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Review Paper

Alienation and *The Comfort of Strangers*

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Abstract
The present study aims to study "Alienation" in *The Comfort of Strangers* a novel by Ian Mc-Ewan. It attempts to work out the negative and destructive aftermath of alienation in the protagonists of the novel. The research on the mentioned term is fulfilled as per the theories of Melvin Seaman. Ian Russell Mc-Ewan is one of the many examples, who depicted the mentioned element masterfully in his works, specifically in this novel. He goes beyond man's expectations to show his readers the smashing consequences of human estrangement from the self and society in intelligence and function. Alienation is a venerable concept, with its roots going back to Roman law, where it was a legal term used to denote the act of transferring property. After World War II, when societal complexity started its increasingly accelerated rate of change, and the first signals of post-modernity were perceived by the intellectual elite, alienation slowly became part of the intellectual scene. Melvin Seaman, a theorist which made momentous modern and post-modern points of view regarding "Alienation" after Marx and Hegel, was one of the first in the 1960s to develop an alienation scale to measure degrees and varieties of alienation.

Keywords: *Alienation; Ian Mc-Ewan; Separation; Social Isolation*

بیگانگی و *آسایش غریبه ها*
پژوهش حاضر با هدف بررسی «بیگانگی» در رمان «آرامش غریبه‌ها» اثر ایان مک ایوان، تلاش دارد تا پیامدهای منفی و مخرب بیگانگی را در قهرمانان رمان بررسی کند. بر اساس نظریات ملوین سیمن، ایان راسل مک ایوان یکی از نمونه های متعددی است که عنصر مذکور را در آثار خود به ویژه در این رمان استادانه به تصویر کشیده است و فراتر از انتظارات انسان می رود تا عواقب کوبنده برآورد انسان را به خوانندگان خود نشان دهد. خود و جامعه در هوش و عملکرد.بیگانگی مفهومی ارجمند است که ریشه آن به حقوق روم بازمی گردد، جایی که یک اصطلاح حقوقی برای بیان عمل انتقال دارایی بود. پس از جنگ جهانی دوم، زمانی که پیچیدگی اجتماعی به طور فزاینده ای آغاز شد. سرعت تغییر شتابان، و اولین سیگنال های پست مدرنیته توسط نخبگان روشنفکر درک شد، بیگانگی به آرامی بخشی از صحنه روشنفکری شد. ملوین سیمن، یک نظریه که بعد از مارکس و هگل دیدگاه های مدرن و پست مدرن مهمی را در مورد «ازخودبیگانگی» ایجاد کرد، یکی از اولین مواردی بود که در دهه ۱۹۶۰ مقیاس بیگانگی را برای اندازه گیری درجات و انواع بیگانگی ایجاد کرد.
واژگان کلیدی: بیگانگی، ایان مک ایوان، جدایی، انزوای اجتماعی

Introduction

The term "alienation" causes considerable difficulty, partly because it is used to refer both to a personal psychological state and to a type of social relationship (Roberts, 1987: 346). Kalekin Fishman claims, "The term alienation refers to objective conditions, to subjective feelings, and to orientations that discourage participation", and remarks that, "In modern sociology, alienation is a term which refers to the distancing of people from experiencing a crystallized totality both in the social world and in the self" (Kalekin Fishman, 1998: 6). Robert Nisbet (cf. Seaman, 1959: 783) writes:

At the present time, in all the social sciences, the various synonyms of alienation have the foremost place in the studies of human relations. Investigations of the unattached, the marginal, the obsessive, the normless, and the isolated individual all testify to the central place occupied by the hypothesis of alienation in contemporary social science. During the 1980s, as the postwar baby boomers grew older, and perhaps more disillusioned, and willy-nilly entered the rat race, interest in alienation subsided. The concept definitely became less fashionable, although a small but active international core group continued to study the subject in all its ramifications since the problems denoted by alienation were certainly far from solved, to the contrary, even (Geyer, 1996: xii).

