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The manifestation of Lacanian desire in Ian McEwan’s Atonement and Saturday

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Abstract: Desire, in Lacanian psychoanalytical approach, is a central idea around which all other notions revolve including object petit a, das Ding the Other and subjectivity. Employing Lacanian treatment of the symbolic order, the present paper seeks to demonstrate the object cause of desire represented in the characters of Ian McEwan’s Atonement and Saturday. The study follows the fields of interest in the characters including Briony and Cecilia in Atonement and Henry, Theo, and Daisy in Saturday. The central objective is to indicate why the subjects after the satisfaction of their needs still feel dissatisfied, empty and unfulfilled. The subjects, realizing what the Other offers is not what they actually aspire, create for themselves what Lacan called object petit a, a reminiscent of the original lost object. This psychological mechanism is demonstrated in the present analysis by investigating the events that entail the subjects to act in accordance with what the Other aspires. Upon examination of these events, it becomes clear that none of the desires, which the subjects assume as their own, is that of the subject; however, they all pertain to the Other. Unlike the function of “need”, the emergence of desire is extensively an unconscious process, and it is boldly troublesome and rather impossible to put it into language. The leading characters recognize that they want something; however,

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PUBLIC INTEREST STATEMENT

There is a relatively large number of arguments on McEwan’s Atonement and Saturday with respect to psychological and psychoanalytical concepts along with the trauma and violence presented in them. The central concern of this paper, however, is to mirror the unconscious of the major characters and to investigate the factors contributed to the manifestation of their desires. McEwan’s novels are regarded as the embodiment of a wide range of considerably distinguishable characters subjected to various ideologies that yield themselves to a comprehensive psychoanalytic reading of their unconscious in order to figure out the causes behind the insatiable nature of human beings in searching new experiences. The characters, situated in diverse ideological conditions, are addressed in order to unveil the ways through which human beings become desiring subjects. It is concluded that whereas the characters in each circumstance assume themselves as independent people in their actions and thoughts, they are mere subjects who act in accordance with the desire of the Other.
they do not know what it is. Frustrated each time by the illusion of locating the truly lost object, they will thus change into desiring subjects.

Subjects: Philosophy of Language; the Century; Literature

Keywords: Psychoanalytical approach; Atonement; Saturday; desire; object petit a; subjectivity; the other

1. Introduction
On Saturday, 15 February 2003, millions of people protested against the USA's military action in Iraq. People rushed to the streets in London protesting against the operation. Ian McEwan was one of those who advocated human rights and settling the political issues through negotiation rather than war. He displayed his disapproval of war via writing novels. His Saturday and Atonement are among those works that call into question the problem of war and its aftermath.

McEwan's power of characterization and narration of Atonement brought him great fame. Afterward, McEwan recurrently was called the author of the Atonement. The significant feature of the novel is the mode of narration adopted by the author, that is, metafictional narration. Briony, a precocious in literature, after her unforgivable misdeed against her sister, Cecilia, spends the rest of her life to find a way to atone. Meanwhile, as the novel unfolds, the reader realizes that not only Briony but also the characters are nothing but mere subjects.

Though Saturday narrates the events of one day, it is replete with flashbacks illustrating the past lives of the characters. The novel uncovers various interests, wishes, and wants of the characters: Henry Perowne’s interest in becoming a neurosurgeon; John Grammaticus’ taste in literature; and Daisy’s craving for literature and Theo’s fond of music. Saturday is the novel of ideas rather than of actions since the inner thoughts and the intentions of the central characters are of more significance than what they do. Characters’ endeavor to gain the acme of success attract the reader’s attention to look for the main impeller of their behaviors.

Although the epicenter of both novels is war, they do not deviate from the recording of the psychological growth of the characters. Lacanian psychoanalysis, due to its deep penetration into the structural unconscious of the subject, lay the groundwork to uncover the hidden causes of the actions through scrutinizing the subject’ language. According to Lacan, the subject could be positioned in three major orders, namely the imaginary, the symbolic, and the real, which play a significant role in converting individuals to desiring subjects. Lacanian concept of the symbolic order owes much to the structuralist thinkers including Claude Lévi-Strauss, Ferdinand de Saussure, and Roman Jakobson. In Lacanian treatment, language is introduced as the leading feature of the symbolic order. Lacan in seminar XI argues that “the unconscious is structured like a language” (Feldstein et al., 1998: 20). Language shapes the unconscious of the subject, and is of central significance to human beings’ entry to the social era. As he puts it, “Man speaks, then, but it is because the symbol has made him a man . . . [it] superimposes the kingdom of culture on that of a nature” (Lacan & Fink, 2006: 49). While entering the language acquisition phase, the subject gradually learns the rules of how to become a social creature.

The symbolic father acts as the legislator of law; “it is in the name of the Father that we must recognize the support of the symbolic function which, from the dawn of history, has identified his person with the figure of the law” (Lacan & Fink, 2006: 95). Anything entangling human beings with language including the customs, institutions, laws, mores, norms, practices, rituals, rules, traditions, can be considered as the symbolic order. In the Lacanian psychoanalysis, language serves as a prison house out of which the human being loses its essence. Language is a domain through which the human being acquires the desires. For Lacan, the subject is not the owner of what he/she aspires but rather it is the Other who produces the desire.
For Lacan, the phallus is “a signifier of lack and sexual difference” (Homer, 2005: 54) rather than a bodily organ. During the age of 6 and 18 months, addressed the imaginary order, the infant considers itself as the sole object of its mother’s desire. Nevertheless, it comes to realize the true desire of the mother is directed toward its father. The child strives to discover the desirable nature of the father that attracts the mother’s attention. This struggle leads to the claim that perhaps the father is endowed with something, i.e. the phallus, which fills the mother’s lack. The infant concerns the phallus as the lost real object but attainable. Consequently, phallus signifies the original desire for union with the (m)Other.

