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Fragmentation in Brian Friel's Selected Plays

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Abstract:

Reared in Northern Ireland, Brian Friel has experienced the dividedness of his country ever since childhood. He* addresses issues such as the workings of memory, history, and past on the people of Ballybeg. The aim of this research is to shed light on the techniques of fragmentation which Friel has experimented with. He has subverted and destabilized conventional stage realism favored by dramatists. As a theme or technique, fragmentation finds its explicit reflection in the critical and dramaturgical analysis of Friel's *Philadelphia Here I Come* (1964), *Faith Healer* (1979), and *Translations* (1980). Using his conceit and theatrical dramatic excellence, Friel successfully manages to present fragmented discourses and even characters that, torn between two diverse selves, come to suffer from uncertainty and loss.

Keywords: fragmentation, Brian Friel, identity, Ireland, narration.

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Introduction :

Born in 9th of January 1929 in Killyclogher, Nothern Ireland, Brian Friel is considered as one of the most celebrated contemporary Irish playwrights who used his pen to write for the Irish theatre. He has negotiated the idea of disruptive identity and discourse. He depicts Gareth O 'Donnell in *Philadelphia Here I Come* as a self-hyphenated character whose memory does not enable him to recall true fond memories but makes him develop a desire to escape his past. Disruption of narrative and identity is also shown through Friel's non-linear and unreliable narration in *Faith Healer* and Frank Hardy's feelings of doubt and loss of confidence in his miraculous ability to heal the afflicted people who seek his aid by attending his performances. Moreover, fragmentation in terms of place is also portrayed through representing Ireland's image in *Translations* as an abducted periphery that, along with its people, undergoes a split and a bitter transformation that is responsible for the loss of its identity as well as the identities of some of its people.

I. Friel's *Philadelphia Here I Come*

I.I. Contested Memories

Friel's *Philadelphia Here I Come* is based on the idea of having contested memories or even narratives that make a character feel as if he was caught in a tormenting self-conflict. In an attempt to turn these memories "into consoling fiction," (Grene) Friel draws an artifact that dramatizes the hesitation and the strife on Gareth O 'Donnell at the prospect of leaving Ballybeg, which represents his rejected past, and heading to Philadelphia, his imagined future. Gar's self-conflict between instinct and reason is shown on the stage by Friel's device of using two actors: "The two Gars, Public Gar and Private Gar, are two views of the one man. Public Gar is the Gar that people see, talk to, talk about. Private Gar is the unseen man, the man within, the conscience, the alter ego, the secret thoughts, the id" (Friel, 1965, p.11).

Such a device is accompanied by other techniques that Friel has experimented with in order to achieve his purpose of showing the split of Gar's identity. Theatrically, Friel fulfills this by associating the two Gars with two divisions of the main stage space, namely "the Spartan kitchen [and] Gar's equally austere bedroom" (Roche, 2006, p.133). Yet these two worlds are also different in the sense that the kitchen which represents Public Gar is presented as lit and is on the left portion from the audience's point of view while Gar's bedroom, which represents Private Gar, is staged right "in darkness." (Friel, 1965, p.11). When the play hits the Dublin Theatre Festival, Friel has shown

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his admiration for the theatre's founders' 'stylishness' and he takes it "to mean a bravura, elegant celebration of the theatrical event in terms of acting, directing, and of lighting and design"(Roche, 2006,122).

