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Redefining Irishness: Fragmentation or intercultural exchange

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Abstract

The traditional definition of Irishness has been overwritten by internationalization, cultural and political discourses. Globalisation today sets the ground for the redefinition of a “new Ireland” altering the ethnocultural base to the definitions of Irish national identity. Recent cultural criticism on modern Irish studies have described the Irish nation as undergoing moments of crisis and instability within a global context. This paper explores and analyzes the process by which literary dramatic works dealing with Irish national distinctiveness have been put subject to being written and re-written as the Irish nation passes through periods of instabilities and problematisations. Ireland has been affected by conflicting narratives and needed to move “towards a new configuration of identities” (Kearney, 1997, p. 15). Edward W. Said comments on this fracturing of identity as “human reality is constantly being made and unmade” (1979, p. 33). The attempt Irish playwrights have made to address factors affecting Irishness and the violent assertion of national identity addressed in this paper, are considered within a post-nationalist and post-colonial context of dramatic works.

Keywords

post-colonialism, national identity, Irish drama, transnationalism, interculturalism, globalism,

I

Ireland’s nationalism has always been the binding force behind the nation. However, the unity of the nation was challenged with the advent of economic reform and globalization. Out of all the countries in Europe, Ireland had globalized at record speed. The rapidness was equally echoed in the identity shift of the nation’s international expatriates and regional communities (Kearney, 1997). Socio-economic reform and cultural transformation exposed the indeterminacy of the nation. Nationalist ideology and Irish identity were fragmented as the country shifted from colonial to postcolonial. The transformation led the nation and its people to experience moments of crises, disunity and enter a phase of discontinuity. The globalized identity paradoxically became a way to escape traditional constructs of Irish identity.

The aim of this paper is to focus on a textual analysis of the process by which the dramatic work of Brian Friel’s *Translations* (1980), Tom Murphy’s *A Whistle in the Dark* (1961) and Marina Carr’s *By the Bog of Cats* (1998) deal with Irish national distinctiveness and the redefinition of Irishness. These dramatists are not chroniclers or political dramatists, yet they paint a rationalistic graffiti of Ireland’s past and present. Their works move the Irish theater beyond the borderlines of buffoonery. They fulfill what Richard Kearney sees as the need today for Ireland to move towards a “new configuration of identities” (Kearney, 1997). The attention to identity in their plays echoes key concepts from Bhabha, Kearney and Appadurai’s theories which help explain the spatial and cultural aspects of the formation, deformation and transnationalism of Irish identity. The dramatic works aim to provide a world view of Irishness. With any attempt at defining Irishness, there is always the question of “How does one get to the real Irish if there is such a thing? ...who gets to be Irish? Is there an authentic and true Irish type? And is recuperation of identity even possible in a post-colonial society (Heinige, 2009)?

The dramatic works discussed in this paper by Friel, Murphy and Carr raise in this sense uncomfortable questions and reflect the lives of Irish people who “really don’t belong” (Toibin, 2012).

The plays are not individual tragedies but rather a display of the process of Ireland moving from “Catholic nationalism towards civic” (Stewart, 1999). The plays share several significant structural and thematic similarities. The texts carry the hope and despair of an Irish nation juxtaposed between space and time. Through their works the authors, pertinent to this paper, depict the reality of modern Ireland and highlight the contradictions and complications of the hybridity of the Irish identity. The disruption caused by socioeconomic changes forces the Irish identity to re-emerge on the Irish theatre stage with a renewed dramatic force in an attempt to move beyond the limitations of traditional nationalism and dispossession.

II

Irishness in this paper is identified through a new configuration of identities as opposed to a single “post-colonial” identity exploring a notion of multiplicity in an age of multiple belongings (Lloyd, 2001). *A Whistle in the Dark*, *Translations* and *By the Bog of Cats...* have been understood as works which are preoccupied with exposing the uncertainty that underlies the shifting of borderline existence as it is set against constructed “essentialist identities” (O’Toole, 2012). It is therefore reasonable to explore the notion of new Irishness and the implications of its cultural transformations in context of Bhabha’s (1994) view that nations and cultures are “narrative constructions that arise from the hybrid interaction of contending national and cultural constituencies” where identity is negotiated.