The distinction between desire and the terms of demand and need, for Lacan, is of a high consideration. To him, the need is a biological instinct and its satisfaction depends on the Other. The infant utters its need in the form of the demand. The mother whose presence signifies a double role for the infant is the first Other for the infant: first as an individual possessing the power of satisfying the infant’s needs, and secondly as a source of love. In other words, the infant considers the mother’s presence as the evidence of her love toward him. A hungry infant, while demanding food, is also demanding love. The infant shortly finds out the Other cannot offer the love he/she craves for. Thereupon, pleading for love remains unsatisfied. Lacan calls this residue, the desire. Accordingly, the infant’s purpose is not acquiring a special object but an infinite love (Lacan & Fink, 2006: 579–580).

The major objective of the present research is to explore McEwan’s Atonement and Saturday in terms of the Lacanian concept of desire in order to manifest the original causes of the characters’ behavior. Considering the viewpoints of McEwan’s critics, this paper attempts to demonstrate the traces of desire in both Atonement and Saturday. Through the representation of the unconscious desire in Atonement, the paper studies the perplexity of the central characters of the novel, Robbie, Briony, and Cecilia, in terms of the desire caused by the Other. In examining the major characters of Saturday, it also investigates the movement of the major characters from “Das Ding” to the pitfall of desire. Finally, the major findings of the paper are presented in the concluding section.

After an overview of the critical approaches to Ian McEwan’s Atonement and Saturday, the full thrust of this argument lies in the way in which desire is depicted in these novels. The central concern of this paper, however, is to mirror the unconscious mind of the major characters and the factors contributed to the manifestation of their desires. Unlike the previous studies that emphasize either the traumatic nature of the novels or the reasons for the strange behavior of just one character, i.e., Briony the present paper not only focuses on inspecting Briony’s behavior but also examines the other major characters’ unconsciousness of both novels. Broadening the prospect, in order to find the reason of man’s inclination for repeating a single action, this survey attempts to penetrate into the mind of the characters. Besides, it investigates the characters’ subjectivity construction process and locates the origins and roots of their desires. The ultimate objectives are to find the underlying causes of the characters’ hesitations and delays in making decisions and depict their unconscious overwhelmed by the desire of the Other. The prior interpretations of the novels also lack the comparison of the mentioned works while the current study seeks to represent the degree by which each novel yields itself to the Lacanian reading.

2. The trace of desire: Atonement and the unconscious desire
Briony Tallis, a thirteen-year-old child who aspires to get famous for her talent in creative writing, has prepared a play under the name of The Trials of Arabella for her older brother’s arrival from London. Three of her cousins, Lola, a fifteen-year-old girl, and the twins, Jackson and Pierrot, have just arrived there for summer vacation. She assigns each of them a role and expects them to collaborate in the rehearsal. At the time of the rehearsal, all leave her alone in the upstairs room, which brings about the failure of the rehearsal.

By imposing the others to play the pre-determined roles, Briony makes the others recognize her as a possessor of the power of controlling. Besides, from Lacanian point of view, she strives to attract others’ attention in hope of filling her lack with. Teti Apriyanti connects Briony’s inclination
for controlling the others to her psychological complexity, a false self-awareness created in the pre-Oedipal stage. Based on what Apriyanti says, in the pre-Oedipal stage, the affinity between Briony and her mother has a significant influence on her psychological growth. Briony’s mother neglects her responsibilities toward her due to her sickness. The inadequate care during the pre-Oedipal stage generates a false self in Briony. The false self-awareness, as stated by her, “is an inability to relate to the others and how the self-views herself or himself” (Apriyanti, 2017: 98). Despite Apriyanti who believes Briony’s narcissistic self-admiration is a disorder originated from a false self-awareness, it could be argued that this egocentric view, as it is agreed upon in the Lacanian psychoanalytical view, is the natural and inevitable outcome of the subject’s psychological growth. It originates from Briony’s experience in the imaginary order, a preverbal realm in which the infant has an illusory sense of unification with its own mother. During the mirror stage, which takes place within the imaginary order, the infant recognizes its image in the mirror, or any reflective screen, and stands in complete identity with it. The pleasure of this stage comes from the ability of the infant in controlling the movements of its image and the sense of wholeness.

Briony’s attempts to attract her mother’s attention could be interpreted as her desire to represent herself as an acceptable subject for the Other. For Lacan, the Other stands for “both another subject, in his radical alterity and unassimilable uniqueness, and also the symbolic order which mediates the relationship with that other subject” (Evans, 1996: 136). At this point, Briony’s cousins stand for the Other. Their complete disregard for what she says is an infuriating denial of her superiority. Inevitably, she appeals to her mother to read the play. Attracting her attention as an Other, is a fertile ground for a person interested in literature and storytelling:

She severed the sickly dependency of infancy and early childhood, and the schoolgirl eager to show off and be praised, and the eleven-year-old’s silly pride in her first stories and her reliance on her mother’s good opinion. (70)

Briony gives a copy of the play to her mother, Emily Tallis, hoping her mother enjoy reading it. She expects to receive her (m)Other’s approval. Now we come to the matter of the unconscious desire, or the cause of the desire in the character of Briony. According to Bruce Fink, “man’s desire is to be desired by the Other, exposes the Other’s desire as object a. The child would like to be the sole object of its mother’s affections but her desire almost always goes beyond the child” (Fink, 1997: 59). In effect, the mother’s apathetic attitude regarding Briony results in a lack; now she wants to fill the lack that is represented as the mother’s unattainable approval in the novel through fascinating the children. Briony, once denied by the Other, strives to fill the existing lack with the others’ appreciation, particularly her cousins. Probably, Briony has a long way to fulfill the expectations of her mother.

