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FORUM

The influence of theory on understanding: reflections from Twentieth-century fiction by Irish women: nation and gender by Heather Ingman

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An invitation to review Heather Ingman’s Kristevan study of Irish women’s twentieth century fiction sparked these thoughts on how theory influences understanding, in this case, of Irish politics, literature and gender. Intersectionality theory, combined with insights from Irish postcolonial studies, is used to indicate some critical implications of how a reading of ‘gender’ and ‘nationalism’ shapes literary interpretation.

Keywords: feminist theory; Irish politics; intersectionality

It is always interesting to read what’s written about the place you come from and live in. It is equally interesting to return to a once-familiar academic terrain and view it from perspectives developed in the course of working in other fields. There may be an edge to these interests if the place in question has been involved in violent political conflict for almost 40 years during which time its depiction as a sectarian conflict has assumed a global life of its own. Moreover, these interests assume urgency at a time when, in the aftermath of 9/11, the then British Prime Minister (Mr Blair) recommended Northern Ireland as a model of how the ‘war against terror’ should be managed (Campbell and Connolly 2003, p. 341). The invitation to review Heather Ingman’s study of twentieth-century fiction provided me with an opportunity to reflect on all of this.

Most of my feminist, academic career has involved analysing and writing about women’s experiences of the Northern Ireland conflict. I have travelled a long (academic) way from an early absorption, as a mature student, in literature studies, to using intersectionality theory for the analysis of transitional societies (Rooney 2007). Intersectionality provides important conceptual tools that highlight the limitations of ‘gender’ as a single analytical category (Crenshaw 2004). It enables us to understand gendered and class dimensions of social identities whilst providing a way out of the impasses of ‘identity politics’. This is useful for analysing women’s circumstances in transitioning societies. It allows us to comprehend the strategic challenges faced by women organising around common goals in places as diverse as Northern Ireland and Afghanistan (Ní Aoláin and Rooney 2007).

‘Northern Ireland’ is where I have lived all my life. The cautionary quotation marks around its designation signal the political significance of state-building and nomenclature in Ireland. The political landscape of each jurisdiction on the island is shaped by partition. For example,

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unlike states where politics are conducted on a left–right basis, politics in the Republic of Ireland continue to be shaped by governance that came into being during the struggle for independence. The main political party titles reflect these origins: Fianna Fáil is traditionally translated into English as ‘Soldiers of Destiny’ whilst Fine Gael translates as the ‘United Ireland Party’. In the ‘North’, for now, the contested status of the state is resolved by institutionalised power-sharing arrangements between unionists and nationalists following from the 1998 Agreement.

In each state, feminists flourish and struggle in ways that reflect common and specific campaigns and strategies undertaken in different times and places on a range of women’s issues (Crilly et al. 2002). Feminism has profoundly influenced public discourse North and South and, arguably, has advanced equality legislation. All political parties claim to be ‘woman-friendly’. However, party structures and elected assemblies remain overwhelmingly male-dominated. Claims about women’s equality rarely translate into concrete benefits, especially for the most marginalised women who continue to experience deepening levels of poverty each side of the border (Rooney 2006).

That potted version of ‘my-story’, involving alerts about language, Irish politics and feminist theory, sheds some light on my enthusiasm when invited to review Heather Ingman’s study of nation and gender in Irish women’s twentieth-century fiction. The prospect offered a welcome opportunity to read about ‘home’, to revisit academic origins and to examine nation-building on the island of Ireland from the critical perspective of a study of women’s fiction during the century of their formative construction.

Ingman begins with some theoretical alerts of her own drawn from Julia Kristeva’s 1995 concerns about the totalitarian impulses embedded in feminism and nationalism: ‘[E]ven political movements which have freedom as their goal ... run the danger of becoming totalitarian if their ideals are constructed around exclusions’ (pp. 4–5, citing Kristeva 1995). Kristeva’s critique leads Ingman to mount two defences for a study which excludes men’s fiction. The first defence is based on an assertion that women’s ‘separate social conditioning’ constitutes and calls for attention to be paid to women’s tradition of writing (p. 2, citing St. Peter 2000). The claim of ‘separate’ social conditioning for women begs so many theoretical and practical questions about the intersecting roles of gender, class and identities in social conditioning that a safer and less theoretically problematic defence for studying Irish women’s twentieth-century fiction might be its general neglect. However, the ‘separate social conditioning’ point leads to a second defence involving the claim that, ‘nations construct their identity around fixed concepts of gender’ (p. 3). Thus, Irish women’s fiction tackles the ‘struggles of particular women to reconcile their gender with their nation’ (p. 3). The ‘particular women’ I take to refer both to the writers and their female characters. Ingman’s aim, in reading fiction through the frame of Kristevan theory, is to ‘place the dialog between Irish feminism and nationalism in a wider theoretical context’ (p. 3). The study begins from the theoretical position that in this context ‘gender’ is equivalent to women who are marginalised within the masculine project of nationalism and nation-building.

