

A Critical Study of Brian Friel's Nationalism: Friel Between Politics and Nationalism

Dr Amal Riyadh Kitishat

Al Balqa Applied University- Ajloun University College, Dept. of English Language.

Postal address: Jordan, Ajloun. Al Balqa Applied University.

Ajloun University College, P.O box (1)

Postal code 26816

Abstract

Taking the Historical background into consideration, the study will shed light on Friel's political and national dogmas. The study addresses large and important issue concerning Friel's role as the national dramatist of Ireland. The study examines the relationship between Friel's drama and his political stance and by extension the larger issues of literature and colonialism and literature and history. The study aims at proving that Friel is a nationalist but not a politician; in other words, the study argues that Friel's philosophy of the Field Day theatre is seen within a cultural perspective. Friel's plays are not only related to the political situation in Ireland, but they are also employed to shed light on the Irish cultural context. Thus, Friel's establishment of the Field Day Theatre comes as a confirmation of Friel's cultural insights which though presented Irish life. Still it did not follow a direct historical or a political treatment of the themes of his plays, rather he focused on stressing the national identity of the Irish audience. The study proved that Friel's works are nationalist in tendency within a cultural perspective.

Keywords: Brian Friel; Field Day Theatre; Irish Theatre; National literature; post- colonial literature.

DOI: 10.7176/RHSS/10-4-10

Publication date: February 29th 2020

1. Introduction

Friel reveals a serious awareness of national identity. This fact also reflects Friel's interests in social and political issues including "the inner conflicts of Northern Ireland". Friel was torn between the claims of unionists and Nationalists, Catholics and Protestants... occupies Friel as it does with everybody else in Ulster" (Achilles 1992: 6). Thus, his establishment of the field day Theatre comes as a confirmation of his cultural insights which though presented Irish life, still Friel did not follow a historical or political treatment of the themes of his plays.

Friel was aware of the cultural background of his plays, so he looked forward to developing a comprehensive vision of Irish history. The current study aims to prove that Friel's view of the Irish civilization as endangered civilization. Moreover, this datum is supported when we take into consideration his audience, as Friel states it clearly Brian Friel, "let it be known that he would no longer write for the world at large, but Ireland. If others – Britain, we inferred wanted to look over his shoulders, that was their business" (Leonard 1998:25). Friel believes that the Irish drama "should make a statement... to the nation. Not to do so, is a betrayal of one's birthright" (Leonard 1998:26). For example; Friel's works explore "issues of cultural identity and collective and personal memory". He "explored the cultural roots, of the Anglo-Irish conflict." (Jonathan Law, 220-21). In other words, Friel is always seen to be "pursuing the topic of intercultural relations, the question of choosing between home and abroad, between stability and change" (Achilles, 1992, 3). It is in this light that the study aims to prove that Friel's that Friel advocates the importance of the theatre, a fact that will be enforced if we take his role in the establishment of Field Day Theatre into consideration. For him, theatre can help in reforming the national identity from anything that might distort it.. After the second world war, Friel recognized that Ireland is in a "crisis with the Northern Ireland enclave forced the Island's citizens to parse identity with a specify unknown to the earlier era" (Boltwood2002:304). The study stressed the idea that Friel suffered from a personal ambivalence towards politics. Friel, the researcher argues, does not pertain to political ideologies, but the nationalist concept of Irishness.

2. METHODS

Probably the most important method that seems to be applicable in studying Friel's nationalism is material culturalism. The study argues that it is difficult to understand Friel's works without referring to his attitude towards the role of theatre concerning its cultural background. Friel 'repeatedly called for the need of going back to the roots, in this light, most of Friel's works stressed "the questionable aspects of the search for an alienable roots" and reveal Friel's attraction of the "intercultural communication and understanding"(Achilles 1992: 3). This depiction of the Irish material enforces his view of the Irish culture as a juxtaposition of the spirit of strangeness which is creeping over the Irish culture and endangering its purity with a sense of alienation.