Most of the time, adults’ expectations go beyond the children’s capacities. The adults set the rules and the children are expected to fit in. From the beginning of the symbolic order the child enters the process of subjectivization in which the Other, who generally sets restricting laws, impose its power over the individuals. The role played by law is of a central significance in the process of subject formation. The mechanism of the process is dependent on two major elements; first, a child who is better fitted to adults’ lost object of desire is loved by the Other, second, in order to be loved and accepted by the Other, a child has to embrace the desires of the Other. Therefore, both the adult and the child mutually need each other. As Peter Childs asserts, the concept of childhood “reflects adult needs and adult fears” (Childs, 2019: 92). Briony acting like an adult forces her cousins to do what she expects; meanwhile, she spares no effort to attract her mother’s attention. She is her mother’s object of desire since her mother thinks that Briony is the one that would fill her lack. Mrs. Tallis always craved to be a writer. Her failure in writing leaves her with an unattainable goal. Briony’s triumph in literature gives the mother the pleasure she lusted for so long. The desire of the mother, according to Tyson, implies “the two-way desire … that is, the desire of the mother for the child and the child’s desire of the mother” (Tyson, 2006: 28). Therefore, it is not surprising when McEwan says, “How could her mother reject the daughter who
had loved her all these years?” (McEwan, 2001: 14). Both the mother and the daughter want to be loved and approved by the Other.

In order to take her mother’s appreciation, Briony reverts to the Oedipal stage where she is attempting to take the place of her father and becoming the phalus for her mother as a response to her mother’s desire. Briony wants to fill the lack in the (m)Other in order to attract her attention, in fact, filling the (m)Other’s lack is a way for Briony to fill her lack. Her desire should thus be in accordance with that of her mother. Briony, whose desire does not belong to her, wants to impose it on the others: her brother Leon and her cousins. She attempts to structure her brother by taking advantage of a play performed by Lola and the twins. She thus makes the rules herself and enforces them.

It is under the domination of law and rules that desire is regulated and controlled. As Lacan contends, “law originates in desire” (Lacan & Fink, 2006: 689). There is a dialectical relationship between law and desire. Law restricts the desire, whereas it is the desire that makes a law to be formed. Linearly, Briony, structured by the symbolic order, strives to shape the Other’s desires into her liking by imposing laws on them. The twins’ feeling of “obligation” during their stay at Briony’s house comes from the mentioned relation between law and desire. The rules Briony sets are based on the degree of their infringement. If there were no desire for violation of the rules, there would be no rules to control the twins. On the other hand, the rules control the twins’ desire for disobedience. Using language and literature, Briony reminds them of the rules. Lacan maintained that “desire is always what is inscribed as a repercussion of the articulation of language at the level of the Other” (Lacan, 2008: 38). Accordingly, not only does Briony want to be recognized by the Other but also she is sanguine about her ability to control the lives of the others through literature. Childs, construing the figure of the child in Atonement as a “perennial missing presence”, interprets Briony’s entrance into the world of the adults as an attempt to “understand the adult world” … [Meanwhile], she cannot “encompass the breadth of adult comprehension” (2019: 98). Strictly speaking, she is a subject incapable of fully entering the symbolic. Enchanted by the imaginary order, Briony’s thoughts and actions are the direct results of that order. Despite her numerous attempts to enter the realm of the symbolic, she frequently slides into the imaginary order. This sense of having the world under control originates in the sense of wholeness in the mirror stage. Imaginary order “is a world of fullness, completeness, and delight because with the child’s sense of itself as a whole comes the illusion of control over its environment” (Tyson, 2006: 28).

One of Lacan’s well-known arguments that have undergone multiple readings is concerning the close affinity of the desire to the Other: “man’s desire is the desire of the Other” (1995: 235). The first meaning is the desire for recognition by the Other. This is possible only when the subject turns to the object of the Other’s desire. Both Briony and Robbie need to be recognized; each of them, even for a while, turns to the Other’s object petit a to fill their primordial lack:

It would be rescuable, if she was not so angry with him over a broken vase that had come apart in his hands. But he loved her fury too … Even in her anger, she had wanted to show him just how beautiful she was and bind him to her. How could he trust such a self-serving idea derived from hope and desire? He had to. (75-76)