The land setting of Baile Beag in Friel’s *Translations* foregrounds historical, political and dramatic elements all realized as nationalistic fury. The existing social and cultural formations are actively erased in the making of a new Ireland through the Ordnance Survey. The mapping and Anglicization of Irish place names is a transformational phase, a process to purge Ireland into its “newness.” Place naming is a central theme of *Translations*. The naming reveals a fresh geography which replaces the old native place names with their myths and identity. The mapping ironically becomes a mimetic representation of reality. The map presents a version of Ireland that is designed to conform to the view of the world - one that would make Ireland “recognizable.” There is only a metaphorical reality between the map and the reality which it purports to represent (Bullock, 2000). Ireland’s transformation in *Translations* begins on paper. Hugh in *Translations* says that it is not history that shapes the Irish identity but rather the images of the past which “we must never cease renewing... because once we do, we fossilize” (Friel, 1981). The past in Friel’s play is didactically reinvented for the present, even as the present is lived through images of the past (Bullock, 2000).

Friel touches upon this intensified struggle between those who attempt to destroy the lingering aftertaste of the stereotyped Irish paddy of the past and those who want to emerge as modern free unlabeled Irish citizens. Hugh, Owen’s father, and the school master, is proficient in Latin and Gaelic (the archaic languages); yet Hugh accepts the necessity of using English as a means to connect to the outside world. Owen in his community represents the allure of a better life after he returns from Dublin as a successful businessman. Owen is on the payroll of the British Army which is a declaration of the tangible advantages of English culture. The mark of success towards social advancement and upward mobility in the play is signified by Owen’s acquisition of a professional position as opposed to the idyllic vision of a rural Ireland. Owen believes that he is better off being on the payroll of the British Army despite being under-paid. Owen creates for himself what Homi Bhabha terms as the third space through translation and straddles both worlds as he attempts to embrace the cosmopolitan world. Bhabha’s notion of the “third space” (1994) allows Owen’s Irish national identity to be questioned in terms of a contemporary socio-economic culture that is situated in the shadows of a past in which there is a time-lag of post-colonial belatedness.

Owen is not the typical stage Irishman in appearance but he is the foil of Hugh. Both Hugh and Owen are two faces of the same coin. Hugh is the old Ireland bound by nationalistic ideals and Owen the emergent new Celtic Tiger image of a new globalised Ireland. Friel presents through them a partial assumption of a stereotype where he exposes their search for Irishness as a paradox; in wanting to break away from the roots of the land, it becomes impossible to escape from the nation’s past. The notion of escape from the culture and the land is complicated by the need to survive the transition into the new era

of a globalised Ireland. Hugh struggles in his metaphorical escape and drinks his Anna na mBreag (a poteen of lies) while the incident of renaming of the well Tobair Vree in *Translations* reveals Owen's intimate connection with his past.

Naming is typically demonstrated as key to the formation of Irish identity. Sarah's speech "My name is Sarah" in *Translations* is crucial to her self-definition, just as with the names of places; her name, in fact, carries with it not only an identity, but also an origin and a lineage. When Owen asks her about her name, she blurts out, "Sarah Johnny Sally." There is an aspect of continuity in these names. It is Manus who encourages Sarah to speak: "Soon you'll be telling me all the secrets that have been in that head of yours all these years" (Friel, 1981). The same cannot be said for Owen who fails to recognize his own metamorphosis from Irish Owen to British Roland as he carefully reveals his role on the Ordnance Survey: "My job is to translate the quaint archaic tongue you people persist in speaking into the King's good English" (Friel, 1981). The well Tobair Vree, named after a disfigured man named Brian who visited it daily because he thought the water was blessed till he drowned in it, emphasizes the subconscious conflict between Owen's inclination towards English modernity and his Irish heritage. He assures Manus that Irish names will be "Anglicized" only where there is "ambiguity" (Friel, 1981). He does not realize that he was being called Roland instead of Owen by the British. Owen misses what Heaney calls the "illiterate and unconscious" in a name – the heritage buried deep within the name itself. His own Irish identity is lost in the English transliteration, he is reduced from a human being to a sign. The loss of lineage in a name reduces identity where the person or place immediately becomes an epistemological referent. The temporary exile he passes on himself by isolating and distancing himself from the community, in retrospect, proves crucial in reconstructing his true sense of Irish identity. This realization symbolically is a revisit to his Irish past because "to forget the past willfully is to threaten the fragile links that, however, tenuously, guard us from oblivion" (Zemon & Starn, 1989). Owen announces his renewed Irish loyalties when he responds to Lancey's question about Sarah's hometown with the Irish names instead of their new English ones.