This core group was called the Research Committee on Alienation of the International Sociological Association (ISA), a non-profit organization dedicated to scientific study in the field of sociology and social sciences. They kept alienation studies alive, until the 1990s when there was again an upsurge of interest in alienation. Three developments caused this upsurge of interest: the fall of the Soviet Union, globalization and increasing awareness of ethnic conflicts, and post-modernism. The fall of the Soviet Union precipitated alienation interest in Eastern Europe for the following two reasons:

--The population as a whole was finally free to express its long-repressed ethnic and political alienation, which had accumulated under Soviet rule, while:

--The existence of alienation was no longer denied and instead became a respectable object of study.

Films such as "Goodbye Lenin" and "Lilya 4-ever" depict post-communist society, and the problems associated with it. Goodbye Lenin is set in East Germany, where a son attempts to hide the fall of communism from his frail mother. Lucas Madyson's "Lilya 4 - ever" depicts the harsh realities of poverty and emigration in contemporary Russia, and the accompanying drug abuse and prostitution in an alienated part of society, excluded from the economic benefits of the modern Russian Federation as enjoyed by others. Alienation was denied by the communist government, as it was seen in Marxian terms, which discusses alienation under capitalism. Thus, under a Marxist regime, alienation is necessarily non-existent in theory. Furthermore, though processes of globalization and internationalization tended to monopolize people's attention during the last few decades, the hundred-odd local wars fought since the end of World War II, which were increasingly covered live on worldwide TV, claimed attention for the opposing trend of regionalization and brought ethnic conflicts to the fore. Internet, and in particular YouTube, play a significant role in highlighting these ethical conflicts. This ties in with the third issue, post-modernism, where the trend has been towards positing increasingly eclectic worldviews because of an information overload stemming from the increased use of the media and the Internet, and the breakdown of gender, national and even personal boundaries, questioning of meta-narratives and cultural norms and values. Post-modernism provided a theoretical frame of reference that necessitated the reinterpretation of alienation theory and questions about identity formation in the contemporary Western world.

Geyer contends states that post-modernism emerged as an important paradigm to explain the individual's reactions to the increasingly rapid complexity and growing interdependence of international society. He also notes that the world of simulacra and virtual reality tends to be an alienated world, for reasons that Marx and Freud could not possibly have foreseen", for "in much of the Western world, the average person is increasingly confronted, on a daily basis, with an often bewildering and overly complex environment, which promotes attitudes of apathy and withdrawal from wider social involvements. This has meant a change in the attitude towards alienation. Geyer (1996: xiv) continues that while 'classical' alienation research is still continuing, the stress is now, on the one hand, on describing new forms of alienation under the 'decision overload' conditions of post-modernity, and on the other hand on the reduction of increasingly pervasive ethnic alienation and conflict.

These are broad definitions, but two of the founding texts on alienation are Marx's theory of alienation, as set out in Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844 and in The German Ideology (1846), and Melvin Seaman's on the Meaning of Alienation (1959). Since Marx identifies three aspects of alienation, namely private property, the commodity character of labor, and the division of labor in society, Seaman identifies powerlessness and self-estrangement with Marxian notions of alienation, and clearly relates self-estrangement to Marx's 'false consciousness. Seaman, thus building on Marx’s insights, provides a methodological framework more suitable to the analysis of alienation in contemporary literature. The focus of this study is therefore on Seaman's theory, which is more applicable to the current study.

The Comfort of Strangers

The Comfort of Strangers is a brief narrative with only a few characters and a very short time scale. It tells the story of a young English couple, Colin and Mary, spending a dull, repetitive holiday in a city resembling present-day Venice. Colin has failed to become a singer or an actor and has a job in publishing. Mary is an actress who used to work with a women’s theatre group and has two children from a former marriage. They have been together for seven years and their relationship, like their vacation, has lost all interest and excitement, all that is to be changed. However, during nighttime walking, the couple becomes lost. Wandering in a deserted street, a seemingly friendly man named Robert appears almost out of nowhere and leads the pair to his bar for wine and conversation. The abruptness of his appearance foreshadows the malice of his intentions. He does not meet Colin and Mary by accident. Later, Robert takes the couple home to meet his semi-invalid wife, Caroline. As the novel progresses, we learn that Caroline’s disability is caused by the sadomasochistic sexual relations that she and her brutal husband have. The contact with the strangers provokes a sadomasochistic element in Colin and Mary’s sex life.