Having seen Cecilia half-naked, Robbie Turner falls into a reverie about what he has observed in the morning. He knows Cecilia should be angry with him for breaking the precious vase into pieces and entering the house barefooted. He doubts about accepting Leon’s invitation for dinner considering the possibility of being humiliated by Cecilia. He starts contemplating her beauty and realizes how deeply he has fallen in love with her. He thus decides to go there regardless of how she may behave. Robbie praises and desires Cecilia not for her physical beauty but for something much beyond it. As Slavoj Žižek quotes from Lacan, “for animals, the most elementary form, the ‘zero form’, of sexuality is copulation; whereas for humans, the ‘zero form’ is masturbation with
fantasizing" (Žižek, 1997: 65). In the same manner, Robbie is not in love with Cecilia’s body; if not, he could not love her anger. Žižek argues that if a woman asks, “Why do you love me?” since this is an unanswerable question, the only appropriate answer is “because there is something in you more than yourself, some indefinite X that attracts me”. Therefore, the “pathological narcissist” is “somebody who is able to answer such a question by enumerating a definite list of properties” (65). Erin O’Dwyer has affirmed “we see in Cecilia everything Robbie is not. Cecilia represents wealth, beauty, and the old regime. Robbie represents uncertainty, conflict, a new world order” (O’Dwyer, 2016: 180). There is no definable reason embedded in the love of Robbie for Cecilia. The love, in fact, is like a puzzle; the beloved fills a missing part of the unconscious in the loving subject. According to Žižek’s elaboration on love, it could be also argued that Robbie is not a pathological narcissist since his love goes very far beyond the physical person of the beloved.

Lacan equates the beloved with the image of one’s ego and argues that “that’s what love is. It’s one’s own ego that one loves in love, one’s own ego made real on the imaginary level” (1988: 142). Robbie is thus not in love with Cecilia, indeed. He is in love with his image that represents his ego. Because in the imaginary order the subject’s understanding of self is based on hallucination, it is not a reliable understanding. Since love is founded on the base of fantasy, the possibility of its conversion to hatred is noticeably high; for instance, the observation of the minor physical defects can ruin the sense of love. It is while these defects have no sexual influence on animals.

Robbie’s love toward Cecilia is so powerful that even smelling the book once Cecilia touched is pleasurable for Robbie. “Willing himself not to, he raised the book to his nostrils and inhaled. Dust, old paper, the scent of soap on his hands, but nothing of her. How had it crept upon him, this advanced stage of fetishizing the love object?” (79) Robbie is roaming in his drawing room and browsing through his books in the library. He detects a book on Versailles landscapes that Cecilia had lent him earlier. He smells the book because it has been once touched by Cecilia. Afterward, he decides to write an apologizing letter for his abominable behavior. He rewrites the letter several times due to his dissatisfaction with the jutted down words.

Robbie who feels an emotional gap between Cecilia and him attempts to fill his lack by sniffing the book. Like any other male subjects, Robbie’s desire for Cecilia is centered on lack. Stratton affirms, “Lacan’s theorization describes the form of male sexual desire, based on lack, which is the result of male experience of cultural fetishism, and which correlates with the increase in consumption in the West in the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries” (Stratton, 2001: 4). When Robbie realizes that he is not his mother’s object of desire anymore, he feels the loss originated in his infancy. He fantasizes and says: “In my thoughts, I make love to you [Cecilia] all day long” (2001: 80). Consequently, the book acts as a fetish to fill the loss of Robbie. The subject has many choices for filling the primordial lack; one of the choices is language. Robbie, who has to return the book to her, labors to fill the gap with letter writing:

He tinkered with his draft for a further quarter of an hour, then threaded in new sheets and typed up a fair copy. The crucial lines now read: “You’d be forgiven for thinking me mad—wandering into your house barefoot, or snapping your antique vase. The truth is, I feel rather lightheaded and foolish in your presence, Cee, and I don’t think I can blame the heat! Will you forgive me? Robbie.” … There it was—ruined. (80)

When a subject demands something, he/she goes beyond the satisfaction of a need. The subject yearns for an absolute love by demanding any objects. Hereafter in the novel, Robbie’s aim is not liberation, instead, he is to attract Cecilia’s desire. Consequently, behind Robbie’s symbolic world “there must be something more which, since it is always more or less there, allows a certain access to this object, her desire” (Lacan, 2002: 160). This “something more” that is “unthinkable”, is called the phallus. Inaccessibility of the phallus, in Lacanian terms, causes the desire to come into being; the phallus sets the desire in motion and the cycle of repetition starts.
In psychoanalytical approach, it is often argued that human beings take pleasure in the act of repetition. Atonement is replete with numerous evidence showing this tendency, such as Briony’s rewriting of the past, Robbie’s rewriting of the letter, Briony’s rereading of the letter and the narration of a single event from various points of view. Many critics including Freud, Eric Berne, Lyotard, and Lacan have reflected on the human inclination to repetition. Drawing on Lyotard’s conception of rewriting, Richard Pedot considers Atonement as McEwan’s attempt to rewrite modernism. It indicates cleaning up the present from the past misdeeds. Unlike Pedot who considers Briony’s rewriting of her past as something “inseparable from McEwan’ revisiting not only of modernism but also of his own works” (Pedot, 2007:149), we do believe that her rewriting is directly connected to Lacanian concept of desire. Briony as a teenager interested in literature is moving from one desiring object to another. When the rehearsal fails to fulfill her expectation, she tries hard to make it well received by her brother. The play, however, is unable to satisfy her desire. This dissatisfaction benefits Briony in that, according to Fink, “satisfaction kills desire, [and] getting what one wants is not the best strategy for keeping one’s desire alive” (Fink, 2009: 51). Briony hence follows another desire that is to become a nurse. Again, she cannot be fully contented. Consequently, at the end, she resorts to literature once more and tries to be a novelist. Žižek considers failure as the inseparable constituent of the process of subjectivization. He stipulates that “the subject is thoroughly ‘processual,’ it means that it emerges through the very failure to fully actualize itself” (Žižek, 2010: 232). Briony is a processual subject in that “there is no end to the subject’s process . . . the very process and liveliness is a predominant characteristic of the subject” (Barati & Esalamieh, 2015: 124). Surprisingly, Emily Sagarlata construes Briony’s desire to become a writer as a sign of her narcissism where she asserts “Briony is rewriting history, propelling McEwan’s question of whether or not the conscience can be relieved through fiction, or whether the act of writing is ultimately self-serving” (Sagarlata, 2009: 76). On the contrary, based on the Lacanian reading of the novel, since the desire has no particular achievable object, Briony as the subject moves from one object of desire to another. It is the unattainability of object petit a, or object cause of desire that puts desire in motion and forces the subject to move.