III

Tom Murphy explores through *A Whistle in the Dark* the implications of post-colonialism for Irish identity. The characters struggle to define for themselves a coherent national identity in the industrial city of Coventry. The nature of the identity is analyzed according to Bhabha's hybrid voices and indeterminate identities which exist in liminal spaces. The play further sheds light on Ireland's transformation from being a "beleaguered colony to a postcolonial nation state" (Murphy, 2001). The play focuses on the "dignity of the human being, whose choices, identity and dignity have been taken away from them through their entrapment in impossible spaces" (O'Toole, 1994).

Having moved to Coventry from rural Mayo in Ireland, the Carney brothers in *A Whistle in the Dark* wonder if those who have left Ireland can still be called Irish and whether emigration requires a forfeiture of national identity just to "fit into a place" (Murphy, 2001). Michael, one of the three brothers, represents the pathology of the alienated individual in the play as he grapples with the reality of his homelessness in Coventry, a small town in England. Moving to Coventry may have allowed him to move beyond an Irish society divided by social classes, but paradoxically enough he finds himself in one where all Irish people are seen as identical "paddies" (Murphy, 2001). His Irishness casts on him a shadow of shame where he is unable to free himself from the notions of "puppetry, mimicry and rhetoric" (Harte, 2012). Michael does not have the ability to define himself, and is therefore defined by others. He articulates the problem in anguish: "We're all Paddies, and the British boys know it" (Murphy, 2001). Michael's identity is divided between "his washed up past; the life waiting to happen; and the part that needs to find its voice to create meaning and define his identity" (Carroll, 2014).

In *A Whistle in the Dark*, Michael wants to own a home and be part of a respectable civilized family; he tries to save Des, his younger brother, from a life of stereotypical "othering" and abjection (Murphy, 2001) by wanting him to be 'something respectable' (Murphy, 2001). Des suggests through his roles in the play that Ireland offers little hope for the future and contrasts Ireland's post-colonial poverty, where

he manages to get “a lousy few quid” (Murphy, 2001) against the many opportunities they anticipate in England. In doing so, he subverts essentialist notions of identity through his scornful speeches. The play reflects the character’s lack of identity in his homeland and his search for Irishness globally. It may be true that something is being eroded or fragmented in this transnationalism of which Ireland is only a part, but at the same time, something new is being born. It is a new beginning that involves the dynamic interplay of Ireland’s past with its present, one that we can refer to as interculturalism. Building identity from experiences and transformations allows a reconstruction and assembling of a global version of Irishness. An identity is forged through the contemporary lens of globalism. The journey of reconstructing Irishness happens in the space between the island and the outside world, the space between lands is usually one full of emotions. The longing for a varied people and places indicates a determination to create an identity from a global perspective.

The dilemma of borderline existence and its effects on identity formation is what Homi Bhabha refers to as the post-colonial “interstices” (1994). The struggle of forming an identity in *A Whistle in the Dark* is by no means a simple portrayal of the Irish immigrant in Britain. The setting represents a hybrid space; Coventry is an industrial immigrant city in England where the Carneys struggle to free themselves of colonial hegemony. Their endeavours to compensate for their sense of inferiority is done through mimicry in an attempt to redefine cultural identity. Michael ultimately has to face the indeterminacy of his identity. Moving to Coventry has allowed him to move beyond a divided Irish society only to exist in a place where all the Irish are seen as the “paddies” (Murphy, 2001). Irishness becomes a badge of shame, his search for a “way of being” yields only “puppetry, mimicry and rhetoric” (Harte, 2012). Michael is haunted by the fact that his desired identity interpreted by him as Englishness, leaves him no less a “paddy” in English eyes as would a “tinker” in Irish eyes. The new Irish identity is presented in a transmuted form. The play raises questions such as if emigration means that those who no longer live in the country are still Irish – is it a forfeiting of national identity and what is to become of those who are searching to “fit into a place” (Murphy, 2001).