Taking the cultural accordance between politics and nationalism into considerations, Friel complains of the sense of rootlessness as a "Northerner". He looks forward to having a great degree of Irishness away from the "sense of exile" that threatened the modern generation. (Murray 1997: 20). Concerning this issue, in "Recording

Tremors...", Christopher Murray comments on Friel's conflict between roots and "rootlessness" even though he is indigenous Irish. He elucidates:

Friel, in an interview, confesses to a sense of rootlessness and impermanence which may well be the inheritance of being a member of the Northern minority... where you are certainly at home but in some sense, exile is imposed on you... In some kind of way, I think Field Day has grown out of that sense of the impermanence of people who feel themselves native to a province or certainly to an island but in some way feel that disinheritance is offered to them. (20)

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

A recurrent feature that can be detected in Friel's work is his elevation of the Irish national identity. Friel's works explore "issues of cultural identity and collective and personal memory". He "explored the cultural roots, of the Anglo-Irish conflict." (Jonathan Law, 220-21). In other words, Friel is always seen to be "pursuing the topic of intercultural relations, the question of choosing between home and abroad, between stability and change" (Achilles 1992: 3). It is in this light that Friel advocates the importance of the theatre, a fact that will be enforced if we take his role in the establishment of Field Day Theatre into consideration. Indeed, this fact reminds us of Yeats' efforts in the establishment of the Abbey Theatre; what is interesting here is the belief that the Field Day is like Yeats' Abbey in some of its dramatic philosophy. Of course, taking into consideration the difference in the development of drama through time. The innovativeness of Field Day and its enlightening motivations shadowed Yeats's style. In an interview, he hinted at Yeats' influence. "The purpose of Field Day, he says, after tiptoeing around it ... is to provide a brave and vibrant theatre that in some way express his country" (Murray 1993: 77).

The Field Day looks like the Abbey in the fact that it presented the Irish theatre and the urgent issues of Irishness with a slight chronological difference of a post-colonial reality. The Field Day's production of the plays is related to the unification of colonial and post-colonial, "it aims to unveil the contradictions and divisions inside the Irish society, of the Republic of Ireland and the united kingdom, of north and south, of Protestant and Catholic', as... central image and instrument of political change" (Worthen 1989:24). In other words, Friel's Field Day Theatre took the burden of correcting the mistaken approaches that distorted the image of the Irish people; the main philosophy of the Field Day was to "create innovative dramas that challenged preconceived notions of Irish history, identity, and theatre. (Trotter 2003:39-40).

Taking the pre/post-colonial reality of Irish society into consideration, the concept of identity was always available in Friel's plays. Friel recognized that the concept of national identity is in crisis. He states that the Irish have to be more concerned with "defining" their Irishness "than pursuing it. We want to know what the 'native' means, what the word 'foreign' means. We want to know whether the words have any meaning at all" (Friel 1999:45).

Friel was indistinct in his refusal of the divisions that threatened Irish society. In addition to the political division's threat, Friel warned the Irish people from the social problems that attempted to de-stabilize their unity and identity. Friel also discussed the religious conflict between Catholics and Protestants; he attempted to reach a "union between nationalism and Catholicism", However, he revealed a "personal ambivalence towards the two ideologies as well as their blending" (Boltwood:304). Yet, Friel reveals that his argument of " 'faith' does not pertain to religion, but the nationalist idea of Irishness" "(Boltwood:304).

Among Friel's plays that deal with Anglo-Irish conflict, the study selects two plays *The Freedom of the City* (1973) and *Translations* (1980). These plays discussed the Anglo-Irish conflict and the decline of the Irish language under the colonial authority. Though the two plays are similar in their theme, yet they are different:

The contrast with *The Freedom of the City* is unavoidable: whereas the earlier play mordantly satirizes Derry's ruling Unionist bureaucracy and provoked controversy in its London and New York productions because of its alleged attack on the British system of judicial and military authority in Northern Ireland, the production and initial reception of *Translations* suggests an entirely different phenomenon. (Pilkington 1990:282)