In rewriting history, there is a kind of danger and that is the danger of subjectivity or the expressing the personal assumption in recording a historical fact. As Elizabeth Weston argues, history or narration as a whole is subjective. The only moral of the novel, according to Weston, is taking the importance of perspective for granted by entering three minds; Briony’s mind, Cecilia’s mind, and Robbie’s mind. Recounting the story from their points of view discloses the truth of the critical event in the novel. On account of this, the novel “will create a yearning for authenticity that it cannot satisfy” (2019: 95). Although she did not mention it straightly, this yearning is the same Lacanian desire: that which cannot be satisfied. Briony the author, unable to reach the acceptable level of authenticity, moves from one point of view to another. Lynn Wells declares that McEwan, avoiding prescriptive moralism, situates the reader in critical circumstances by his method of narration. That is to say, Atonement and Saturday “involve sophisticated narrative techniques that raise questions about the novel’s overall moral stance” (Wells, 2019: 40). In Atonement Briony restates the story differently so that the reader perceives the events of the novel with a completely different mentality. Likewise, in Saturday we see the world through Henry and Baxter’s eyes.

Critics of McEwan’s novels have mostly explored the aim of repeating rather than the cause of it. It is agreed that there must be something hidden in human’s tendency for repetition, something that unconsciously motivates a human being to repeat a single action. With recourse to Lacanian ideas on the satisfaction of a need, it can be concluded that in the case of Robbie for instance, since single writing does not satisfy him, he repeats the action to acquire the intended satisfaction. As Homer contends, desire is “always the desire for something that is missing and thus involves a constant search for the missing object” (Homer, 2016: 102). That none of the letters satisfies Robbie, indicates that Cecilia presents herself as the ultimate signifier of lack, of something missing, or as Lacan in his seminar X asserts “she establishes herself on what she does not have, the phalus, and to show clearly that she has it, she gives it” (1962: 110). Nevertheless, the
fact is that rewriting the letter recurrently signifies Cecilia is “unapproachable in language” (Soler, 2003: 100). The lover can never find the exact word to describe his love since the beloved belongs to the realm of the real, which is out of reach. Robbie’s love for Cecilia does not indicate the idea that Cecilia is his true object of desire. There can be no true love according to Lacan in that “the real which remains, as we know, an enigma [is] capable only of lying to the partner” (Lacan, 1990: 14). Similarly, if a lover sends love letters to the beloved he has to tell lie to her for no word matches the real experience. Unable to put his thought in order, Robbie proves that he is not insane since “the only one who speaks appropriately about love, is a clown” (Lacan, 2015: 76).

According to Lacan, the lover is actually the lover of his unconscious desires, not of the beloved. It is for this reason that Lacan calls the love letters the “most paradoxical”. Lacan claims that the lovers “seem to speak about the big Other and to be directed to the everyday other; but, in fact, they are made with the unconscious of the subject” (soler, 2003: 101). In an attempt to reach the original lost object capable of filling the lack, the lover is posited in an interminable recurrent circuit of searching. According to Alenka Zupančič, desire has no object, instead “here is the demanded object and then there is the object-cause of desire” (Zupančič, 2003: 184). Cecilia is the object cause of desire for Robbie although she is not the ultimate or true cause of his desire. Her role is just to spur Robbie’s desire in action. He needs Cecilia, and better to say that he demands her; however, he cannot be satisfied. Robbie thus loves Cecilia eternally.

For both Freud and Lacan “being in love [is] an expression of narcissism, not love for the other but self-love, self-deception” (Easthope, 2003: 66). It would be more accurate to argue that being in love means falling in love with one’s image or the ideal ego. Being out of reach, the loved one brings about a kind of desire that cannot be satisfied. As Lacan states, “the point of the ego ideal is that from which the subject will see himself, as one says, as others see him” (1995: 268). The lover likes to be viewed in a way that he likes to regard him. The beloved turns to the desired object of the subject. Robbie and Cecilia desire each other; however, they cannot win each other. It is for this reason that the concept of desire has been used for them. The desire can never be fulfilled in the characters and it remains unanswered at the end of the novel.

3. Saturday: movement from Das Ding to the pitfall of desire

Saturday recounts the events of a day in Henry Perowne’s life that took place on Saturday, 15 February 2003, when wide-reaching demonstrations against the American invasion of Iraq occurred. Upon seeing an object in the sky, Henry starts reflecting on the future of London and compares it with the present condition of the Islamic countries. Although he is optimistic about the future of London, he lives with fear every second of his life. Like Atonement, this novel is replete with a wide variety of references to literature and debates about war. These works vividly describe the traumatic aspect of war with the aim of leaving a mark on the reader’s mind. In this respect, many scholarly literature have been done regarding the traumatic nature of McEwan’s works. They tried to explore the reason for the recurrence of violence.

