

The Watchers Are Being Watched''. Defying Binary Oppositions Through the Mindful Use of Mimicry in Charabanc Theatre, Marie Jones's Somewhere over the Balcony

By

Haidar Layke Hashim

Ministry of Education, The General Directorate of Education in ADiwaniya city, Iraq

Email: Haidarhashim8@gmail.com

Hazim Abdulhamza Mutar AL-Shabbani

Ministry of Education, The General Directorate of Education in ADiwaniya city, Iraq

Email: Hazim1974@yahoo.com

Abstract

Somewhere over the Balcony is one of Marie Jones's best play in which she tries to show and assert the Irish women identity. In this research I will try to explain, from a postcolonial perspective, how the writer defies the binary oppositions of gender and of place through applying Bhabha's notion of mimicry which leads Jones to transfer a domestic place of the balcony into a place that grants power and authority. The female protagonists grasp this power through the mindful use of mimicry. Orders of masculinity, of public and private places are all vanished when Jones defies sectarianism through the power of freedom that she gives to the three women characters.

Keywords: Mimicry, Bhabha, Charabanc, Marie Jones, Binary oppositions Somewhere over the Balcony

Introduction:

1- Bhabha's Mimicry and Irish Discourse.

In spite of decades of colonialism, people tend to believe the impact was very little on the cultural production although of the fraught political relationship between the two sides of British and Irish. Ireland was always, as Edward Said pointed, a "continuous colonial problem" And anyone who has the desire to define and discover British imperialism in the context of Irish history will face certain difficulties and meet with silence and bewilderment. (Said, 87). Even Robert Young in his well-known book *Colonial Desire* 1995 in which he states that colonialism in its modern form is found in Northern Ireland, but he largely neglected Ireland as some of the critics claim. (Young, 4). Although there are many question marks for regarding Ireland as Other to the rest of Europe, no one can ignore that the country is a product of a long epoch of colonial domination under which the Irish people were totally repressed and harshly abused.

However, it is crucial to point to the fact that our understanding of artwork and of culture is enhanced rather than diminished through the social and imperial context as Said stated. Culture and identity are hardly damaged, reshaped and influenced by the sever years of colonialism. Ashcroft stressed that "more than three quarters of the people living of the world today have had their lives shaped by the experience of colonialism." (Ashcroft & others, 1989, 1). This sort of colonial practice threw the colonized nations into dilemma, conflict and contradiction. Even if they got free well and independence, they still in a state of confusion of their culture and identity. In fact, colonialism is not only a power control, but it is also a cultural

domination.

Indeed, one of the advantages of the colonial period is that it enhances the sense of place and ways of spatiality sustained. Hence, Charabanc theatre was established to suit the expression of minor voices of the Irish people in general and of Irish women especially.

In order to understand the complex relationship between the colonizer and the colonized and show how the psychology and existence of the colonized have been affected during the reign of oppression, number of concepts come to the surface to state the ambivalent relation of the two cultures. Bhabha's notion of mimicry is a unique part of a greater concept of visualizing and understanding the postcolonial state. It is regarded to be this sort of a binary opposition between oppression and authority.

Bhabha declares that "all modes of imposition in including the demand on the colonized to be like the colonizer results in mimicry". He has the believe that the rise of mimicry is one of the reasons of affirming authority over the colonized.

Furthermore, Bhabha provides further description on mimicry as that " the discourse of mimicry is constructed around an ambivalence; in order to be effective, mimicry must continually produce its slippage, its excesses, its difference". (Bhabha ,1994:86)

Following Lacanian view that sees colonial ambivalence as the result of mimicry which becomes like an illusion or camouflage, Bhabha looks at the colonizer as a snake in the grassland who speaks in "a tongue that is forked," and creates a mimetic representation which "... emerges as one of the most elusive and effective strategies of colonial power and knowledge"(Bhabha, 1998: 122). He sees mimicry as to "adopting and adapting or even copying. It is the exaggeration copying of language, culture, manners, and ideas" (Bhabha, 1998: 86).

