

Identity Crisis in Northern Ireland: Evidence from Sheridan's *Some Mother's Son* and George's *The Boxer*

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Abstract

Our paper entitled "Identity Crisis in Northern Ireland" reflects upon the changes emerged on the identity of the Irish people in Northern Ireland in the aftermath of the guerrilla warfare which the nationalists waged against unionists and the British subjects in Belfast for several decades in the twentieth century. According to Sheridan's and George's films, the ethnocultural conflict in Northern Ireland unveiled the patriarchal, racist and homogeneous paradigms of such nationalist organizations as the IRA whose overdependence on violence in its resistance to the British revitalizes the Machiavellian principle of "ends justifying means" and nurtures racism and cultural bigotry. Sheridan and George, we conclude, advocate the culturally tolerant and diverse ideology of multiculturalism to counteract the essential homogeneity and chauvinism of nationalism as practiced by the IRA.

Key words: Nationalism; Multiculturalism; Hybridity; Northern Ireland

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INTRODUCTION

In this paper, we will argue that Jim Sheridan in *Some Mother's Son* (1997) and Terry George's in *The Boxer* (1997) disavow nationalism in favor of universalism which they represent as a more viable paradigm for the

promotion of tolerance and respect of difference in the multicultural society of Northern Ireland. The two films, we assume, are intended to promote multiculturalism and defy the dogmatic discourse of nationalism. Both films are set in the context of the history and politics of the conflict between nationalists, predominantly Roman Catholic, and unionists, predominantly Protestants, in Northern Ireland over whether to ally with England or reintegrate with the Republic of Ireland. While unionists identify themselves as British subjects and substantiate confederacy between England and Northern Ireland, nationalists feel proud of their Scottish Gaelic heritage and seek to reunite with Ireland culturally and politically. Discrimination against nationalists as a minor group by the unionist majority and the British government fueled troubles which lasted until the late 1990s.

The boxer starring Daniel-Day-Lewis as Danny Flynn, and Emily Watson as Maggie Hamill was directed by Jim Sheridan and co-written by Jim Sheridan and Terry George in 1997. It reflects upon the deep fissures within the Irish Republican Army (IRA) in Belfast in the wake of a cease-fire treaty. While the group headed by Joe Hamill views peace as an end to violence and subsequently negotiates a peace treaty with the British government, another group led by Gerard McSorley opposes peace negotiations and brands negotiators as traitors to the sacrifices made by the IRA soldiers since the outbreak of the military conflict in Northern Ireland. Amidst the military and political turbulences of the period, Danny's fourteen-year-imprisonment term for his involvement in the terrorist activities of the IRA at age 18 comes to an end; and he returns as a non-partisan man who does not denigrate his former IRA associates but wants to lead a life free from political violence for which he has paid the best years of his life. He, therefore, works with his old trainer, Ike Weir, to reopen a non-sectarian boxing club to resume his life as a boxer and bring both Catholic and Protestant boxers to train together. Irked by this brave move, some of Danny's

old IRA colleagues resort to violence when they blow up his club with a bomb in an attempt to abort his peaceful initiative to abate political tension and eradicate ethnic and religious intolerance. The tensed social and political atmosphere surrounding Danny and his former girlfriend, Maggie, now a wife of an IRA prisoner and a mother of a teen-aged son, does not avert them from pursuing their dream of living together.

