



Interrogating Moral Cosmopolitanism: A Critique of Ian McEwan's *Black Dogs*

A. Balu Vijayaraghavan

Researcher, Department of Indian and World Literatures, The English and Foreign Languages University, Hyderabad, Andhra Pradesh, India.

Abstract

In recent years, political philosophy has been a resurgence of interest in the idea of cosmopolitanism. In common parlance, the term 'cosmopolitanism' suggests a posture of worldly sophistication which is naturally contrasted with more provincial or parochial outlooks. Philosophical usage, although not unrelated, tends to be more specialized. Interestingly enough, however, there is no consensus among contemporary philosophers and theorists about how the precise content of a cosmopolitan position is to be understood. This, despite the fact that cosmopolitanism as a political doctrine, has a rich history dating back to ancient times. This paper attempts to study Ian McEwan's *Black Dogs* in the light of "moral cosmopolitanism."

Keywords

Ian McEwan, *Black Dogs*, Moral Cosmopolitanism.



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The word ‘cosmopolitan’, which derives from the Greek word *kosmopolitês* (‘citizen of the world’), has been used to describe a wide variety of important views in moral and socio-political philosophy. The nebulous core shared by all cosmopolitan views is the idea that all human beings, regardless of their political affiliation, are (or can and should be) citizens in a single community. Different versions of cosmopolitanism envision this community in different ways, some focusing on political institutions, others on moral norms or relationships, and still others focusing on shared markets or forms of cultural expression. Cosmopolitan political theorists of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, who talk about the injustice of current international or global economic, environmental, political, legal and social conditions, commonly base their arguments on one or another form of moral cosmopolitanism. Seldom have moral philosophers of past centuries used the term “moral cosmopolitanism” in distinguishing or classifying conceptions of morality or ethics. All cosmopolitan conceptions of morality oppose views according to which some human beings lack moral status, as well as views according to which some human beings’ needs or interests do not count or have moral importance. This paper attempts to study Ian McEwan’s *Black Dogs* in the light of “moral cosmopolitanism.”

“A Goodbye to Gore” is the title of Andrew Billen’s interview with McEwan, published to coincide with the *Observer*’s review of *Black Dogs*. The story material of McEwan’s novel lacks the grisly horrors of his earlier fiction—incest, sadistic slaughter, child kidnapping, and dismemberment of dead bodies. *Black Dogs* is the story of a family disagreement. This short novel is narrated by Jeremy, middle-aged, bland, happily married and successful after an unhappy,

orphaned, isolated youth and drifting, rootless adulthood. Having married into the Tremaine family, he becomes fascinated by his wife's parents, Bernard and June, by their romance in the mid-1940s, by their marriage and its subsequent disruption in 1946, and by the nature of and reasons for their long forty-year estrangement. In the mid-to late-1980s, Jeremy, undecided, questioning, and longing for substitute parents, tries to understand their different philosophical positions while also attempting to unravel the circumstances of the event that led to June's adoption of a metaphysical understanding of the world. This incident gives the novel its title. While hiking in Southern France in 1946, June is attacked by two huge black dogs that for her seem to incarnate a terrible evil at the heart of the universe. In a moment of revelation, however, as the beasts close in, she discovers a sense of the divine within her that allows her to resist these hellhounds.

In keeping with this narrative frame, Jeremy is trying to write a memoir of his parents-in-law-the novel's action moves backward and forward between settings in the late 1980s and mid-1940s. It also moves around Europe: various sections take place in an English nursing home, in Southern France, in Poland, and in Berlin in November 1989 when the Berlin Wall begins to be dismantled. Within the framework of a family dispute, it attempts to touch upon the clash of science and mysticism, rationality and magic, violence and love, and civilization and its abandonment. Within that same framework, it also delves into some of the major currents and events of late-twentieth-century European history: the legacy of World War II, the German death camps of the 1940s, the promises and failures of Soviet Communism, the axial moment of the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989. Toward the end of the text, one is aware of the European terminally polluted by the brutalities of its mid-twentieth-century bloodletting, and Jeremy concludes with his visionary warning that the black dogs will return at some other time in Europe. For such a short novel about a family quarrel, *Black Dogs* covers a wide range of material.