The next morning, Mary awakes first and examines their little room. When Colin wakes shortly after her, they wonder, Colin with some nervousness, Mary with blithe disregard, where their hosts might be. As they are naked and the only piece of clothing in the room is an embroidered dressing gown, Mary goes in search of information. After passing through a long gallery filled with remembrances of Robert's father, Mary finds Caroline. Mary and Colin stay to dine with Robert and Caroline, but there is a strange detail that casts a shadow over the evening. While showing him some of his father's most prized possessions, Robert inexplicably punches Colin in the stomach. Colin reveals this to no one at first and, when asked by Caroline to promise to come back, does, indeed, promise. After that night, however, Colin and Mary's holiday seems to take a turn for the better. They spend days in their hotel room making love, which they thought they had lost years ago. Accidentally arriving in front of Robert and Caroline's home one afternoon, their peace is shattered.

Against their instincts, they respond to the couple's invitation for another visit. After separating the couple, Robert takes Colin to the bar and Caroline makes tea for Mary, Robert and

Caroline put their grisly plan into effect. Caroline drugs Mary so that Robert must decide between doing anything Robert asks and watching Mary die. With that, Robert slits Colin's wrist, and he bleeds to death while Mary watches the scene helplessly, and then, when she awakes, he is lying dead at her feet, and she finds out that Robert and Caroline are gone. The police later informed her that such crimes are common.

Method

Melvin Seaman was part of the surge in alienation research prominent in the middle of the twentieth century when he published his paper, *On the Meaning of Alienation, in the American Sociological Review* in 1959, followed by *Alienation, Membership, and Political Knowledge: A Comparative Study* in 1966. One of the sociological papers most often cited concerning alienation is Melvin Seaman's on the Meaning of Alienation, published in the American Sociological Review in 1959. Although alienation is not a modern phenomenon, it has progressed far beyond what Marx envisaged. Weber already noted, "The total being of man has now been alienated from the organic cycle of peasant life". The situation in which modern man finds himself, is one where man attempts to remain an individual against all external onslaughts which reduce him to a number, making him a gear in a machine (Degenaar, 1992a: 92). According to Von Bertalanffy's General Systems Theory, the self is dependent upon its environment for its existence, both as a biological organism and as a psychological construct. Thus, looking at the particular form of social attachment sheds some light on the self's interaction with its environment. This systemic approach to identity alienation was essential to reinterpret Seaman's theory.

Seaman's paper identifies five dimensions of alienation: powerlessness, meaninglessness, normlessness, social isolation, and self-estrangement. These categories are useful for studying alienation, but since the world has changed since the publication of Seaman's paper, his work has to be reinterpreted.

Textual Analysis: Alienation in *The Comfort of Strangers*

The main preoccupations of The Comfort of Strangers are signaled by its two epigraphs. The first, an extract from the poem “Sibling Mysteries” by Adrienne Rich, introduces Mc-Ewan’s feminist concerns: “how we dwelt in two worlds / the daughters and the mothers / in the kingdom of the sons”. The idea of women’s world is essentially different from that of men’s which is fore-grounded from the opening pages of the novel where Colin and Mary are introduced. Despite their long-standing relationship, the couple is sleeping in separate beds and is not on speaking terms. When they do attempt to communicate with each other, they fail to merge their separate discourses into a dialogue. The result is an alternation of monologues: each of them listens “patiently” to the other’s dreams, but only “in exchange for the luxury of recounting their own”. Their dreams, too, suggest distinct desires and concerns: Colin dreams “of flying, of crumbling teeth, of appearing naked before a seated stranger”, whereas Mary dreams of her two children complaining that she has gone away without them, or of “her ex-husband steering her into a corner and beginning to explain patiently, as he once had, how to operate his expensive Japanese camera, testing her on its intricacies at every stage” (Mc-Ewan, The Comfort of Strangers 12).