There are seven chapters beginning with an introduction, ‘Irish women in the twentieth century’. The five that follow combine a Kristevan theory-to-theme approach: ‘Reaching out to the other in the nation’; ‘Dialog from the margins’; ‘Reclaiming the mother’; ‘Translating between cultures’; ‘The feminine and the sacred’. The final chapter is simply titled ‘Northern Ireland’. Ingman organises her considerable reading into sub-sections that centre on Kristeva concepts. These are then explored through analysing diverse female characters that embody and enact these concepts. Throughout, the analysis is used to reflect upon the position of women in Ireland in relation to specific events. For instance, ‘Chapter 2: Reaching out to the other’ turns on Kristeva’s notion of ‘herethics’ as a ‘relational dialogic practice of love in which recognition
of alterity takes precedence over personal identity’ (p. 30). In this reading, Cathleen, in Edna O’Brien’s *The country girls trilogy* (1987/1988), epitomises ‘herethics’. She falls in love with a married man and ‘outsider’. He is castigated, by locals, for ‘enticing Cathleen away from her rightful place as an Irish Catholic girl who should be embodying the purity of her nation’ (p. 43). Cathleen’s escape to England, Ingman points out, is ‘ironic since … England is the Other … [whilst her] desire to reach out to the other is thwarted by her nation’s rigidity’ (p. 43). Cathleen eschews enforced submission to Church and nation and proceeds, in London, to ‘experiment with different identities’ (p. 44). Freed from ‘Ireland’, Cathleen’s ‘identity’ appears to be solely a matter of lifestyle choice.

Each chapter forcefully analyses characters whose actions exemplify the theoretical framework. One more example will suffice. ‘Chapter Three: Dialog from the margins’ illustrates Kristeva’s perspective that women are marginal to the ‘nation [being] positioned as strangers and exiles within [its] public life’ (p. 30). This outsider location means, however, that women are able to ‘subvert entrenched Irish nationalism and open it up to a more fluid identity’ (p. 49). This is confirmed by reading ‘Claire’, the protagonist of Mary Leland’s *Approaching priests* (1991) as, ‘ultimately … Kristevan … contestatory and vigilant, on the borders of her nation yet still in dialog with it’ (p. 51). Whilst on a journey with some Sinn Féin men and their erstwhile political opponents (now all united in opposition to Ireland joining the European Union), Claire listens as the men talk of nationalism and bloodshed. She menstruates. Ingman points out that Leland’s description of Claire’s natural blood-letting contrasts embodied female submission to nature with the men’s violent urges to control ‘the land’ by forced blood loss. In this way, Ingman, concludes, ‘Leland juxtaposes the female body to the abstraction of violent nationalism’ (p. 53). Claire is viewed, like other women characters analysed elsewhere, as resisting nationalism’s ‘death dealing ideology … by valuing the human body and its connection, not to the technology of war, but to nature’ (p. 59). Ultimately, Claire is read as representing the ‘heterogeneous Irish nation of the future’ (p. 53). Such women characters are interpreted as being harbingers of a future not yet realised and witnesses to a present in which they play a subversive role.

Kristevan theory is a relatively new field for me. Still, I learned a lot from Ingman’s application of these ideas to understanding Irish women’s fiction. It’s a tricky business – borrowing or developing a theoretical framework from models produced elsewhere in other national and/or disciplinary circumstances. Obviously, social theory scholarship (whatever its provenance) endeavours to provide tools for understanding that have general application. Feminists (Kristeva included) have invested a lot of effort in critiquing the normative, gendered assumptions embedded in social theories. As well as improving upon the explanatory power of mainstream social theory, feminist theory broadly aims to make women’s lives visible for analysis. The political aim is to advance women’s equality or emancipation (although what these mean in different contexts is disputed). Mainstream strands of feminist theory have been critiqued for the single focus upon gender and the neglect of race, ethnicity and social class (Newman 1999). Intersectional analysis, on the other hand, originating in African American feminist jurisprudence, when deployed in the Irish context, raises critical questions about the construction and inter-relationship of social identities in state formation (Hill-Collins 2004, Rooney 2006). Evidently, theoretical frameworks have practical implications for the kind of understanding that results, whether the site of analysis is novels of the twentieth century or Northern Ireland’s transition.

