

Ireland as a Mother Figure in *Cathleen ni Houlihan*: Mother Figure as a Symbol for Nationalism

Amal Kitishat

Department of English Language and Literature, Al Balqa Applied University, Ajloun 26816, Jordan

ABSTRACT

This study aims at shedding light on the Mother figure as a symbol in Yeats' *Cathleen ni Houlihan*. While most of the writers favour to present the female figure as a young and beautiful, Yeats contradicts this attitude by identifying Ireland with an old and dignified lady. The study aims at justifying Yeats' choice of the old female figure as opposed to the young. The study proved that Yeats aimed to create double cultural function: the first was for a national purpose; where the young men decide to help the old lady only for her own sake without having any personal benefit. The second function had a cultural depth that aimed at reviving Irish culture by reintroducing Celtic figures adopted from the Irish culture as major characters in his plays. Therefore; the study proved that Yeats' choice of the old female figure was a very influential way to foster national awareness and to revive the Celtic heritage as well.

Keywords: Colonial and post-colonial literature, female figure as a symbol, Irish culture, Irish drama, W. B. Yeats

INTRODUCTION

Cathleen ni Houlihan (1902) is one of Yeats' best plays which embodies Yeats' cultural awareness and his sense of nationalism. Like many of Yeats' works, *Cathleen ni Houlihan* aims at strengthening the national awareness of his audience and reviving the

Celtic heritage. This goal is achieved by drawing on Irish material as a source of his plays and presenting heroes and heroines adopted from the Irish Culture. The figure *Cathleen ni Houlihan* is a Celtic figure adopted from Irish mythologies. By doing so, Yeats succeeded in fostering the main principles of the Irish identity.

In *Cathleen ni Houlihan*, Yeats focused on the charismatic qualities that *Cathleen* had, she enjoyed such an unresistible charm; not due to her youth or beauty, but for her strong presence and her ability to influence others. She was old; however,

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E-mail address:

dr.amal.kitishat@bau.edu.jo

she was not weak. Rather she was strong with a queen –like dignity. By drawing on Irish material as a source of the play, Yeats presented Ireland and its struggle for independence in a symbolic context. In this light, the importance of the study is in its investigation of the presentation of Ireland in a female figure, the old lady Cathleen ni Houlihan. The study aims to prove that the use of the “old” female figure as the main image enriches the play and it indicates the possibility of generating other images from the Irish culture.

The play is related to a period of Ireland history when Ireland was a colonial country under the English Rule. The play is an implicit representation of Ireland in its struggle to have its independence from colonization. The play introduces the female figure Cathleen ni Houlihan who is a symbol of Mother Ireland and “has the goal of convincing men to fight for Ireland. While this play was written about the rising of 1798, it was meant to inspire people for the 1916 Rising” (Irish Studies, 2019).

The study shows that the female figure is used twice: the first as a sheltered helpless old woman who sought the help of people, and the second as a young woman. The study proved that the image of women played a great role in arousing the national feelings of the audience to participate in their country liberation from occupation.

METHODS

The aim of the study is to determine the cultural and historical significance of Yeats’ great play *Cathleen ni Houlihan*. The method

adopted in studying the play is related to multiculturalism since the play celebrates the Irish sense of nationalism and draws on heroes and heroines adopted from the ancient Celtic culture.

To trace the cultural perspective, the researcher investigated and analysed the symbolical significance of the major character (Cathleen) as an allegory of Ireland itself who urged people to sacrifice their souls for her sake to help her restore her “four Green Fields” from the “strangers” (Yeats, 1997, p. 215).

Also, this study refers to historicism since the play tackles an era of colonial Ireland and portrays symbolically the Irish people attempts to have their freedom.

Besides, the study adopted colonialism as a method of criticism and analysis of the play major events. The researcher adopted this method because the play referred to a real historical event which was the occupation of Ireland. To sum up, the study tries to explain the intersection between historicism, multiculturalism, and colonialism as methods that are interrelated to clarify the main theme of the play which is Ireland in its quest for independence.