I.II. Language and Identity Split

Gar's schizophrenia is shown through the language. Language reflects Gar's identity split. Seamus Deane argues that " the language of the real, in all its rigor, is Irish- and that emerges as silence; and the language of the possible is English- and that emerges in eloquence" (p.118). The memories of Gar and his father S.B. O' Donnell are false and are created wrongly by them. They have never existed and are only fantasies of one's creation. These memories reflect the kind of miscommunication between Gar and his father who is seen as a representation of "the patriarchy" (Boltwood, 2007, p. 61) and with whom he will accept to stay in Ireland, Gar implies, only if he asks him. In addition to the authorial presence of his father, another patriarch makes Gar feel his low self-esteem. This man turns to be Senator Doogan who has refused to give his daughter's hand in marriage to him. Frustrated, Gar comes to suffer from two conflicting forces; with one wanting to keep him home and the other wanting him to escape and betray a generation that is "intimidated by Ireland's revolutionary generation which had led the nation to independence." (Boltwood, 2007, p. 62). Hence, the failure to recall and remember valid memories about the father and son at home is a failure to reserve meaning from destruction and fragmentation. This kind of fragmentation is clear as Private Gar tells Public Gar: "Just the memory of it – that's all you have now-just the memory; and even now, even so soon, it is being distilled of all its coarseness; and what's left is going to be precious, precious gold" (Friel, 1965, pp. 78-79). One comes to conclude that Friel wants to show that just as the relationships at home are destabilized, so too is the relationship between people and their land if they do not give meaning to memory, history or the past.

II. Friel's *Faith Healer*

II.I. Fragmented Discourse

To consider the idea of fragmentation in Friel's *Faith Healer*, it is fundamental to discuss the techniques he uses to unfold the story. Using anachronism, Friel has intended to show how much these narratives are self-contained, fictive, and full of discrepancies. In the play, three characters start narrating their different narratives of the same events of their lives together (as they set wandering England, Scotland, and Wales) and their return to Ballybeg where Frank Hardy the faith healer is doomed to death. Affected by

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Chekhov whose works show the workings of the 'colliding worlds of his characters' egos,"(Grene) as well as Eugene O'Neill's idea of self-delusion, Friel, through the four monologues delivered by the three characters _ Frank Hardy, his partner Grace, and their manager Teddy, tries to pinpoint that history is as fictive as that of "the individual or the collective family memory,"(Grene) for they are subject to fabrications that one fashions according to his/her compelling needs, enabling by that the readers and audience to get "deep insight into their psyche"(Roche, 2006, p.161).This idea finds its reflection in his play and his readers or the audience will come to the realization that it is being narrated after two of its three narrators have died. In the last monologue, Frank Hardy himself points to his own demise and how truths have lost their meanings:

> the whole corporeal world— the cobbles, the trees, the sky, those four malign implements— somehow they had their physical reality and had become mere imaginings, and that in all existence there was only myself and the wedding guests […], that even when we had ceased to be physical and existed only in spirit, only in the need we had for each other. (Friel, 1980, p.54)

II.II. Friel and Dramaturgy

Dramaturgy, as a new discipline, is widely used in theatre in a way that makes possible for truths to be theatricalized and practiced differently. Authenticity, in terms of the elements of time and space, "is continually revised and reinvented" (Martin, 2010, p.1) especially due to the development of technology. Sharing some of the characteristics of postmodernism, contemporary theatrical performances reject universal truth by acknowledging "the contradictions of staging the real within the frame of the fictional…and asserting that truth is contextual, multiple, and subject to manipulation"((Martin, 2010, p.3).

Many theatre makers nowadays tend to go beyond the traditional conventions. Dramatic works are approached differently since the elements (staging, text, sound, audience [active vs. passive], lighting, movement, and performance) within the various genres of theatre do receive attention and are perceived with relative degrees of importance. Again, this traditional idea is challenged with the emergence and creation of many new dramaturgies like those introduced by Brecht, Artuad, and Grotowski to name a few. Dramaturgical analysis, as A. P. Hare and H. H. Blumberg argue in their 1988 book entitled Dramaturgical Analysis of Social Interaction, needs to focus on two interrelated concepts, namely "the stage or region and the social roles

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enacted or performed in each region" (qtd. in Benford and Hare, p. 646). Benford and Hare state that there are three action area regions to be considered. These are the backstage, the frontstage, and the offstage. They, along with the social roles enacted, strongly affect performance (p.647).