Mimicry, in postcolonial studies, is regarded to be as unsettling and disturbing imitations which are features of postcolonial history and cultures. For Homi Bhabha, "colonial mimicry is the desire for a reformed, recognizable 'Other', as a subject of difference that is almost the same, but not quite" (Bhabha, 1994: 122).

For Bhabha, the polarity of the self/ other is going to be undermined since both the colonizer's and the colonized's cultures are going to form a kind of negotiation in which no culture is completely "pure" as the West may regard. Also, there is no recognition between the master and the slave , the self and other or the colonizer and the colonized since both are being equally "caught up within and similarly affected by the psychic ambivalence which accompanies colonial exploitation and domination". So, the relation between the colonizer and the colonized is a "non-conflictual recognition of the enslaved master and unmaster slave". (Bart Moore Gilbert,1997, 147).

2- Charabanc Theatre and Marie Jones

Charabanc theatre explains the tension in the relationship between women and the theatre in Ireland which is a reflection of the complex relationship between women and the Feminist movement itself that can be explained through the growing creative process of the five fellow women's cooperative charabanc company. Their work came as a reaction against the masculine movement of the Field Day Theatre Company cofounded by Stephen Rea and Brian Friel in 1980. Worthy to mention that Charabanc theatre embodied the "collective spirit of the feminist movement of the 1980s where single authorship was often eschewed in favour

of plurality and publication didn't take place". One of the Field Day's contribution was the elimination of women from the tenet of Irish literature when the company's major work "a comprehensive anthology of Irish writing" in its first second and third volumes included not a single name for Irish women. It was the anthology of "all Irish men" that brought a heated debate. (Green, Morash. 2016. 10).

Remarkable to say that the economical affairs of the women established the theatre of Charabanc were severe and couldn't be imagined. Yet, DiCenzo explained that it might be wrong to describe the Charabanc theatre to be "an all-female ensemble ", but it was the financial circumstances that obliged the women to be more creative:

They [Charabanc] were on a social welfare scheme designed to deal with long-term unemployment, whereby the government paid eighty percent for their wages for the year, based on the Equity minimum. But to qualify for the scheme one had to have been unemployed for a certain number of months and even though Charabanc had created parts for men in the play [*Lay Up your Ends*], they could not find any actors who had been out of work for that long. (179)

Established in 1983, charabanc theatre was intended to present a new vision for the development and production of alternative strategies for the understanding of Irish history and identity through performances. It was a story of success recorded for Northern Ireland's theatre that challenged all the traditional and physical impediments among them was the casting codes that concealed and degraded the role of the Irish women. The title theatre was formed by five actresses' women who were tired of playing trivial roles of a mother or a girlfriend whereas important and major roles were taken by English actresses who were brought to substitute them on the stage of the theatre and of life then. Their aim was to present the stories of Northern Irish women on stage and to give depth and meaning and to register a position for Irish women in history. (J. K. Curry, Wallace E. Bert, 2010, 64). Taking a small loan from her husband, Maria Jones and her friends Maureen Macauley, Eleanor Merthven, Carol Moore and Brenda Winter originated the group of charabanc theatre asking Martin Lurch to write a play for the group and when Lurch became more demanded for his famous political plays, the women decided to write their own scripts and took the lead. Maria Jones and her colleagues found out that they needed to change the path of future and give the Irish women a real role to lead. However, In spite of being the result of years of frustration, desperation and defiance against Northern Ireland's theatre establishment, Charabanc created some of the most engaging discussions of the predicaments and of Northern Irish history in the 1980s. (Trotter, 2008. 165). Because they were deeply rooted in the aesthetics of the working-class theatre, members of Charabanc liked to describe themselves within the same lines of social class as a "working-class theatre company", in order to carefully avoid the polarities of gender or of sectarianism. The early plays of the Charabanc were very typical as social and working class plays since they have the qualification and the characterization of the basic nine elements that John McGrath, the famous theatre theorist and playwright, put: "the direct treatment of the problem, sharp comedy, the use of music, openness to emotion on the stage, elements of variety entertainment, "a moment-by-moment effect rather than "a slow build-up to great dramatic moments, immediacy, strong localism, and the audience's sense of identity with the performer" (John McGrath, 1982. 54–61).

