A Postcolonial Reading of Frank McCourt

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Abstract: Post-colonialism, as an academic discipline, analyzes, explains, and responds to the cultural legacy of colonialism and imperialism. The Irish American writer Frank McCourt won a Pulitzer Prize for his 1996 memoir Angela's Ashes, a tragicomic memoir of the misery and squalor of his childhood. Later in 1999, he authored 'Tis, which continues the narrative of his life, picking up from the end of Angela's Ashes and detailing his life after he returned to New York. Being mostly analyzed within the framework of personal growth or feminism, Frank McCourt's memoir, therefore, has been regarded as a motivational life story. Within the postcolonial context, however, his memoir can be interpreted from a quite different perspective. Although Ireland has never been a colony of America, certain critical concepts from post-colonialism can be applied to the exploration of the identity formation of Frank McCourt.

Keywords: Post-colonialism; Frank McCourtr; Douban Platform; Identity

1. Introduction

As an academic discipline, post-colonialism analyzes, explains, and responds to the cultural legacy of colonialism and imperialism. It discusses the human consequences of external control and economic exploitation of native people and their lands and analyzes the politics of knowledge (creation, control, and distribution) by examining the functional relations of social and political power that sustain colonialism and neocolonialism-depictions (social, political, cultural) of the colonizer and of the colonized. One of the important figures in contemporary post-colonial studies, Homi K. Bhabha, has developed a number of the field's neologisms and key concepts, such as hybridity and mimicry, which provide a new perspective on the study of Frank McCourt's memoir.

Greenblatt considers Bhabha a prominent figure in postcolonial studies who has infused thinking about nationality, ethnicity and politics with poststructuralist theories of identity and indeterminacy (Greenblatt, 2016). Bhabha developed new concepts in colonial discourse to challenge the pre-established notions of imperialism. He dispels the specter of pure culture with the realism of hybridity and spoils the intricate, delectable misunderstanding between the colonizer and the colonized with the image of mimicry. Also, he presents a third space that challenges our sense of the historical identity of culture as a homogenizing, unifying force.

As a consequence of migration, displacement and the social and cultural transformations associated with globalization, identity–both individual and collective–has become a vibrant, complex, and highly controversial concept in our increasingly diverse and fragmented post-modern world. Identity is no longer a prescribed and self-sufficient entity but a plural, floating and becoming process (Zhou, 2007). Some people argue that we need to find our "true identities" but others hold that we are in an era of "identity crisis". What holds true is that we experience cultural identity at global, national, local, and personal levels in very "real" ways.

According to Hall, there are three possible consequences of globalization with regard to identity: First, globalization contests the settled contours of national identity and exposes it to the pressures of difference, "otherness" and cultural diversity; Second, globalization strengthens local identities, which is seen in the defensive reaction of those members of dominant ethnic groups who feel threatened by the presence of other cultures; And thirdly, it may also lead to the production of new identities. Globalization, therefore, contests and dislocates the centered and "closed" identities. Its impact on identity is pluralizing, producing a variety of

possibilities and new positions of identification, and making identities more positional, political, plural and diverse (Stuart, 2007).

Kobena Mercer maintains that identity only becomes an issue when it is in crisis, when something assumed to be fixed, coherent and stable is displaced by the experience of doubt and uncertainty (Mercer, 1990). Minority immigrants have been struggling to pursue their own cultural identity in the United States, so identity is one of the most important core concepts in post-colonial literature. It is also a key word to analyze ethnic literature. As described in the memoir, The McCourt family has been seen as the Other in the United States, migrating from the poor country. Despite all their efforts of assimilation, they are never accepted as original settlers; And back to Ireland, they are seen as the Other, returning from the developed country, and they are treated differently against their favor. Thus cultural identity is constantly modified and re-written in these two contexts, forming a complex cultural identity.

Moving back to America at the age of nineteen draws Frank McCourt away from Ireland, where he spends most of his childhood and teenage years, and breaks the once solid orientation of his identity and creates many layers and aspects of identity, which causes him to wonder who he really is, where he belongs or should belong, and results in difficulty in identification.