The events in *Black Dogs* (1992), McEwan's fifth novel, are set on the background of the Berlin Wall. Unlike other novels by McEwan, which are

usually written in the third person, in this one the events are seen through the eyes and memories of a narrator embodied by Jeremy, a young man who, as an orphan having lost his parents at an early age, confesses his fascination for other people's parents. The preface gets the reader acquainted with Jeremy's background and introduces the main characters of the novel - the parents of Jeremy's wife Jenny - June and Bernard Tremaine. The two met as members of the Communist Party and fell in love with each other but eventually their personalities turned out to be totally opposed. And this opposition has separated and taken them in entirely opposite paths in life. While June appears to be an intuitive being, with spiritual interests, a natural believer, Bernard, on the other hand, is an unshakable materialist, rational, always looking for a logical explanation and concerned only with matters that can be perceived through the five senses. She searches for the hidden truth of the universe while he believes there is no truth that science cannot ultimately reveal to humanity.

In *Black Dogs* McEwan presents the problems he has already worked through in eleven pages of the preface, ties up some loose ends and takes up the issues clarified but not resolved in his earlier works. There is very little new material from the unconscious while conscious ideas are elaborated at length. The protagonist of *Last Day of Summer* or *First Love*, *Last Rites*, Henry from *Disguises* or even Stephen from *The Child in Time* could, with time and experience, have grown to resemble Jeremy in their middle age. Theme of lost or rejected parents, the efforts to compensate for this deprivation by adopting parents and parenting children; the problems in intimate relationships and the evil in the world are restated and worked on, but not worked out and indeed, some are shown to be insoluble. The voice is sad and the tone pessimistic.

Like Stephen and Leonard, Jeremy shares some aspects of McEwan's own life. The lower-middle class military background, reappears in Jeremy's thought about his father:

“the life of an infantry sergeant: enforced travel abroad, boredom alternating with severe stress, the violent deaths and terrible injuries of close friends, no privacy, no women, irregular news from

home. The prospect of a life of constrained and rhythmic ordinariness must have acquired in the slow slog eastwards through Belgium...a glow quite unknown to my parents-in-law.” (136)

The hurt and vulnerable internalized child and the oedipal theme are once more in evidence. The narrator was orphaned at the age of eight. When he was seventeen, he lived with his older sister, her husband and his three year old niece, Sally, who is possibly a resurrection of Kate from *The Child in Time*. Like Kate, in *Last Day of Summer*, Jean is a reluctant and unsatisfactory mother absorbed in the violent and sadomasochistic relationship with Harper, amid daily quarrels, abuse of alcohol and drugs. Jeremy is a very serious and studious young man, who sees his future in a University education and sometimes acts as a surrogate parent to Sally: “Naturally, I identified with an abandoned child and so we holed up nicely from time to time in a large room over-looking the garden with her toys and my records...whenever the savagery beyond made us not want to show our faces” (9).

There is a disparity between real life experience and the fictional report of the enthusiastic journey to Germany on the occasion of the fall of the Berlin Wall on November 9 1989. In the novel, Jeremy returns after a ten day absence in Strasbourg and Brussels, and as she joins him in the marital bed. Jeremy shares with the reader his observations on “how easily one gets used to sleeping alone” (67). Their drowsy reunion is interrupted by Bernard who communicates the excitement of events reported on the news and he and Jeremy order a taxi to the airport. In reality, McEwan told Edward Pilkington: “My wife and I jumped on the first plane out to Berlin...It seemed the obvious thing to do.” The reader is powerfully reminded of Colin and Mary in *The Comfort of Strangers*, who would have had a better holiday with someone else, and of Albert, in *Solid Geometry*, telling the reader, but not Maisie, of his plans to divorce her. In McEwan’s fantasy, Jeremy chooses Bernard, his father-in-law, to share this emotive moment with him. It is also significant that his real walks in France, attributed to June and Bernard and later to Jeremy’s whole family in the novel, were taken

in the company of Jon Cook to whom *Black Dogs* is dedicated. Jeremy's family life has very little bearing on the story, except as a secure point of reference, an anchor for the narrator who wants to believe that his emotional problems are over. Occasional hints incline the reader to suspect that this is temporary if lengthy escape from upheavals which threaten to return in the mid-life crisis.

