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RELATIVISATION OF AUTHORITIES IN THE POSTMODERN ERA: IAN MCEWAN'S *THE CHILDREN ACT*

Abstract: *Hierarchy of moral values and relevant authorities, in the public as well as in the private sphere of society, has never been so vague as in the postmodern age, which is primarily influenced by the social philosophy of capitalism and globalism, thus changing forever the image of the traditional family, relationships between members of closer community, as well as the way in which people perceive themselves. The novel Children Act by Ian McEwan presents court cases related to problematic situations of children, usually innocent victims of various unfortunate circumstances, legal regulations, decisions and personal beliefs of adults. During the settlement of these disputes, the focus is on the struggle for supremacy between different socio-regulatory authorities: the secular court, religious communities, institutions of medical and social sciences, whereas each of these parties offers their own view of an acceptable solution. In some situations, the court often does not have a real solution, and the only option is to make a choice between less detrimental options, in accordance with the law. In an atmosphere of postmodern ambiguity and relativism, there is no one "correct" answer or solution, but multiple individual perspectives, each representing the truth from their own point of view. This paper deals with issues of public authority and personal autonomy, their mutual relationship and the consequential impact on the lives of ordinary people. The Court, as an instrument of the state, in some cases grants legitimacy to a certain solution, while in others it enforces a solution, thus putting an individual in a rather isolated position. The only way individuals can overcome these challenges and obstacles is to achieve internal stability by building their own moral standards, despite the conflicts and contradictions of the surrounding world.*

Key words: *postmodernism, relativism, moral standards, relevant authority, globalisation.*

In his latest novel, Ian McEwan creates a deeply touching, intricate story, encompassing several independent episodes craftily intertwined in the main plot line, developing some of the writer's favourite themes and motives, such as broken family relations and the endangered welfare of children, viewed through the lens of tension between public institutions' regulation of justice and the inner moral dilemmas of individuals. The issues of complex psychological and emotional aspects of family relations are presented through the perspective of a female Supreme Court judge, thereby adding the voice of a rational legal authority, without being deprived of great human sensitivity and emotions. This external, public institution makes the final, mandatory decisions in resolving the major life issues of

ordinary people within contemporary English society. Accordingly, we reach this research paper's main topic of interest, which is the question of relevant authorities in our time, while focusing primarily on the moral aspect, which often cannot be easily or straightforwardly defined. In this novel, the authority is divided between several public institutions such as: court, church, social service and hospital. In parallel, we are witnessing the needs and drives of ordinary, private persons: a natural human hunger for meaning, an inner sense of morality, and the social norms adopted by a family or small community, as basic units of society, which also represent a reflection of social policies and various regulating systems of the state (Cutler 1997: 2-3).

The framework story shows the marriage crisis of a childless, upper-middle class couple in their late fifties, Fiona and Jack Maye, embedding court cases as intersecting episodes. Fiona has a flawless professional reputation, both amongst her colleagues in the Family Division of the Supreme Court and also amongst the applicants approaching the court. However, due to her great responsibilities, she is under constant pressure and her professional life threatens to destroy the unity of her family. The cause of the family crisis is Jack's wish to have a passionate, adventurous relationship one last time before he dies, and having confessed his intention, he is already planning an affair with a much younger statistician woman from his company. This makes a shocking impression on Fiona, considering the fact that she resolves family disputes every day in her courtroom, and suddenly realises that she herself is now in a situation whereby her husband is willing to destroy their marriage in a matter of moments and for a handful of pleasure, implying the devaluation of family bonds in modern times, right from the first pages of the book.

The novel could be classified as a family drama, with touches of a medical thriller and love story. Narration is a kind of third person actorial type, representing events from the central character's point of view (Prince 2003). The narrator is reliable and impersonal, but the reader should bear in mind that the speech and thoughts of other characters are filtered through Fiona's viewpoint. In the beginning, the overall atmosphere of the novel reflects the feeling of safety and orderliness, narrated from Fiona's safe and confident position, and somehow the reader has an impression that everything will be resolved justly and to the benefit of all parties. However, in the second half, a sort of an ominous suspension arises, when we realise that not everything can be resolved by means of the law. The action is modestly restricted to a few places: Fiona's home, courtroom, hospital, Newcastle, and the street on the way from the courtroom to Fiona's house. As for the time in the novel, there is a dynamic intersection of objective time related to external activities and its chronological reach is about six months, and the subjective time, related to Fio-

na's consciousness, which appears as much longer. The social setting is upper middle-class London, during the second half of the year 2012 (Malcolm 2002: 13-15).