Having the Irish identity placed at the top of Yeats’ agenda, he allotted a great role for the theatre in increasing the national feelings and forming a cultural identity as well. For this, he wrote *Cathleen ni Houlihan* for the Abbey theatre to be the first play to be acted on its stage. Though this play is simple in its form, it is great in its theme which focussed on the theme of sacrifice for one’s country, as represented

in the figure of Cathleen ni Houlihan. Therefore, discussion of its importance from a cultural, historical and national background is imperative.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Taking the historical and cultural context into consideration, this play was written when Ireland was struggling for its freedom. The play's theme is Ireland and its struggle for independence put in a symbolic context.

By using the Irish theatre, Yeats was seeking the formation of the Irish identity through arousing the cultural and national awareness among the Irish people. Thus, as the study discusses, the play was situated within the Irish context. *Cathleen ni Houlihan* is considered the embodiment of Yeats' national efforts through the medium of drama and his role in the revival of Irish culture by presenting myths, legends, and folktales which Yeats believed them to be a medium of portraying heritage and forms of national identity realization.

The importance of the play is in its presentation of Ireland personified as an old lady who had a majestic appearance. Kitishat (2014) for example highlighted the cultural role of the personification of Ireland as an old woman, she even added that such reintroduction of the Irish culture was seen as one reason for the great success of the play, she says that the "cultural depth proves to be existent as a background for the play", which became "a firm source of a national identity" (Kitishat, 2014, p. 7).

Moreover, "the world of Ireland" is embodied in a single figure drawn from

the Irish Celtic mythologies, the old lady, Cathleen ni Houlihan. This cultural depth "enriches the play"; the study explains the significance of this representation of Ireland not only as an old lady, but also draws the attention to the possibility of generating other images from the Irish culture and this conveys the "richness of the Irish culture, in its capacity for self-reference and for significant unity" (Welch, 1987, p. 212-213).

Having Ireland's political struggles to have independence in mind, Yeats drew on this reality as a source of the material of his plays. In this play, Yeats presented Ireland as a helpless old lady who urged young men to help her. The heroine of the play, as perceived by Yeats, had become a metaphorical figure of Ireland seeking independence. In *Cathleen ni Houlihan*, Cathleen says:

[M]any that have gathered money will not stay to spend it, many child will be born and there will be no father at its Christening to give it a name they that have red cheeks will have pale cheeks for my sake, and for that, they think they are well-paid. (Yeats, 1997, p. 219).

Symbolically speaking, the play can be read as a clear reference for the men who died while fighting for Ireland. Yeats declared that they were considered heroes. This explains "why memory and martyrdom were such important themes that are incorporated into works about revolution" (Irish Studies, 2019). Yeats celebrated the sacrifice of the young men who would

be registered in the records of mortality, Cathleen Ni Houlihan said:

They shall be remembered for ever,
They shall be alive for ever,
They shall be speaking for ever,
The people shall hear them for ever.
(Yeats, 1997, p. 219).

Thus, through the metaphorical figure of Cathleen, Yeats' sense of nationalism was made very clear. This "romantic devotion" enabled us to see "in the soul of Ireland everything he [Yeats] idealized" (Stock, 1964, p. 66).

Perhaps in this context, it is worth mentioning that Yeats idealized the mother figure due to its dignified presence and respect. The word "mother" is worked on in various ways in terms of symbolism and from a semiotic angel. This image reminds us of the inseparable link between the mother and her sons. It also drags to our mind the notion of loyalty and obedience any person has to his/her mother. Therefore, it is not strange, the researcher argues, to use the mother figure as a personification of Ireland.