Critics of post-national drama like Umberto Eco suggest that one of the ways by which the post-colonial nations and individuals form an identity is through the invention of an enemy. It is typically one of the ways to measure themselves against in order to demonstrate their self-worth; thus when there is no enemy, an enemy has to be invented, or one risks losing one’s identity (Eco, 2012). In a colonial Ireland, the enemy was the English or the Protestant; in a post-colonial Ireland where globalization creates complex connections, the person who exhibits his otherness or behaves differently is the “enemy.”

IV

A Whistle in the Dark and *Translations* represent images of the internal enemy. Michael represents the internal enemy; he creates for the Carney brothers a sense of cohesion and identity through their distance from him. Having sided with the British Army, Owen in *Translations* by parading his “otherness” becomes the temporary enemy from within. The enemy in the plays is not those who pose a real threat but rather the ones who represent that which is different. More recently, Marina Carr’s *By the Bog of Cats...* revisits the idea of the enemy within and the notion of exile and dissatisfaction with the homeland. Her character Hester Swane represents an isolated, rural, pagan Ireland and its struggle to maintain its traditions against the new trends of universal modernity. Hester embodies all the outdated traditions from which the community she lives in attempts to separate itself. The play illustrates the struggle between the traditions of Ireland and the national movement towards the European normalcy. Vic Merriman notes in his essay “Decolonisation Postponed: The Theatre of Tiger Trash” that the strain between Hester and her community stems from the economic boom of the “Celtic Tiger” (Merriman, 1999). For the first few scenes, it seems that Hester’s identity is formed by her relationship with Carthage, as the play progresses, the complexity of the situation is revealed and it becomes clear that her identity is connected to the homeland and not Carthage. Hester’s identity is defined by the landscape of the Bog of Cats; this deep connection restrains her ability to leave and further grounds her refusal to go into the exile state which her community wishes to force upon her. Hester’s refusal to leave is both an act of self-definition of all

that is traditionally Irish and an attempt to maintain an already strongly defined identity. Hester resists the attempts of forced exile by asserting her place in the community from her marginalized position: "I'm goin' nowhere. This here is my house and my garden and my stretch of the bog and no wan's runnin' me out of here" (Carr, 1998).

The symbols of the black swan and a black train are likened to Hester, connoting her mobile nature as a descendant of tinkers. Hester's permanence in that closed community, is a constant reminder to the characters in the play of their Irish traditions, which they wish to break from, as they progress towards modernism. The community is consumed with showy materialism as they prepare for Caroline and Carthage's wedding reception. Carthage's break from Hester and a uniting with a new wife, Caroline, is a representation of the dilemma of the characters of the community as they straddle two notions of Irishness. Caroline and her family are the picture of modern conventionality juxtaposed against the lower class dysfunctional life of Hester. The fragmented memory of Hester's mother by the community as being a song stitcher is unfavourable as they recall her preference for drink and shameless sexuality in fulfilment of her mobile tinker nature. *By the Bog of Cats...* unravels the mystics behind the hybrid language only intelligible to Hester Swane because of her tinker lineage. This mystic language constitutes for her a sign of personal heritage and empowerment rather than shame. Her unintelligible speech, however, further marginalizes her from her community and connects her more to ghosts than to the living. Xavier Catherine's father recalls: "Let me tell ya a thing or two about your mother, big Josie Swane. I used to see her outside her auld caravan on the bog and ... her croonin' towards Orion in a language I never heard before or since" (Carr, 1998). Hester's connection with the mythological, supernatural and pagan elements of the play reveal her as a mirror image of the fragmented Irish identity in the face of her community. In parallel, the members of the community are guilty of isolating Hester partly for the crime of being the embodiment of everything that reminds them of what it used to be to be Irish as they struggle with material modernity.