In Friel's *Faith Healer*, the question remains how Friel experiments with the idea of bringing "a dead character on stage [to show] his break with naturalism"(Roche, 2011, p.158). The answer to this question lies in his understanding of the theatrical techniques he has employed to meet the desire of explaining "the inexplicable,"(Strain) with which he opens his play:

> The stage in darkness. Brief pause.
> Then out of this darkness comes Frank's incantation 'Aberarder, Aberayron, … Throughout this opening incantation he is standing down stage left, feet together, his fate titled upwards, his eyes shut light, his hands in his overcoat pockets, his shoulders hunched.
> He is middle-aged; grey or greying pale, lined face. The overcoat is unbuttoned, the collar up at the back; either navy or black… Underneath he is wearing a dark suit…
> Three rows of chair_ not more than fifteen seats in all_ occupying one third of the acting area stage left. These seats are at right –angles to the audience (Friel, 1980. P.11).

Devoid of characters' interaction and lacking dialogues, Friel's *Faith Healer* defies "the Aristotelian definition of drama as 'men acting' (Tracy, 2006, p.92). Each storyteller is represented to the audience as having his or her own story which he /she narrates the way "he /she must,"(Worth, 1993, p.83)and memories of their shared past in a bare space. Friel's defiance of Aristotelian drama is made possible with his use of "metaphysical space [that contains] only fragmentary objects"(Roche, 2006, p.138) of a dead being with his few tell-tale props like a poster and three rows of "empty chairs that fill up with those invisible audience" (Worth, 1993, p.82).

Friel manipulates the stage illusion for example by making Frank Hardy come from the dark downstage (death) to address the audience who will participate directly in the play's re-enactment before them as well as in the faith healing ritual which accordingly extends "the drama from the confines of the stage to embrace the entire auditorium"(Roche, 2011, p.158). Hence, Friel's *Faith Healer* is read as:

> a kind of a metaphor for the art, the craft of writing…And the great confusion we have about it, those of us who are involved in it. How honorable and how dishonorable it can be. And it's also a pursuit that.

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Of necessity, has to be very introspective, and as consequence it leads to great selfishness. (Roche, 2006, p.56).

Like a creative artist, Frank plays the role of a performer who is concerned to portray his virtuosic achievement through faith healing_ the power, which according to the ancient Celtic lore, that some gifted persons possess. Having substituting the sacred with the secure as it happens with transubstantiation, Friel presents Frank as a type of Christ endowed with divine power of healing the diseased people and an artist able to "subordinate himself and others to his own gift"(Morse et al., 2006, p. 17). However, it happens that he becomes uncertain of his talent and his tormenting questions, whether he possesses divine inspiration or not or even able to control it, bring about his death. To show that he possesses power, Frank, closing his eyes, begins to recite place names:

Aberarder, Aberavron
Abergorlech, Abergynolwyn,
LIandefeilog, Aberchymedd,
Aberhosan, Aberporth (Friel, 1980, p.12)

The melodic recitation "can be traced to the early Celtic oral (and later written) literary tradition of dindshelzchas,"(Strain) which as a term is a combination of the words senchas: "knowledge of all that pertains to earlier times, history"(Strain) and dind: "fortified hill, stronghold, and famous or important place"(Strain). This recital is meant by Frank to give himself the identity of the faith healer. Such identification is made possible only by "the mesmeric power of the place names"(Morse et al., 2006, p. 45) that he utters. Through investigating Frank's obsession with, and restless questions about his talent, Friel likewise wants to show how modern man, wrestling with his uncertainties, comes to lose faith (Morse et al., 2006, p.17). Such a gift makes him ironically speaking falls tragically and be killed at the hands of McGarvey, a crippled man on a wheelchair whom Frank fails to heal. Rather than with three rows of chairs , the last monologue of the play closes with a "single chair across which lies Frank's coat exactly as he left it in part one," (Friel, 1980, p.49) with his poster gone and him [not as a creative artist] accepting his destiny in Ballybeg. This idea of Frank's restlessness that is responsible for his downfall is again shown through the restless narration of the play which keeps "wavering among details and eluding certainty and objective truth" (Morse et al., 2006, p.43).