The novel is organised into five chapters, softly subdivided into related episodes. All parts have approximately the same structure and length. The fragmented organisational form of the novel is appropriately indicative of its content. The narration does not simply flow in a linear manner: it is often interrupted by memories about past events, the central character's inner thoughts, with the moral climax of the story set at the Jehovah's Witness boy case. In addition, there are five unrelated court cases representing independent mini-narratives which include a spectrum of culturally different characters, such as: Jews, Muslims, Jehovah's witnesses, Jamaican and Scottish Catholics. All this contributes to the general sense of unsteadiness, disturbance due to events of multicultural misunderstandings, and collisions of different views and perspectives (Malcolm 2002: 17).

The socio-economic background is primarily based on the already highly developed principles of globalisation and capitalism in modern England. Although not directly related to the novel's action, it is evident how the economic precepts and guidelines once set by Margaret Thatcher in the eighties, and later continued by her successors, affected the weakening of the immaterial values such as: national tradition, religious and family unity, common moral framework, whereas the mainstream culture was removed from the central stage and replaced by the mass media and its reproductive culture (Reitan 2003: 243). Prime Minister Thatcher believed that a society as such was no longer needed, and that only individuals are important, viewed simply as a number of men and women, finally aiming to create a competitive mind-set, perfectly adjusted to the ruthless conditions of the free-market. Her statement: "Economics are the method; the object is to change the soul" (Butt 1981), paved the way for the development of a neoliberal theory of society, concentrating on the issues of isolated persons, the disintegration of the traditional family and its closer communi-

ty, and the weakening of implied social norms and ethical regulations, which once served to restrain human passions and vices potentially leading to crime. However, now the law assumed this role of social order keeper, as the final instance that deals with the consequences of people's behaviour and not the cause. Needless to say, the formation and further development of the private individual identity was seriously jeopardised (Harvey 2006: 17).

Scepticism underlies the basic concept of postmodern philosophy, targeting the disassembling of social structures creating value judgments. Postmodernism is always dealing with contradictions, controversy, and the negation of any authority that claims to be the ultimate or the most relevant one. The criteria for determining what represents the truth or moral correctness should be independent from any social authorities or influences, stemming from a person's own free judgement, as much as this is possible. This sort of philosophy is sometimes referred to as "anti-foundational" (Sim 2001: 3-4). However, this inclination of the period to have absolute liberty of thinking and acting often bears a risk of creating a state of chaos, and it should somehow be restrained. To have personal freedom without any limitations would result in the total apathy of people and the annihilation of personal identity. Therefore, individuals must find a balance between the differentiation of self, and accepting the norms of society, through autonomous, independent thinking (Lindholm 1997: 13).

Regarding this, it is clear that in the postmodern world the way of reaching the truth is not an easy one. There is no unique or received set of standards or parameters, since they are in constant dialogue and negotiation. The characters' best efforts and intentions to resolve the unwarranted situations, however, often lead them to do smaller or sometimes even greater evil. As a rule, they insist on their ethical stance as the only one valid and acceptable, following the pattern of an individualistic, isolated postmodern character. This creates a confrontation against the outside world, a battle against the external system they cannot win against, bringing their set of be-

liefs and moral standards into question (Djergovic 2009: 20-21).

Each of the five court cases presented in the novel deals with different aspects of moral issues and causes of family breakdown. The main interest is the case of a 17-year-old boy, Adam Henry, suffering from a specific form of leukaemia, curable from the point of view of official medicine, however, the manner of treatment is forbidden by the boy's and his family's religious beliefs, all of them being members of Jehovah's Witness church. The religion obliges them to refuse any treatment that includes blood transfusion, which is the only way of saving the patient's life in this case. As part of the usual procedure, the hospital addresses the Court for help, requesting approval to proceed with the treatment, despite the parents' decision. Tension rises between the basic human right of a person to decide on one's own life issues, and state involvement in private matters, especially when it comes to preserving a human life. The views of the priorities differ: whether to protect the bodily, material existence of the boy; or to save his soul by keeping his body uncorrupted by other people's blood, at the cost of his perishing. The major problem for the boy is that his congregation and his family are the only social community he has ever known. Growing up in this rather claustrophobic environment, Adam is torn by the struggle between his natural human instinct for survival, and the decision not to disappoint his community, thus refusing to break the ties that constitute the central part of his identity (McEwan 2014).