Frank McCourt uncovers his own diverse and special cultural identity at the very beginning of Angela's Ashes. "When I look back on my childhood, I wonder how I survived at all. It was, of course, a miserable childhood: the happy childhood is hardly worth your while. Worse than the ordinary miserable childhood is the miserable Irish childhood, and worse yet is the miserable Irish Catholic childhood" (McCourt, 1996). Frank McCourt manages to find a balance between the national culture and the acquisition of western identity, and he uses the American sense of humor, irony, and criticism to demonstrate the unique ethnic culture of Ireland-drinking, singing, and story-telling, combining two cultures in a piece of work, which may be one of the key factors of success.

2. Ambivalence

The term ambivalence is first developed in psychoanalysis to describe "a continual fluctuation between wanting one thing and wanting its opposite" and also refers to "a simultaneous attraction toward and repulsion from an object, person or action" (Arabian and Rahiminezhad, 2016). Bhabha adapts ambivalence into colonial discourse to describe the complex mix of attraction and repulsion that characterizes the relationship between colonizers and the colonized. Bhabha defines ambivalence as a duality that makes a split in the identity of the colonized. He believes that ambivalence presents the colonized as those who are a hybrid of their own cultural identity and the colonizer's cultural identity. Bhabha explains that colonial signifiers of authority only acquire their meanings after the "traumatic scenario" of colonial difference, cultural or racial, returns the eye of power to some prior archaic image or identity. Paradoxically, however, such an image can neither be "original"–by virtue of the act of repetition that constructs it–nor "identical"–by virtue of the difference that defines it. Therefore, the colonial presence is always ambivalent, split between its appearance as original and authoritative and its articulation as repetition and difference. Its discriminatory effects are visible in those split subjects of the racist stereotype, which ambivalently fix identity as the fantasy of difference (Bhabha, 1999). Bhabha explains that diaspora people find themselves "in the moment of transit where space and time cross to produce complex figures of difference and identity, past and present, inside and outside, inclusion and exclusion (Bhabha, 1999)". He defines identity of diaspora people as an ambivalent state of mind where there is no longer a specific place or home but mixed feelings over the fact that nothing is stable anymore or is the way we expect things to be. Frank McCourt masterfully creates an inquiry of ambivalent identification, first from New York, where he was born, to Limerick, his mother's hometown, and then from Limerick back to New York. Hall discusses that identity becomes a "moveable feast": formed and transformed continuously in relation to the ways we are represented or addressed in the cultural systems which surround us. It is historically, not biologically, defined. The subject assumes different identities at different times, identities which are not unified around a coherent self. Within us are contradictory identities, pulling in different directions, so that our identifications are continuously being shifted about (Stuart, 2007).

In the 19th century, Irish immigrants lived at the bottom of the American society, hiding some bitter immigration history behind. Most Irish people entered the United States as refugees, being vulnerable groups in American society. Frank McCourt was born in this era in the United States of an Irish immigrant family, living in the bottom of the society. Worse still, his father had the biggest bad habit of Irish, drinking. The McCourt family could barely get by on a small wage of the father, who, more often than not, spent all his wage

in the bar, leaving the family in extreme poverty. With the increase of children, they could no longer maintain the life in the United States, and had to go back to Ireland.

Frank McCourt assumed different identities at different times and experienced conflicting identities that pulled him in different directions. When in America, the McCourt family was seen as the Other, migrating from the poor country. They were at the bottom of the American society, impoverished, having difficulty landing a job, and had to move back to their hometown Ireland; And back to Ireland, they were again seen as the Other, returning from the developed country, and they are treated differently against their favor. When Frank McCourt moved to Limerick at the age of four, he and his brothers were teased for their American accent (McCourt, 1996). "The boys in Leamy's want to know why we talk like that. Are ye Yanks or what? And when we tell them we came from America they want to know, Are ye gangsters or cowboys?"–Angela's Ashes (79)

And when Frank McCourt got into fight with his classmates, "Mr. Benson, the master, has me by the ear and he's whacking me across the legs. You little hooligan, he says. Is that the kind of behavior you brought from America? Well, by God, you'll behave yourself before I'm done with you."–Angela's Ashes (79)

Frank McCourt might not be old enough to judge what the American identity meant for him at that age, but he was told to be ashamed of it and to hate America or Mr. Benson would hit him.