The Freedom of the City was written in 1973 and newly revived by the Irish Repertory Theatre. on the surface, the play seems to be a dramatized representation of Bloody Sunday, the dreadful afternoon in 1972 when British army shot and killed 14 unarmed men at a civil-rights protest in Northern Ireland. Though it refers to a historic event, still it can be viewed as a reflection on how politics can kill innocent people, who are victims of political disorder. In *A Tragedy of Irish Proportions*, Terry Teachout summarized the play as follow:

As his fictional protest unfolds, three marchers take cover from tear gas inside a nearby government building, where they discover to their astonishment that they're hiding out in the mayor's office. None of them is in any way militant, much less inclined to violence. Michael (James Russell) is an earnest, priggish activist for Catholic rights, Lily (Cara Seymour) is a good-natured but ill-educated mother of 11, and Skinner (Joseph Sikora) is a cynical ne'er-do-well drifter. As the three drink the mayor's whiskey and marvel at the fanciness of his furniture, the soldiers surrounding the building wrongly conclude that it has been occupied by 40 armed protesters, and no sooner do Mr. Friel's hapless characters come out with their hands up than they are cut down in a hail of gunfire. (Teachout 2012:1)

The Freedom of the City is dissent against both the vainness of Bloody Sunday and the poverty in which the major characters live. It is argued that a part of the play's greatness and popularity is due to Mr. Friel's surpasses "the immediate by rising above politics to portray the killing of Michael, Lily, and Skinner not as a mere public event but as a tragedy in the truest, fullest sense" (Teachout 2012:2).

Also, in *Translations*, Friel discussed another level of national identity, however; this time identity is related to language. Friel stressed the importance of the Irish language as the main source of national identity. He sees in the attempts of the English colonial authorities to translate the names of Irish cities and towns as a threat against the Irish national identity.

In *Translations*, Friel linked between language, politics and national identity. He presented his indirect criticism of the Irish indifference to their language as an interrelated paradoxical relation between politics and national identity. The play's greatness lies in "its de-mythologizing of traditional conceptions of Irish history in a way that offers a healing potential for the violent conflict in the North" (Pilkington 1990:282). Regarding this point, Kitishat in "Language and Resistance in Brian Friel's *Translations*" States:

Taking Brian Friel's *Translations* (1980) as the point of focus, the study investigates the influence of English occupation represented by the English language, (the language of the occupation forces), on the Irish language which represents the voice of the occupied. The study tries to trace the relation between language as a marker of identity on the one hand; and language as a way of resistance on the other hand. The study concludes that the Irish language doesn't have power even inside its homeland, in addition to the fact that the Irish people show indifference to the use of their language in their daily life. This fact is represented through the symbolic process of translating the geographic Irish places into the English language. The co-operation between the Irish citizens with the forces of occupation reveals a political unconsciousness, and a hidden approval of replacing the Irish language by the language of the "enemy". (2014:1)

In other words, Friel identified the Irish conflicts and divisions by shedding the light on the hidden and the under-surface conflict in contemporary society. In this light, Friel determined to unveil these problems by dramatizing the contemporary Irish society's problems at his theatre. His heroes share a common attitude of the view of Irish youth towards the political as well as a social disorder. Friel for instance, regards "the dramatist's overwhelming duty is to "clarify, elucidate, and establish agreed codes, for purposes of communication and discussion." (Binnie 1986: 366). Friel sees theatre as a means of creating "self-awareness through the critical examination of Irish beliefs, as these are expressed in the contours of everyday speech..." (Binnie 1986: 366).

Also, the Irish civil war was another political issue that s troubled Friel. The political disorder of post-1969 Ulster made Friel predict with a kind of inevitability the breakthrough of civil war. Such a political disorder situation had continued to bear on what Friel regards writers' interaction and response to the major events in Ireland. With regard, this point Friel is seen in the light of "social commitment" while he is in, " the process of structuring drama" (Etherton 1989:149). So, most of Friel's plays focus "either on public events Or private traumas, but always on the moment, which is taken to be the crisis, the fall, the moment which is to be the origin of and the key to all subsequent moments". (Andrews: 34) Thus, Friel's choice of themes is believed to be moving and shaking which gives his theatre a flamboyant success.