Directed by Terry George and co-authored by George and Sheridan, *Some Mother's Son* features Helen Mirren as Kathleen Quigley, a widowed schoolteacher and a mother of hunger striker Gerard Quigley (Aidan Gillen); and stars Fionnula Flanagan as Annie Higgins, a mother of another hunger striker Frank Higgins (David O'Hara). The film dramatizes the 1981 hunger strike in which three hundred IRA prisoners in a Belfast prison protested against their isolation, criminalization and demoralization by the Northern Ireland policy of Thatcher's government which listed the IRA as a terrorist organization. The strikers led by Bobby Sands would refuse to end the strike unless the British government recognized them as prisoners of war instead of criminals. Thatcher's intransigent opposition to negotiate their demands even when Sands was elected as a parliament member resulted in the perish of Sands and ten other strikers whose strike continued for sixty six days. George's film calls attention to the suffering of the strikers' families and reflects upon the dilemma of Kathleen whose heart is torn between her rejection of the IRA violence and her respect to the convictions of her son, who is dying of hunger for a cause she does not share. Driven by her maternal instincts, Kathleen agrees to feed her son intravenously before he enters a coma. However, Annie, who firmly embraces the IRA's nationalist ideology, resolves to let her son die for his cause. Despite the conflicting political views Kathleen and Annie hold, the suffering of their sons render them close compatriots.

DISCUSSION

Sheridan and George agree that Irish nationalism and patriotism have declined and begun to collapse since the renewal of Northern Ireland conflict in 1969 (Rockett 89); and they suggest that the guerrilla war of the IRA significantly stigmatized the legitimate national strife of people in Northern Ireland for their freedom and independence. The perspective they arrive at and dramatize in their films converges with Edward Said's (1994) critique of nationalism and refutation of the claims that culture is essentially homogenous, deterministic and stable; Said contrarily proved that "culture is not monolithic either, and is not the exclusive property of East or West, nor of small groups of men or women." (xxiv) Despite his recognition of the role nationalism played in advancing struggle against all forms of colonialism and imperialism, Said criticized it for not renovating

its conceptions of society and culture in the light of the different sociocultural and political realities that characterize the pre-colonial state and the postcolonial state. In response to whether the colonized people's resort to violence is legitimate or not, Said emphasized the need to couple violent resistance with nonviolent resistance which, he believed, is far more efficient.

Sheridan in *The Boxer* highlights the division of the IRA into a right wing legitimizing violence and religious exclusivism and a left wing endorsing nonviolent struggle against colonial oppression as well as religious pluralism. Harry, a villain and a troublemaker, reflects the tenets of the political right. Despite the suspension of all military operations in preparation for a permanent peace agreement, Harry carries out a number of explosions which lead to the deaths of British soldiers and innocent Irish people. He is not convinced that political negotiations will bring freedom to Northern Ireland and IRA prisoners. Grieved by the death of his 13-year-old son in paramilitary activities, Harry opposes the ceasefire agreement and charges Joe, an IRA leader, of treason. Similarly, he opposes Danny's scheme to reinforce tolerance and consolidate relationships between the Catholics and Protestants through sports. Conversely, Joe as a leftist and a peacemaker no longer believes in violence as a legitimate means for liberation; instead, he negotiates the British government to release the IRA prisoners and reach an agreement by which bloodshed stops and the suffering of Catholics is relieved. Fearing that Harry's avenging nature would incite sectarian violence and undermine peace negotiations, Joe instructs the guards to kill Harry.

George, however, equally denounces the British and the IRA violence, accuses them of gambling with human souls and considers the resort to force by any party for colonial or decolonial ends an essentially pathological choice. In *Some Mother's Son*, George, on the one hand, portrays the British as oppressors for dehumanizing and demoralizing the Irish prisoners whom they detain in dirty small cells. He also takes several shots to the military checkpoints that are distributed throughout Northern Ireland to suggest that the British have transformed it into an open prison. On the other hand, he presents the IRA as a bloody organization and its members as terrorists and suicidals. The scenes portraying the IRA murdering British civilians and terrifying schoolgirls while performing their step dance demonstrate that. In addition, the scenes of the hunger strike depict the IRA as a self-destructive organization whose members starve themselves to death just to achieve political conquests.

The British media misinterpreted George's objectivity as a bias to the IRA. This explains why *Some Mother's Son* has achieved less popularity and sales than *The Boxer*, which has been widely welcomed by the British media for its subjectivity and condemnation of the IRA terrorism. Barton (1990) substantiates that unprecedented success of

The Boxer by quoting an English press report celebrating it:

A remarkable new film, *The Boxer*, is set to blow British and Irish audiences out of their political apathy about the North... What makes it remarkable is that it is the first balanced film on Northern Ireland for almost 15 years, and a model of how to meld politics and drama that film-makers tackling Northern Ireland have too often ignored (116).