Jung writes at length about the physical and psychological changes at this time, which can lead to "all sorts of catastrophes in marriage" (*MM*, 124). In his middle forties, McEwan is facing illness and imminent death in the parent generation and is preparing to confront issues beyond 'love and work.' Jung holds that the mid-life crisis can be delayed by the fact that a person's parents are still alive: "It is then as if the period of youth were unduly continued. I have seen this especially [in]...men whose fathers were long lived. The death of the father then has the effect of an over-hurried – almost catastrophic – ripening." (*MM* 121)

In this novel, the oedipal theme is dealt with by killing off both parents before Jeremy's adolescence. This is the cause of much rootlessness and sadness but has the advantage of leaving him free to choose several pairs of substitute parents who are "educated and well off" (*BD* 11) and middle-aged. These pseudo-parents can be picked up and dropped, have neither powers nor authority over him but can be used at will, within broad limits, to meet his needs without making demands or putting him under pressure from their expectations. All are useful models of the middle-class life-style to which Jeremy aspires. His parents-in-law are married and love each other, but have separate, loving, filial relationships with each and an illusionary sense of control by acting as a channel of communication between them. He gains access to private information about their sex life, discovers that Bernard "took a small penis size" (32) and secures a detailed description of his wife's conception from each of her parents in turn. The opportunity to project jealousy and resentment of closeness into all their children, including his own wife, is an added bonus: "My tendency to play the cuckoo caused some unhappiness to Jenny and her brothers for which I apologize" (20). This is much more acceptable than the gloating of the protagonist

in 'Homemade' but springs from the same impulse. The creation of June and Bernard gives McEwan an opportunity to revisit once more the historical time of his youthful parents.

June and Bernard met in 1944 and married in 1946. The traditional values of the parent generation, with their liberal use of the mechanisms of splitting and projection which requires an enemy and their hot and cold wars fought to eradicate the evil that lives in themselves, are obviously wrong. It became necessary to create a new creed. The two contenders in this novel are the extreme polarities of the idea, intellect and science versus matter, intuition and revelation. In politics, this translates into a concern for the masses of mankind versus the individual human being. McEwan embodies these opposites in the attitudes of Bernard and June and seems to return by this means to his early opposition of male and female consciousness.

In order to depict the irreconcilable division in his own psyche, McEwan gives Bernard and June the youthful convictions which he had chosen for himself to replace the received wisdom of the parent generation. He then follows the changes which the process of individuation produces in their inner and outer lives. He never joined any political organization for fear that this might compromise his artistic integrity but he made it clear that in the first half of his adult life he sympathized with the political left, supported unilateral disarmament and identified himself closely with the Women's Movement. Since his 'move-abroad', there has been a gradual drifting away from any hard-line general principles towards an acceptance of the primacy of the goal of success in his career and, until the writing of *Black Dogs* of wholehearted commitment to family life.

Black Dogs deals in depth with the transitional phase of middle life. Unlike most analysts, Jung takes a special interest in the second half of life and has developed a sophisticated system of ideas which is used here to shed light on some of the more obscure aspects of this unusual novel. He holds that the task of the first half of life is "to restrict one's self to the obtainable" (*MM*, 19). The persona, which mediates between the ego and the outside world, is energetically

developed together with the primary and, to a lesser extent the secondary functions, while the inferior functions remain in the unconscious. The unacceptable aspects of the personality are repressed and form the personal shadow. This becomes associated with the collective shadow, which exists in the collective unconscious and represents evil in mankind as a whole.

In the absence of her early pregnancy, June and Bernard's marriage could have followed McEwan's frequently described pattern of marriages where the woman is like a man or the man like a woman and the partners are like-minded, friendly and compatible to the extent that they have nothing to quarrel about. Jung states that "nothing is more bearable than a tepid harmony in personal relations brought about by withholding emotion. The repressed emotions are often of the kind we would wish to keep secret" (*MM* 39). When the essential self is a secret, not only from 'the other' but also from oneself, an inauthentic closeness must replace genuine intimacy and these cosy couples go sleepily to bed, planning a trip with someone interesting or remembering how easy it is to sleep alone. Even so, this is more viable and comfortable than the endless and passionate quarrel in which each partner attributes his or her own faults and shortcomings to the other or bitterly attacks them for showing any sign of their true self. While the anima and animus are unconscious and projected, the disappointment in love fuels the conflict as happened between June and Bernard. If both partners can value each other's authentic individuality, a strong and genuine love and respect can develop.

