coitus never occurs in vacuum and is always under the impact of other societal factors. Leonard's awareness of his political condition is a clear example of this. Leonard's fantasy of parading his power comes to reality when he attempts to act like an emotionless rapist; as such

Leonard kept his voice level and, as he thought, expressionless. 'Take off your cloths.' ...He held her by elbow and pushed her back. 'Do it here'. When she resists he needs to use more effort, "it cost Leonard some effort of will to reach out and take her chin between his forefingers and thumb". Maria questioning his Tarzan like behavior irritated him so he acted fiercely "he ran her against the wall, harder than he intended. The air was knocked from her lungs. Her eyes were wide. She got her breath and said, 'Leonard...'.... 'Do as I tell you and you'll be all right.' He sounded reassuring. 'Take it all off or I'll do it for you'. (*IN 81*)

He continues bulling Maria until he aggressively takes the skirt off. Leonard's desire to ill-treat Maria is satisfied only when he observes fear and desperateness in her eyes. The aggressive and unjustified act of Leonard breaks their emotional bonding relationships and ultimately results in splitting up. The visualization of the scene is remarkable; the description of the scene by mentioning "voice level" and every single act of exceeding violence demonstrates the power of words and their meaning. Leonard's gradual steps toward changing into a sexual torturer are observable to the reader like acting a movie.

At first, he avoids touching her and just uses his voice to intimidate her, but soon, as the sadistic Leonard goes further, this verbal harassment turns to a physical and painful torture that can be considered as an iconic act of rape in the Second World War. This is how according to Millet sex has political implications. When power plays an important role in sexual relationships, and one group tries to impose their power on the other party. Leonard's political view of being superior emerges and interferes with his personal relationships. What he does is an example of sexual politics, which was repeatedly practiced during the war.

For Maria such an act is a reminiscent of sexual abuse. Although it seems a joyful game to Leonard who is entertaining himself without having any intention for an actual act of rape, it is for Maria a reminiscence of Red Army's mass rapes in Germany. It occurred when Russian soldiers surrounded Berlin, in the Second World War, and proved it, once more, that patriarchy is still affecting and undermining women's life and identity, giving men (soldiers in this case) the idea and the consciousness that women are their inferior and they have the right to do whatever they want with them, even if what they do is inhumane and cruel:

One of the Russian pointed a rifle at the group while another mimed for the Germans, watches, jewellery. The collection was swift and silent.... On a mattress on the floor was a woman of about fifty who had been shot in both legs. Her eyes were closed and she was moaning.... It attracted the attention of one of the soldiers. He knelt by the woman and took out a short-handled knife... The soldier lifted her skirt and cut away her underclothes.... Then he was lying on top of the wounded woman, pushing into her with jerking, trembling movements. (*IN 83*)

Thus, whatever happens between Maria and Leonard reflects whatever happens outside their small world. Like the soldiers that dominate and penetrate into women's body, Leonard and Otto play a soldier-like role through employing all their power to dominate Maria. The German police stand as a metaphor for the World in which Maria cannot find the slightest cover of protection. Relying on Leonard who wonders why Maria has not asked German police for help and protection when faced Otto's harassment and maltreatment, Maria says "They liked him, they thought he was a war hero, he told them some kind of story. They thought he was a drunk because of the war. He was a drunk who had to be forgiven. The off-duty ones sometimes bought him a beer. And they thought he was also a drunk because of me. I wanted protection, and they said, but you're driving the

poor devil crazy" (IN 149,150). This is telling because it shows us that even police, that must be an unbiased order provider, praises Otto for his wrong deeds. It is under such circumstances that we find Maria as a victim blamed for the violence she has to gone through. What Black says affirms the bitter fact of repeated rapes in Berlin. Men are familiar with the sound which is related to the imminent rape. When Maria screams out of fear Black interprets it based on his experience. On the other hand, it demonstrates the momentous occasion for women; as Black puts it, "Women generally scream like that when they think they're about to be raped" (IN 102).

It is very ironic that while Leonard blames Maria of choosing Otto as a husband and thinks Maria might hate Otto, he, himself, does possess and demonstrates the same features and characteristics of Otto. It is very obvious that both Leonard and Otto act like an intruder when they enter Maria's home without permission. Otto's breaking into Maria's home and entering her bedroom is much alike Leonard's intruding Maria's home without knocking. From the very beginning, we can see that Leonard's treatment of Maria and their relationship is marked by a sense of domination and power imposture. When we find him, for the first time, allowing himself to open the door without knocking and when we see him stepped inside, we realize that, at least in his unconscious mind, he considers himself as the real owner, one who needs no permission to enter. And later he goes further and acts like a real rapist. Following the course of his thoughts and actions ends in a true picture of sexual politics demonstrating that coitus has political implications and as Millett claims never occurs in vacuum.

### Conclusion:

No matter when and where the war occurs women have been always treated as spoils of war. This horrendous fact has always affected women's honor and life in significant ways. Analyzing McEwan's *The Innocent* in the particular time and place this paper highlights the character's transformation during War. It brings to the light how an ingenuous young man gradually turns to a brutal rapist as a consequence of war. Leonard was not a predator, brutal or rapist, but it was war that changes his personality. He could not resist the feeling of being conqueror and treats Maria in the same way that other treat women of the defeated countries. For Leonard, Maria is nothing more than an object and that is why he does whatever he wishes. Accordingly, as McEwan shows its necessity, to protect women in the chaotic world of war international law and protective rules should be anticipated and established. It is suggested that whatever the rule is, it must be applied in an effective way, to avoid further oppression and sexual violence. Since nowhere is safe, the rule should be applied globally to gain a strong, legal and effective result.

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