Hester's quest to achieve a balanced relationship with the community is diminished by her refusal to conform to the new standards of conventionality in Irish life. Her identification with mythological figures as well as her reliance on folk traditions best illustrate the way that she uses the recently outmoded elements of Irish culture in order to subvert the newly adopted modern ones (Kader, 2005). When Josie her daughter asks her what she needs her teeth for, Hester replies, "Ya need them for snarlin' at people when smilin' doesn't work anymore" (Carr, 1998). Hester is labelled as a witch despite her inability to perform witchcraft as a means to stereotype her as the enemy within. Hester turns this weapon of marginalization to her own advantage; she uses pre-modern traditions to inflate the negative conceptions of her community and assert her powerfulness in their eyes (Kader, 2005). Melissa Sihra in "A Cautionary Tale: Marina Carr's *By the Bog of Cats ...*" identifies Hester as a Cathleen Ni Houlihan – a re-imagined metaphor for Mother Ireland. Hester is presented in many scenes as the daughter of great mother Ireland symbolising the bogs as an abandoned piece of land, an indication of the land's suffering and neglect. Both Hester and the bog are dangerous images for the collective trauma of the Irish people and their national sense of identity.

Unlike Michael who forfeits his homeland, Hester Swane in *The Bog of Cats...* defends her right to stay by the bog by telling the wedding guests, "I know every barrow and rivulet and bog hole of its nine square mile. I know where the best bog rosemary grows and the sweetest wild bog rue" (Carr, 1998). Hester's knowledge of the herbs of the bog marks her connection to the natural landscape and anchors her to her identity. It also re-emphasises her inert connection to folk tradition and removes any possibility of her emerging with a new Irish identity. The bog is a transhistorical space less solid than other landforms which effectively serves the play's purpose of keeping in flux the past and the present. Hester mirrors the past and the bog challenges the present towards which the community is heading. The characters in Carr's play fluctuate between a pagan Ireland and the temptations of "the new free market world of consumerism and upward social movement" (Gladwin, 2011). The waiter at Caroline and Carthage's wedding laments his fate for having been born in a family that has always worked on the bogs: "I want to

be an astronaut but me father wants me to work on the bog like him and like me grandfather" (Carr, 1998). The young waiter, is unable to transverse the margins of economic development in twenty-first century Ireland.

Hester's refusal to leave the land stems from her desire to stay in a place to which she is connected: "I was born on the Bog of Cats and on the Bog of Cats I'll end me days. I've as much right to this place as any of yeess, more, for it holds me to it in ways it has never held yeess" (Carr, 1998). Hester's identity is immersed in the place in which she lives and the thought of removal represents self-annihilation and redefinition (Kader, 2005). In her plea not to be removed from her life-long home, Hester tells the wedding guests, "I've never lived in a town. I won't know anywan there [...]. I can't lave the Bog of Cats" (Carr, 1998). It is through the landscape that Hester defines herself. Her claim to the land is emotional; it is her pride and superior knowledge of the land which tells her to stay. When Xavier tells her, "This is no longer your property and well ya know it," Hester responds, "I have regained my pride and it tells me I'm stayin" (Carr, 1998). By modern day legal standards this may be laughable but the conflict over land between Xavier and Hester mimics the dispute which arose between the native Irish and the British forces in the colonial era. Ownership of land in pre-colonial Ireland was determined by familial connections to the piece of land. Unfortunately, such claims do not hold up in the modern world of globalization and intercultural exchange.

The bog in the play stands as a synecdoche for all of Ireland, it represents the challenges of a new Ireland, one that allows itself "to quickly expunge some of its traumatic past" (Gladwin, 2011). Hester's relationship to the bog forces her to stand on the peripherals of society as she attempts to defy contemporary displacement. Carr aligns the bog and the Irish nation as a whole through Hester. Declan Kiberd's notion that Ireland represents the unconscious of England is underscored in Hester's sense of abandonment which Carr links with that of the nation itself. He claims that Ireland when looked at through a post-colonial perspective "represents the dark history of colonial rule and the attempt to eradicate surfaces not just in the residents of the bogs but in the Irish ethos" (Gladwin, 2011). Hester probes this tension: "The truth is you want to eradicate me, make out I never existed" (Carr, 1998). Hester's choice to commit suicide signifies her emigration from the homeland, Joseph's ghost tells her, "Death's a big country" (Carr, 1998).

