

## Review

# Colonialism and the recreation of identity: The Irish Theatre as case study

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**This study aims at highlighting the role of the Irish theatre in reviving Irish culture and establishing a dependent Irish identity. It also seeks to prove that theatre is used as means of resistance to English colonialism; it presents W. B. Yeats as an example of the Irish dramatists who played a significant role in the recreation of Irish national identity as an independent distinct identity. Actually, Yeats' efforts in the national employment of literature for national purposes were the fountainhead by which he was able to present the national cause of his country. The study concludes that the Irish theatre played a great national role by presenting nationalism-oriented plays that aroused the sense of national feelings of audiences and created a national identity as well. Irish theatre imposingly for grounded itself powerfully not on the literary level, but also on the national level by its role in identity creation.**

**Key words:** Colonialism and the recreation of identity, theatre and nationalism, Irish culture, The Abbey Theatre, literature and identity formation, multi –culturalism, new historicism.

## INTRODUCTION

One of the distinctive features of the Irish theatre is its adoption and its reintroduction of the Irish habitat to strengthen national feelings among audiences. So, this over – determined relation between the theatrical and cultural and historical matters functions as, “a pervasive”, but it still has a largely “invisible restriction” on the critical frame of Irish theatre (Pilkington, 2004:724). Taking the political milieu in Ireland into considerations, The Celtic Revival, called for “de- Anglicizing” Ireland in addition to its political and cultural independence. On the other hand, this movement attracted many writers who adopted its principles and advocated them in their works. This background justifies the preoccupation of Irish dramatists with an “idolized” nationalist vision of their theatre (Herr, 1991:10). In this light, the study presents W. B. Yeats a clear example of this trend for his role in Ireland’s national cause.

### Historical background

The Irish cultural awareness resulted in the Irish Literary Revival. Thus, Irish cultural nationalism was greatly

influenced by the political disorder that resulted in the breaking of the union with England. On the other hand, Yeats had an intimate relationship with Douglass Hyde who had a great influence on Yeats’ sense of nationalism. Hyde was able to bring the Irish question into focus by establishing the “Gaelic League” in 1893. He declared its purposes to be mainly cultural; and paid a great attention to the indigenous Irish language. No doubt, there is a strong relation between language and the national and cultural identity, from this point Yeats was aware of the importance of Irish language; and he consequently emphasized the Irish dialect, especially the peasants’ dialect, as the main principle of the Irish theatre. No doubt then, language is considered as a marker of national identity because there is a strong relation between language and cultural identity.

Viewing language in this light, the Irish theatre focused on the issue of language and aimed at introducing Irish plays using the peasants’ dialect. These attempts had a national and a cultural influence among the Irish audiences and hence is seen as a step forward establishing an independent distinctive national identity.

## APPROACH

The study adopts new historicism and material culturalism as its approach to analyze how far the Irish theatre was influenced by the political and historical events that took place during the colonial era. Referring to the historic facts, though the Anglo-Irish war ended, Irish people did not have peace. Unfortunately, the civil war broke through; and so another state of disorder dominated the country, this war divided the people into two groups: those who accepted the Anglo-Irish treaty and those who refused it. Because of this situation, six northern Irish counties joined the British rule and were later called as Northern Ireland; however, it was in 1923 that the civil war was put to an end. No doubt, this historical context enriched the Irish theatre for it highlights the question of the Irish identity. Thus, it is apparent that the Irish became aware of their identity as distinct from the English nearly in every thing: language, tradition, heritage and even in religion. Evidently, this justifies the Irish dramatic movement in its quest of making "drama as a vehicle of propaganda" (Maxwell, 1988:17).

The interaction between Irish historical context and Irish theatre is the core of the study. Irish theatre, as represented in literature, played a great role in building a national identity and eliminating the barriers that hindered the independence of the Irish identity. Indeed, Irish theatre participated in presenting a positive image opposite to the negative stereotype, which the English literature had attributed to them.

Therefore, identity formation is considered an urgent priority for countries that are under colonialism. A major aspect of identity is language, which is seen to be operating within a framework of power, institutions and politics (Hall, 1992:275). Moreover, the concept of identity, as Bhabha argues, is not "an affirmation of a pre-given identity, never a self-fulfilling prophecy"; it is a production of an image of identity and theatre. In this light, Irish writers established a theatre that reflected the Irish culture in a positive context. These attempts were considered as a reaction against British colonialism. In The location of culture, Bhabha clarifies this fact; he states that colonial authority "requires modes of discrimination...between the mother culture and its bastards, the self and its doubles" (Bhabha, 1995:34).

### The cultural role of the Irish Theatre

Evidently, Irish theatre urged Irish writers to present plays that glorified their past heroism. Hence, Yeats, together with other Irish writers, was encouraged to write a literature that was based on Irish themes such as Irish tradition and heritage. The most desirable Irish theme was that which is concerned with the concept of Irishness (Pilkington, 2004:726). This national goal was later developed to turn into the so-called "Literary Revival", literary Revival accompanied political revival and thus

their interchangeable relations with each other can best be described as supplementary. This attitude was fully accepted by Irish writers and gradually the issue of Irishness "became a source of inspiration for many writers. No doubt then, their poetic dramatic achievements defended the so called "Gaelic consciousness" (Pilkington, 2004:272).

