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The Imagery of Water: A Tool of Expression and Deciphering Life (A Comparative Study of *The Waterfall* and *On Chesil Beach*)

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ABSTRACT

Margaret Drabble, the author of *The Waterfall* published in 1969 and Ian McEwan, the author of *On Chesil Beach*, though published in 2007, deal with the struggles of the youth. This struggle becomes relatable for every reader who fails to express or attain desired satisfaction from life, under the conquest of expectancies. The attitude of the characters to express themselves though varies in different aspects, but the approach of their creators converges at expressing the internal and external clashes, with the imagery of water. The authors make use of this powerful element of the universe to soothe, to rescue, to express and instruct the characters, reverberating through a chorus for the readers.

Keywords: Water, Desire, Neurosis, Marriage, Expression, Feminism, Agency, Time, Life.

The major struggle that both the female protagonists go through is the conflict between what they want and what the surrounding provides them. They are troubled so much so that their desire begins to fall prey to ambiguity, landing them into neurosis and hysterical behaviour. Drabble's Heroine, Jane suffers due to her neurosis and instead of making trials to come out of it she broods in it and breeds on her isolation and self-loathing:

If I were drowning I couldn't reach out a hand to save myself, so unwilling am I to set myself up against fate. (*The Waterfall* 7)

She justifies this behaviour and alludes to many Lady Protagonists who shared her fate created by the significant writers in Literature. She prefers isolation and to stay in her gloomy world, "Unless cast up there by the water itself, she would drown (TW 7)". She has lost her agency and her desire to be social: "Like a victim, she waited: meek, like a sacrifice (TW 8)" and gives the power to her fate. She relishes her isolation unless, "If the current chose to rescue her, it could: providence could deal with her without her own assistance (TW 7)". As the novel proceeds, we see that she chooses to be loved by James, the husband of her cousin Lucy. She silently slid into the infidel relationship justifying herself that she deserved love after having a horrible marriage with her husband Malcolm, who dashed her across the wall, leaving her for another woman and for her "bad housekeeping" and "too evident frigidity". This struggle between her isolation and her amorous desire makes her stance unclear though exposing her as utterly human full of contradictions.

McEwan's protagonist Florence also suffers this confusion but chooses to conceal it, giving her a chance to overcome it. She has fear about marriage and intimacy that this institution brings in with itself, despite being aware of it, she goes for it and subjects herself to trauma all the more. After only Eight hours of her marriage with Edward she realises that she is better off alone with her platonic idea of innocent love rather than confronting the raw realities of the human world that opens after marriage. She runs away from her honeymoon suit which in itself was a hysterical act, exclaiming: "I came here to be alone" (*On Chesil Beach* 149) and takes recourse to the desolation of the beach and the water to calm herself. She expects them to be "Free agents" (*OCB* 154), but is bound by her own shackles.

Both the female protagonists called upon their respective fate due to their lack of communication. They chose not to express their internal agony and not finding way to get out of it, until their silence backfired on them. Both Jane and Florence were Poetess and Musician respectively. Their professions expect a sense of expression which is crucial for being an artist, but contrary to it they chose the track of silence and self-agony. In the case of Jane it was to please her own self-whereas in the case of Florence it was to please Edward because "Above all, she did not wish to hurt his feelings" (*OCB* 92). Jane was addicted to her isolation to such an extent that: "The temperature of her life seemed to be cooling into some ice age of inactivity, lacking the friction of dying marriage" (*TW* 7), because "she preferred to be alone" (*TW* 8) and blamed herself for all the damage their relationship faced: "I did in a sense murder him, and I murdered him in the true lyrical sense, by rejection, by the breaking of vows, by the lending and withdrawal of my beauty" (*TW* 87), which was very neurotic and unfair of her.