The failure of *Some Mother's Son* has taught Sheridan to better comply with media standards and encode his political attitudes as in his more recent film, *The Boxer*.

In addition, the films of Sheridan and George portray the IRA as an androcentric and misogynistic organization that systematically and consistently marginalize the voices of Irish women and denied their constructive roles in the anticolonial movement. In *Some Mother's Son*, Annie and Kathleen's sacrifices go unnoticed and unrewarded by their fellow male nationalists. Annie, for instance, logistically supports the IRA in its struggle against the British and unionist forces, and sacrifices with two sons for the rightful ends of freedom and self-determination. In comparison, Kathleen creates a space in which politics rather than violence can be used to settle conflicts. Her conviction that the Irish can get their rights through political negotiations drives her to defend the electoral choice of the Irish people in the British Parliament, where she states: "They won't even let Bobby Sands talk to the press. He is our M.P. We have no voice. You know 30,000 people voted for Bobby Sands. That is more than voted for Thatcher. So what are you afraid of?"

Despite their unrecognized successes on the battle and political fields, they fail to change the traditional image of women as nurturers and caregivers needy of protection and men as protectors and providers. Such stereotypes are sometimes reproduced when patriarchal nationalists reconceive the oedipal complex both as unconscious appreciation of masculinity over femininity and reconciliation between male children and their fathers whom they now uphold as exemplary models for power which they lack in resistance to colonization. MacKillop (1999) observed the emergent alteration on son-mother relationship in colonial contexts and indicated that:

Memory actively redefines the subject's relationship to his own corporeal and psychic masculinity through the incorporation of symbolic paternal figures embodying the range of masculinities that emerged over the course of colonization, anti-colonial resistance, decolonization and the consolidation of postcolonial imperial relationship (55).

Hence, male children persistently emulate the father figure role or seek a surrogate father when the biological father is dead or absent for any reasons. In Sheridan's and George's films, boys do not show any sexual attraction to their mothers. In the absence of his father, Gerard in *Some Mother's Son* accepts the paternity and philosophy of his prison leader and teacher, Bobby Sands, and beguiles his mother from whom he conceals his identity as an IRA fighter. In *The Boxer*, Liam feels jealous of Danny whom

he thinks will take his mother, Maggie, away. Viewers first interpret Liam's jealousy as a sexual attraction to Maggie, but they start to modify their perceptions when he accepts Danny as a surrogate father at the end of the film. Moreover, Danny himself seeks the father figure. His reconciliation with his former alcoholic coach, Ike, reflects that unconscious desire. As a protective father, Ike earnestly advises Danny to disassociate himself from the IRA and restart the gym despite the opposition of the IRA to its political trend.

The gendered discourse of Irish nationalism, therefore, brings Kathleen and Maggie into conflict against patriarchy. In *Some Mother's Son*, Kathleen grows outrageous and offended when her son, Gerard, claims he has joined the IRA to protect her. Kathleen's outrage springs from her conviction as an educated woman that she is capable to survive without relying upon a male protector, whether that be a father, husband or son. Likewise, Maggie in *The Boxer*, opposes her being objectified and treated as slaves or sex objects. Her resumed relationship with Danny means that she breaks the androcentric protocol of the IRA, which demands prisoners' wives to remain faithful; early in the film, a man is threatened for even dancing evocatively with a prisoner's wife. Maggie has also to challenge the orders of her father, who asks her to "get rid of Danny or she will find him in a pool of blood". She courageously responds to that threat by her emphasis that "I'm the prisoner here. You and your politics have made sure of that". Maggie and Danny accompanied with Liam eventually depart Belfast, most probably, to the United States where they can live together in peace. Their departure signifies their physical detachment from home and their psychological alienation from their native patriarchal culture.