Frank's school education ended at age 13, when the Irish Christian Brothers rejected him and he decided to work as telegram boy in the post office. "Mr. O'Halloran tells the class it's disgraced that boys like McCourt have to hew wood and draw water. He is disgraced by this free and independent Ireland that keeps a class system foisted on us by the English, that we are throwing our talented children on the dungheap. You must get out of this country, boys. Go to America, McCourt. Do you hear me?"–Angela's Ashes (290)

They have been told to be ashamed of their Irish identity, mostly because of their poverty, and opt for an American identity. But when Frank McCourt finally realized his childhood dream by moving back to America, he was looked down upon as an Irish. "New York was the city of my dreams but now I'm here the dreams are gone and it's not what I expected at all."–'Tis (49)

Difficulty in identification invariably leads to a sense of being homeless, being rootless, and a crisis in identity. In the ship taking Frank McCourt from Ireland to America, he had a conversation with the first officer. "He knew I was from Limerick. When he sneered at Limerick I didn't know what to do. I'd like to destroy him with a smart remark but then I'd look at myself in the mirror and know I could never stand up to anyone. Then I'd say to myself, why should I care what anyone says about Limerick anyway? All I had there was misery."–'Tis(13)

While serving the army, Frank McCourt got a two-week furlough to Ireland. He described his ambivalence: "You'd think that after all the miserable days in Limerick I wouldn't even want to go back to Ireland but when the plane approaches the coast and the shadows of clouds are moving across the fields and it's all green and mysterious. I can't stop myself from crying. People look at me and it's a good thing they don't ask me why I'm crying. I wouldn't be able to tell them. I wouldn't be able to describe the feeling that came around my heart about Ireland because there are no words for it and because I never knew I'd feel this way."–'Tis (100)

Hall argues that "as the system of meaning and cultural representation multiply, we are confronted by a bewildering, fleeting multiplicity of possible identities, any one of which we could identify with–at least temporarily (Stuart, 2007)".

Frank McCourt's identity has been formed and transformed continuously in relation to the ways he's represented or addressed in the cultural systems. He assumes different identities at different times, identities which are not unified around a coherent 'self'. Within him are contradictory identities, pulling in different directions, so that his identification is continuously being shifted about.

3. Mimicry

According to Lacan, the effect of mimicry is camouflage. It is not a question of harmonizing with the background, but against a mottled background, of becoming mottled–exactly like the technique of camouflage practiced in human warfare (Lacan, 1997). Mimicry appears when members of a colonized society imitate and take on the culture of the colonizers. Colonial mimicry is the desire for a reformed, recognizable Other, as a subject of a difference that is, as Bhabha writes, "almost the same, but not quite". Therefore, the discourse of mimicry is constructed around an ambivalence; in order to be effective, mimicry must continually produce its slippage, its excess, its difference. The authority of that mode of colonial discourse is stricken by an indeterminacy: mimicry emerges as the representation of a difference that is itself a process of disavowal. Thus, mimicry is a sign of a double articulation; a strategy which appropriates the Other as it visualizes power.