According to Lydia R. Cooper (2013), the four fragmented monologues are analogous to and "mimic the gospel account of Christ"(p.240) with each

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monologue contradicting and reversing the other. Restless and fragmented, these accounts have lost authenticity as their creator does. Yet, it is only by the end of the play that the artist unlike his creation (narrative) finds rest and a sense of order, having "reconciled with his questions"(Morse et al., 2006, p.58) which vanish and become silent, ironically speaking, only with his death: “And as I moved across that yard towards them and offered myself to them, then for the first time I had a simple and genuine sense of homecoming. Then for the first time there was no atrophying terror; and maddening questions were silent” (Friel, 1980, p.55).

III. Friel's *Translations*

III.I.The Unreliability of Memory and History

Friel's *Translations* shows how memory, history and the past are unreliable for they all have lost their meanings. Friel portrays the effects of two crushing forces that English imperialism has brought about by the colonial projects of Ordnance Survey and National School System. These projects help the English colonizers to Anglicize Ireland and make it lose its cultural Irish tradition and adulterate its people. Set in Ballybeg in 1833, Friel's *Translations* dramatizes the fear of Irish people lest they would enter into "an irreconcilable struggle in an eternal borderland," (He, 2010, p.1) with the intention of saving their Irish language, culture and tradition. Therefore, with the Anglicization of the local toponyms in Ireland and the replacement of many hedge schools, where Irish was taught, with National ones, many people working there find it difficult to reconcile their Englishness and Irishness, giving by that a room for continuous shift in people's attitudes, personal ambiguity, engulfed or even failed emotional relationships between lovers of diverse descent. Though set in 1833, Friel impregnates all of these problems in his play, equating by that nineteenth century Donegal and 1970s Derry through an anachronistic portrayal of 1930s Ireland. This brings critics “to criticize it, denouncing it as "a deliberate distortion of historical truth” (Roche, 2006, p.73).

Friel, through different allusions, represents to the reader the Irish language and civilization as being dead compared with other cultures and languages. Moreover, there are many references to classical literature in contrast to the limited one to ancient Irish culture. Friel shows the Irish people's pride and their praise of their rich language and literature through the character Hugh, the school master of the hedge school, who shows his contempt for English language. He even refuses to teach Maire English. However, he does not resist the idea of Anglicization and later he teaches her

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English. This idea of resistance of the imperial English is also reflected through Mother Nature in act two, scene one, with Friel's reference to the weather as hot. This kind of turbulence is also prominent in act three as the weather becomes worse and it starts to rain, when Maire enters "bare-headed and wet from the rain; her hair in disarray"(Friel,1981, p.59). This change in weather symbolizes her distress.

In this play, identity is lost due to colonialism. With Ireland Anglicized, people's blood, nationality, and language come to fade away and die for all of the three "are space-oriented though man has always been less conscious of"(Beyad and Shabanpour, 2020, p.8). As the play opens, the audience and readers come to realize the impact of the First Ordnance Survey on Ireland. Owen, the civilian interpreter, works in Ordnance Survey, seems to be unaware of its impact as he helps the English officers, Lancey and Yolland who are in charge of the Survey, to Anglicizing Ireland.

Owen indulges in loose translations of Lancey's speech on the Survey and this makes his brother, Manus accuse him of betrayal as he is concealing the true meaning of the words. Moreover, Manus feels indignant that his brother, Owen is to be known to his English companions as Roland since he considers that his brother's new name is a poignant form of "an abdication of his Irish identity"(Roche, 2006, p.67). Forced to translate Lancey's threats of violent retaliation lest Yolland is not found, Owen feels freer as it comes to do with military involvement:

Lancey: In conclusion I wish to quote two brief extracts from the white paper which is our governing chapter (Reads) 'All former surveys of Ireland originated in forfeiture and violent transfer of property; the present survey has for its object the relief which can be affected to proprietors and occupiers of land from unequal taxation.