Once June is dead, Bernard continues the dialogue with Jeremy and becomes obsessed with the idea that if June's spirit survives, she will get in touch with him. In typically McEwanesque fashion, Bernard and the reader are offered descriptions of ambiguous events which do not convince an unbeliever but, like the paranormal happening in *The Child in Time*, "almost connect[s] up...almost" (*CT*, 177). There is Jenny's sixth finger, Bernard's rescue at Checkpoint Charlie by a young girl who reminds him of June in her youth and later, Jeremy's own experience of something that could have been June's warning about the scorpion in her house in France. When Bernard too dies, Jeremy continues the dialogue

inside himself but never reaches any conclusions. His only credo is summarized thus: "I would be false to my own experience if I did not declare my belief in the possibility of love transforming and redeeming a life" (20).

The symbolism of the black dogs is carefully explained in the book itself. Bernard tells Jeremy:

I was the one who told her about Churchill's black dog. You remember? The name he gave to the depressions he used to get from time to time. I think he pinched the expression from Samuel Johnson. So June's idea was that if one dog was a personal depression, two dogs were a kind of cultural depression, civilization's worst moods. Not bad really. (104)

The black dogs are a powerful symbol from the universal unconscious. Black usually denotes death, the shadow or the evil side of the psyche and dogs or other dangerous animals stand for man's animal nature, his instincts and uncivilized impulses. In addition to the dogs mentioned by McEwan and Billen, there is a long history of the use of this symbol. Dogs are associated with Artemis who is an anima figure, generally hostile to men, who sometimes set her dogs on them.

June had been living through her animus and her repressed femininity had become connected with the shadow and the self. A complex image representing these unconscious elements is constellated by the stress of the meeting with the dogs, soon after her pregnancy has evoked an urgent need to reclaim her femininity from the unconscious. Only the dark, negative side of the archetypes is experienced in projection on the black dogs so that she is convinced that she had come face to face with pure evil. This evil is later shown to be connected with the Nazi atrocities and with war and destruction, so that the dogs become a new symbol which is personal to June but can be shared with her family and with the reader without diminishment or trivialization. June and Bernard's relationship "becomes an obvious representation of post-war Europe, a combination of love and hate, politics and sentiment, and their marriage, appropriately, spans the Cold War, ending only when June dies in 1987" (*Slay*

42). McEwan comments that within six weeks of completing *Black Dogs* “the catastrophe of Yugoslavia began...If you asked me where the black dogs went, it’s exactly there.”

The novel is to some extent organized as a debate between June and Bernard with Jeremy as an undecided observer ripe for conversation. Critics have observed that Jeremy is full of uncertainty while Bernard is filled with bluff commonsense rationalism. The novel is organized around a clash of the rational and the non-rational, of practical political activity and private mysticism. Jeremy sums up this clash and its embodiment in the novel’s protagonists. “Rationalist and mystic, commissar and yogi, joiner and abstainer, scientist and intuitionist, Bernard and June are the extremities, the twin poles along which my own unbelief slithers and never comes to rest.” June insists that a concern with this world, with politics, and with social activity leads to an impoverishment, a lack of appreciation for the richness and beauty of that very world and the mysterious divine force that underlies it. There is a mysterious “power of love” in the universe that Bernard and his kind simply ignore. Bernard talks of practical political matters and does so through methodical, logical argument. He finds June’s mind driven by rather absurd emotions, and he is extremely vexed by what he sees as her lack of respect for any kind of objective, verifiable truth. June’s voice advances non-rational explanations for his not touching the switchboard cupboard and, thus, bot being bitten by a scorpion while Bernard’s dismisses these and gives his own rational, materialistic ones.

This dispute between the two relates to an opposition that runs throughout McEwan’s fiction, an opposition between male and female. There are two major groups of motifs in the novel that seems related in some way to June and Bernard’s dispute. It has already been noted how characters’ lives and experiences are closely related to public and historical events. For example, Jeremy and Jenny’s lovemaking is interrupted by Bernard’s excited telephone call about the fall of Berlin Wall. But one of the clearest ways in which private and public are interwoven is embodied in another major strand of motifs that runs throughout the novel. The novel continually presents violence and a

rejection of civilization. Violence is clearly there in Jeremy's youth, in the sadistic-masochistic relationship of his sister and her husband, in their treatment of each other and of their daughter. Violence is closely connected with an abandonment of civilization. This is how Jeremy sees his friends at the novel's start: as young men who are turning from their parents' intellectual culture toward something more brutal and racy. The novel suggests that only love redeems the situation. Bernard and June's relationship has been both a failure and a success. They could not live together, but they did stay together. If both have a sense of failure, it is because they could not realize or make tangible that love. But Jeremy's life does give some cause for hope. His marriage is a good one; his children are loved. That is no mean achievement in the world of the novel.