In other words, Friel's political opinion only represents him since he refused any political commitment to any "particular part of faction". Still, "his later plays, especially are dependent upon the dialectical method". (Binnie: 366). At this point, the study concludes Friel's Field Day had set a well-knit philosophy. His theatre proved to be "expectant and trustful" of an audience that cannot be "wooed by the populist 'relevance' of community theatre, nor condescended to by 'culture' mongering. The relationship between theatre goes to the people, not for their sake but its own" (Maxwell 1993: 51).

4. Conclusions

To sum up, the study proved that Friel as a worthy nationalist of the post-colonial Ulster Theatre. The importance of the establishment of The Field Day theatre is in its relevance to Irish locality. So, such a locality in the circumstances constitutes an entire stimulus for many of Friel's plays. It is in this critical angel, that the Field Day theatre established itself strongly on the literary scene and enabled the Irish theatre to generate new approaches of presenting long-lasting problems.

No doubt that the recurrence of the national themes hints at Friel's serious awareness about the national identity, it also reflects Friel's interests in social and political issues including the chronic conflicts of Northern Ireland, represented in the contradictory parties: unionists and Nationalists, Catholics and Protestants...etc. Friel was able to draw the attention of the Irish society of the factors that divided them. By depicting the Irish reality and history as major themes in theatre, Friel succeeded in stimulating a sense of awareness among the Irish audience to overcome any threats that undermine their national identity. In this light, he is seen as a nationalist writer who played a cultural role in reforming the Irish identity by excluding all the barriers that troubled the building of the national identity in post-colonial Ireland.

References

- Achilles, Jochen. (1992). "Intercultural relations in Brian Friel's works." *The internationalism of Irish literature and drama*. Joseph McMinn (ed.). Gerrard's Cross: Colin Smythe, 3-16.
- Andrews, Elmer. (1993). "The fifth province" *The achievement of Brian Friel*. Ed. Alan. J. Peacock. Great Britain: Gerard's Cross, 1993, 29-48.
- Binnie, Eric. (1986). "Brecht and Friel: some Irish parallels". *Modern Drama*. 31 .3, 364-370.
- Boltwood, Scott. (2002). "Brian Friel: staging the struggle with nationalism." *Irish university review* 32, no. 2 (2002): 303-18. Accessed January 26, 2020. www.jstor.org/stable/25504911.
- Etherton, Michael. (1999). *Contemporary Irish drama: 1964-1999*. edited by Christopher Murray. London: Faber and Faber.
- Kitishat, Amal. (2014). Language and resistance in Brian Friel's *Translations*. *International journal of linguistics and literature (IJLL)*.3,1:1-8.
- Leonard, Hugh. (1998). "The unimportance of being Irish". *Irishness in a changing society*. Edited by the Princess Grace Irish Library. Gerrard's Cross: Colin Smythe, 18-29.
- Maxwell, Desmond. (1993). "'Figures in a peepshow': Friel and the Irish dramatic tradition". *The achievement of Brian Friel*. (ed.) Alan J.P. Peacock. Colin Smyth: Gerard's Cross, 1993, 49-68.
- Murray, Christopher. (1997). *Twentieth-century Irish drama: mirror up to a nation*. Manchester UP.
- Pilkington, Lionel. (1990). "Language and politics in Brian Friel's '*Translations*'". *Irish University Review*, 20, 2, pp. 282-298.
- Teachout, Terry. (2012). A tragedy of Irish proportions. *the wall street journal*. Accessed on 26 January 2020 from <https://www.wsj.com/>.
- Trotter, Mary. (2003). "Reimagining the emigrants exile in contemporary Irish drama" *Modern Drama*, XLVI. 1:35-54.
- Worthen, W.B. (1995). "Homeless words: field day and the politics of *Translations*". *Modern Drama*, 38. 1: 22-41.