After the announcement of a horrendous event with a wide catastrophic side, many of its representations appeared in social media. The question is why human beings are eager to repeat a catastrophic event either in speech or in literature. McEwan’s critics have reflected upon the act of repeating, a leitmotif running throughout McEwan’s works. In their view, the repetition technique is done directly for moral and ethical purposes. Following the responses of Judith Butler, Jenny Edkins and Slavoj Žižek to 9/11, Jennifer Isherwood explores the tendency for Western nations to recycle their trauma into stabilizing narratives. She claims that in Saturday “McEwan affords us the opportunity to think about ethical responses to violent interventions that have been foreclosed by the military response to 9/11” (2006: 11). According to her, the only possible salvation happens by rethinking, and literature provides the data to be rethought. If we look at the repeating a violent act in literature from a broader perspective, that is from Lacanian psychoanalytic view, it can be said that it is in search of the lost peace that human beings keep writing and talking about the traumatic events. The peace is the unattainable object cause of desire or the
object petit a that can be approached but never reached. McEwan, like any other desiring subjects, by depicting traumatic events follows the way trodden by the others and looks for the lost peace.

It is the unsatisfiable nature of the desire that makes McEwan to seek solace in repetition in various forms, such as the mode of narration. McEwan not only repeats traumatic events but also he restates a single event from various points of view just. As attested by Wells, Atonement and Saturday “involve sophisticated narrative techniques that raise questions about the novel’s overall moral stance” (2019: 40). Restating a single event from Henry and Baxter’s points of view, McEwan makes the reader reconsider the events and acquire a better understanding. Maryam Sedaghat declares “different points of view create different accounts of a single fixed event” (2015: 42). She argues that restating the past will give the reader a better understanding of the present events or as Yoshikatsu Tsuji says it bears “mutual understanding” (Tsuji, 2009: 29). In her opinion traumatic literature prepares human being for encountering with probable future traumatic events.

All of the aforementioned critics are concerned with connecting repetition to the moral and ethical values; however, there must be another considerable and all-comprehensive reason behind human inclination for repetition. This reason can be more psychologically based if the scholars have an eye on the Lacanian concept of desire and the restless search for object petit a. According to Lacan, the mother is the first Other the infant meets. When the intervention of the father in the symbolic order ruins the mother–child relation, the feeling of castration covers the infant. Thereafter, the subject seeks for the original lost object, which Lacan refers to as the Thing, object petit a, or the lost object of jouissance. Unification with the (m)Other is the only thing that satisfies the subject. Similarly, Chiesa declares that “the desire for the (m)Other must not be satisfied because this would be the end of the mirage of ‘massive’ jouissance generated by the Mother as das Ding” (Chiesa, 2007: 169). Henry Perowne, the protagonist of the novel, is a neurosurgeon whose love of his occupation is obvious in spending many a time with his patients. Because Henry wants to be recognized by his mother, his desire is in line with the desire of his (m)Other. He supposes himself as the Other’s lost object of desire or the thing that the Other lacks. His desire “emerges originally in the field of the Other; i.e. in the unconscious” (Evans, 1996: 39). In his early childhood, the pain of the bedridden people does not abandon him from his profession:

She liked a good exploratory heart-to-heart with her neighbours. The eight-year-old Henry liked to flop on the floor behind the furniture and listen in. Illness and operations were important subjects, especially those associated with childbirth. That was when he first heard the phrase “under the knife” as well as “under the doctor”. “What the doctor said” was a powerful invocation. This eavesdropping may have set Henry on his career. (158)

Overhearing his mother talking to the neighbors, Henry unconsciously initiates structuring his desire. The phrases uttered by them such as “under the knife”, “under the doctor” as well as “What the doctor said” begin to form his unconscious. Lucie Cantin stipulates “the child is born as a subject by this very capture into signifiers coming from the Other” (Cantin, 2012: 37). Henry as a child is cast in the language of the Other, where the unconscious desire of the subject flourishes. Lacan in The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psycho-Analysis remarks that “[t]he unconscious is constituted by the effects of speech on the subject, it is the dimension in which the subject is determined in the development of the effects of speech, and consequently, the unconscious is structured like a language” (149). Henry does not exist out of the domain of language, the big Other, and the symbolic order; His (m)Other’s desire is transferred to him not through language but speech. The signifier “under the doctor” provides Henry with an occasion to think about being a doctor as his future career; besides, the signifier “under the knife” shapes his interest in being a surgeon.

After becoming a neurosurgeon, Henry who is contented with locating his apparently true desire, attempts to replace it with a new one. On this account, he attempts to move from the
field of science to literature. From now on, he turns to what Lacan calls a desiring subject. For Lacan what puts the subject in the cycle of desire is the Thing or the Ding, something which evades signification, or as Lacan puts it, it is this “impossible for imagine” (Lacan et al., 1992: 125) and “dumb reality” (55) that causes the desire. After being overcome by the false impression that he has located the original lost object or the Thing, Henry experiences satisfaction for a while; however, the discrepancy between what he aims and what he finds situates him in an endless cycle of quest for the true cause of desire. Much of Henry’s thoughts intersect with the thoughts of others, illustrating the fundamentally intersubjective nature of subjectivity. That is why Lacan calls das Ding “the cause of the most fundamental human passion” (Lacan et al., 1992: 97). Henry, the subject of the Other’s desire, knows that something exists but does not know what it is.