The differences in gender and worldview at the heart of June and Bernard's relationship also characterize the defining event of the novel: June's encounter with two enormous black dogs left behind by the Gestapo, one male and one female. June confronts the dogs alone, realizing in the process that she has "physical courage" of her own, "a significant discovery for a woman" (*BD*, p. 34) at that time. With her successful repulsion of the dogs, June gains not only physical but also spiritual power; she is henceforth convinced of her own belief that the animals were symbols of a higher reality, that they "emanated meaning" (120), over Bernard's rationalist arguments to the contrary.

For June, this event becomes the turning point in her life, leading to a religious awakening and her eventual break with Bernard. With frequent retellings, the biographical fact of the encounter with the dogs, as Jeremy notes, has evolved into "a myth, all the more powerful for being upheld as documentary" (27). For June, this particular story-unchangeable, infinitely repeatable and undeniable mythical in significance-acts as an insuperable barrier to her having a close relationship with Bernard, who could never consider the incident from her point of view.

In *Black Dogs*, McEwan stages the crisis into which his beliefs have been thrown and takes stock of what writing fiction entails. The novel compresses the diverse conflicts organizing his work to date into a single, searching debate. The

contending viewpoints are embodied in the three principal figures between whom the narrative commutes: the narrator, Jeremy, and his wife's parents, Bernard and June Tremaine. Jeremy's Preface to his memoir of this couple, which furnishes the main substance of this novel, spells out the nature of the positions competing for the author's allegiance: "Rationalist and mystic, commissar and yogi, joiner and abstainer, scientist and intuitionist, Bernard and June are the extremities, the twin poles along whose slippery axis my own unbelief slithers and never comes to rest." (19)

McEwan frames his fiction like an actual memoir, beginning with a preface, using exact dates, and anchoring events in known history. The novel is however playing with being non-fiction in order to highlight the subjectivity and situation of all histories, both national and individual. Bernard and June's stories are in many ways incommensurable, not least because at the center of each is a firm and opposite idea about the nature of fact and truth, science and narrative, the spiritual and the material. As each refutes and reconstructs the other's version, our assumptions, like Jeremy's, are undermined, and so is the moral weight we cannot help but attach to each version. Two startlingly vivid scenes, one involving a dragonfly and the other a scorpion, illuminate the difficulty of objective perception and demonstrate how the beauty and the malignity of the world, particularly where humans are involved, are often inseparable.

This novel would be a powerful tool for exploring narrative ethics, situated knowledge, and the relationship between abstract principles and concrete lived experience. Bernard is able to cling to the principles of socialism long after Stalinism has demonstrated its practical failure. Similarly, he persists in understanding what happened to June as figurative. Not having been there, he cannot grasp the concrete reality that is so unavoidably obvious to her. He links the horror (the specifics of which we learn--if these are actual--only at the very end of the book) with Churchill's metaphor for depression, the "black dog." "June's idea," he tells Jeremy, "was that if one dog was a personal depression, two dogs were a kind of cultural depression, civilization's worst moods" (82). But

for June, the dogs and what they signify are absolutely literal. They are starving animals that threaten her life, and worse. Jeremy, along with the reader, must decide whether the difference matters.

Thus, we see that though McEwan attempts to dismantle various social institutions—such as love, marriage and family, he ultimately conveys the readers a sense of a moral or spiritual enlightenment. The novel, written in the form of a memoir, is plausibly a fictional biography where McEwan attempts to intertwine myriad aspects of history as well as fiction. We clearly see the interplay of “moral cosmopolitanism” in different sections of the novel. *Black Dogs* seem to represent the high point of McEwan’s spiritual development and abandons the task of integration of the opposites which he himself once believed to be the key to human progress in the next millennium.

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