Sheridan and George's films further unveil the chauvinistic and sectarian insinuations of the nationalist discourse in Northern Ireland and, on one hand, advance Homi Bhabha's thoughts on cultural hybridity which, in large part, invert imperial values and promote tolerance as well as diversity in postcolonial societies. Homi Bhabha (1990) mythologizes the idea of nation which he metaphorically compares to "narratives" on the account that both lose originality, continuity and identity over time and get dissolved or universalized. This comparison underlies Bhabha's theory of hybridity which identifies ethnic and national identity in liminal ambivalent terms, and substitutes nationalism for internationalism and multiculturalism as it is evidenced by his emphasis that there is a particular ambivalence that haunts the idea of the nation, the language of those who write of it and the lives of those who live it. It is an ambivalence that emerges from a growing awareness that, despite the certainty with which historians speak of the 'origins' of nation as a sign of the 'modernity' of society, the cultural temporality of the nation inscribes a much more transitional social reality (1).

Bhabha in this passage highlights the epistemological conflict between the volatile nature of nation and national identity and the views of historians who represent nations as continuous and rooted in a linear stable and homogenous culture and ethnicity. Bhabha's disbelief in the existence of a pure indigenous culture cultivates his notion of ambivalent or liminal space, i.e. diasporic sphere and colonial sphere, where he assumes cultural differences are rearticulated and cultural practices are reproduced across and within different temporal and spatial contexts, i.e. displaced or diasporic communities. This culminates in the formation of a hybrid identity that neither recognizes the homogeneity of culture nor the purity of a race or ethnicity.

In epitomization of Bhabha's brilliant theory of hybridity, Sheridan and George consider the diverse religious make-up of Northern Ireland responsible for establishing a sectarian society and kindling tension and enmity between the majority (Protestant Community) and the minority (Catholic minority). Yet, they believe that the hostile encounters between the followers of Catholicism and Protestantism astonishingly creates a liminal religious space in which a tolerant generation that appreciates difference and diversity is produced. In *Some Mother's Son*, the Catholic headmistress of the school opposes the IRA operations and calls for peace; therefore, she suspends Kathleen when she finds Bobby Sands' pictures in her office. In another example, Father Daly condemns murdering people regardless to their religious or political loyalties. When the IRA assassinates prison officers and a British civilian, Daly delivers a sermon in which he mourns "the death of this young man. But we also must mourn the death of two prison officers brutally murdered in front of their own families. Some of you here have your hands steeped in blood. Stop this violence. Please don't let anybody else die". In addition, he tries to persuade Boyle, an IRA commander, to cease fire and sign an agreement with the British to spare the prisoners' lives; nonetheless, his efforts are thwarted by the strong will of Annie, who reproachingly says "You are telling me to betray my son". In *The Boxer*, Danny seeks to reinforce tolerance by running a nonsectarian boxing gym, where Catholic and Protestant boys can train together. In this sense, his gym assigns itself the mission of the church. As a reward for his endeavors to eradicate terrorism and enhance tolerance, the Protestant-dominated police in Belfast provide him with gifts for the winners as well as with training equipment.

Realizing the destructive effects of the chauvinism of the nationalist anticolonial discourse the IRA embraced, people in Northern Ireland gradually assumed a more hybrid and ambivalent identity that disrespects existing cultural boundaries and boosts diversity. In this sense, Madsen (1999) believes that maintaining racial, ethnic and cultural differences challenges "the false concepts of cultural purity and authenticity that serve the interests

of the colonizer" (6). Furthermore, she used the term "Englishes" to denote the multiplicity of versions of English language as it is suggested by her claim that "dialect, allusions, narrative intrusions, the refusal to translate key words, use of vernacular expressions, switching between languages or (code switching) all serve to undermine the assumption that English is a privileged agent of colonial control" (9). The Irish prisoner, Bobby Sands, in *Some Mother's Son* epitomized that by addressing the other prisoners in Gaelic or Gaelic English.