Owen: The captain hopes that the public will cooperate with the sappers and that the new map will mean that taxes are reduced. (Friel, 1981, p.31)

The quotation above shows that Owen comes to manipulate the Irish by minimizing and even altering Lancey's words for the sake of not realizing the upcoming threats of Survey and their messages of opposition or even what their organization is. Through these conversations, Friel succeeds to show how translation comes not to serve its purpose and is rather used as a tool of manipulation, corruption, and perversion (Robuchon, pp. 6-8). As characters come to lose their identities with colonization, words too come to lose their meanings through translation for it is used by those who have reconciled themselves with the colonizers in their colonized periphery. What complicates

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the matter is that the Irish people represented by Maire, feeling that English is the language of modernity, comes to have a strong tendency to learn English and convinces Hugh to teach her. With such inclination, English, rather than Irish, is the language which is heard (or read) in the Irish-speaking community and here lies the irony. This is true to what Friel has felt for he thinks that if readers are to understand him by the great number, he needs then to write in English"(Robuchon, 4). Friel is conscious of such kind of irony. He continues to be perfectly "alert to the central irony that the supposed first official language, Irish, is the only present residually"(Roche, 2006, p.69). The silenced Ireland appears in *Translations* through the character of Sarah, a peasant Irish pupil who, analogous to Yeats and Gregory's Cathleen Ni Houlihan, with the help of Manus, tries to overcome her speech defect and pronounce her name properly. However, Sarah, being asked by Lancey about her name, reverts to silence which is the only possible reaction to "the imposition of English"(Roche, 2006, p.68). In Friel's play, there is such a recurrent sense of doom, with death approaching and threating characters on his stage (Roche, 2006, p.76).

With the intention of making the audience understand the tragedies he presents on the stage, Friel uses the technique of storytelling, whereby he becomes able to impregnate it with moralizing allusions as he does in *Translations*. Bridget frequently alludes to "sweet smell [that] references the impending potato blight"(Robuchon, p.3) that would struck the 19th century Ballybeg. Hinting that something tragic is to come, it is not surprising to end his play with Maire attempting to draw the map that Norfolk Yolland has drawn for her, while Hugh picking up the Name-Book and telling his sons that they must learn to accept the new names, seeking vainly to recall and recite the opening lines of Virgil's Aeneid, the epic tale of Carthage's destruction and Rome's triumph.

IV. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, Friel's plays are worthy of reading for they address issues that concern postmodern man. Of paramount importance is the issue of the self and discourse that come to be fragmented due to the loss of faith and truths respectively. In all of these dramatic works, truths have lost meanings. Moreover, they can easily be reconstructed, deformed, and fictionalized throughout history. Having felt personally the division that plagues his country, Ireland, Friel the playwright documents this split in his plays. This division is even more successfully represented on the stage through employing dramaturges that readers seriously need to scrutinize if they are to

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understand Friel's plays.

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التفكك في مسرحيات مختارة لبريان فريل

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ملخص:

نشأ بريان فريل في إيرلندا الشمالية، وقد شهد انقسام بلاده منذ طفولته. يتناول فريل قضايا مثل أثر الذاكرة والتاريخ والماضي على سكان باليبيغ. يهدف البحث الى تسليط الضوء على تقنيات التفكيك التي جربها فريل. لقد قام فريل بتفكيك وزعزعة استقرار واقعية المسرح التقليدي التي يفضلها المسرحيون. ينعكس التفكك ،كموضوع أو تقنية، بشكل واضح في التحليل النقدي والدرامي لمسرحيات فريل المختارة: فيلادلفيا ها أنا آتي (1964)، والمعالج الروحاني (1979)، والترجمات (1980). و باستخدام خياله وتميزه الدرامي المسرحي، نجح فريل في تقديم خطابات مفككة و شخصيات تعاني من التفكيك إذ انها إعتادت على إنتقالها بين ذاتين مختلفتين وتشعر بفقدان اليقين و بالاضطراب.

الكلمات المفتاحية: التفكك، براين فريل، الهوية، إيرلندا، السرد.