

# Rethinking Multiculturalism in *New Dubliners*: An Outsider's Perspective

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## I. Introduction

I will never forget what happened that day when I was walking through Stephen's Green. As I was strolling with excitement through St. Stephen's Green in Dublin downtown, a boy came and asked me, "Do you speak English?" Without second thoughts, I said "Yes," wondering what good news he would like to share with me. Then he pointed to one of the boys playing around and said, "Do you see that boy over there?" To be frank, I was kind of surprised because I could not see anything wrong with those kids. So I said, "Yes" again. However, I was terribly stunned on the spot when he went on saying with an innocent voice, "You have to be careful. He is a racist." You might think I would have been grateful to the boy for his kind reminder, but actually, I was not. I did not appreciate the reminder because when the boy talked to me, he grinned and made faces at me. At that moment, I knew they meant to play tricks on me, an Asian in appearance like me. I knew that these kids were harmless, but I just could not help feeling scared, harassed and even terrified at that time. This was the first time in my life that I found myself so helpless and alienated. From that moment on, a series of questions kept lingering in my mind: What's wrong with contemporary Ireland, a land that has been well-known for mass emigration for centuries? Irish people must have known very well about being guests in other countries, but are they really ready for being hosts in the twenty-first century as more and more immigrants from around the world choose to settle down in this beautiful, mythical land?

For centuries, people in Ireland have been beset by antitheses such as British/Irish, Protestant/Catholic and colonialism/de-colonization due to Ireland's special relations with England. As a consequence, a tenacious Irish identity distinct from non-Irish identity has been formulated. The efforts made by cultural nationalists such as Yeats and Lady Gregory are a case in point. With the rehabilitation of indigenous Irish culture in mind, these cultural zealots strive hard to channel nationalism into the construction of artistic perfection and to kindle Irish people's awareness of Irish-ness as opposed to the encroaching British imperial culture. However, unlike the essentialism salient in the past, Ireland in the twenty-first century is characterized by its more multicultural facades. Sabina Sharkey's concept of "a plurality of Irelands," (2003, 118) coupled with Declan Kiberd's metaphor of Ireland as "a quilt of many colors," (1996,

653) testifies to the multiculturalism of contemporary Ireland. But, as multicultural as it may appear, Ireland as a member of the European Union seems to be tightening its ties with other European countries, while immigrants from non-EU countries tend to be disregarded or even discriminated against in various ways. Such a Europe-oriented penchant is also evidenced in everyday practices and contemporary Irish literature.

This paper aims to investigate this Europe-dominated mentality and how non-EU outsiders are unfavourably constructed and excluded in *New Dubliners*, a short story collection published in 2005 in honour of Joyce's writing of *Dubliners* a century ago. The research is expected to help lay bare the xenophobia latent in stories like Roddy Doyle's "Recuperation," Joseph O'Connor's "Two Little Clouds," Colum McCann's "As if There Were Trees," and Frank McGuinness' "The Sunday Father" from an outsider's perspective. These stories are chosen because among the eleven stories in the collection, they best relate to the discussion of multiculturalism in contemporary Ireland. Hopefully, the discussion will contribute to rethinking and redressing the idea of multiculturalism in contemporary Ireland.

## II. Ireland vs. Outsiders

As the farthest part of Western Europe on the Atlantic Ocean, the strong desire to get connected with outsiders is unceasing. In fact, the recourse to rescue from other lands recurs in Irish literature and culture. In the aisling writing tradition, Ireland is invariably envisaged as a beautiful woman awaiting rescue from foreigners. In Aogán O Rathaille's "Brightness Most Bright," for example, the fair lady, deprived of her native land and enslaved by alien forces, is desperately in need of help from outsiders. For the subordinated lady, "no relief can reach her until the heroes come/ back across the main" (Murphy 1987, 45). Likewise, the dark lady's misery in James Clarence Mangan's "Dark Rosaleen" will never last long, for along with rescue from afar as embodied by "the priest" and "the wine," and "the Spanish ale" comes hope of regaining the usurped Irish throne (Murphy 1987, 114). In addition, such a reliance on foreign aid is evidenced in the 1916 "Proclamation of the Irish Republic," a joint announcement by Thomas J. Clarke, Patrick H. Pearse and others, in which the nationalists habitually turn to Ireland-as-mother to arouse their countrymen's commiseration and gain their support for a new revolutionary effort: "supported by her exiled children in America and by gallant allies in Europe, but relying in the first place on her own strength, she (Ireland) strikes in full confidence of victory" (Murphy 1987, 230-31). Although undoubtedly, Ireland's domestic forces like the Irish Republican Brotherhood are vital to the emancipation of the symbolic motherland, nothing great can be achieved without sponsorship and support, spiritual as well as material, from abroad. As stated in the proclamation, Irish expatriates in America and enthusiasts from Europe are needed to help make Irish liberation possible. This smacks of the spirit latent in the hag of Beare writing tradition prevalent in Irish literature, in which the hag desperately awaits the coming of outsiders to rescue her from the control of her lord and master. Therefore, the Irish mother keeps summoning rescuers from abroad as well as from home for the benefit of the nation.