Catherine Kelly, an emerging critic, attacks Carr's disappointing ending where suicide stands as a full abdication of Hester's identity and the loss of the battle between primitive Irishness and the modern day Ireland of multiple belongings. In her death, Hester is physically returning to the land or as Bernadette Bourke calls it, "the great nurturing womb of nature" (Bourke, 2003). Hester attempts to solidify her identity in Bhabha's notion of the "third space"; the bog which exhibits her connection to the land and to the peripheral social space of the bog. In fact, the bogs are commonly referred to as "liminal, no places" (Gladwin, 2011). The second act in *By the Bog of Cats...* is set inside Xavier's house where Hester is not welcome, hence representing a space in which the community resists misfits; a place where they can be easily marginalized for exhibiting their "otherness." Hester exhibits both pagan and Christian elements. Her heinous crime of offering her daughter to the bog as a sacrifice followed by her own suicide is a permanent fixture on the landscape of the Bog of Cats and her identity remains as an irremovable part of the land. In this way, her identity had been translated through strategies of appropriation producing for her the possibility of a dignified after life for having had a tinker identity conscripted on her.

Conclusion

The dramatic works *A Whisper in the Dark*, *Translations* and *By the Bog of Cats* question issues of Irish identity which Kearney describes as "co-terminous with the island" (1997, p. 99). The mobile life of the characters is what forges their new Irish identity; one can argue of course that it could also be fragmented. The plays display the stage Irish figure in a "heightened form of brutality" (Heininge, 2009), the characters fight the world and each other with a ferocity born of inner emptiness, frustration and bitterness (Griffin, 1983). The plays are illustrative of the aspects of Irishness which must be cleansed to obtain a new configuration of cultural identity. The three dramatic texts are subtle "chronicler[s] of the

embourgeoisification of rural Ireland” as Kiberd would put it (1996). This raises the issue of the impossibility of representing a single, fixed reality of postcolonial Irish identity on the stage.

Many critics have interpreted Sarah and Hester as allegorical representations of Cathleen ni Houlihan, the legend of Ireland and her connection to the Irish land. This element of similarity highlights a significant factor of the cultural marginalization experienced in Irish communities. Their limited margin of communication reveals the discrimination in society at a national level of those who resist cultivation. Sarah's lack of communication in *Translations*, represents the inevitable loss of the Irish language. Mikhail Bakhtin further explains the complexity of using this allegory in that when an audience have been promised a nationalist drama that will reveal themselves to themselves, dramatists tend to make use of “distant images” (Bakhtin, 1981). Eavan Boland explains that any effort to recover authenticity in Irish identity usually results in an abundance of false Irish sentimentalism (Harper, 2008).

Michael in *A Whistle in the Dark* and Owen in *Translations* both attempt to defensively assert their national identity and self-image as a natural response to their marginal status and powerlessness. Their identities as suggested by Bhabha's theory of hybridity do not live in the middle ground of difference or by the “straight arrow of emancipation” (1997). It is however as Diana Fuss argues, a sense of identification which is only possible when placed in Bhabha's ambivalent third space (Fuss, 1995). Owen and Michael retain their presence between those “lousy Englishmen” (Murphy, 2001) and the “Paddies” (Murphy, 2001) establishing themselves as what can be termed as borderline identities. With this setup, identity is moved beyond its former rigidity where it can escape the confinements of constructed identity.

On a more up to date note, communication and technology have become part of the individual's meaning-making and thus identity building. This suggests that individuals in different geographical spaces can construct a version of Irishness that has little to do with where an individual lives, or even where they began (Mara, 2010). The global connection via television, internet and radio build an Irish identity that withstands examination from within. Perhaps those new connections have allowed a broadening of the understanding of what being Irish can encompass. Globalism within such a context, recreates a more progressive Irish identity which integrates Irish experience with interactions other than those with the nation. In this sense, Irish identity continues to reside at the cusp of transnationalism because it was constructed in a global context, both pre-nation and post-nation (Mara, 2010).

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