Henry, though never fully successful, attempts to act in line with his mother’s desire even in selecting his future hobby. Lily, Henry’s mother, was a famous swimmer. At the age of 14, she had “her first lesson with a sixty-year-old international athlete who had swam for Britain in the Stockholm Olympics in 1912- the first ever women’s swimming event” (McEwan, 2005: 159). Recognizing Lily’s talent, she decided to instruct her. Hard-working as she was, she won the silver medal in 1954 at the age of 42. Lily taught Henry swimming. When he was 10 there was a “school visit one morning to the local pool” (ibid: 160). Henry with his classmates was waiting for the end of the adult session. They observed a dexterous swimmer, who to their surprise, was Henry’s mother:

Someone called out, “That’s Mrs. Perowne!” In silence they watched as she reached the end of her lane right at their feet and performed a flashy underwater turn that was novel at the time. This was no mere duster of sideboards. He’d seen her swim often enough, but this was entirely different; all his friends were there to witness her superhuman nature, in which he shared. (160)

As the novel says, Henry was “proud of her [mother]” (38); however, this time is different since he realizes no difference between himself and his mother. He is recognized with (m)Other and by the others—i.e. the classmates. He considers his mother’s victory as his own. It is the dissatisfying nature of the desire for mother or desire, in general, that makes Henry pursue a wide diversity of objects petit a, namely being a surgeon, learning swimming and becoming a devotee of literature. All of them are the reminiscence of his primordial lost object of the desire. Henry always thinks that there is a connection between him and his mother. After her success in swimming, a fading euphoria is now available for streaming. His subjectivity, therefore, is being shaped by his interaction with the others. As Susan Green stipulates “much of Henry’s thoughts intersect with the thoughts of others, illustrating the fundamentally intersubjective nature of subjectivity” (Green, 2010: 63)

The other connotation of Lacan’s statement “man’s desire is the desire of the Other”, as Evans suggests is “qua Other that the subject desires [...] that is, the subject desires from the point of view of another” (Evans, 1996: 39). John Grammaticus, Daisy and Theo’s grandfather, is a famous poet whose poem “Mount Fuji … anthologized in all the school editions” (McEwan, 2005: 47). Like the other subjects, Grammaticus moves from one object of desire to another in search of his true lost object of desire.

John minded when Spender and not he was knighted, when Raine not Grammaticus got the editorship at Faber, when he lost the Oxford Professorship of Poetry to Fenton, when Hughes and later Motion were preferred as Poets Laureate, and above all when it was Heaney who got the Nobel. These names mean nothing to Perowne. But he understands how eminent poets, like senior consultants, live in a watchful, jealous world in which reputations are edgily tended and a man can be brought low by status anxiety. Poets, or at least this poet, are as earthbound as the rest. (131)
Anxious enough as he is to reach the acme of fame to be recognized by the Other, Grammaticus determines some goals for himself. Not only failure in obtaining object petit a does not hinder him from chasing his desire, but it also ignites his motivation. The vigor of the need for satisfaction prompts him to search it in his grandchildren. He applies all his faculties to conduct their desires. Since he is a well-known poet, he is authorized enough to influence them. In the novel, we read that “They loved their grandfather and considered his silly moods proof of his difference, his greatness „a view he rather shared himself” (132). As a subject of literature, John resorted to it at the time of hardships like the funeral of his wife in which “he mourned her with the famous sad-sweet love songs” (129). Not knowing that he is a slave of language, John strives to enslave his granddaughter, Daisy, by encouraging her to study English literature. In other words, John considers himself a “figure in their intellectual development” (132). When John, the subject, considers himself as a legislator it is nothing but a veil of illusion because as Lacan suggests “while he may appear to be the slave of language, is still more the slave of a discourse in the universal movement of which his place is already inscribed at his birth” (2006: 414). As we read in the novel:

John Grammaticus has also been a force in Daisy’s life . . . He persuaded her to try Jane Eyre, and read the first chapters aloud to her, and mapped out for her the pleasures to come. She persisted, but only to please him. The language was unfamiliar, the sentences long, the pictures in her head, she kept saying, wouldn’t come clear. Perowne tried the book and had much the same experience. But John kept his granddaughter at it, and finally, a hundred pages in, she fell for Jane and would hardly stop for meals. (133–134)

John offers Daisy to read Jane Eyre while he is highly disdainful of the sort of works that Daisy likes or reads. At the initial stages “she persisted” but later on she desires what her grandfather desires and “fell for Jane” (134). From now on, Daisy obliges herself to fill her spare time with literature even she wants to select it as her future field of study. Learning literature turns to a sort of need for Daisy. She cannot imagine a life without literature. In the course of the novel, Daisy says that “people can’t ‘live’ without stories” (67). John determines even Daisy’s reading materials. He pays money for the memorized parts that are assigned by him as well: “Milton and the King James Bible—five pounds for every twenty lines memorized from the passages he marked” (135). In this way, he conducts Daisy’s desire toward a pre-established end. The method of conditioning Daisy caused her to be interested in the act of memorization: First, Daisy gained the approval of the Other by reading; then, with the money she was awarded, she was situated in an unending circuit in search of the ultimate object petit a. The more she memorizes, the more money she aspires.