Numerous plays had been presented by the charabanc theatre company among which were *Lay Up your Ends* 1983 which was seen by 13,515 people and *Oul Delf and False Teeth* 1984 which was about the life in Belfast during the 1940s. It discussed many important issues of sexuality and contraception. Also in 1986 the company produced *Gold in the Streets* which

depicted the lives of three different generations of Northern Irish women who emigrated from Northern Ireland. Yet, the most expressive and most widespread play was *Somewhere over the Balcony* by Marie Jones in 1987 (Stephen Watt, 2000. 180). It was about the impact of violence on the Irish working class communities and the ways in which the extent of the struggle had normalized the abnormal experience of deficiency and war faced everyday by Northern Irish women. The play designates the often bizarre ways a group of working class Belfast women effort to preserve a sense of family and home from the epicentre of economic, social, religious and government violence.

Whereas most of Charabanc plays dealt with the state of Irish women experience in the light of the past or of history in Belfast, *Somewhere over the Balcony* dealt with the present moment to describe the conditions of Irish women living in Belfast. Maria Jones took a deep and revolutionary look at life for three women friends in Belfast's Divis Flats "which was one of the largest and most violent housing projects in Europe". This play obliges the audience to see the bizarre levels of horror, ferocity and constraint for persons living in this community by watching how the war infiltrates the secluded lives of the community of women living in the flat. (Trotter, 2008. 166).

The play which was launched in 1987 is regarded a best description for the lives of a group of Catholic Irish women in the infamous Divis Flats in Belfast and their everyday fight with the actuality of sectarianism in the occupied Northern Ireland. The play really rejoices female inspiration, creativity and pleasant.

In her attempt to use her drama to describe the vicissitudes of the messy and violent North, Maria Jones, and her fellow women writers, has struggled to find new way to deal dramaturgically with that violence. She rejected the classical order of Aristotelian models. Most of the plays including *Somewhere over the Balcony* have a lack of structure, lack of monologues and for an open-ended writing that might be regarded as an effort to reflect the confusion and chaos around them. Old model of open-ending can leave the audience disturbed, ill at ease, tense, As one of the characters in a play exclaims " We have been an occupied country for centuries now, and you wonder that I'm a little tense" (John W. Frick, 1999, 71). The three women in the play are suffering of both mental and physical violence. It might be the same violence of Greek tragedy. Common acts of violence against women are embodied in Charabanc plays like the abandoning of a pregnant woman, abandoning of a woman's own child or the physical beating up. (ibid). These women are also broken from inside. They have broken souls when they are treated as others in their own country and own houses. They try hard to find the true of themselves, so they try to imitate, to mimic and to improvise to take the roles of whatever give them personality and free space.

Although there is a clear link between Charabanc and the international movement of Feminism, the group of women who established it were a little cagey of using the term to represent their efforts and work. The reason, as it is said, that they don't want to be detached from the audiences they are part of and from a political point of view feminism tended to connote the individualism of middle-class writers, that compromised significant class and religious affiliations/oppressions vital to the political condition in Northern Ireland. Instead, women of the Charabanc saw their 'feminism' as "something inhering in the style and practice process of writing from a female perspective and point of view, emphasizing that this was not so much through adherence to feminist doctrine as simply a natural starting place. (Gilbert, 2007, 443). Maria Jones writes "We were feminist in the sense that we were presenting women, and very strong women, who always formed the center of the plays which were about empowering women. That is feminism. she didn't want her plays take any form or follow any

agenda in order not to put the audience in any arguable context, but the context that serves their cause as women from Northern Ireland. She declares "It could be alienating, and we were trying to encourage people to go to the theatre, people who had never been before, and we didn't want to put them off by having any kinds of labels, we just wanted to say that this is a play about ordinary people. (John. F. Deny. Maggi B Gale 2015, 128)