McEwan questions, what can be the cause of such a lack of communication and expression that forced Florence to hold her back even being so much in love with Edward:

And what stood in their way? Their personalities and parts, their ignorance and fear, timidity, squeamishness, lack of entitlement or experience or easy manners, then the tail end of a religious prohibition, their Englishness and class, and history itself. (*OCB* 96)

Florence and Edward have come upto their marriage night with lots of conditioned baggage. It is ironical yet pitiful that the time when they are expected of maturity they behave in a childish manner without understanding each other, which is the result of their lack of communication. Even a moment of re-thinking about each other's stance could have helped them to save their marriage. McEwan writes:

All [Florence] had needed was the certainty of his love, and his reassurance that there was no hurry when a lifetime lay ahead of them. Love and Patience – if only he had had them both at once – would surely have seen them both through. (*OCB* 166)

Fate wouldn't have been so powerful, if they would have decided to move ahead of their differences and awkwardness to understand each other and express themselves.

Same was the case with Jane and Malcolm. At first they thought to be very compatible but with the years the rift between them increased as he left her for another woman. Despite suffering so much she chose to tolerate it until the worse was knocking at the door.

The idea of guilt had overpowered Jane and Florence to such an extent, that they both thought that whatever happened to them and their counterparts is all because of them and that they are not good enough or they possess some kind of lacuna. These constant pangs of guilt made Jane as well as Florence take the recourse of falsehood to save themselves and please the counterpart on the one hand and distancing themselves from their true self on the other hand. This concealment took a very bad shape when Edward charged Florence of being a trickster and calling her a "bitch", which surpassed all the limits:

'You tricked me. Actually, you're a fraud. And I know exactly what else you are. Do you know what you are? You're frigid, that's what. Completely frigid. But you thought you needed a husband, and I was the first bloody idiot who came along'. (*OCB* 156)

Had Florence been honest with her past, her insecurities and her fear, her love for Edward wouldn't have been in question. All her truth was reduced to trickery and falsehood. This exposes the inability of Florence on the one hand to be honest towards herself and her husband, and on the other hand, the inability of Edward to understand the trauma, space and individuality of his wife.

The falsehood can also be seen in the narration of Jane's reality as Richardson claims in his article on the basis of the narration:

For a more sustained and realistically motivated example, we may turn to Margaret Drabble's *The Waterfall* (1969). Well into the work we are informed by the narrator: "I told a really shocking lie at the beginning of this narrative, when I said that I told James I wasn't writing any more.... I lied, too, about the circumstances of Malcolm's departure. In fact I have already told two lies about this event, and who can tell if I will now risk a true account?" (130). This deceptively protean narrative starts off, it might be noted, being told in the third person but, after fifty pages, the narrator switches to the first person in the name of a more accurate telling. Most readers will probably grant this narrator the benefit of the doubt, and may even find a token of authenticity in the unconnected representation of the narrator's erroneous path; the story world will remain stable as the transformation is limited to the narrator's act of story-telling. (Richardson 170-171)

The narration also reveals that the idea of family doesn't stand at a high position for the both the set of characters. They had an unhappy family and most of the time avoided being a part of it. Some reasons were abused childhood for Florence, strict mother which was the case for both Jane and Florence whereas Edward wanted to go away from his family because he couldn't handle the truth of brain-damage of his mother, James favoured to be with Jane despite the fact that he had to return to Lucy and the family and Malcolm all together abandoned his family, during the most crucial time when Jane was about to give birth to their second child. No matter how significant a role family plays in someone's life but in both the novels, the love of the family crumbles like the card trick of waterfall.

The female protagonists of both the novels have a sense of secrecy which they follow from their family members as well as the most immediate intimate person. They do not prefer to disclose their inner most musings and troubles that they are

facing before anyone. The male counterparts also come with lot of baggage and do not let their secrets overpower them as the female protagonists allowed to. Their idea of secret was to safeguard themselves from even the loved ones and gives a sense of self-protection from being all the more miserable and vulnerable, but this act made them all the more insecure and desperate for unconcealment.

The approach towards marriage is very arbitrary without a meditation upon this lifelong affair, both of entering into it and getting out of it. Florence on the one hand being deliberately ignorant about the expectancies of marriage chose to travel the path despite her insecurities, whereas Jane chose to stick to the marriage until she could no more endure it. She could have saved herself long back without suffering so much. Also her self-denial and self-loathing elevated her trauma because she thought that whether it was Malcolm who went away or did she drive him away. On the contrary the male protagonists in the Novels haven't been given much agency and their Fate are the result of the actions of their beloveds. James chooses to be with Jane without realising that he was only a medium of Jane's neurosis to be cured and may not be her utmost love, whereas Edward was left lonely without being able to accept Florence's offer even though, "In the new circumstances of the day, it appeared liberated, and far ahead of its time, innocently generous, an act of self-sacrifice that he had quite failed to understand" (OCB 160-161).

