

# "Now We Breathe A Different Air": Reading Post 9/11 Imaginary as a Site of Trauma in Ian Mcewan's *Saturday*

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## **Abstract:**

*The 9/11 onslaught euphemized as a tragedy, moved beyond its locus to extract global attention. The cataclysmic sight of the collapsing towers marked a conspicuous blow to the super power i.e. the USA. Trauma in its protean moulds ensuing from the episode contours the immediate and belated literary responses. The attacks though materialized within the U.S. territories, its reverberations had a transnational appeal, particularly in the Western front. Set in a day's timeframe in a post 9/11 urban space, McEwan's *Saturday* (2005) posits an arresting negotiation of trauma and violence, family and outsider, victim and perpetrator, violence and empathy. Though the text refers to the attacks after months and located in London, it deftly penetrates the paranoid Western psyche, primarily through the consciousness of Henry Perowne. The apocalyptic fear implanted by 9/11 crisis in the Western imagination to defend itself from the brutal other manifests in Henry's efforts to safeguard himself and his family from Baxter, an intruder. The paper endeavours to analyse the representation, articulation and politics of trauma in the wake of the 9/11 attacks in *Saturday*.*

**Keywords:** *post 9/11, 9/11 attacks, trauma, media*

The days immediately following 9/11 witnessed literary responses fraught with the wounded white Western voices. Most of them echoed the presidential rhetoric of American victimhood, positing the unimpeachable self against the brutal other. Though authors such as Mohsin Hamid, H.M. Naqvi, Laila Haliby etc. have countered the unapologetic stereotyping of the non-Western entities, the texts of the 9/11 canon as a whole invariably draw on the geographies of trauma- physical and psychological, personal and cultural, primary and secondary etc.- ushered by the chapter. The effortless spectatorship, owing to the live and repeated broadcast of the catastrophe, catered in mentally settling the event as a global tragedy and established trauma as a trope in its literary domain. According to Kristiaan Versluys, the tragedy of 9/11 is not exclusive to America, but a predicament common to all of the advanced nations (80). The resultant traumatic experiences of the survivors, related families, unassociated individuals and the collective psyche, fashion as a leitmotif in the 9/11 discourse. In fact, the corpus has often been accused of dealing with the personal and the domestic, rather than probing into the questions of politics and policies. The fictional narratives deal with the explicit delineation of the very day, while it also serves as a backdrop in some or a passing reference in others.

The etymology of the word "trauma" rests on its Greek root connoting a wound in a corporeal sense. However, the medical and psychiatric domains and the writings of Freud allocated the psychological dimension to the word, implying a wound inflicted on the mind and hence it does not adhere to the simple and healable process of the body (Caruth 3-4). This paper endeavours to analyse the representation, articulation and politics of trauma in the domesticated rendition of the 9/11 attacks in

Ian McEwan's *Saturday* (2005). The narrative is set in a day's timeframe in the 9/11 aftermath and revolves around the lives of the Perownes and Baxter, an intruder. McEwan's text moves away from the bracketed 9/11 literary space of New York to encapsulate the urban Londonscape. The absence of the 9/11 epicentre however contributes significantly to the existing scholarship centering trauma, albeit non-American, corresponds to the overarching but complicated Western reaction on the event. The Perownes suggest a strong social and economic standing with Henry, a reputed neurosurgeon, his lawyer wife Rosalind, daughter Daisy, a poet and son Theo, a musician. The 9/11 event assuming a material as well as a semiotic status unveiled the looming precariousness even in the supreme hegemonic power, hence displaying that vulnerability takes no cognizance of any frontier. The apparently safe and sound lives of Perownes are violated by the intruders, thus presenting a microcosm of the world afflicted by sheer precariousness post 9/11. The Perownes reside in a posh neighbourhood leading a life of privilege and comfort, and their reputation is determined further by their presence in gatherings that include even the prime minister. The political overtones of the diegesis are observed in its strategic setting, the 15<sup>th</sup> February 2003, marking the grand scale protests in London and worldwide against America's declaration of War on Terror. Henry's distress emanates from the existing state of the world, and the protestors seem to testify for it, thus any action corresponding to 9/11 or its semblance rekindles his trauma. The text thus engages with the prevailing chaos of 9/11, which would take a significant period of time to dilute, and hence his trauma too.