On the other hand, Sheridan and George advocate the rise of a multicultural society in Northern Ireland, where people of different cultures and ethnicities can peacefully coexist. Rockett (1988, p. 91) comparably urges indigenes to interact positively with other cultures so as to create a more diverse cultural sphere. Replicating the American model of multiculturalism in Northern Ireland represents a complete severance with the intolerant and fanatical past and a reformation of cultural identity on the principles of diversity and intercultural dialogues. The American jazz music backdropping the shots of *The Boxer* and the image of an Irish boxing fan with the British flag painted on his face coupled with the scene of the British audience cheering Danny, an Irish boxer, as a Londoner in his match with the Nigerian boxer introduce Northern Ireland as a multicultural society.

The multicultural identity of Northern Ireland as Sheridan and George envisage it is evident in film industry during the seventies and eighties of the last century when Irish directors heavily made use of the cinematography, visual tricks and iconic messages characterizing Hollywood as an American icon. In *Some Mother's Son*, most scenes are recorded by a hand-held camera because events take place in closed areas such as houses, offices, and a prison. This facility enables the director to take influential shots to the actors' performances and feelings at a closer distance. In addition, the director selects excerpts from the British Prime Minister, Thatcher, to contextualize the film in its historical background. Placing these excerpts in the opening scene surprises the viewer, who expects to watch a social drama as the title suggests. The shot the cinematographer takes to Kathleen's tears in the prison harmonizes with the film title since it shows how some sons may frustrate their mothers and ignore the suffering they cause to them. The director also makes use of such symbols as the crucifixion of Jesus Christ on the British flag to highlight the conflict between Catholic Ireland and Protestant England. Besides, he skillfully modifies the prisoners' appearances by letting them wear dirty long hair and beards which look genuine to the viewer, and wrap their bodies up with blankets to highlight their refusal to wear the prison uniform. Their purposeful shabby appearances, in fact, succeeds in influencing international perspectives and raising questions about human rights and justice around the world.

Sheridan after all used both a hand-held camera and a helicopter's camera to take shots to the film events. For example, Danny's release from a British prison and his capture later on by the IRA are snapped by a helicopter which keeps roaming around the place. The shots taken by the helicopter give an omniscient overview to the setting, before it is closely examined by the hand-held camera. Unlike George's motion pictures which display all the bodily features of the characters to let the viewer observe any emergent physical changes, Sheridan centers his camera on the characters' faces and eyes when they engage in dialogues. This would help viewers to better understand the body language of the characters based on their eye movements and facial expressions. In all Danny's dates with Maggie, the lens of Sheridan's camera is pointed at their eyes to suggest the intimacy of the moment. Sheridan also centers the camera on the eyes of Danny and Harry who are aggressively eying each other after the explosion that takes place in front of the gym. Such technical diversities enrich the scenes with detailed pictures about characters and the setting.

With respect to his use of icons, *Sheridan's film features a photo album and a barricade. The viewer can, for instance, see three photo albums in this film. One belongs to Maggie and contains Danny's pictures; another to Ike and contains Danny's pictures with other boxers; and the other to Harry's wife and contains the pictures of her deceased son.* The photo album is the image Sheridan uses to stand for the Irish history. Each page of the album represents a stage of that history which people can page through but they can never change. The barricade segregating catholic and protestant communities in Northern Ireland is another important symbol in *The Boxer*. It reminds the viewer of Berlin Wall, which divided Germany into two countries in the aftermath of the Second World War. Demolishing the barricade by Danny signifies his role as a peacemaker in his multicultural society.

CONCLUSION

The Boxer may be mistakenly viewed as an action movie and *Some Mother's Son* as a social drama due to the implications of their titles, which are carefully chosen to create suspense. The love and boxing themes are primarily customized to *attract as many young spectators as possible*. Yet, the two films are soaked in their multicultural contexts and consequently renounce anticolonial organizations as reproducers of violence, sexism, bigotry and chauvinism that have characterized most nationalist movements in colonial and postcolonial societies. The films wholeheartedly argue for developing a hybrid identity that is capable of maintaining diversity and reinforcing intercultural and interethnic dialogues.

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