Lacan relates the substitution of one thing for another to metonymy and contends that “it is caught in the rails of metonymy, eternally extending toward the desire for something else” (Lacan & Fink, 2006: 431). John with the hope of regaining the originally lost object moves from one object of the desire to another. At his dotage, the sense of frustration and dissatisfaction overcomes him, which forces him to stop. In an attempt to promote the children from nature to culture, John, the parental Other, imposes his unfulfilled wishes on the children. Cantin considering Lacan’s statement, remarks “what the parent demands from the child is fraught with the dissatisfactions that have marked the parent’s own life. Such demands carry unconscious and unsatisfied desires from past generations” (Cantin, 2012: 41). Likewise, Daisy is subject to her grandfather’s desire; therefore, she is not the originator of her desires. Her interest in literature grows pseudo-naturally to the extent that she publishes her notebook of poems at her youth.

As a subject to literature, comparing to the other members of the family, Daisy is easily mentally affected and shortly bursts into tears. Henry, her father, diagnoses the change in her behavior and says “all those novels she read as a child, especially after her grandfather took her in hand, schooled her in the accurate description of feelings” (210). John Grammaticus does not stop here and this time devotes his energy to the construction of Theo’s desire:
Once it became clear that Theo was never going to take more than a polite interest in books, John encouraged him at the piano and taught him a simple boogie in C. Then he bought him an acoustic guitar and lugged up from the cellars cardboard boxes of blues recordings on heavy old 78s as well as LPs, and made tapes which arrived in London in regular packages. (132)

Theo's interest in music like his sister's desire for literature is rooted in the desire of the Other. The reason for why the subject follows the Other's desire can be found in Lacan to the Letter: Reading Ecrits Closely (2004) where Fink remarks “what I want as a subject, is recognition by the Other, and this recognition takes the form of being wanted: I want to be wanted … Object a … can be understood as the Other's desire for me” (119). Theo wants to be what his grandfather, as the Other, wants. In fact, Theo is devoting his life to be his grandfather's object petit a. Again, the method of the conditioning streams through the novel because when Theo becomes successful in music, he will gain a gift from his grandpa.

For the subject to fit the Other's desires, he/she must modify its shape to fill the lack within the Other. Theo and Daisy, likewise, have to give up their interests and yield their desire to their grandfather's desire. They may not be the grandfather's missing piece, yet they ought to situate their desire in accordance with that of his grandpa's. With big surprise, the Other itself does not know what it desires since the desire is formed in the unconscious. Due to John's efforts, Theo and Daisy unconsciously find their interest and turn to the Other for people around them; therefore, their subjectivity is formed and they search for their own object petit a. Under the influence of their grandfather, their identity is changed as well. Affected by John's instructions, Theo and Daisy assume a new subjectivity that is the art subjectivity, and literature subjectivity and their behavior changes. For instance, his father who did not dare to talk to Theo finds him easy to approach.

Another instance is observed in the novel when we read that “they've never talked so much before. Where's the adolescent rage, the door-slamming, the muted fury that's supposed to be Theo's rite of passage? Is all that feeling sunk in the blues?” (35). The Blues has ameliorated his manners. At the end of the novel both Theo and Daisy enter the room with their grandfather's desired objects that is a guitar and a book of poem: “Seconds later, entering the sitting room hand in hand, the children present a tableau of their respective obsessions … Daisy holds a copy of her bound proof, her brother grips his guitar” (208). Their aim is not to show off but rather they want to be recognized and approved by their grandfather. In this scene, both sides desire each other since their existence depends on one another and their desire, therefore, is always of the Other.

4. Conclusion
Concerned with the current issues including war, misjudgment, murder and love, Ian McEwan has created memorable, inspiring, and unforgettable characters in most of his novels. In psychoanalytic criticism characters are considered as subjects who need to be analyzed. Of rather similar features, Saturday and Atonement yield themselves to be scrutinized via an identical analytical approach. McEwan’s elaborate writing styles, as well as worked-on characters, have caused many critics to reflect not only upon his works in general but also on his characters. Drawing upon Lacanian key concept of “desire”, this paper has attempted to answer the question of man’s bewilderment and the tendency for repetition of an action.

Numerating some examples of the central characters' shifting from one desire to another, this survey strived to delineate the cause of the dissatisfaction within the subjectivities of the characters. It appears that the main characters in Saturday and Atonement are not the true proprietors of their desires. They are the subjects trapped in the pitfall of the Other's desire, and they are subjugated to the pervading rules of the society in which they are born. Unable to reach the ultimate satisfaction, the characters are unconsciously situated in an unending quest for retrieving the object petit a. They are lost in the realm of the symbolic, moving from one signifier to another in order to fill their unconscious desires rooted in a lack.
Owing to the fact that the whole novel revolves around Briony’s uncertainty, since her mind constantly jumps between many foci, the state of indecision in character’s subjectivity is more observable in Atonement than in Saturday. The process of subjectivization is more conspicuous in characters appeared in Saturday in that the past time and experiences closely control the worldview, manner, and thus the lives of the characters. It illustrates that the characters’ actions represented in the novel have their roots in the events occurred in the realms of the imaginary and the symbolic. Through Lacanian psychoanalysis, McEwan’s novels demonstrate that although some of the characters may arrive at temporal tranquility after following their so-called own desires, they are nothing but the mere subjects of the Other’s desire. They feel a sort of covetousness that positions them in the state of ever dissatisfaction.

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