3. The use of Mimicry to defy binary oppositions in *Somewhere over the Balcony* The play, which was first opened in Belfast Arts Theatre just after the Remembrance Sunday bombing in Enniskillen and the offence was very high among the Irish people, represents a mixed reaction to "the ostensible trivialization of the sectarian conflict". (Chambers, 2001, 351). In this play the audience face a bizarre rendering of the martial, dehumanizing factors of war upon the family. All ordinary opportunities are upturned or postponed as the rebellious becomes suitable, enabling "institutionalized insanity". With lyrical Irish distinctive dialect and a compound soundscape, the play is both a "hilarious send-up of and poignant observation upon the anarchic realities of living in a war zone". (Chambers, 2001, 352)

In his masterpiece, *The Location of Culture*, Homi K. Bhabha states that "Mimicry emerges as one of the most elusive and effective strategies of colonial power and knowledge". It is the product of years of degradation and isolation as being second degree subjects. He adds "Mimicry represents an *ironic* compromise. It is the desire for a reformed, recognizable Other as a subject of a difference that is almost the same but not quite". (Bhabha 1991, 85-86)

In this play, rather than being the "Other", Maria Jones tends to give women an effective role in writing the Irish history and in the formation of Irish Future. She rises high the sound of Irish women as writers, intellectuals or workers through giving distinctive personalities to the three women protagonists and diminishing the ivory personality of the man. Thus, all of the events are retold through the multiple viewpoints of the protagonists Kate, Rose and Ceely. In this world, men have no individuation take the same pet name "Tucker" (Green, Morash. 2016. 11) while the three women have the freewill to comment upon, to criticise and to make fun of all what they have seen from above.

Through the use of bin lid, the three neighbors, who are the only three woman characters on stage, gives the audience a glance about the nature of life in Ireland and also about the nature and kind of play it is. Kate's monologue that she delivers from the very beginning in the play, turns the iconic of a bin lid into a means of struggle and a way of supporting Irish fighters. It is not only a thing that makes her home clean but it is a thing that would clean her country from invaders and that would make her and other Irish women as fighters as men. The play suggests that the bin lid is not a device used for alarming others of the coming of troops. Yet, it subverts and highlights the role of the bin lid to a historical souvenir, a part of the Irish struggle in general and of the women's identity in particular. It is not a mere bin lid, but a legacy that Kate has received from her late mothers. She refused to sell it for the German tourist:

KATE (*jumps off her bin suspiciously*) Ten pounds? For my bin lid? Away and feel your head. That was the first bin lid ever banged on internment morning . . . was handed down from my granny. It is a collector's item. It's worth . . . 450

It is a message that our fight and struggle is historical and would never have an end until we get liberty of land and of soul.

KATE: See this bin . . . thank God for it . . .

(pause) . . . Oh, the peace and quiet. If it wasn't for me having my own bin I wouldn't know peace and quiet. They all used to laugh at me in these flats..... I wonder how many videos they have of me and my bin? Hundreds over the years. I'll be doing them a favour cos they'll have 1755 ratern' to look at soon

The song that the three women sang it in act one is a strong sign of rejection and political and personal freedom demand. It is a demonstration that stigmatizes all kinds of abuses caused by the English presence which is of course refused by all and exposed by the women:

Why do you watch me? I won't do no wrong.

Just mind my own business and wish you were gone.

You hear every whisper, each move that I make.

And when I am sleeping, you're always awake.

You're there every morning every hour of the day.

I've nowhere to run to, I just gotta stay.

I can't see your eyes; I can't look on your face,

but I feel your presence all over this place.

Why don't you leave me for my peace of mind?

You don't belong here, not one of my kind.

Go back where you came from, I'm tired of your stare.

I can't have my freedom until you're not there. 448

They have these manly attitudes and behavior when talking about the British soldiers and when they shout against them asking them to leave or accusing them for the lack of necessary life needs. Although it is a domestic place, the balcony has been turned to be a place of struggle, freedom request and historical narration.

KATE (*calling to Pepe*) No, just stay were you are. Ach, he'll be safe with Rambo.

That dog has ate more soldiers' legs than dog biscuits, and him with only one eye.