By juxtaposing his protagonists’ dreams, Mc-Ewan emphasizes their alienation from each other. Mc-Ewan seems to be availing himself of Freudian dream interpretation to suggest the couple’s distinct concerns: preoccupied with sexual desire, Colin does not share Mary’s maternal concerns or her feminist irritation at being treated like an imbecile. Their dreams are thus reflective of their disparate worlds. Illustrating the alienation of Colin’s and Mary’s worlds is their inability to agree on the direction they should take in the maze of the tourist city’s streets in

order to find a place to satisfy their most basic human feeling, hunger. The couple constantly loses their way because either they forget their street maps, or, when they do have the maps, they are unable to decipher them: “It was easy, Mary and Colin had found, to get lost as they walked from one page to another”. Mc-Ewan makes it clear, however, that the couple’s disorientation is to be understood as being emblematic of the more important gender conflict between them. As the narrator explains, “Alone, perhaps, they each could have explored the city with pleasure, followed whims, dispensed with destinations and so enjoyed or ignored being lost.

Together they moved slowly, clumsily, effecting lugubrious compromises, attending to delicate shifts of mood, Normal Abnormalities: Depiction of Sado - Masochistic Violence in Ian McEwan’s The Comfort of Strangers repairing breaches. As individuals they did not easily take offense; but together they managed to offend each other in surprising, unexpected ways” (14-15). Their inability to read the street maps can be construed not as “incompetence” or “ineptitude”, as has been suggested by some critics, but as symptomatic of their fundamental incompatibility. Something else that Colin and Mary try to decipher while wandering in the streets is feminist posters calling for convicted rapists to be castrated. Through the couple’s reactions to seeing the posters, Mc-Ewan introduces his feminist concerns more directly:

Mary had climbed the first steps of the palace and was reading the posters. ‘The women are more radical here,’ she said over her shoulder, ‘and better organized.’ Colin had stepped back to compare the two streets. ‘They’ve got more to fight for,’ he said. ‘We came by this way before, but can you remember which way we went?’ Mary was translating with difficulty a lengthy proclamation: "Which way?" Colin said slightly louder. Frowning, Mary ran her forefinger along the lines of bold print, and when she finished, she exclaimed in triumph. She turned and smiled at Colin. ‘They want convicted rapists castrated! He had moved to get a better view of the street to the right. ‘And hands chopped off for theft? Look, I’m sure we passed that drinking fountain before, on the way to this bar.’ Mary turned back to the poster. ‘No. It’s a tactic. It’s a way of making people take rape more seriously as a crime.’ Colin moved again and stood, with his feet firmly apart, facing the street on their left. ‘It’s a way,’ he said irritably, ‘of making people take feminists less seriously.’ (23-4)

The passage portrays Mary as a woman with a high degree of sexual consciousness. Her quick recognition of the fact that the women of the city are “better organized” and are pursuing “radical” demands, suggests her feminist sensibilities. That, by contrast, her partner does not appreciate these sensibilities is evident from Colin’s response; he ridicules Mary’s reasoning about the tactical nature of the militant feminists’ demand, implying that they do not deserve serious attention. Colin’s attention is directed to comparing two streets, a pragmatic and relatively easy task when compared with Mary’s contemplative evaluation of the women’s movement. Whether in their dreams or in wakefulness, then, Colin and Mary have discrete, irreconcilable concerns. Providing a foil to feminism, Mary is the other main female character of the novel, Caroline. Typifying the battered wife, Caroline is first introduced felicitously as a phantom: “a small pale face watching . . . from the shadows, a disembodied face” (60). This impression of Caroline as an incomplete human being, as a woman reduced to certain aspects of her physique, is reinforced in another passage where her facial features are detailed: “Her small face was featureless in its regularity, innocent of expression, without age.

