Chapter 17
The Story of the Unborn:
Fetal Narrators in Pascal Bruckner, Chinghiz Aitmatov, and Ian McEwan's Novels

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ABSTRACT

This chapter focuses on a relatively new kind of narrative, concerning storytelling from inside the womb as it offers an inner perspective on both outside social matters and on the first stage of life as well. The author of the given chapter aims to explore the specific features of such a narrative, by comparing the novels of three writers, Pascal Bruckner, Chinghiz Aitmatov, and Ian McEwan, that belong to three different cultural spaces, French, Kyrgyz, and English. The basic elements of a story (plot, setting, characters, point of view, theme, symbolism, conflict, and resolution) are taken into account and their contrastive analysis is meant to reveal some key concepts that define an innovative way to approach literature.

INTRODUCTION

Contemporary literature has witnessed an array of changes and experiments, which sought to shock and radically change the reader's understanding of society and the world. Irrespective of their social background, many writers have expressed an interest in and have brough to the fore similar issues, in the case of this chapter, the status of the fetus. For instance, the works of Chinghiz Torekulovich Aitmatov, who stands as one of the most representative figures in Kyrgyzstan's literature, are strongly linked to the concept of social realism. His literary career spans three fundamental stages, but, in the 1990s, *Cassandra's Brand* epitomizes current issues of modern society, which tend to worsen due to an acute increase in technological use. Thus, new conflicts arise not only on streets, but also at the level of conscience. As a prototype of the universal soldier, the *Cassandro-embryo* lacks memory and freedom, but he becomes aware of this fact and ends up denying his right to live, preferring not to be given birth rather than to condemn himself to a tormented existence, full of emotional pain and spiritual deprivation.

Standing undoubtedly as an archetypal impersonation of a Parisian intellectual, the second writer who delved into the issue of fetal narration, Pascal Bruckner was raised in a deeply cultured and religiously-rooted background, his mother being a conservative Catholic and his father—a Protestant. Bruckner's works, as well as his own life, push empiric experiences "to the extreme in lucid, provocative and occasionally shocking" fictions (Golsan, 2007, p. 2). *The Divine Child*, published in 1992, is the story of a mother pregnant with twins, that teaches her children various things, while they are still in the womb. This novel resembles to a certain extent McEwan's *Nutshell*.

The third and last writer to be discussed here is Ian Russell McEwan, whose own life reveals that he himself went through quite tough times and in his own words his writing is strongly related to this biographical background. McEwan's works deal with "a wide range of human experiences, including the effects of losing a child, religious fervor, psychological obsession, the numerous intricacies of relationships" (Roberts, 2010, p. 69), which has led to him being labeled as 'Ian Macabre' or a 'literary psychopath'(Heidari & Talif, 2012, p. 56). In *Nutshell*, the author's prose fully depicts the clash of distinct characters, by thoroughly analyzing the dominant versus submissive household relationship.

The main objective of this chapter is to compare the works of Bruckner, Aitmatov and McEwan, in an attempt to identify and highlight some of the dominant issues of contemporary literature. In doing so, a number of tasks are taken into consideration. First, the chapter aims to familiarize readers with theoretical concepts related to storytelling, then to apply as many of these theoretical concepts to each of the three novels (*The Divine Child*, *Cassandra's Brand* and *Nutshell*), in pursuit of both concrete common ground and different interpretations, able to illustrate various perspectives on life, society, technology and so on. The conclusions that are drawn allow for future research to develop, merely opening the way for further exploration of this topic.

BACKGROUND: ESSENTIAL THEORETICAL CONCEPTS

In terms of *narrative techniques*, two essential items are the *point of view* and the *narrative mode*.

The point of view (in its broad sense, as Jaap Lintvelt mentions) or the *angle of vision* (as Wayne Booth calls it) refers to the narrative perspective from which events are reported. Its particularly important role is revealed by Lintvelt (1994) in whose opinion "firm control over narrative perspective, as well as its motivation, ensures that the given literary work is not only coherent, but also deeply credible, a fact that intensifies the illusion of reality" (p. 5) and supported by Mark Schorer (1968), who notes that narrative perspective and its *modus operandi* "allow the writer to explore and develop a topic, to convey its meanings, and eventually, to assess them" (p. 39).

In their approach to the matter in question, Jean Pouillon, Tzvetan Todorov and Gerard Genette distinguish three types of what they address to as *vision*. According to Pouillon (1946), the next features should be taken into account: *vision from behind*—when there is either a "Demiurge or privileged spectator, who knows well the depths of the problem", *vision from without*—dealing with "the behaviour and physical appearance of the character, as well as the environment in which he lives" and *vision with*—if in the center of attention is only one character, usually described from an inner perspective (pp. 74-103).

Tzvetan Todorov (1968) summarizes the classification suggested by Pouillon in the following way: the *vision from behind* corresponds to a narrator who knows more than the character, or says more than any of the characters know, *vision from without* means that the narrator says less than the character knows and *vision with*, when the narrator says only what a certain character knows.

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