From a semiotic angel, the representation of the mother is connected in its meaning and use in language and its usage in culture. Thus, the image of the mother has socio-political messages. According to semiotic analysis, there are different kinds of messages which words can advocate. About this point, Sarah Ahmed Adham comments on such images saying that socio-political messages "are images where viewers are invited to take

a particular stance. They may be invited to embrace concepts such as 'Freedom', or 'Revolution'. Such images tend to have a high degree of youth." (Adham, 2012, p. 8) Taking this analysis in mind, the old lady who is weak and helpless is pathetic and her insistence on the need of her sons to help her is explicitly introduced. In Yeats' *Cathleen ni Houlihan*, the mother has an emotional meaning. The mother, especially in old age, needs help and it is expected that her sons should help her. Yeats linked the national cause with personal cause. This explains why Cathleen refused any material help when Peter offered her money and food: "Bridget [to the Old Woman]. Will you have a drink of milk? Old Woman. It is not food or drink that I want." (Yeats, 1997, p. 217).

Also, "the word mother is a significant concept that can be seen in mythology, art, sociology, and psychology at the same time" (Koçak & Gürçay, 2017, p. 1). To explain this meaning, when we say "mother" for instance, many meanings come to our mind, these significances denote many symbolic meanings, especially that meaning which is related to "existence (origination from the birth) also feeding and protecting" (Koçak & Gürçay, 2017, p. 1). In other words, Cathleen's figure represents "Mother Ireland", who offer The Irish people protection and the hope of a better life as symbolically presented by independence. As Mother Ireland, Cathleen relates the revival of her youth to the sacrifice presented by her sons. Here the independence of Ireland represented as a mother, could never be done without the help of her young strong sons

who willingly join her to restore her land back from the strangers.

However, there is a sharp, defined conflict between the biological mother “Bridget”, and “Mother Ireland” Cathleen (Stock, 1964, p. 66), this “opposition”, is presented by two female figures, “one mortal and one supernatural, to set up an opposition between the world of the glorious ideal and the world of limiting domesticity” (Harris, 1996, p. 479-80). It can be hinted that “Bridget” symbolizes “England” who refuses the separation of the Irish people from her to join Ireland, on the other hand, Ireland is represented in the figure of Cathleen ni Houlihan. This play belongs to an era in Irish history, in which rebellion against England, the biological mother as implicitly mentioned in the play, and Mother Ireland represented by the old lady Cathleen. This takes us back to an era when the political conflict between the two countries “was in its utmost form” (Doyle, 1998, p. 9). By writing this play, Yeats was encouraging the Irish people to resist English colonization. So, Yeats hoped that “his generation should live up to their ancestors’ tradition of heroic rebellion” (Stock, 1964, p. 160).

By linking Ireland to the female figure, the study highlights the role of the female identity and nationhood to demonstrate how Yeats “repeatedly attempts to transcend nationalism gendered symbolic economy” (Stock, 1964, p. 160). This interrelated metaphor presented Ireland as a “politically disempowered domestic” old lady who is a “spiritual guardian of the community”

(Stock, 1964, p. 160). Therefore, this play symbolically presents Ireland’s transition from a colony to a partially independent nation.

Allegorically, the image of Ireland as a mother is of great significance to the play deep meaning. With regard to this point, Kim discussed the function of symbolism as a main literary tool which enabled Yeats to relate the political situation to the Irish cultural background. Also, Yeats aimed to represent an original dramatic form which depended on symbolism. In Yeats’s plays, “imagery, symbols, style and plot are well organized and unified as an organic whole. Therefore, the characters usually have symbolic meanings [...] Cathleen ni Houlihan, a personification of Ireland” (Kim, 2000, p. 121).

No doubt, the revelation of the allegorical nature of the old lady is presented throughout the whole play. The old lady was embodied in a dignified way of a majestic look. This image stimulates the hero to join her in her struggle with the strangers. The moment the metaphorical figure “Cathleen” realized that the young man will help her, though she is weak and old, another gendered image was presented, the old lady was transformed into a young beautiful woman. This allegorical image of Ireland is strengthened when Cathleen boasts that many men from different parts from Ireland died for her sake, she says that, “the O’Donnell’s from the North” and also “O’Dallivan’s from the South, [...] and there were a great many in the west, some that died hundred, of years ago, and there

are some that will die tomorrow” (Yeats, 1997, p. 216).