Furthermore, mimicry is the sign of the inappropriate, "a difference or recalcitrance which coheres the dominant strategic function of colonial power, intensifies surveillance, and poses an imminent threat to both 'normalized' knowledge and disciplinary powers". In this way, mimicry gives the colonial subject a partial presence, as if the 'colonial' is dependent for its representation within the authoritative discourse itself (Bhabha, 1999). But Bhabha does not interpret mimicry as the familiar exercise of dependent colonial relations through narcissistic identification of the colonizer in which the colonized stops being a person without the colonizer present in his identity. He sees the menace of mimicry as a "double vision which in disclosing the ambivalence of colonial discourse also disrupts its authority. And it is a double vision that is a result of the partial representation/recognition of the colonial object. They are the figures of a doubling, the part-objects of a metonymy of colonial desire which alienates the modality and normality of those dominate discourses in which they emerge as 'inappropriate' colonial subjects" (Bhabha, 1999).

The colonists' desire is inverted as the colonial appropriation now produces a partial vision of the colonizer's presence; a gaze from the Other is the counterpart to the colonizer's gaze that shares the insight of genealogical gaze which frees the marginalized individual and breaks the unity of man's being through which he had extended his sovereignty. Thus, "the observer becomes the observed and 'partial' representation rearticulates the whole notion of identity and alienates it from essence" (Bhabha, 1999).

When he first arrived in America, friendless and clueless about American customs, Frank McCourt struggled to integrate himself into American blue-collar society. He started to note the differences in the language use. "In America a torch is called a flashlight. A biscuit is called a cookie. A bun is a roll. Confectionery is pasty and minced meat is ground. Men wear pants instead of trousers and they'll even say this pant leg I feel like breathing faster. The lift is an elevator and if you want WC or a lavatory you have to say bathroom even if there isn't a sign of a bath there. And no one dies in America, they pass away or there're deceased and when they die the body, which is called the remains, is taken to a funeral home where people just stand around and look at it and no one sings to tells a story or takes a drink and then it's taken away in a casket to be interred. They don't like saying coffin and they don't like saying buried. They never say graveyard. Cemetery sounds nicer."–'Tis (49)

In mimicry, the representation of identity and meaning is rearticulated along the axis of metonymy. The threat comes from the strategic production of discriminatory 'identity effect' in the play of a power. Mimicry does not merely destroy narcissistic authority through the repetitious slippage of difference and desire. It raises the question of the authorization of colonial representations; a question of authority that goes beyond the subject's lack of priority to a historical crisis.

4. Hybridity

Hybridity, one of the most widely employed and most disputed term in post-colonial theory, commonly refers to the creation of new transcultural forms within the contact zone produced by colonization. The application of the term goes back to the linguist and cultural theorist Mikhail Bakhtin, who used it to suggest the disruptive and transfiguring power of multivocal language situations and by extension, of multivocal narratives (Arabian and Rahiminezhad, 2016).

The term hybridity has become one of the most frequently discussed concepts in postcolonial cultural criticism. It is meant to foreclose the diverse forms of purity encompassed within essentialist theories. Homi Bhabha is the leading contemporary critic who has tried to disclose the contradictions inherent in colonial discourse in order to highlight the colonizer's ambivalence in respect to his position toward the colonized Other. The simple presence of the colonized Other within the textual structure is enough evidence of the ambivalence of the colonial text, an ambivalence that destabilizes its claim for absolute authority or unquestionable authenticity.

Bhabha presents hybridity as a paradigm of colonial anxiety. The principal proposition is the hybridity of colonial identity, which, as a cultural form, made the colonial masters ambivalent, and therefore weakened the authority of power; as such, Bhabha's arguments are important to the conceptual discussion of hybridity. Bhabha uproots the concept of the polarized world, undermines the dichotomy between self and other, and introduces some controversial concepts such as the hybridity of cultures. Hybridity denotes the impurity of cultures and the quality of mixed-ness to be inherent in all forms of identity. Within the domain of cultural identities, it points to the fact that "cultures are not discrete phenomena", rather "they are always in contact with one another"; this fact, thus, creates a cultural mixed-ness, a space within which no hint of purity or authenticity can be traced. This point is emphasized by Loomba, too, when she puts forth that "neither colonizer nor

colonized is independent of the other. Colonial identities−on both sides of the divide−are unstable, agonized, and in constant flux" (Loomba, 1998).