Her eyes, nose, mouth, and skin, all might have been designed in committee to meet the barest requirements of feasibility. Her mouth, for example, was no more than from the word suggest, a moving, lipped slit beneath her nose” (67). As the novel progresses and we come to know Caroline better, it becomes clear why Mc-Ewan describes her in terms of diminished bodily features: she is a miserable, obedient wife frequently beaten by a husband who has reduced her to a mere object used for satisfying his sadistic desires. Severely maltreated by Robert (she speaks of her body having been covered in bruises, cuts, and wounds; three of her ribs have been

cracked; one of her teeth has been knocked out; one of her fingers has been broken, and she has been hospitalized for months after her back was broken), Caroline is, in fact, a semi-invalid, unable to bend down. So wretched is she that, ironically, even joyfulness causes pain to her: “It hurts when I laugh”. As Caroline herself points out, she is “just another beaten wife”, “a virtual prisoner” in Robert’s house of terror (109, 111). The Comfort of Strangers is a brief narrative with only a few characters and a very short time scale. It tells the story of a young English couple, Colin and Mary, holidaying in an unnamed tourist city. Colin has failed to become a singer or an actor and has a job in publishing. Mary is an actress who used to work with a women’s theatre group and has two children from a former marriage.

The couple has been lovers for seven years but has no great passion for each other. Unable to find restaurants or even their hotel, they frequently lose their way in the labyrinthine streets of the seaside resort. Late one night, they encounter Robert, a local who takes them to eat at his own bar. Later, Robert takes the couple home to meet his semi-invalid wife, Caroline. As the novel progresses, we learn that Caroline’s disability is caused by the Sado - Masochistic sexual relations that she and her brutal husband have. The contact with the strangers provokes a sadomasochistic element in Colin and Mary’s sex life.

The novel ends with a graphic account of how Robert murders Colin: he beats Colin up, daubs blood from Caroline’s cut lip onto Colin’s lips, kisses him deeply on the mouth, and then cuts Colin’s wrist with a razor. The main preoccupations of The Comfort of Strangers are signaled by its two epigraphs. The first, an extract from the poem “Sibling Mysteries” by Adrienne Rich, introduces McEwan’s feminist concerns: “how we dwelt in two worlds/ the daughters and the mothers/ in the kingdom of the sons”. The idea of women’s world being essentially different from that of men’s is foregrounded from the opening pages of the novel where Colin and Mary are introduced. Despite their long-standing relationship, the couple is sleeping in separate beds and is not on speaking terms. When they do attempt to communicate with each other, they fail to merge their separate discourses into a dialogue. The result is an alternation of monologues: each of them listens “patiently” to the other’s dreams, but only “in exchange for the luxury of recounting their own”. Their dreams, too, suggest distinct desires and concerns: Colin dreams “of flying, . . . of crumbling teeth, of appearing naked before a seated stranger”, whereas Mary dreams of her two children complaining that she has gone away without them, or of “her ex-husband steering her into a corner and [beginning] to explain patiently, as he once had, how to operate his expensive Japanese camera, testing her on its intricacies at every stage”.

Finally, as Colin and Mary leave Robert’s apartment, they hear “a sharp sound that, as Mary said Normal Abnormalities: Depiction of Masochistic Violence, could as easily have been an object dropped as a face slapped”. Through his protagonists’ condoning of all the patent indications of misogyny and violence in Robert and Caroline’s speech and behavior, Mc-Ewan hints that the gap between the two couples is perhaps not as wide as it appears to be. This hint is reinforced in the subsequent rekindling of Colin and Mary’s sexual desire for each other. What was missing in their sexual relations before meeting Robert and Caroline, was precisely passion: “Their lovemaking had no clear beginning or end and frequently concluded in, or was interrupted by, sleep” (18).

However, their contact with the sad masochistic couple results in the awakening of their somnolent passion. Like Caroline’s masochism, then, Robert’s sadism, his insatiable desire to manipulate others, to stalk and even go as far as murdering his victims, is the consequence of the misogynist behavior to which he was exposed and which he was encouraged to emulate. Mc-Ewan combines his explorations of the internalization of patriarchal values and sadomasochistic patterns of behavior with the theme of traveling. The first hint about this theme is given in the novel’s second epigraph: “Travelling is a brutality. It forces you to trust strangers and you lose

sight of all that familiar comfort of home and friends. You are constantly off balance. . ..” Cesare Pavese’s description of traveling as a situation in which people are compelled to rely on strangers is particularly applicable to Colin and Mary’s plight. After their first encounter with Robert, the couples are unable to find their way back to their hotel and so spend the night in the street. The following morning, they are tired, thirsty, and unable either to locate their hotel or even to find a glass of water. Therefore, when they encounter Robert again, Colin and Mary can hardly resist his insistent offers to take them to his apartment for some rest. “I will make you so comfortable you’ll forget your terrible night,” Robert tells the couple and they trust the stranger.