The final decision was entirely in the hands of the law. Fiona referred to the provisions of the Children's Act from 1989, the main aim of the Act being the child's welfare, which was also the main concern of the court. There have been many subsequent Children's Acts, but this one was perhaps one of the best, and its provisions were copied around the world as a model to be used in other countries. Considering the fact that the law usually supports medical, i.e. scientific evidence, this state regulatory tool is said to be humane in its nature, with a tendency to take into consideration all possible psychological and social factors relevant for a child. Most hospitals are successful

in court when pleading for help in these sorts of cases, because the court is naturally reluctant to pass a verdict which would endanger somebody's life, thereby also performing its usual role of an authority in charge of granting legitimacy to other state institution's actions (McEwan, Interview 17th May 2014).

Surprisingly enough, after the successfully resolved initial problem of the disputable transfusion, the case of the Jehovah's Witness boy does not end happily, due to Adam's disappointment with Fiona's rejection and his inability to cope with his disillusionment of the world of grown-ups outside of his community, he takes a fatal decision. When his illness rebounded, he consciously refused medical treatment, this time as an 18-year old adult person, thereby ending his life. In his final letter to Fiona, he reveals his love to her, and his repentance for having drifted away from his religion.

Adam's specific situation is that there were no explicit evil forces in him or around him. He brings his own demise upon himself by refusing to take an active role in his life and by making a judicious decision in a critical situation (Mineva 2007: 35). Adam's parents had led a deviant lifestyle when young, being violent and using too much alcohol, and the rules of religious community brought back order into their lives; consequently, they made religion a central pillar of their family. However, Adam's identification with his environment was so strong that it affected his common sense and he became unable to abstract himself from this collective identity (Hilbert 1986: 5). The failure to deal with the external reality and broken connections resulted in the eventual split of his personality. "Moral dilemmas are thus usually reflections of the fact that most of us identify with a number of different communities and are equally reluctant to marginalise ourselves in relation to any of them" (Bertens 195: 137). Thinking freely, actively and independently could have saved him, but due to strong predefined restrictions in his mind, and his narrowly controlled and specific upbringing, he did not succeed in winning the battle against himself (McEwan, Interview 17th May 2014).

According to Durkheim, an individual has consciousness about their external reality, which includes the capacity for understanding the presence and actions of other members of society; as well as internal consciousness about one's own private world. The only way to achieve personal autonomy and a certain degree of independent thinking is to better understand both the world inside of us, and also to analyse and decompose the rules of the outside world, becoming more aware of its core functions and reasons. This is probably one of the best ways for a postmodern subject to overcome one's sense of disorientation and be genuinely free and happy (Muniz 2012: 3).

The following two cases are marked by strong religious motifs, with emphasised sentiments of tradition, viewed by the characters as a protective shield from the outside world's frustrations and disintegration forces working against their value system. The Jewish girls' case is about a religious orthodox Jewish family, who reared their two daughters within the social circle and strict norms of their community, which was against any notion of official education for girls and a free choice of career or a husband. The mother was trying to fight against these restrictions in court, requesting the right to send her daughters to a secular state school, where they could have access to Internet, social media, and other contemporary facilities. The mother was acting upon her inner instincts, wishing to provide her children with a possibility of choice, as well as a fulfilled, meaningful, purposeful life; while the father claimed that a life within the community was much happier and safer, because of their clearly defined rules and identity, as opposed to a disordered life in a modern secular community (McEwan 2014: 10-11). Judge Maye, representing the official authority, passed the judgement in favour of the mother.

The next case is about a family from Morocco, also a minor episode in the novel, but by no means insignificant, with a similar topic as the previous case. Namely, a Moroccan father had abducted his daughter, because he believed that this was the only way to save her from the secular life in the West, which he considered to be highly

immoral and corrupt, just like the father in the Jewish family. The law had a final say in this matter as well, passing a verdict in line with contemporary Western world standards of living and with a view to the child's best interests exclusively from its own legal perspective, while placing the tradition of the immigrant families in a clearly lower and subordinate position (Ibid. 47).

All parties in these two cases only wanted what was best for the children. However, the problem arose because of their significantly different views of what constitutes a beneficial influence and better conditions of life for a child. Also, there is an aspect of multiculturalism here, which loses its position and reputation in times of global financial crises, because it is too expensive to take action and to promote better integration of immigrants, especially those whose culture is significantly different from British culture. Therefore, these cases draw the reader's attention to the struggles of poor immigrant assimilation. In both cases, the court has a coercive and regulating role, showing low appreciation for the different cultures of immigrants, and little interest to see life from their perspective.