However, regarding the significance of Cathleen’s character as a metaphorical figure, Yeats’ dramatization of the Irish issue has a universal meaning since it can be applied for any nation that is looking for its freedom and so, *Cathleen ni Houlihan* can be understood as a form of universal “racial and cultural” humanism (Taylor, 1984, p. 34).

By introducing the old lady’s character, Yeats symbolized Ireland itself seeking help from the youth of Ireland, Cathleen stated “I have travelled far, very far; there are few have travelled so far as myself, and there’s many a one that doesn’t make me welcome” (Yeats, 1997, p. 8). Having in mind Yeats’ personification of Ireland as an old, dignified lady, effective influence is expected of such an image on the audience. Without doubt, Yeats’ allegorical image of Cathleen “inspired several imitations in the National Theatre and even more counter-responses over the following decades, thus, the tradition of the Ireland figure was effectively transposed by Yeats to drama” (Novakovic, 1996, p. 4787).

In fact, this allegorical representation of Ireland is enhanced when Cathleen refused to have any “material” help and insisted on spiritual help embodied in self-sacrifice for her sake. In her conversation with both Peter and Bridget, Cathleen said that she did not ask any material help; her allegorical significance was asserted when she said, “anyone would give me help, he must give me himself, he must give me all” (Yeats,

1997, p. 217). Consequently, Cathleen becomes a clear personification of Ireland when she declares that anyone who wants to help her must do that task entirely for her alone. Hearing Cathleen’s words, Michael sympathizes with her cause and promises to help her to dismiss the strangers out of her house. Again, clearly enough, the symbolic significance of the “strangers” and the “house” attracts the attention particularly if taken in their political context. In fact, the strangers are a symbol that stands for the English occupation and her house stands for Ireland.

As far as postcolonial literature is concerned, this play can be conceived to strengthen the quest of Yeats for a national Irish identity. Kitishat (2012) for instance drew the attention to the national depth of Yeats’ plays, she argued that:

This Irish touch in Yeats’ works incited other Irish writers to assert Irish identity in their writings by advocating awareness of their national identity. Yeats celebrated having Irish identity and tradition in many of his works. In fact, Yeats not only emphasized the ‘instinctive’ nature of tradition, but he also believed that it was impossible to understand the traditions of others if one was not aware of his/ her culture and identity. (Kitishat, 2012, p. 85).

The presentation of Ireland as an old lady links the metaphorical meaning of Mother Ireland. Where the love of her

requires that sacrifice should be done to help her; this meaning is represented in Michael's final decision to help the old woman against the strangers who took her land. This theme confirms the assumption of post-colonial criticism for it is believed that "cultural representations were central first to the process of colonizing other lands, and then again to the process of obtaining independence from the colonizer" (Boehmer, 1995, p. 5).

This reading of the play refutes the suspicions concerning Yeats' Irishness, an attitude which questions "whether [Yeats] can really be thought of as an Irish writer, coming, as he did, from Anglo-Irish stock" or not (Welch, 1985, p. 226). Here Yeats established himself as a nationalist who had a vision which "led him into a reading of the old codes inherent in Gaelic literature; and his version of these, though politicized by nationalism, and affected by the nineteenth century revulsion against materialism and modernism, is very accurate indeed" (Welch, 1985, p. 226). In *Cathleen ni Houlihan*, Yeats invites the young Irish men to fight sincerely for Ireland and it is also a clear invitation for self-sacrifice to obtain independence by dismissing "the strangers": from Cathleen's house, and when asked about "What was it put the trouble on you?" She answered, "My land that was taken from me" (Yeats, 1997, p. 215).

It is not a coincidence that Yeats used the word strangers to indicate the English. The choice of words fits significantly enough in this context. Clearly, Yeats, as well as other Irish people, felt different from the English

in everything: in religion, language and culture. Regarding the religious differences, most of the Irish people are Catholics; while the English majorities are Protestants. The language is also another difference in which the Gaelic language is the real language of old Ireland, which witnessed many attempts of reviving and bringing it back to life. It is also known that the old Irish language is still used in many parts of Ireland, especially the Western region which is famous for the pure Irish dialect. Clearly, the Irish people have worked endlessly to revive their language and culture to bring them back to life again. Even more, this culture is different since the Irish people consider their culture spiritual if compared with the influence of the English material culture.