Images of foreign aids are never absent in modern Irish literature. It is the French forces that are supposed to rescue the distressed lady, the personification of Ireland, in Yeats' *Cathleen Ni Houlihan* for the restoration of her green fields. In John Millington Synge's *The Playboy of the Western World*, what Shawn Keogh has been wistfully waiting for is "Father Reilly's dispensation from the bishops, or the Court of Rome" so that he can consummate his marriage to Pegeen Mike (2000, 70). Moreover, in *The Country Girls' Trilogy* written by Edna O'Brien, the female protagonist, Cathleen, endeavours to shun away from her suffering by engaging in a series of jail-break love affairs with foreigners, especially middle-aged men from France. Mr. Gentleman, for instance, is said to be an elegant, French-speaking solicitor. He is somewhat mysterious and unapproachable for the provincials in the country. "He was French, and his real name was Mr. de Maurier, but no one could pronounce it properly, and anyhow, he was such a distinguished man with his gray hair and his satin waistcoats that the local people christened him Mr. Gentleman" (1987, 12). Moreover, her next lover Eugene Gaillard, a half-French documentary film maker, is a god-like figure with "his strength, his pride, his self-assurance" (1987, 335). Taken together, the images of foreigners abound in Irish literature, yet the portrayal is dominated by people from Europe (Spain, Italy, France) and America, with a cloak of invisibility thrown upon people from other countries and cultures. This is understandable when considered geographically and religiously, for geographical proximity, emigration history and Catholic religion naturally bind the Irish, French and Spanish together, but this Eurocentric mentality simultaneously renders Irish people less well-informed about people and culture from other parts of the world. In the wake of such ignorance, misunderstanding, conflict and confrontation are inevitable when Irish people are faced with the people and cultures of these non-European aliens.

### III. Xenophobia in *New Dubliners*

The prosperity boom in the last two decades of the twentieth century brought Irish people significant changes, socially, culturally, and economically (Paseta 2003, 146). The flow of immigration to Ireland was rarely problematic amid the economic explosion in the nineties. However, with the decline of the Celtic Tiger in the following years, immigrants (especially those from non-EU countries) became easy targets for rising unemployment. This sort of hatred, coupled with a certain racism, prompts xenophobia in Irish people. As Terence Brown maintains, emigration has been part of Irish life, yet immigration since the nineties is "a situation which it (Ireland) had scarcely prepared itself" (2004, 385). Traces of the immigrant cultures can be found in Roddy Doyle's "Recuperation," in which some oriental cultures like kick-boxing and martial arts are introduced as something new, yet a certain doubt is simultaneously cast when the character in the story wonders "what kick-boxing is like, what kick-boxing parents are like" (2005, 22). Moreover, in the story, an African is said to be walking between the cars selling the *Herald* at the crossroads every day, yet the main character has "never seen anyone buy one" (2005, 23). Both cases demonstrate that non-EU cultures or immigrants do exist in contemporary Ireland. However, they are more often than not

caricatured and downgraded because they are either inferior or useless. This phenomenon contradicts the essence of multiculturalism, which promotes the concept of "recognizing and accommodating different cultural beliefs, practices, traditions, languages or lifestyles" (Murphy 2012, 14).

Likewise, images of non-EU immigrants recur in Joseph O'Connor's "Two Little Clouds." This short story features the transformation of Ireland's economy, culture and society around the turn of the twenty-first century, epitomized by the success of the main character, Eddie Virago. However, interspersed in the success story are episodes of immigrants working and living in contemporary Ireland. For example, in a hotel lobby, "Chinese waiters in white were handing out glasses of wine" to customers (2005, 6). The portrayal of these Chinese waiters testifies to the fact that modern Ireland tends to be more culturally diversified. However, many things related to these immigrants are unfairly presented. Eddie's comments on Nigerian immigrants showcase such a negative viewpoint:

It was just—you know—these immigrant fellas. They were *different* somehow. Not like us bog gallopers. Their *culture* was different, their music, their food. Nothing wrong with it, of course. All very colourful. But these Nigerians, for example—what could they say? (2005, 9).