The next one, the Siamese twins' case is the most horrifying and controversial case in the novel. At the time when Fiona was working on it, she stopped having sexual relationships with her husband, because she became "squeamish about bodies" (McEwan 2014: 30). This was the event that would trigger her marriage crisis, culminating some seven weeks later. Hospital was applying before the court to approve their expert recommendation for treatment which would include taking away the life of one of the Siamese twins in order to save the other. Namely, the twins had a dangerously high degree of physical connection. In the eyes of medical science, the decision was clear: the one with more chance of survival and more independent organs should be saved. On the other hand, judging in line with moral criteria, no life is more valuable than the other, thus making the right decision practically impossible. Also, the parents, both Catholics, were against this aggressive procedure of physically separating the twins, even though it meant saving one of their sons. Fiona chose the lesser

evil, granting leave to the medical point of view, for which she gave a clear, legal rationale.

In Anglo-Saxon law, the sources of law are common practice from previous judgements and legislation (McEwan, Interview 17th May 2014). Fiona used the old 'doctrine of necessity'¹ (McEwan 2014: 28) as argument, and passed the decision, which would save one of the twins and kill the other one. Nevertheless, this decision haunted Fiona for a long time, in spite of words of congratulations and expressions of approval by her colleagues. To make things even worse, she was personally emotionally affected by the case, due to her own childless marriage. This court case is unique in the novel, because her decision has directly and consciously sanctioned the taking of an innocent life, even though it was done with the best possible intention and through a lawful procedure (Ibid. 30).

Underlying all reasonable evidence, we can recognise motifs of euthanasia and even some traces of eugenics in this case. In the post-industrial, cost-effective world, guided according to some new versions of the Darwinian principle *the survival of the fittest*, where natural selection was replaced by man-made selection. The twins were objectified here, one of them being viewed as dysfunctional and replaceable. The doctors were strictly following medical rules, but showing little consideration for the humane aspect of the ethics, apart from the practical one. Likewise, the twins may be viewed as a symbolical representation of the inner split of postmodern identity, where the capitalist money-consuming self will survive as the stronger party, having all major organs functioning on his or her side of the body; whereas the weaker, irrational self will inevitably perish as an anachronism not belonging to this world. The contemporary human survival sometimes requires severing ties with oneself and with one's own environment, as a necessity (Hoover 1987: 260).

¹ A principle whereby a normally criminal act is justified by the necessity of preserving something of greater utilitarian value than that lost or sacrificed (Wiktionary, accessed 28 Nov 2014, http://en.wiktionary.org/wiki/doctrine_of_necessity)

The following case was not Fiona's, but one of her colleagues in the court, whereby she only wrote the official verdict for it. This case was based on the true story of Sally Clark, a solicitor (McEwan, Interview 17th May 2014). The mother in the novel was accused and sentenced for the murder of her twins. They were suffering from Sudden Infant Death Syndrome, an extremely rare disorder causing sudden death in children. A possibility of having this syndrome in both twins was deemed by a medical expert to be nearly impossible. On the other hand, it was highly unlikely that a middle-class mother, content with her life, would have killed her children. At the end, it proved to be a mistake of "a mathematically ignorant expert witness", i.e. the doctor (McEwan 2014: 50). Due to the prosecutor's mistake, and a sequence of misassumptions, the mother was sentenced to death for killing her children (Ibid. 51). Without any show of sympathy, understanding, mercy, or kindness from anyone, the media, her former friends and colleagues, as well as the other inmates in prison bullied the mother. Failure of the system completely and irreversibly destroyed an innocent life. This case is the only one in the novel where the legal authority does not bring any kind of resolution to the situation, but causes exactly the opposite effect, thereby representing the only instance of overt criticism of the modern legal system in Great Britain. Otherwise, the law was presented as a functional and well-meaning force throughout the book. This mother is the first character who committed suicide in the novel, foreshadowing the later suicide of Adam Henry (Ibid. 52).

In parallel to the issues resolved in the court cases, we are witnessing Fiona's private life marriage crisis, presumably caused by self-absorption in her work, lack of attention and passion for her husband, who has decided to seek his thrills elsewhere. Fiona is an embodiment of her profession: rational, thorough, just, and by the requirements of her position of authority, she measures every thought and word with almost surgical precision, her vocabulary reveals a highly educated and intelligent person, who always likes to keep her world in peace and order. Quite appro-

priately and up to her mark, her husband Jack is a UCL Academic, a professor of history, but presented as a more spontaneous and liberal person than her, enjoying jazz and a rich social life; while Fiona, by contrast, could never listen to real jazz, because of her inability to follow unsymmetrical and irregular beats, and let go of rules.