Colin and Mary choose to rely on the comfort provided by the strangers despite obvious indications that their relationship with Robert and his wife may expose them to grave danger. For example, when the couples wake up in the guest bedroom of Robert’s apartment, they are surprised to find themselves naked with Caroline silently staring at them. When they demand that their clothes be given back to them, Caroline refuses to do so until they agree to stay for dinner. In the “family museum” that Robert keeps of his father’s and his grandfather’s possessions, Mary finds “several cut-throat razors arranged in a fan” which resemble the gold imitation razor-blade that Robert wears around his neck (59, 60). Also, in this scene Caroline remarks that she would be prepared to kill her beloved if she were a man. Robert, too, makes derogatory comments about women; already, in their first encounter, Robert had said about militant feminists demanding castration for rapists that “These are women who cannot find a man. They want to destroy everything that is good between men and women. . .. They are too ugly”, but this time he speaks scornfully about women in general: “Whatever they might say, they believe, women love aggression and strength and power in men. It’s deep in their minds. …. Women long to be ruled by men. . . They talk of freedom, and dream of captivity”. Significantly, while making these comments, Robert keeps “massaging Colin’s shoulder gently”; he also strikes a heavy blow to Colin’s stomach, “expelling all the air from Colin’s lungs”, and winks at him (72, 73). Finally, as Colin and Mary leave Robert’s apartment, they hear “a sharp sound that, as Mary said Normal Abnormalities: Depiction of Masochistic Violence, could as easily have been an object dropped as a face slapped”. Through his protagonists’ condoning of all the patent indications of misogyny and violence in Robert and Caroline’s speech and behavior, Mc-Ewan hints that the gap between the two couples is perhaps not as wide as it appears to be. This hint is reinforced in the subsequent rekindling of Colin and Mary’s sexual desire for each other. What was missing in their sexual relations before meeting Robert and Caroline, was precisely passion: “Their lovemaking had no clear beginning or end and frequently concluded in, or was interrupted by, sleep” (18). However, their contact with the sad masochistic couple results in the awakening of their somnolent passion.

So immediate is the strangers’ impact on Colin and Mary’s relationship that, walking back from Robert’s apartment to the hotel, they had held hands all the way; that night they had slept in the same bed. They woke surprised to find themselves in each other’s arms. Their lovemaking surprised them too”. (77) Their re-discovery of each other affords them such joy that they feel as if they have just met. In contrast to the early days of their holiday when they could hardly go beyond reciprocating accounts of their dreams, they are now so eager to talk with each other that they stay awake until four o’clock in the morning. Fascinated by their sexual rejuvenation, Colin and Mary barely leave their hotel room for four consecutive days.

However, the details of Colin and Mary’s renewed sex life suggest that Mc-Ewan sees little difference between them and the perverted strangers they have come to know. It is not only Mary whose intellectual interests in feminism is emphasized in the novel, her partner, too, is characterized as an intellectual, albeit with somewhat different, Marxist attitudes. For example, the narrator points out that, like “many times” before their holiday, the couple talks about the politics of sex. But whereas Mary regards patriarchy as “the most powerful single principle of

organization shaping institutions and individual lives", Colin argues that "class dominance is more fundamental". Mc-Ewan advances a cynical view about these intellectuals by suggesting that they share the same streak of sad masochism that Robert and Caroline do. "You might well have grown up," Mc-Ewan states in an interview, "deciding that you accept certain intellectual points of view, and you might also change the way you behave as a man or as a woman, but there are also other things, vulnerabilities, desires, within you that might well have been irreversibly shaped in childhood" ("John Haffenden Talks to Ian Mc-Ewan" 32). It is as an expression of such desires that, at the height of their sexual pleasure, Colin and Mary take to muttering to each other erotic fantasies which, ironically, involve mutilation and bondage:

They joked about handcuffing themselves together and throwing away the key. The idea aroused them. . .. Mary muttered her intention of hiring a surgeon to amputate Colin's arms and legs. She would keep him in a room in her house, and use him exclusively for sex, sometimes lending him out to friends. Colin invented for Mary a large intricate machine that would fuck her till she was dead and on even after that, till Colin, or his solicitor, switched it off. (81)

These fantasies are reminiscent of the "pure hatred" that Caroline says Robert whispered into her ears while they made love (109). Both Robert and Colin derive erotic pleasure from the fantasy of inflicting pain on their partners, as Caroline and Mary take pleasure in subjugating to sadistic desires. Thus, the turn in Colin and Mary's sex life brings their relationship closer to Caroline's definition of love: "By 'in love' I mean that you'd do anything for the other person, and you'd let them do anything to you" (63). The congruence between the two couple conceptions of sexual pleasure provides a context for considering the climactic scene of the novel. Colin and Mary return to the strangers' apartment, where Caroline serves Mary drugged tea and starts fondling and pinching Colin before Robert cuts Colin's wrist with a razor. Such a fatal event would have been predictable from Robert and Caroline's portentous behavior, and yet Colin and Mary return to seek comfort from the strangers, Mc-Ewan suggests, because, like their hosts, they do not distinguish between pain and pleasure. It is precisely their failure to do so that makes them assume that Caroline takes delight in being maltreated:

She's a kind of prisoner,' said Colin, and then, more certainly, 'She is a prisoner.' 'I know,' Mary said. . .. After a prolonged silence Colin said, 'Perhaps he beats her up.' Mary nodded. 'And yet . . . she seemed to be quite . . .' He trailed away vaguely. 'Quite content?', Mary said sourly. 'Everyone knows how much women enjoy being beaten up. 'What I was going to say was that . . . she seemed to be, well, thriving on something.' 'Oh yes,' Mary said. 'Pain.' (91)

Significantly, in the above passage as well as in other similar passages where Colin and Mary discuss sexual politics, what is excluded from their conversation, is their own relationship. Mc-Ewan makes a point of stressing that, as intellectuals, the couple proves competent at scrutinizing Robert and Caroline's behavior, censuring the strangers for having patriarchal and Sado-masochistic inclinations, but that ironically, they overlook the same shortcomings in themselves. For example, we are told that "when they talked Normal Abnormalities: Depiction of Sado-Masochistic Violence in Ian McEwan's The Comfort of Strangers of the politics of sex . . . they did not talk of themselves"; after their sexual regeneration, "they could not talk about the cause of their renewal.

Their conversation, in essence, was no less celebratory than their lovemaking; in both, they lived inside the moment"; and "they conversed rather than talk. . . . They avoided references to themselves. Instead, they mentioned mutual friends" (18, 81, 96). By exempting themselves from the faults that they find in others, Colin and Mary vainly try to deny the very desires which they find themselves unable to suppress in their most intimate moments. Their return to the strangers' apartment at the end of the novel is, therefore, symbolic of their willingness to associate with the people who share their hidden perversions. The two couples' potential for forging a strong bond

is also suggested by Robert, who remarks, “We knew you would come back. We were waiting, preparing. We thought you’d come sooner”, as well as by Caroline, who, just before Colin’s wrist is slit, tells him, “Mary understands. . .. Secretly, I think you understand too” (103, 119). Caroline’s claim concerning the two couples’ secret understanding of each other’s perverse desires for cruelty is borne out by Mary who, at the end of the novel, has a “theory about how the imagination, the sexual imagination, men’s ancient dreams of hurting, and women’s of being hurt, embodied and declared a powerful single organizing principle, which distorted all relations, all truth”. Whereas Mary in the past believed that patriarchy was the “single principle of organization”, she now assumes that sadomasochism has this function. Even more alarming is Mary’s generalization of this “principle” to all human beings, suggesting that deriving pleasure from sexual cruelty has always been universal among all men and women. This suggestion is corroborated by the police, who refer to Colin’s abuse and murder as “obscene excesses”, “describing the crime back to Caroline as wearyingly common, belonging in a well-established category”. The strange is not only familiar but also commonplace. The Comfort of Strangers bears all the hallmarks of McEwan’s fiction.