Although Eddie asserts that he is by no means a racist, this remark about Nigerian immigrants betrays his mild racial discrimination. As a cultural essentialist, he fails to identify with other cultures. This episode echoes Homi Bhabha's idea that "it is actually very difficult, even impossible and counterproductive, to try and fit together different forms of culture and to pretend that they can easily coexist" (Rutherford 1990, 209). For Bhabha, cultural diversity has been widely promoted and has become the basis of multicultural education policies in many parts of the world. But when it comes to cultural differences, the dominant culture (or host society) is inclined to be more reserved, saying "these other cultures are fine, but we must be able to locate them within our own grid" (Rutherford 1990, 208). As a consequence, while cultural diversity has been widely promoted, respected and even accepted, the true embracing of cultural differences has only been a dream to be realized in the future. However, multiculturalism is not only about cultural diversity, but it is also about "culturally embedded differences" (Parekh 2000, 3). To a certain extent, Eddie's case demonstrates that no matter how multicultural contemporary Ireland appears, it is far from easy to make a compromise between traditional Irish culture and other immigrant cultures. According to Bhabha, a certain discrepancy does exist between "cultural diversity" and "cultural difference" in the apparently multicultural world. This incongruity mostly comes from the host society's cultural chauvinism, regarding its own culture as supreme and universal. But the reluctance to face up to change and difference is doomed to fail, for one's cultural identity is never constant but always becoming. As Stuart Hall proposes, "difference and rupture" as well as "similarity and continuity" make up the driving force of one's culture (1990, 226). In other words, according to Hall, while people from different cultures stick to their history, tradition and culture, they have to be open to other new elements, however different or alien they may be.

Frank McGuinness' "The Sunday Father" is not meant to be a story about migration; nevertheless, references to non-EU immigrants in Ireland are embedded in the story. The cynical narrator is back to Ireland for the funeral of his father, who happens to die on the same Sunday as Princess Diana. He raves at the taxi driver on his way back to Dublin, saying "Fuck it, are we in Moscow, in Petersburg, in Odessa? Why are you speaking, my good man in that oddly Slavonic fashion?" (2005, 131). This grievance alludes to the main character's intolerance of the driver's accent, which differs from his. The driver is growled at simply because his English is not pure but mixed with his native tongue. Blatant racial discrimination is laid bare later in the dialogue between the two female characters:

- What's your question?
- When I take the number 7 bus it's full of Chinese—
- What about them? (Honorina begins to fear Rialto is a racist.)
- So many Chinese people on that one bus, the widow observes.
- What's your problem?
- The bus can take eighty-one people—
- What is the problem with you?—
- How can billions of Chinese fit in to the one double decker?
- Is that what it seems like to you? Do you see them in their billions?
- I do. (2005, 147)

The vision of billions of Chinese packed into one double-decker bus is obviously an exaggeration, but it significantly highlights Rialto's (or some Irish people's) fear of the invasion of locust-like Chinese in contemporary Ireland. This Chinese-phobia mindset as reflected in Rialto corresponds to Declan Kiberd's comment that in Ireland, "many politicians seem to fear 'flood,' 'invasions,' 'swamps' of immigrants (the language always suggests a loss of control)" (Kiberd 2005, 311). In addition, according to Tom Inglis, many Irish people look upon immigrants as a threat and dismiss the possibility that these aliens could become truly Irish (2008, 110). But, as Kiberd suggests, normally immigrants contribute to rather than endanger public wellbeing. However, pitifully some Irish tend to dismiss the "unseen benefits" (new kinds of medical therapy, for example) brought by immigrants (2005, 311). In fact, in a study conducted by Alan Barrett and Adele Bergin, it was found that, contrary to common-sense perceptions, immigration to Ireland is generally good for Irish people because it helps to increase GDP and reduce inequality of earnings (2007, 82).

The most unsettling story in *New Dubliners* is Colum McCann's story, "As if There Were Trees," in which physical violence against immigrants prances upon the stage. Half of the story centres on Jamie's misery caused by his unemployment, paving the way for his killing of the unidentified Romanian labourer near the ending. As depicted in the first few paragraphs, Jamie, his baby and his horse are all haggard with their ribs exposed to outsiders. Helpless and hungry, they are lethargic trying to get fed, which triggers the narrator's great sense of sympathy. As the narrator remarks, "There's nothing worse than seeing a baby hungry. She was tucked in against Jamie's

stomach and he was staring away into the distance" (2005, 53-54). Obviously, Jamie's unemployment is the root of all misery. He has to take care of his baby on his own, but he is not up to the task, especially after being laid-off. This episode depicting the wretchedness shared by Jamie, his baby and his horse paves the way for the sympathetic understanding the narrator gives to Jamie in spite of the murder Jamie commits against a Romanian later in the story.