Moreover, the action of the play concentrates on the relationship between Michael and the old woman. Actually, the revelation of the allegorical nature of the old woman is presented "gradually" with the final decision of Michael Gillane to leave his bride to help the old lady. Most of all, the climax of the play once again reinforces the national message that Yeats wanted to convey, it is clarified when Michael finally decides to postpone his marriage refusing the physical joy and follows Cathleen's voice and left Delia, his bride, though she was begging him to stay (Taylor, 1984, p. 19).

At this moment a supernatural event takes place: the old lady is transformed into a majestic-looking young girl. This fact was reported by Patrick, Michael's brother, when he was asked if he has seen an old woman

walking down the path he said, "I did not, but I saw a young girl, and she had the walk of a queen" (Yeats, 1997, p. 220).

In other words, Michael must choose between his physical pleasures, represented in his new marriage, or the national cause of the independence of the country. This struggle stresses the character's quest for having an identity on the one hand and the refusal of the stereotype that the English colonizer has already presented of the Irish people. Indeed, Cathleen's speech represents the "well-known image of the oppressed speaking out of silence" (Boehmer, 1995, p. 6).

Finally, Yeats' message is embodied clearly at the end of the play when Michael leaves his bride and joins the rising of 1798. This incident is magnificently expressed in "Red Hanrahan's Song about Ireland", Yeats boasted "Our courage breaks like an old tree in a black wind and dies. But we have hidden in our hearts the flame out of the eyes of Cathleen, the daughter of Houlihan" (Wu, 2002, p. 198).

Therefore, reading the previous lines, Yeats aimed at "kindling Irish patriotism into a blaze of hatred for everything despicable in the modern world" (Stock, 1964, p. 168). The researcher stresses that Yeats' method was "visionary", by this method, the researcher argues, that Yeats "deploys a dream figure to mobilize inspirational text for nationalists ... creating the spirit of the 1916 rebellion and, indeed, in creating recruits" (Murray, 1997, p. 70-71).

In fact, Michael's behavior could be justified in the light of the postcolonial

criticism because he was "preoccupied with interpretations of identity – of the need to achieve an independent sense of being in the world-and concerned to high light this question of decolonization over others" (Boehmer, 1995, p. 8).

CONCLUSION

To conclude, having in mind Yeats' personification of Ireland as an old dignified lady, the study proved the effectiveness of such image in restoring the Irish culture and in arousing the sense of nationalism. By drawing on the Irish culture through the allegorical figure of the old woman, the study emphasizes the idea that Yeats was able to assimilate the Irish culture and the national identity into one another. By reviving Irish myths, legends and folktales, Yeats achieved two goals: first, strengthening the Irish awareness of their present by linking it with its cultural origins and this can best be described as the "cultural" awareness, the second is to increase the national feelings among the audience. The study adopts postcolonial criticism to trace the intersection between literature and political reality. Another method adopted in studying the play is multiculturalism since the play celebrates the Irish sense of nationalism and draws on heroes and heroines adopted from the ancient Gaelic culture. Therefore, the study proved that by the personification of Ireland as an old, dignified woman, who has been referred to as "Cathleen ni Houlihan", Yeats uncovers an eager quest for restoring the ancient Irish culture as a source for stressing

a national Irish identity, and implicitly, Yeats hints that sacrifice should be done so that independence could be obtained. In *Cathleen ni Houlihan*, Yeats represented this fact with Michael's final decision to help the old woman against the strangers who took her land. This theme confirms the assumption of post-colonial criticism for it is asserted that cultural representations play a great role in the process of decolonization. The study proves that Yeats was aware of the effectiveness of Irish material, and thus; he succeeded in making his characters fulfill their quest for the independent Irish identity which was achieved by the arousal of national feeling among the Irish people by the personification of Ireland as an old, dignified lady.

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