(CEELY begins to sing very reverently and

KATE joins into the tune of 'The Holy

Ground'.)

Oh, Rambo McGlinchey, you've only got one eye.

You're fearless and brave, and for us you

would die.

You take on the British with no weapons
at all,
And when Ireland at last is free you will
hang on our wall. 449

Most important to postcolonial discourse is its specific attention of difference, and any theory of postcolonialism that misses to recognize this recognition between differences will be a part of the imperial activity, because it will lead to the formation of “spurious hierarchies, misreadings, silencing and historicism” (Tiffin, Lawson. 1994, 230). In this respect, Bhabha's theory of mimicry comes to set the binary oppositions of gender, colour, race, and of self and other to infiltrate deeper into the dilemma of the individuals living their lives in flux. (Kumar, 2011, 1)

In the same respect the use of mimicry helps the women in the drama to convert the balconies of their apartments into a place of creativity and empowerment, which defies binary thinking about the division into private and public space. Like an audience of a match or the audience who sees a battle in an old Roman arena, the female characters watch the world from a high place. They have no boundaries to limit their freedom, no obstacles to prevent them to deliver their opinions in a ridiculous but more real way and to state their rights.

CEELY :(*sarcastically*) Sure, aren't they on their holidays?

ROSE: Oh, is that what they call it?

KATE: Sure, everybody deserves a wee holiday

CEELY: Everybody has a right to a holiday.

ROSE :(*ironically*) Aye, holidays. (*They all sing 'Why Do You Watch Me?'*)" 448

Meanwhile, the balconies are used to be the three women's own fortress and the place of their creative and expressive strength, as they grant a convenient perspective to observe sectarianism, the working-class spirit of Irish people, and conventional gender parts in a playful manner, expressing their performative nature. Cleverly, Jones manages to transfer the balconies from a domestic like a garden place which reflects femininity and weakness and an entrapment into a liminal space or as Bhabha calls a third place "a borderland between male-dominated, public and stereotypically female, private space". In their balconies, the women can take any role to imitate and practice. In Charabanc's drama the balcony is planned to be as a ceremonial space of female happiness, pleasure, and rebellion. (Ojrzynska, 2018,144)

In his article “Of Mimicry and Man,” Bhabha stated that mimicry as sometimes "unintentionally subversive" and it is a kind of act that depicted the "artificiality of all symbolic expressions of power". For Bhabha, mimicry is used by the colonized or by the degraded people to copy the master, the colonizers' own power. (Bhabha, 1984, 126) While imitating the master, the individuals have to intentionally ensure their own existence and their own presence as people of the country who have rights to take and sound to be heard. Bhabha states that "Mimicry is thus the sign of a double articulation; a complex strategy of reform, regulation and discipline, which appropriates the Other as it visualizes power". Just like the British snipers who occupied the roofs of the high buildings and watch every movement by their helicopters and tools, the three women; Kate, Ceely and Rose are watching the soldiers using a binocular and comment on their acts and movements. Simply, the watchers are being watched.

ROSE They'll be on the rampage tonight.

CEELY, I love it when a new tour comes in. All of them wee pink arses not tanned yet.

KATE (*mock horror*) Ceely Cash, have you been fraternizing with the foreigners?

CEELY No, just spying on them from the Rape and pillage, getting drunk, projectile vomiting from the fifteenth floor, drowning the natives." 447-448

Through this drama, Marie Jones uses mimicry to defy the binary oppositions of gender also. She gives her three female characters strong personalities to assert their Irish identity. Whereas all men whether young or old, Irish or British are called "Tuchers". (Green, Morash. 2016. 12). The Irish man took her rights as an independent woman who should participate in the future and in the liberation of her country in all fields whether intellectual or political and the British colonizer took her land and concealed her identity. From the balcony, the three watch everything from husbands and descendants to joyriders, demolition forces, a marriage and a blockade.