Xenophobia is foreshadowed in the episode when the narrator, who works in a pub called The Well, says: "We don't serve the foreigners or at least we don't serve them quickly because there's always trouble" (2005, 55). A comment made by the narrator's husband, Tommy, clearly illustrates the heart of the matter: "Tommy said they were lucky to walk, let alone drink, taking our jobs like that, fucking Romanians" (2005, 59). The resentment of the Irish over Romanian immigrants is self-evident in Tommy's remark. Tommy is so angry because, as indicated in the previous episode, he was laid off not long ago and is now looking after his children at home. In a sense, the non-European immigrants should not be allowed to walk or drink because their participation in the job market endangers the survival of local Irish people. What is worse, the antipathy towards these non-European immigrants is so great that Jamie, the jobless single father, furiously kills a guest labourer from Romania. The narrator, however, justifies and identifies with such an act of atrocity after witnessing the murder.

There were people out looking in the corridors now and they were hanging over the balconies watching. They were silent. Tommy was there too with our young ones. I looked at Tommy and there was something like a smile on his face.... Tommy was crushing the Romanian's balls and he was kicking the Romanian's head in and he was rifling the Romanian's pockets and he was sending him home to his dark children with his ribs all shattered and his teeth all broken and I thought to myself that maybe I would like to see it too and that made me shiver, that made the night very cold, that made me want to hug Jamie's baby the way Jamie was hugging her too. (2005, 60)

The reticence of these spectators is really dismaying, insinuating that racism is not so much an individual response as a collective unconscious latent in many Irish people's psychology. In a sense, although they do not participate in the killing of the Romanian, these spectators are to a degree the accomplices perpetrating the crime. Pitifully, even though the narrator feels insecure witnessing the violence against the Romanian, he feels like hugging Jamie's baby instead of saving the immigrant victim from further abuse. As a matter of fact, this impulse to hug Jamie's baby derives from the narrator's identification with his Irish compatriot because, after all, they are much more similar, both physically and culturally. This example again reinforces the tenacity of the Irish identity and the difficulty of enacting multiculturalism in contemporary Ireland. It echoes Gary Younge's observation that the Irish, who used to take pride in their heart-warming welcome to strangers, are treating people of colour very differently in contemporary Ireland. This is evidenced in a 2002 Irish government report, which shows that black pregnant women were targets of abuse in the streets and hospitals

because supposedly they were having babies to secure Irish citizenship (2010, 127). In addition, a referendum held in 2004 nullified the automatic right to Irish citizenship for anyone born in Ireland, because Irish people managed to stop black people from settling or having the right as Irish citizens (Fanning 2007, 21; Younge 2010, 128). The story of Jamie and the Romanian significantly reiterates the difficulty of actuating multiculturalism in contemporary Ireland.

#### IV. Conclusion

The Irish have been confronted with defining Irish-ness for centuries. Irish literature, especially in the twentieth century, has been beset by ambiguity, by the antitheses of British and Irish, Protestant and Catholic, English and Irish, and colonialism and nationalism. These ambivalences correspond to the duality of Irish-ness proposed by Seamus Heaney. According to Heaney, the either/or mentality is far from common in Ireland, while “both/ and” logic permeates in the everyday life of the Irish (1990, 21-23). In a nutshell, self-conflicted in one way or another, Irish people have been forced to make compromises amid the continuously contradictory systems and hybrid cultures.

Contemporary Ireland is situated in a relentlessly globalizing world, one where notions of “nationhood” and “national identity” as well as gender and sexual identity are being increasingly rethought and redefined. The European element surging in Irish society in the last few decades, for example, is challenging grass-roots Irish identity (Kiberd 1987, 97). Over the last decade, this “increasingly Europeanized republic” faces still another challenge—the rise of immigration (Eagleton 1998, 131). The duality of Irish-ness makes clear the Irish’s ability to thrive amid incessant conflicts and compromises. Hopefully, this very attribute characteristic of the Irish can help create what Bhabha calls “the third space,” a hybrid culture that allows people from different cultures to emerge, coexist and prosper alongside each other (Rutherford 1990, 207-21).

However, integrating people from different cultural backgrounds is easier said than done. About six months after I left Dublin, some bad news came to me. David, my best friend from Asia who was employed in a Dublin-based international business, was attacked by a couple of Irish young men and suffered concussion. He was taken to hospital and was hospitalized for a week before he could get back to work. This was not surprising news to me because I had a similar experience when walking near Parnell Street in Dublin in broad daylight. I found some stones being pelted against the windowpanes close to me. When I turned around, I saw some teenagers about thirty metres behind me. I felt afraid every time I walked near the same alley. Irish people have been well-known for their hospitality, but are they really ready to accommodate non-white immigrants? It seems to me that Irish people still have a long way to go before knowing how to get along well with non-EU immigrants and learning to appreciate and accommodate these foreign cultures.

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