Mc-Ewan startles and repulses his readers with a narrative of a nightmarish atmosphere, bizarre characters, and grisly events. As with his previous fiction, morbidity and violence pervade The Comfort of Strangers. It is not difficult to see why so many of Mc-Ewan’s critics have accused him of writing deliberately to shock. Yet it would be wrong to suppose that there is nothing beyond morbidity and violence. In his second novel, Mc-Ewan offers a penetrating analysis of how patriarchy warps our sexual behavior, distorting our conceptions of sexual pleasure with brutal paradigms of dominance and subservience which, at times, can be fatal. He traces unconscious perverse desires back to these paradigms and demonstrates that sad masochistic fantasies are the expressions of the same desires. Mc-Ewan states that, when writing The Comfort of Strangers, he was aware that “it wasn’t enough to talk about men and women in social terms, I had to address me to the nature of the unconscious, and how the unconscious is shaped. Their return to the strangers’ apartment at the end of the novel is, therefore, symbolic of their willingness to associate with the people who share their hidden perversions. The two couples’ potential for forging a strong bond is also suggested by Robert, who remarks, “We knew you would come back. We were waiting, preparing. We thought you’d come sooner”, as well as by Caroline, who, just before Colin’s wrist is slit, tells him, “Mary understands. . .. Secretly, I think you understand too” (103, 119). Caroline’s claim concerning the two couples’ secret understanding of each other’s perverse desires for cruelty is borne out by Mary who, at the end of the novel, has a “theory about how the imagination, the sexual imagination, men’s ancient dreams of hurting, and women’s of being hurt, embodied and declared a powerful single organizing principle, which distorted all relations, all truth”.

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conceptions of sexual pleasure with brutal paradigms of dominance and subservience which, at times, can be fatal. He traces unconscious perverse desires back to these paradigms and demonstrates that sad masochistic fantasies are the expressions of the same desires. Mc-Ewan states that, when writing The Comfort of Strangers, he was aware that “it wasn’t enough to talk about men and women in social terms, I had to address me to the nature of the unconscious, and how the unconscious is shaped. It wasn’t enough to be rational since there might be desires, masochism in women, sadism in men, which act out the oppression of women or patriarchal societies but which have actually become related to sources of pleasure” (“John Haffenden Talks to Ian Mc-Ewan” 32).

As in most of Mc-Ewan’s previous fiction, it is pessimism about human nature that prevails in The Comfort of Strangers. What he demonstrates with this novel is the ubiquity of evil, the universality of perverse desires in all humans. Unappealing as Mc-Ewan’s characters are, they nonetheless draw our attention to the disparity between people’s public images and their private, hidden selves. Displaying a shrewd understanding of this disparity, Mc-Ewan exposes the cruelty behind everyday civility, the agony behind seeming comfort. Mc-Ewan defines as one of his areas of interest “the way people’s unconscious brings them into conflict with their social structure or the gap between people’s presentation of themselves in the outward world and the inner one” (Stephen 38). The Comfort of Strangers is, in the end, about the necessity of acknowledging this conflict as the first step toward its resolution.

Conclusion

Finally, this study has found that Seaman's conception of alienation is reflected in the literature stemming from the society that spawned this theoretical frame of reference. The primary question the study aimed to answer was: To what extent does Ian Mc-Ewan deal with the concept of "Alienation"? Various perspectives have been employed in attempting to come to a better understanding of alienation in the novel, and a great effort has been devoted to straightforward reporting on the demographics of alienation, that is, to the social location of high alienation. It seems reasonably clear, for example, that alienation is more clearly visible in less democratic societies, and among the working class and minorities. Nevertheless, a case could be made for the view that the dimensions of alienation described here are alive and well in contemporary analysis.

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