The text opens with Henry Perowne waking up one Saturday before dawn and sinking into unrest, typical of the cynical and melancholic tenor orchestrated by 9/11. He believes words such as 'catastrophe', 'mass fatalities', 'major attack', 'chemical and biological warfare' and have turned mundane owing to repetition, which also form his everyday life. Through his window, he witnesses a plane on fire midair heading towards Heathrow airport. The scene deftly arrests the paranoia in Henry who treats it as a repetitive dream, ensuing from the sustained trauma of the 9/11 attacks. He finds the sight familiar and spontaneously connects it to the circulated images of the hijacked planes on the World Trade Center. His cynical imagination echoes the collective sense of skepticism rife after 9/11 towards any airliner visible in motion. This reflects the manipulation of reason and the ubiquitous sense of uncanny, dread and waste pervading the lives of everyone post 9/11. It also exhibits the way harrowing memories induce psychological strain on the individual even after definite time gap of eighteen months and bearing no direct connection to the event, precipitating secondary trauma. LaCapra views that trauma unsettles the self and perforates existence itself (41). Henry's pessimism is further observed in his analogy of the Schrodinger's Cat experiment and the two equally possible outcomes of the burning plane, only to accommodate the fatalistic choice. He lands in a quandary as he wishes to do something, and it is only later that he learns it as a cargo plane with mechanical failure. His preoccupation with the ongoing political dialogues is highlighted as his mind organically wanders from the erotic thoughts concerning his wife to Saddam. The word "jihadist" uttered by Theo throws him momentarily to a dizzy state. The gravity of 9/11 is also evident in the teenage son Theo's introduction with the world outside his immediate surroundings. In a family moment, his thoughts effortlessly but oddly move to contemplate on the improbability of terrorists murdering his family that night.

McEwan makes an extensive use of medical jargon, familiarizing the readers with Henry's professional realm, also ironically placing the veteran of neurosurgery a prey to psychological trauma. Henry's expertise is described through his dexterous handling of complex and intricate surgical operations on the human brain yet himself succumbing to an anxious consciousness. The world came to a standstill at the live reception of the planes in the American skyline launching a dystopian

scenario. Though the recent history consist multiple instances of mass destruction, 9/11 dwelt on unprecedented media coverage owing to America's status of a superpower. The impact stretched to incorporate transnational reactions at the apparent disruption in the geopolitical matrix. The umbrella term of the West also comprise of England, and hence, for London, there was a passive waiting for its turn of 9/11-like event or the anticipation of revenge attacks post war. The modes of mass media, primarily television occurs throughout the text, serving as a narrative ploy to demonstrate the media dominance and aiding Henry to stay updated with the ongoing dialogues on war and verify his doubts on the plane on fire. Thus, there exists a paradoxical longing to witness a catastrophe, fuelled dramatically by media culture. Though Henry admits his adapting with the 9/11 ravages, he is clearly affected and days are saturated with bewilderment and angst to the present day, evident in the episode of the burning plane. He realizes media addiction as a part of the new order marked by the loss of his skepticism and contraction of mental freedom. His believes that words fail him as he has experienced a lot while describing the plane incident to Theo, indicating the toll on the self and situating trauma as untranslatable. In Amy Waldman's *The Submission* (2011), the U.S. media is witnessed to contribute to the frenzy following 9/11 thereby generating a culture of anxiety. Similarly, the widely circulated yet disturbing photograph of "the falling man" by Richard Drew had added remarkably to the trauma scene. Thus, Henry's case presents the classic example of mediatized trauma.

Apart from the colossal tragedy and the lingering trauma of 9/11 culture, trauma in the text at an individual level can also be located in Rosalind's past. In her initial phase with Henry, she appears to have been in denial of her mother's death three years ago which subsided after her marriage with Henry. Again, Baxter suffers from the trauma of his degenerative neurological disorder and hence is chagrined at Henry's mention of it. He treats the condition as shameful and struggles to conceal it from Nark and Nigel. Henry's identification of him with the disorder stupefies him and the slightest prospect of receiving positive medical information prompts him to momentarily halt his violent outrage. In a similar vein, the charged encounter with the trio engenders physical trauma and later psychological strain for Henry during his squash game. The word "crash" employed in the gaming parlance transports his mind from the present to the memories of the plane at night and the street fight. LaCapra in his book draws on trauma in which "one is haunted or possessed by the past and performatively caught up in the compulsive repetition of traumatic scenes-scenes in which the past returns and the future is blocked or fatalistically caught up in a melancholic feedback loop" (21). Moreover, Henry questions the possibility of enjoying a game sans any intrusion from the outer world. It can be deduced that his frustration in the otherwise regular game probably stems out of his silenced internal trauma.