Therefore, there is a deep link between Irish theatre and its various historical contexts. This interrelation between culturalism and nationalism demanded that the Irish theatre should emphasize awareness by urging Irish dramatists to have a commitment to the national theatre and this new reality required an emphasis to the interconnections between the theatre and contemporary political events.

Though William Butler Yeats, the descendent of an Anglo-Irish stock, did not speak Irish; still he adopted the themes of the Irish revival and advocated them in his works. His efforts in urging Irish people to fight for a distinct Irish identity are unquestioned. To achieve his goals; he collaborated with a group of Irish people who were known for their patriotism to establish a theatrical tradition that would help in fostering people's loyalty and strengthening their sense of nationalism. Among this group of nationalists was Lady Gregory whose role is set as an example of collaboration between the Irish writers to serve their national cause.

Yeats as well as Lady Gregory had a deep vision and both were aware of the importance of the theatre and its role in increasing people's sense of nationalism. They acknowledged the instructional authority of the theatre; this explained Gregory and Yeats' choice of the Department of Education to seek the support of academia and so, Ireland became "the first English-speaking country to subsidize a national theatre." (Pilkington, 2004:723). Actually, the political and historical milieu had grown on the newly established theatre. For instance, many political movements appeared such as the Irish Republican Brotherhood, the Irish Citizen Army...etc., a fact that led to the breaking of the union with England. Obviously, the newly-born dramatic movement was challenged by these serious barriers which hindered the creation of an Irish identity.

### Theatre and identity formation

Clearly, Yeats declared that the Irish dramatists' responsibility is very serious; for literature is as important as other national factors. Thus, Yeats' dream of having an Irish theatre faced many obstacles, yet he was determined to fulfill it. His efforts, undoubtedly, would have been fruitless without the tremendous efforts of his colleagues: Lady Gregory, Synge and Martyne. Yeats was interested in retrieving the Irish identity by asserting the relation between culture and nationalism, "which results in new speculations about the sense of nationalism" (Greene, 2000:242).

Based on national factors, famous Irish writers at that time (Lady Gregory, Synge and Martyne) decided to have an indigenous Irish theatre that dealt with Irish subjects far away from the English colonizing influence. This theatre was called The Abbey Theatre. By establishing this theatre, the founders attempted to send a message to colonial authorities to warn them that Ireland was not "the home of buffoonery and easy sentiment, but the home of the support of an ancient idealism" (Gregory, 1973:5). The new theatre attempted to reintroduce the "other" image of the Irish people by changing the negative stereotype that the colonizer associated with them. Lady Gregory hinted to this fact saying "we are...weary of misrepresentation" (Gregory, 1973:5).

Above all, the founders of the Abbey theatre published a notice called "Advice to playwrights", in this notice, they demanded that a "play to be suitable for performance at the Abbey should contain some criticism of life, founded on experience or personal observation of the writer, or some vision of life, of Irish life by preference" (Gregory, 1973:62). Obviously enough, the former notice reveals that the Irish theatre has a distinctive trait. Unlike other theatres, which aimed at providing fun, and amusement for the audience, the Abbey theatre however was distinguished for its educative power. The educative power is the key to understand the policy of this theatre. For instance, Yeats clarified this point saying, "literature is to my mind the greater teaching power of the world" (Yeats, 1962a, b:57-58). Surely, Yeats' interest in Irish themes brought him round to a point where he felt the urgency of utilizing the Irish national heritage in the theater. Therefore, there is a close relationship between the theatre and Ireland's cultural and social reality. This notion was regarded as a "national autonomy" which was an immediate result of the increasing interest of the Irish dramatists in their culture, language, and heritage. Consequently, this led to the spread of "Renaissance" ideals among Irish people (Maxwell, 1988:17).

However, this sense of Irishness made the Irish dramatic movement so peculiar if compared with other European counter parts. For example, in Theatre in Ireland states, the Irish dramatic movement had distinguished itself "from its prototypes in Bergen parts of London by its use of Irish legends and folklore as a material for poetic drama" (O'h Aodia, 1970:8). When compared with other Irish dramatists, Yeats strikes us as a unique figure and yet the context in which he lived participated in his originality. Surely enough, Yeats benefited a lot from the historic milieu and thus his "sense of history and sense of tradition are important, and with Yeats one can go further to say that traditionalism is based on a wide reading in, and a rich knowledge of ...modern cultural historians" (Brooks, 1978:45).