Despite their knowledge about the gravity of marriage, the characters bent the idea of morality to their own accord. On the one hand where Florence thought it was alright for her husband to be intimate with other women, until she knows that he loved her, on the other hand Jane thought it was alright to have an affair with her cousin's husband as long as he is the sole reason of her re-discovery of self. Contrary to the previous, in order to

keep Edward happy as well as keep herself away from his expectations Florence suggests:

Edward, I love you and we don't have to be like everyone, I mean, no one, no one at all.... No one would know what we did or didn't do. We could be together, live together, and if you wanted, really wanted, that's to say, whenever it happened, and of course it would happen, I would understand, more than that, I'd want you to be happy and free. I'd never be jealous, as long as I knew that you loved me. (OCB 155)

This in turn was very absurd for Edward as if she had made fun of the institution of marriage by comparing them to a Queer couple and giving such bizarre suggestion according to Edward. He felt betrayed and considered Florence to be a lair of all the promises she made at the altar. Florence and Edward both had different approaches to marriage which created a rift between them. On the contrary the idea of marriage for James and Jane was not as important as their love for each other, but always recognised their real marriages as lingering, non-departing parts of their lives. Jane explains and analogises this involvement as an act of getting "Drowned in a willing sea" (TW 45), being very well aware of the consequences.

When the concepts of marriage are so fragile for both the set of couples in the respective novels, their idea of morality and sexuality bends according to their own convenience. On the one hand, Florence is acceptable for a Queer couple to live in secrecy but for her Edward not being able to control himself is a violation of morality and feels betrayed, whereas for Edward morality lies in the fact the once the couple takes the vows, their world shall revolve around them only, accommodating no one else. The approach towards the same concept for both of the characters is so different. Contrary to it, the idea of morality doesn't hold good initially in the case of Jane as she gave her sexuality an upper hand: "I wonder from time to time whether the fact that I now find this not painful but amusing is a sign of maturity, or a sign of the total deprivation of my character" (TW

235); but she also compares morality as a pre-requisite for her sense of art:

We should have died, I suppose, James and I. It isn't artistic to linger on like this. It isn't moral either. One can't have art without morality, anyway, as I've always maintained. It's odd that there should be no ending, when the whole affair otherwise was so heavily structured and orchestrated that I felt, at times, that I could see the machinery work, that I was simply living out some text book pattern of relationship. (TW 232)

Bromberg also gives an account of art and Jane's realisation regarding her life:

As Jane tries to interpret the events of her affair with James recognises with increasing clarity that art and life, fiction and truth, in an on-going dialectic of perception, interpretation, correction, and The patterns of art, the expressive forms of many cultural codes and of belief, shape experience by creating certain kinds of significance and expectation. Experience in turn, as it changes over time, forces us to bring cultural unconsciousness into the realm of conscious artistic choice, the artist reworks the patterns of art to correspond to that new experience. (Bromberg 84)

This monopoly of their sexual ideas gave the characters a sense of freedom, which can be seen in Jane by accepting her sexuality after her encounter with James, though she preferred isolation and did not want to be intimate with Malcolm, while Florence had her sense of freedom by walking away from sexuality and believing in a kind of platonic love without being intimate, which Edward couldn't understand, as a result she chose to walk away ensuring her freedom.

The constant overtones of Feminism in Jane and Florence led the male protagonists to be humble and feeble before them. The idea of exploring self and to discover what they exactly need forms the base of this domination. As a result the male counterparts do not have an agency as such over their fate but are mere puppets by the treatment of the lady protagonists.

Edward, James, Malcolm, all of them do not get to have proper expression of their view points. The males somehow become the victim of the neurosis that the female characters bore which they overcame in their respective manners. And the characters take the recourse to mystery, because we do not know what happened to Malcolm, contradictingly we do not know what happened to Florence as well.