The transatlantic locale and the belated timeframe though offer the author to engage in a relatively less gory panorama of 9/11, its ramifications play its individualized and domesticated rendition in the present context in the Perownes and Baxter's lives. Though there exists no direct connection of the Perownes or Baxter with the 9/11 event, the action of the text hints at the semblance of its microcosmic sketch. The deduction of Freud that the catastrophic events in a person's life strangely seem to repeat itself (Caruth 1), materializes vividly in the text. Henry has an unpleasant exchange with Baxter on the street, with the former identifying the latter with Huntington's disease, a neurological malady. Baxter is humiliated in the presence of his companions and later intrudes the home of the Perownes causing a ruckus. In a 9/11 reading, the scene can be read in the lines of the hijackers intruding the American skies and conducting the onslaught. He carries a knife and threatens to kill Rosalind, hits and injures her poet-father Grammaticus and forces Daisy to strip naked. The celebratory scene at the Perownes on the return of Daisy after months turns topsy-turvy as the

unfamiliar entities invade their home. The impact of the trauma induced by Baxter propels Rosalind to suspend her fear and ignore the future. They however return to normal activities such as indulging in dinner or listening to music after Baxter is hospitalized. It is only later Rosalind confides in Henry the nestled terror and trembles: "I feel they're in the room. They're still here. I'm still frightened" (McEwan 265).

The rundown on Henry's life projects his hectic yet efficient management of work and family life. However, he passively participates in the ongoing socio-political configurations by being an active subscriber of mass media information. However, he refrains from siding with the polarities on the war question as the outcomes of the both weigh in same intensity and invite deliberations. Hence, his stance neither a proxy for the American vengeful voice nor the anti-war sentiment evinces the ignored middle grounds. Instead of the condensed East-West binary, the narrative conjures the sinister within the European characters. It meditates on politics of culpability, as Baxter intrudes the house and lives of the privileged Westerners, the Perownes while it is stimulated by the prior episode of him feeling humiliated by Henry's diagnosis of him with Huntington's in the presence of his friends. However, despite being physically assaulted, Henry does not detest Baxter. He admits that he is in fact intrigued by Baxter, and evaluates his own part as contributory for the trio's actions. In contrast to America, Henry wishes for an interlude to reassess the dispute and introspect on his actions. This counters America's act of evading liability that further facilitated its decree of war on terror. Moreover, the imperialist exercises on Iraq can be read analogous to Henry's act of pushing Baxter down the stairs and invading his brain during the medical procedure (Lee 79). Despite the near death situation of his family members, Henry sends help for the injured Baxter. He also goes to the hospital to operate on him and its success delivers him contentment. The vengeful American ethos post 9/11 is shattered as Henry does not fit into Rosalind's idea of revenge, as he partially shares the blame for provocation for the entire episode.

Literature constitutes a prime theme in the text. In contrast to his poet daughter Daisy, Henry sees his past years completely devoid of literature. He prefers the factual over the imaginary, and presents himself as a testament to refute Daisy's perception that people cannot exist without stories. His stance is ironical as the very next moment he collects the newspapers, the mode which filters and moulds his version of reality. The recital of Mathew Arnold's "Dover Beach" by Daisy not just serves instrumental to pacify Baxter, but elucidates the wider ken of prevalent socio-political predicaments. The poem is a meditation on the loss of faith, and the music of the world is only timeless resonance of sorrow. Henry's incompetence is vivid as he hears the music of melancholy through Baxter's ears, thus empowering the latter with a refined attribute missing in the former (Lee 95). It thus disrupts the West's grammar of the barbaric other, and sets a new paradigm where the absolute entities of the Western imagination cease to exist, thereby placing the self under scrutiny for accountability. Henry's way of handling the situation with Baxter during the day and night are new possible arenas to dissect who is asking forgiveness and from whom. Though trauma constitutes of belated effects that can be harnessed only with difficulty and perhaps never completely grasped (LaCapra 41), the two figures seem to have learned it. It allows reflection on the rigid compartments of victim and the perpetrator, and in the process relate trauma of the self with the other. The climax of the poem moves both the traumatic figures of Baxter and Henry, as the former awakens with a renewed yearning for life, while the latter learns about shared vulnerability, against his earlier stance of incapability of empathy (Pitt 57).

The text depicts the way people who are neither first hand witnesses nor distantly related to a catastrophe can be equally traumatized. The 9/11 attacks though occurred in the U.S. soil, it had

ushered in a global tragedy. The fact that the narrative is set in a European city liberates the genre from cocooning in the American voice or its locale. The post 9/11 melancholy also reiterates the way personal is political and vice versa. The narrative engages with the politics of trauma but does not endorse its total alleviation. Hence, though the cultural trauma of 9/11 cannot evaporate instantly, Henry's momentary sense of relief is witnessed at the end of the day and its affairs as he considers himself for the moment to be solely at the present, devoid of the burden of the past or any sense of unease about the future. The victim-perpetrator dichotomy apart, the narrative suggests a shared empathy and responsibility to deal with any existent, sustaining and potential modes of trauma and the resultant vicissitudes. The text is paradigmatic of one's struggles with trauma besides the subsequent means of adjusting and co-existing with it.

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