" Rose: The best man does not look like himself Ceely: That's because he is not himself Rose: Who is he? Ceely: Tootsie O'Hare disguised as Big Tucker O'Neill Rosie: Where is Big Tucker O'Neill? Kate: On the run disguised as Tootsie O'Hare Rose: Why? Ceely: Cos' Danny didn't want Tucker, he wanted Tootsie ate: So, Tootsie is Tucker and Tucker is Tootsie! Rose: Why is Tucker on the run when he didn't do nothing? Ceely and Kate: So, Tootsie could be Best Man, for fuck's sake! Rose: Right! Ceely: I'm all excited so I am...when wee Tucker was wee, my big Tucker used to say to him, 'Son what do you want to be when you grow up' and he woulda said, 'On the run, Daddy'. Oh God if he was alive the day, he would be so proud of him...he's probably in Bundoran by now Kate: It's well for you Ceely, my Dustin wants to become a computer scientist Ceely: My wee Tucker was just lucky, Kate, he happened to be in the right place at the right time " 456

The submission of this public "generic" name proposes entrapment in the constricted restrains of Irish masculinity. Male sectarianism is further mocked by the female characters, who observe their husbands as "lazy idlers". Therefore, the female grant the position of "local heroes" not so much like their men, but to their dogs whose actions they celebrate in a song acted to an old Irish shanty song, "The Holy Ground": (Coleman Coffey, 2016, 12)

"**KATE** (*calling to Pepe*) No, just stay where you are. Ach, he'll be safe with Rambo. That dog has eaten more soldiers' legs than dog biscuits, and him with only one eye.

CEELY, He used to be the quietest wee dog in Belfast, until he got shot with a plastic bullet.

ROSE (*sarcastically*) Oh aye, a legend in his own lifetime.

(**CEELY** *begins to sing very reverently and*

KATE joins in to the tune of 'The Holy

Ground'.)

Oh, Rambo McGlinchey, you've only got one eye.

You're fearless and brave, and for us you would die.

You take on the British with no weapons at all,

And when Ireland at last is free you will hang on our wall.

CEELY Fine dog y'are." 448

Through this mimic image of the poodle dog, Marie Jones links the characteristics of the hero character of the American action series and the chief of the illegal "Irish National Liberation Army" and thus scorns the local die-hard nationalism and male-controlled sectarianism as a whole. The song also proposes the insufficient nature of the male role

prototypes which in reality are never completed. (Ojrzynska, 2018,144)

A very important instance of the use of mimicry is the event of the stolen radio transmitter which is used by Ceely to listen to important news and intimations and to the bingo gaming. It is their means of communication in the emergency cases. Yet, from a male sectarian viewpoint, the radio is a special and dangerous means used by the troops and should be fetched out and get rid of. The radio scene is not new for the Irish audience. It in fact echoes the real story of Jean McConville who was sentenced to death for helping the British find a radio in the same flats of Belfast. The radio for Marie Jones is a "suspect device". (Trotter,2008,166).

" CEELY Not my Dwane. Dr. Barnardo wouldn't even take him. (*SFX voice over: 'Attention! Attention! Would*

all residents please leave their homes immediately as we have reason to believe there is a suspect device in the area'. The same message is repeated through the following dialogue.)

CEELY Bloody army. That is gonna interfere with my radio bingo!

KATE It's just an excuse so they can raid the place.

CEELY (*on headset*) Mona, pay no heed to themmins. Only tryin' to get you to surrender.

KATE The Brits have surrounded Rose Marie Noble's car.

CEELY (*casually*) Probably gonna blow it up.

KATE And it only polished, too.

CEELY (*shouts*) Tucker! The Brits are gonna " 458

Conclusion

Somewhere over the Balcony is a play produced by Charabanc theatre and tended to show the power of women through the mindful use of mimicry to defy the binary thinking of place and gender. Marie Jones presents new strategies for resistance that depends on the power of discourse to reveal certain thoughts important in the ongoing development of women's intellectual movement in Northern Ireland. The dichotomies of female –male and of private-public place have been demolished and trespassed when mimicry tends to expose the artificiality of the social ideas to which they follow. The domestic ,private balcony is a real representation of Northern Ireland in particular where the women live their normal life. It becomes a representation of power, culture, history and struggle.

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