Nevertheless, one of the main problems of their marriage was that they postponed the decision to have a child until it was too late. She has a tacit feeling of guilt and shame for her egocentric and complete dedication to her career. Paradoxically enough, the only place where she can forget about all her personal problems, find escape and comfort, is her work. In general, women were a major discovery in the first years of capitalism, primarily as a new source of taxable labour force. Moreover, during the early 1980s, as unemployment decreased, the percentage of unmarried women, often single mothers, was rising. Over the years, the percentage of professional women, building their careers at the expense of personal and family life also increased.

In all the cases in the novel, family relations are complex and problematic in different ways, but they are all characterised by the absence of children, who are sick, kidnapped, dead, or have never been born. Usually, the parents are a part of the problem, or the institutions trying to contribute to the overall solution. The lack of children symbolises a stalemate in the future development of humankind. Also, through Fiona's voice, McEwan sharply criticises the alarming situation of divorces in Britain in 2012. Through her soliloquy about the fragility and fleeting nature of love, as well as the baseness of human nature which rises to the surface in cases of family disputes, the author warns against different kinds of abuses of the legal system by the parents aiming to protect their own interests, hurting their loved ones and humiliating themselves with lies, arrogance, pretence and greediness. She compares the condition after the divorce to a state of a country in a war aftermath, invoking the image of robbery, where each side grabbed what they could, without any guilt of consciousness, acting only upon their egocentric self-preservation instincts. Human relations became "commodified", and as such, they

could be acquired, dispensed with, replaced or discarded, without too much damage or consequence to anyone (Rorty 1989: 194).

Similarly, we recognise a ubiquitous theme of treachery, even from the opening of the novel, when Fiona contemplates her husband's decision to betray her trust and have an affair with another woman. Adam is betrayed by his parents and his church, who left him to die in hospital, with the explanation that it would be the best for the community. Further on, he is also betrayed by Fiona, her selfishness and lack of understanding for his position after he was left alone and shunned by his community (Malcolm 2002: 17). The egocentric post-material individual also shows little sense of personal responsibility for his neighbour and next of kin. There is a false conviction that the system will take care of everybody's problems, and that no personal involvement to help our nearest is necessary. Until the time they realised their mistakes, it was too late.

Redemption does not come easily to characters in McEwan's novels. It is hard to obtain, often through love, which turns out to be impossible, tainted or fragile, and generally leads to the destruction of one of the parties. Fiona's human compassion had brought her, as the judge appointed, to visit Adam at the hospital where he was at the edge of dying, which used to be a regular practice of state and social authorities' representatives in the old days, but now was abandoned due to cost cutting for welfare services. She does not get a second chance to repair the outcome she had caused by giving him the cold shoulder during his great personal crisis. However, none of the characters is blameless for somebody else's misfortune, and even though they all act from their best intentions, they end up harming their loved ones. The characters find no real redemption for their actions, or the liberation from the tyranny of the limitations of their own mind (Ibid. 17).

In the postmodern world, there has been a significant change with respect to the norms and standards of the time, predominant convictions and relevant institutions, caused by a new climate of scepticism and relativism. There are many possible realities, choices one can make for oneself,

available versions of one's identity, without any certainty of claim to be the right one, in the sense that any single option can have an evident advantage over some other, each being a circled unit by itself. Epistemological tensions are present and dynamic throughout the whole novel, as we see religion, science and law to be in constant confrontation and battle for the position of the referential system, sometimes acting in favour and sometimes against the needs and wishes of individuals (Butler 2002: 118-9).

Science, as the new *credo* of the post-industrial world, is mostly narrowed to medical science in this novel, with remarkable and authentic representations of details of health afflictions in the court cases. Likewise, there is a significant influence of social welfare aspects to each issue, represented by social workers who give their opinion about the family problems in the court. Science is considered to be highly reliable in the novel, due to its rational nature; however, its outcomes are characterised by an almost complete absence of any moral aspect. Conversely to that, several religions formed the predominant community in many of the court cases: Islam in the case of Moroccan girl, Judaism in the case of the Jewish girls, Jehovah's Witnesses in the case of Adam, and Catholicism in the case of the Siamese twins. However, in all instances, religion was shown as irrational and unreliable, and sometimes even as a force indirectly acting contrary to the best interests of a child. One of the main reasons for this could be that the believers interpreted the religious scriptures very differently and understood the teachings in relation to their own personal experience, according to their will, thereby letting their wishful thinking or personal tastes influence their readings, thus causing distrust in the integrity of the religious system. Legal authority has proved to be fairly reliable compared to other external authorities, except in one case. A vivid description of the collision of these different standpoints is given through Fiona's inner voice, with strong covert irony, in the cases of Siamese twins:

"As for the spectrum of positions, at one end were those of secular utilitarian persuasion, impatient of legal detail,

blessed by an easy moral equation: one child saved better than two dead. At the other, stood those of firm knowledge not only of God's existence but an understanding of his will. Quoting Lord Justice Ward, Fiona reminded all parties in the opening lines of her judgement, 'This is a court of law, not of morals' and our task has been to find, and our duty is then to apply, the relevant principles of law to the situation before us – a situation which is unique." (McEwan 2014: 26-7)

Fiona says that she is only performing the duty entrusted to her by the state. On the other hand, she is implicitly suggesting that the best arbiter and authority in cases of moral dilemmas are people themselves, listening to their inner, natural moral sense and their own spiritual cues, as the author of the novel would have described it: "I think we are instinctively moral beings" (McEwan, Interview 25 June 2014). As said, every situation is unique, and it seems that the responsibility ultimately lies in the hands of an individual, as the most humane source of moral thinking and acting. There is no single formula or system that would give a straightforward answer to any moral problem. In reality, people often do make some smaller evil, in order to avoid a bigger one.

The author implies that the moral sense is inborn and that public authorities such as the law, science or religion, however advanced or needed in all societies, acting as intermediaries for reaching decisions by investing their best efforts and intentions into finding a solution often impede or fog our own moral goggles, making us forget about our innate inclinations and abilities to think and decide in the best interest of ourselves and our nearest. Occasionally, postmodern subjects must remember to "re-centre" themselves both with respect to their inner beings and needs, as well as to the accepted public and social parameters, in order to function properly (Holstein 2000: 59).

In case they do not succeed, they will be left in the cruel hands of endless free choices and possible options of living in the mass-production and mass-consumption world of globalisation. Basically, all human quests and desires in this age of capitalism are inspired by the need for financial spending. The driving force of the age is encouraging these passions, which all eventually

lead to a certain form of self-destructive behaviour that needs to be restrained by an inner power of will and self-awareness, and not by official laws and/or while under threat of criminal prosecution. The postmodern principle of relativism, if brought to its extreme, could become nihilism. Contemporary individuals stand alone, balancing on scales with fragile stability, in danger of being crushed into vanity and emptiness, if they do not construct their own inner authority and a strong sense of morality (Gray 1998: 38).

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РЕЛАТИВИЗАЦИЈА АУТОРИТЕТА У ПОСТМОДЕРНОМ ДОБУ: ЗАКОН О ДЕЦИ ИЈАНА МАКЈУАНА

Резиме

Хијерархија моралних вредности и меродавних ауторитета, како у јавној тако и у приватној сфери друштва, никада није била тако неодређена као у постмодерно доба, на шта је превасходно утицала друштвена философија капитализма и глобализма, мењајући заувек слику о традиционалној породици, везама унутар чланова ближе заједнице, као и начину на који човек сам себе посматра. У роману *Закон о деци* Ијана Макјуана, приказани су судски случајеви који се односе на проблематичне ситуације деце, углавном невиних жртава разних несрећних околности, законских правила, одлука и личних уверења одраслих. Током решавања спорова, у фокусу је борба за доминацију међу различитим друштвено-регулаторним ауторитетима: световног

суда, религијске заједнице, институција медицинске и друштвене науке, при чему свака од тих страна нуди своје виђење прихватљивог решења. У неким ситуацијама, суд често нема право решење, те је једина могућност избор између мање штетних опција, у складу са законом. У постмодерној атмосфери опште неодређености и релативизма, не постоји само један „тачан“ одговор или решење, већ више-струке индивидуалне перспективе, при чему свака представља истину из свог угла. Овај рад се бави питањима јавног ауторитета и личне аутономије, њиховим међусобним односом и утицајем који имају на животе обичних људи. Суд, као инструмент државе, даје одређеном решењу легитимитет, док у неким случајевима делује и принудно, стављајући тако појединца у прилично изолован положај. Једини начин да индивидуа превазиђе ове изазове и препреке је да постигне унутрашњу стабилност изграђивањем сопствених моралних стандарда, упркос конфликтима и противуречностима света који је окружује.

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