The impact of adapting social theories for understanding the ‘local’ (a location that is categorically neither ‘central’ nor the source of theory) is part of the critical terrain of subaltern studies and, recently, of Irish postcolonial studies. In a way reminiscent of feminist theoretical interventions in the academic ‘mainstream’, but from the perspective of postcolonial studies, Joe Cleary (2003, p. 24) notes that, ‘dependent cultures are always interpreting their own realities with intellectual methodologies created somewhere else and whose basis lies in other social
processes’. The significance of acts of interpretation is familiar terrain for feminist interventions in methodologies that categorically exclude gender and render women’s lives invisible. Cleary argues that at the heart of ‘interpretation’ in Irish studies is a dispute about whether or not Ireland can be regarded as a ‘colony’. Furthermore, he explains, ‘[t]he question about whether Ireland should be considered a colony or a small European nation has a great deal to do with the categorization of Irish nationalism’ (Cleary 2003, p. 28). This ‘category’ tension is evident when Kristeva theoretical tools are applied to the interpretation of gender and nation in Irish women’s writing of the twentieth century.

Cleary’s argument is critical in considering the importance of how ‘nationalism’ is conceptualized in diverse acts of interpretation. For instance, Deirdre Madden’s *Hidden symptoms* (1986/1988) appears to speak directly to Cleary’s analysis. In the novel Belfast is described as, ‘an introverted city, narcissistic, nostalgic and profoundly un-European’ (my emphasis; p. 152). Being ‘European’ is a desirable designation signalling escape from ‘a city paralysed by hatred and fear’ (p. 152). This longing is viewed here and interpreted elsewhere in the text, as a longing to escape the ‘weight of inherited narratives of Irish history’ (p. 152). At fault and impeding escape is the ‘dead hand of Irish history’ (p. 153, referring to Duffaud 1993). In Duffaud’s novel a house is saved from demolition by a group of liberal Protestants in the ‘hope that it might become a place where Catholics and Protestants could reach across the sectarian divide’ (citing Duffaud 1993, p. 153). The house’s destruction becomes a ‘symbol of the Northern Irish situation where future possibilities are portrayed as doomed … by endless recountings of old grievances’ (Duffaud 1993, p. 153). The people themselves, always figured as male in this narrative, are to blame.

A theoretical framework informed by intersectionality and Cleary’s insights might begin by questioning a narrative that explains institutionalized sectarianism in Northern Ireland in terms of people being unwilling to ‘reach across’ to each other. This dominant narrative works, in part, by keeping women out of the picture or by introducing them only when their presence confirms the account that sectarianism is a matter of dysfunctional relations between brutal, working-class men whose reading of ‘Irish history’ leads to an endless ‘recounting [of] old grievances’. This dominant, but surely now-defunct, narrative of the Northern Ireland conflict relies on forgetting, or never knowing in the first place, of the commitments to power-sharing, equality, human rights and criminal justice reform negotiated into the 1998 Agreement. This treaty reconstitutes as it re-imagines state–citizen relations central to the conflict. The impacts of all of this on women’s lives remain largely off-stage and invisible to mainstream analysis (Rooney 2007).

It has been some time since I contributed to feminist studies in literature (Rooney 2000, Crilly *et al.* 2002). Working in diverse academic fields of transitional justice, equality, and feminist theory involves coming to terms with how theories and concepts often contain silences about women’s lives and their geo-political circumstances.

Ingman does a service for Irish women, of all hues, in undertaking this study and informing us about how our lives are rendered in literature produced by Irish women writers of the twentieth century. Her study opens a space for thinking about the intersecting roles of gender, sect and social class in making nations (and war) as well as in making Irish literature. Reading it led me to consider how theory influences understanding, in this case, of Irish politics, literature and gender. Meanwhile, I recommend those who read and listen to reports of the ‘war on terror’, wherever the site of ‘battle’, to pay attention to references to ‘sectarian conflict’ that shut down analysis and foreclose curiosity whilst relying upon silences about women.

**Note**

Notes on contributor
Eilish Rooney is a feminist academic in the University of Ulster and an Associate of the Transitional Justice Institute. She has published extensively on women and gender in the Northern Irish conflict and is currently working on the application of intersectionality theory to women’s equality and masculinity as a framework for thought in transitional justice.

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