Another interesting aspect of both these novels is the way in which they deal with the idea of time. On the one hand when Jane and James wanted to be together, they transformed their wait, from conscious meeting at the starting of the novel to an eternal wait towards the end of the novel, when James had to return to Lucy yet continuing their affair and had asked:

.... 'You wouldn't go away from me, would you? You'll wait for me, won't you?'

.... 'I'll wait for you', she said: long dead through all her bandages, ripped and defeated, she committed herself to waiting. (TW 37)

Contrary to it in the novel *On Chesil Beach*, Florence and Edward, couldn't understand the idea of waiting and left each other without even trying to understand each other, rather took to ignoring each other's existence, only in the end thinking how life would have been if they had done something about it. McEwan writes:

This is how the entire course of a life can be changed – by doing nothing. On Chesil Beach he could have called out to Florence, he could have gone after her. He did not know, or would not have cared to know, that as she ran away from him, certain in her distress that she was about to lose him, she had never loved him more, or more hopelessly, and that the sound of his voice would have been a deliverance, and she would have turned back. (OCB 166)

Despite being so much in love, both Florence and Edward neither could wait for each other nor could they compromise for

their relationship. This failure raises question about the intensity of their love, all together.

When we reflect for the judgement, we see how desperately both the characters, Jane and Florence justify their stance. On the one hand when Florence is convinced that it is her fault:

And she was convinced she was completely in the wrong. If the entire wedding ensemble of guests and close family had been somehow crammed invisibly into the room to watch, these ghosts would all side with Edward and his urgent, reasonable desires. They would assume there was something wrong with her, and they would be right.

She also knew that her behaviour was pitiful. To survive, to escape one hideous moment, she had to raise the stakes and commit herself to the next, and give the unhelpful impression that she longed for it herself. The final act could not be endlessly deferred. (*OCB* 33)

On the other hand, Jane pleads her readers to be lenient with her and not to be too critical in having an opinion about her:

Judge me leniently, I said, I am not as others are, I am sad, I am mad, so I have to have what I want. I cannot be blamed, I said. Let me off lightly. (*TW* 227)

The course of fate that all the characters underwent, finally placed them in their respective tracks, forming one or other inspirations for each. Jane finds a new strength in her an independent will: "Had I been destined for collapse, I would have collapsed. But I was not. So to plead its past imminence, as I did in this first chapter of this book, is illegitimate: a false plea, falsely based" (*TW* 228). Jane dedicated all her recovery and the fact that she was able to write poetry again to James:

James changed me beyond recognition. I bow to circumstance, I acknowledge it, I acknowledge the things that brought him to me. Foolish to deny them, foolish to deny the accidental, foolish to deny the personal. I lay myself at its feet. (*TW* 228)

She wrote poetry when she thought she was about to lose James and in a way formed her muse:

I had the experience without the loss: for free. And the poems are none the worse for the fact that they were founded on an unfulfilled terror. I have been writing better ever since that episode (accident).... I said that it was an act of affirmation, at once a defiance and a distant grateful bow to providence... (TW 233).

On the other hand, James took to his driving again, "a reunion with his car" (TW 233). And Edward moved on with his life: "His modest achievements were mostly material. He owned a tiny flat in Camden Town, a share of a two-bedroom cottage in the Auvergne, and two specialist record stores, jazz and rock and roll, precarious ventures slowly being undermined by Internet shopping." (OCB 166) and Florence had her fame through her music which she always dreamt of and reviews about her read:

At the end of his review he singled out the leader, the first violinist. 'Then came a searingly expressive Adagio of consummate beauty and spiritual power. Miss Ponting, in the lilting tenderness of her tone and the lyrical delicacy of her phrasing, played, if I may put it this way, like a woman in love, not only with Mozart, or with music, but with life itself.' (OCB 162)

In this manner the life of Jane and James enters into a mutual understanding and conscious decision which Drabble beautifully portrays by the imagery of water, signifying the seemingly selfish yet mature union:

.... She flinched and sighed, listening to him, alarmed yet hopelessly moved by his willing fate blind suicidal dive into such deep waters; the waters closed over their heads, and they lay there, submerged, the cold dry land of non-loving abandoned, out of sight, so suddenly and so completely out of sight, lost at the sound, at the syllable of the word love. 'I love you, I love you,' he said: words she had not thought to hear again. (TW 36-37)

And when they finally reunite yet secretly, on the vacation to see the scenic beauty of the Goredale Scar, a part of Pennines, Jane (Drabble) explains their love with the symphonies of the nature and especially the water that gave a word to their life and emotions:

.... A view which suddenly disclosed itself, after murmuring watery premonitions: we turned the final bend and suddenly found ourselves within the roofless cave of the Scar itself, where huge carved echoing rock sides stretched up above us, and water leapt down through the side of the cleft, pouring itself noisily downwards across brown rocks that are twisted and worn like wood, like the roots of trees. It is impressive not through size, as I had perhaps expected, but through form: a lovely organic balance of shapes and curves, a wildness contained within a bodily limit. The water flung itself out from the rock. (TW 236)

Drabble dismisses the notion of reality and fiction and juxtaposes the nature of dryness and water; the nature and the waterfall act as a metaphor to the entire journey that Jane and James undertook from the flicker of attraction to decision of being together sharing a sublime relationship, as Jane says: "And I must conclude that I did not summon James (that revolution in the elements) from nothing: I did not draw him like a ghost from the outer sky. He pre-existed. It was our meeting that was not foreseen: though what lovers have not believed that the whole of time has been watching over their convergence?" (TW 229).

As McDowell writes: "Miss Drabble's thematic line is complex. She emphasizes, first, the transforming and the resurrective powers of love. It is James who originates for Jane "the new courses, the new ways, the new landscapes." Considering her shabby treatment of Malcolm, all that she deserves, she thinks, is "solitude, or a repetition of pain," but what she receives is "grace." (McDowell 556)

When questioned about the water imagery, Drabble answered Hardin in an interview:

Well, yes, I think water is symbolic.... About the waterfall image, I'll tell you something that will amaze you. In *The Waterfall* I had no idea that I'd got a double image of the Waterfall. I'd no idea that I'd pulled the card trick, the waterfall, and that they went off to the waterfall at the end. It occurred to me later when I was looking for a title and I thought "the waterfall," damn it, there's two of them, how suitable. I can see it all looks incredibly deliberate, but it just isn't. I think Mary McCarthy said something very nice about imagery in novels. She said that naturally all the leaves on the same tree are the same kind. Well they would be. You start with the tree and the leaves grow from it. (Hardin 291)

On the contrary McEwan tries to dictate a suggestive advice with the last lines of his novel, in a way entwining the course of Nature into a didactic tone which signify a need for change, a need for flow with the situation and a need for accepting the loved one; through the accompanying waves of the ocean alongside. He is critical of behaviour that Edward and Florence had. A mere re-thinking could have changed the course of their fate:

Instead, he stood in cold and righteous silence in the summer's dusk, watching her hurry along the shore, the sound of her difficult progress lost to the breaking of small waves, until she was a blurred, receding point against the immense straight road of shingle gleaming in the pallid light. (OCB 166)

The location i.e. the Chesil beach is a significant symbol in itself, as Davis writes: "Chesil Beach is composed of shingles, or pebbles; each pebble is singular yet participates in the special pattern of the whole, just as each word and gesture of these two young lovers drives them together on their wedding night or irrevocably apart" (Davis 188).

The continuous flow of waves alongside the beach stands as a suggestion for them to contemplate on their flow of feelings and the vastness expects them to understand each other, where the struggle shall also subside with a solution and that their love shall be the embracing force, which they fail to understand. As Henry suggests the vastness: "remind us that our world is not as

small and isolated as we think; outside pressures and outside actors influence events" (Henry 76), but the characters need to survive through the waves of influence and emerge. McEwan contrasts the light and dark moments; the gleaming light of the situation and the darkness that is to envelope both their lives devoid of love and each other's company.

In this manner both Drabble and McEwan form their narrations around the imagery of water trying to implicitly hint at how one's attitude towards life should be and its upto oneself to choose.

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