Hybridity, Bhabha argues, subverts the narratives of colonial power and dominant cultures. The series of inclusions and exclusions on which a dominant culture is premised are deconstructed by the very entry of the formerly-excluded subjects into the mainstream discourse. The dominant culture is contaminated by the linguistic and racial differences of the native self. Hybridity can thus be seen, in Bhabha's interpretation, as a counter-narrative, a critique of the canon and its exclusion of other narratives. In other words, the hybridity-acclaimers want to suggest first, that the colonialist discourse's ambivalence is a conspicuous illustration of its uncertainty; and second, that the migration of yesterday's "savages" from their peripheral spaces to the homes of their "masters" underlies a blessing invasion that, by "Third-Worlding" the center, creates "fissures" within the very structures that sustain it.

The dominant American culture is contaminated by the linguistic and racial differences of various cultures. Frank McCourt writes in his memoir: Why is it the minute I open my mouth the whole world is telling me they're Irish and we should all have a drink? It's not enough to be American. You always have to be something else, Irish-American, German-American, and you'd wonder how they'd get along if someone hadn't invented the hyphen.−'Tis (91)

Bhabha explains that the importance of hybridity is not to be able to trace two original moments from which the third emerges; rather hybridity is the Third Space which enables other positions to emerge. Thus, the third space is a mode of articulation, a way of describing a productive and not merely reflective, space that engenders new possibility. It is an "interruptive, interrogative and enunciative" space of new form of cultural meaning and production blurring the limitations of existing boundaries and calling into question established categorizations of culture and identity. According to Bhabha, this hybrid third space is an ambivalent site where cultural meaning and representation have no "primordial unity or fixity.

Bracken interprets Bhabha's hybridity as a stratagem for negotiation between "the dichotomies of colonizer and the colonized, self and other, East and West". Hybridity, in this sense, acts as a means of avoiding the replication of the binary categories of the past and developing new antimonolithic models of cultural exchange and growth. Bhabha suggests that the colonial authority is hybrid and ambivalent; therefore, the colonized are provided with opportunities enough "to subvert the master discourse". In fact, hybridity "unsettles the mimetic or narcissistic demands of colonial power but reimplicates its identifications in strategies of subversion that turn the gaze of the discriminated back upon the eye of power".

Frank McCourt finally achieves cultural hybridity by striking a balance between the national culture and the acquisition of western identity, and he uses the American sense of humor, irony, and criticism to demonstrate the unique ethnic culture of Ireland−drinking, singing, and story-telling, combining two cultures in a piece of work.

5. Conclusion

With the collision and coexistence of different cultures in America, a nation of immigrants, ethnic minorities are striving to enter the mainstream from the fringe. The success of Frank McCourt's memoir somewhat embodies the success of the quest of ethnic minorities−demanding a reasonable status of their own ethnic culture. He describes the struggle, confusion and compromise of the ethnic minorities. Minority immigrants have been struggling to pursue their own cultural identity in the United States, so identity is one of the most important core concepts in post-colonial literature. It is also a key word to analyze ethnic literature. As described in the memoir, Frank McCourt assumed different identities at different times and experienced conflicting identities that pulled him in different directions. The McCourt family has been seen as the Other in the United States, migrating from the poor country. Despite all their efforts of assimilation, they are never accepted as original settlers; And back to Ireland, they are seen as the Other, returning from the developed country, and they are treated differently against their favor. Thus cultural identity is constantly modified and re-written in these two contexts, forming a complex cultural identity.

Frank McCourt experiences various stages of development through all the tensions, contradictions, ambivalence and mimicry until he gets at his final destination, a cultural hybridity. Frank McCourt manages to find a balance between the national culture and the acquisition of western identity, and he uses the American sense of humor, irony, and criticism to demonstrate the unique ethnic culture of Ireland−drinking, singing, and story-telling, combining two cultures in a piece of work, which may be one of the key factors of success.

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