### **The Irish Theatre and the challenges of colonialism**

Interestingly, drama played a direct role in the promotion

of Irish nationalism; in fact, it had been "so closely bound up with a national politics as opposed to English colonialism. Indeed, Irish theatre asserted the return to Irish traditions and roots. Concerning this point, the founders of the theatre called for a drama that was "rooted in Irish soil", they considered their role of a great significance in the sense that the new theatre attempted to inspire and promote nationalism. However, the founders of the Irish theatre had their opponents; the efforts of both Yeats and Gregory were attacked since "in both cases an emphatic distinction was asserted between what was seen as the British or Ascending" (Pilkington, 2004:725). Surprisingly, Yeats and Lady Gregory though played a great role in the national cause, were accused of their nationalism simply because of their being a descendent from Anglo-Irish origins. Their efforts were underestimated and were viewed from an exclusive colonial perspective.

Indeed, not only the founders of The Abbey Theatre were attacked, but the philosophy of the theatre was criticized as well. The founders of the Irish theatre asserted the independence of the Irish identity and confirmed that "Irish national drama must be very different as the Irish nation is not decadent and is still living by virtues" (Levitas, 2002:572). This misunderstanding of both the principles of the theatre and his founders' nationalism reflected a "deeper cultural division, among the Irish themselves. Therefore, if we take Yeats as a representative of the founders' principles, we assume that he sought drama to be Irish than for national propaganda. Yeats looked forward to introducing "something more objectively responsible to historical facts than merely subjective reveries" (Brooks, 1978:45). This is the message that Yeats expressed in his poem "The Fisherman", in W. B. Yeats: A Critical Edition of the Major Works, Yeats writes:

All day I'd looked in the face  
What I had hoped would be  
To write for my race (Larrisy, 1997:69).

Actually, this Irish touch in Yeats' works incited other Irish writers to assert Irish identity in their writings by advocating an awareness of their national identity. Yeats celebrated having Irish identity and tradition in many of his works. In fact, Yeats not only emphasized the "instinctive" nature of tradition, but he also believed that it was impossible to understand the traditions of others if one was not aware of his/ her culture and identity. In Autobiographies, Yeats indicated that the supreme art is a traditional expression of, "certain heroic and religious truths passed from age to age modified by individual genius, but never abandoned" (Yeats, 1955:490-491). However, Yeats was not only satisfied with his role as the Irish Dramatic Movement main advocator, but he also became the theatre's manager, director and playwright. In fact, his friendship with Lady Gregory and Martyne was of a great benefit for him since he was among colleagues

who shared similar beliefs and hopes. This fact was a step forward toward the successful accomplishment of the Irish theatre. Together, they established the philosophy of the Abbey theatre, which insisted on the reform of the traditional theatre, and on the transformation of the purposeless abstractions in constructive positive attitude. Yeats praised the role of the founders of The Abbey Theatre, he celebrated their role in his poetry, he wrote:

John Synge, I and Augusta Gregory though  
All that we did, all that we said or sung  
Must come from contact with the soil, from that  
Contact everything Antaeus-like grew strong (Dantanus, 1988:9).

Reading the previous lines, Yeats asserted the necessity of having a theatre that can play a direct function by eliminating the obstacles that created gaps between theatre and audiences. Thus, the founders of The Abbey Theatre looked forward to having a theatre that can be instructive and entertain at the same time.

Yeats as a representative of the Irish theatre, asserted the necessity of the interrelation between culture and tradition in the process of creating an identity. He asserted the importance of tradition in reflecting the cultural consciousness of the Irish people. The Irish theatre, from Yeats' perspective, is a means of inspiration through writing plays that dealt with topics that were directly involved in Irish life. Thus, Yeats' reconstruction of Irish past in his works was an outlet of a cultural function geared towards preserving Irish identity and its continuity. Surely, this goal could not be achieved unless the dramatists presented selective images of the desired characteristics the Irish man was supposed to have.

## CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

The historical and cultural milieu had a direct impact on the Irish stage. This background participated in redirecting Irish theatre to cope with the modern changes in postcolonial Ireland. In other words; the theatre's increasing authority was brought to equal terms with political institution. Thus, the Irish theatre possesses a high instructive authority.

Viewing theatre from this perspective, Irish theatre succeeded in making drama directly involved in national issues. This success exceeded the expectations as the Irish theatre became internationally accepted; hence, the Irish dramatic movement succeeded in portraying the Irish identity crisis while politicians failed to do so.

Finally, through the establishment of a national Irish

theatre, the founders of Irish theatre in general, and Yeats in particular, aimed at national identity building. The Irish theatre was made as a source of inspiration rather than an imitation of other European theatres. In doing so, The Abbey theatre presented itself powerfully, not only on the European stage, but also to the universal dramatic reception. Most of Yeats plays were staged in many countries in Europe, even more; they extended Europe to different countries of the world including America, Asia, Africa and Australia. For instance, in Japan there is a great interest in Yeats' Noah plays.

In conclusion, this wide spread of Irish drama, represented by Yeats, succeeded in attracting the attention to the Irish cause and presenting the image of Irish culture away from any colonial distortion. In conclusion, staging Irish national plays had a powerful impact on the national interaction of the Irish audience more than any other political propaganda. Hence, the study concluded that Irish theatre participated indirectly in the liberation of Ireland by promoting the sense of nationalism among Irish people.

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