

Studi irlandesi. A Journal of Irish Studies, n. 8 (2018), pp. 189-205
DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.13128/SIJIS-2239-3978-23319>

The Genocide and the Rising: Drama Reassessing the Past

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Abstract:


This essay proposes a comparative analysis of the plays *Exile in the Cradle* (2003), by Lorne Shirinian, which dramatizes the Armenian Genocide (1915), and *The Patriot Game* (1991), by Tom Murphy, which revives the Irish insurrection known as Easter Rising (1916), focusing on their female characters, who did not experience those events but still face their aftermath. When compared, besides the consideration about women and how they have been excluded from the traditional accounts, both texts reveal a dialogue with respect to resistance, national liberation and its implications for future generations. In this sense, revisionism may be also a form of overcoming unfortunate components and adjusting the understanding of the past.

Keywords: Drama, Easter Rising, Genocide, Tom Murphy, Lorna Shirinian

1. Introduction

Carved with a pungent trail of ravage and deprivations, Armenian and Irish historical narratives are real tales of colonial exploitation. In this regard, Ireland's Easter Rising of 1916 and the 1915 Armenian Genocide stand as pivotal records in the history of those people. The insurrection of 1916, a double-edged sword in Irish history, has been seen both as a profoundly important and a profoundly unnecessary event for the reason that, even defined as a moment of terror and tragedy because of the irreparable loss of human lives it caused, this premature Irish rebellion, controversially, would change the nature of English rule forever, bringing freedom to Ireland. In Armenia, the genocide, which began with the deportations and forced marches that preceded the vast extermination of the Armenians by the Turks, rendered unforgettable and disturbing images of horror and mass killing. As socio-

ISSN 2239-3978 (online)

 <http://www.fupress.com/bsfm-sijis>
2018 Firenze University Press

political events, the Easter Rising and the Genocide have a lot in common concerning resistance, national liberation and its implications for future generations. The plays *Exile in the Cradle* (2003), by the Canadian Lorne Shirinian, which dramatizes the Armenian Genocide, and *The Patriot Game* (1991), by the Irish Tom Murphy, which revives the Irish rebellion, present retrospective assessments of those specific historical moments by representing female characters that did not experience the events by themselves but that still face their aftermath in a future time. In this sense, a feminist consideration of the two works may also suggest a dialogue with respect to women and how they have been excluded from the traditional accounts. Shirinian's play describes the huge gap in communities where the genocide's memories still echo, at the same time placing feminine figures who question the extent to which such unfair past offers a regulating framework for their transplanted diasporic identities. Murphy's play, which takes a different route from the mainstream Irish-Literary-Revival-based theatre, placing a female narrator as a key character, reveals Murphy's attempt to expose a particular view about the events of the Rising.

A comparative reading of these two dramatic texts from different cultures goes beyond literary purposes. To Greene (1995, 143), comparative literature is the laboratory or workshop of literary studies which lead us to the humanities. All in all, this analysis intends to demonstrate how drama may also embrace issues which transcend the literary realm and a specific cultural domain, ones which deal with actual human quandaries and may lead the readers to a broader and more thoughtful conversation.

2. *The Patriot Game: Reviving and Revising 1916*

Tom Murphy (1935-2018) was born almost twenty years after the 1916 Easter Rising, a violent uprising mounted by Irish rebels that would result in war. This insurrection, considered the birth of Ireland's independence movement, occurred between Easter Monday, 24 April, and Saturday 29 April. It was supported by approximately 1,800 members of the Irish Volunteers and the Irish Citizen Army. It was quickly crushed by British forces, but not before the destruction of the city, hundreds of civilian deaths, and the certainty of a violent period between England and Ireland in the near future. The 1916 Easter Rising was a decisive moment for Irish history and the process of independence. In the 1940s, during his childhood, the only surviving rebel of 1916 was the president of Ireland, Eamon de Valera, one of the greatest names in charge of implementing the Irish national project. So, if Murphy did not live the Rising itself and its peculiar form of nationalism, he did not escape the idealised atmosphere promoted by the Irish government which sought to portray a truly Gaelic country, emphasising the rural life. Many Irish writers saw themselves and their concerns as being allied to those promoted by public

politics, bound up in the higher unity called Ireland. These writers embraced, and were embraced by, this single movement which also included their readers. However, Murphy kept himself apart from this romantic version of the country for, although “the official ideology of Irish politics at this time was that the ideal Ireland was rustic and Gaelic [...], de Valera’s famous vision of a bucolic rural paradise was broadcast when Murphy was fifteen, and it held little for the urban working-class of which he was part” (O’Toole 1994, 25). Murphy had a different attitude towards this national vision, firstly because he grew up in a working-class family which did not occupy any space in the prevailing vision of the period, and secondly, because “he always thought of himself as an urbanite” and, in doing so, “this sense of not being a part of the rural Ireland that was the established ideal was crucial in his consciousness as it would be in his plays” (*ibidem*).

Murphy revisited Ireland’s most famous insurrection in 1965 when he wrote *The Patriot Game*. Having worked consistently for BBC and Thames TV throughout the 1960s, Murphy was initially commissioned by the former to write the play for the 50th anniversary of the Easter Rising as a television docudrama, but it was never aired. The docudrama is a type of historical and political play which retells the plans and part of the Rising. Although it was written in 1965, its first performance on stage occurred only on 15 May 1991 at the Peacock Theatre. Divided into twenty-four scenes, the plot is basically the representation of some moments prior to and during the Rising. The characters have the names of real people involved in the insurrection and the whole story is presented by a young woman who narrates the events with a critical eye and expresses her attitude to the nationalism of the period.

The imagery of nationalism is built into the play, since it examines the planning and some moments of the Rising itself, and uses the leaders and other historical figures involved in the event, reasserting the importance of the Rising in the Irish collective memory. One of the few characters in Murphy’s play who is not associated directly with the real event is the narrator. While names like Connolly, Pearse and MacDonagh appear throughout the plot, the narrator is the most present character in the play, recounting the story and sometimes interacting with the Irish leaders. “The actors’ play is framed by a story told by a female Narrator, who is extremely critical of the whole venture of the Rising and wary of what Murphy calls the nationalist emotion” (Poulain 2006, 15). The theatrical reconstruction of this intense nationalistic period through a sceptical female narrator suggests an attempt at reading the real events from a different perspective, particularly concerned with feminine impressions of nationalism: more than retelling the story, she expresses her feelings and conceptions about the Irish leaders’ deeds and their concept of nationalism. Furthermore, her view of the insurrection seems to be focused on the disorganised and despairing aspect of the battle which echoes Michael Collins’ real reflection about the rebellion, “These are sharp reflec-

tions. On the whole I think the Rising was bungled terribly, costing many a good life. It seemed at first to be well-organised, but afterwards became subjected to panic decisions and a great lack of very essential organization and co-operation” (Coogan 2005, 126-127).

Murphy’s non-traditional attitude to the promotion of nationalistic sentiments made it possible for him to depict a new form of understanding the Easter Rising. When the author re-envisioned the insurrection, the traditional and romanticised version of the insurrection, which had seemed to be so fixed, natural and reasonable, gave place to different perspectives, including a reflection on how Irish women experienced it.

It is Murphy’s capacity to entangle themes of nation, gender and identity, as he does in *The Patriot Game*, which makes his plays so thought-provoking in relation to the complexities of these connections. Although Murphy is not considered a playwright primarily concerned with feminist topics, in *The Patriot Game* he expressly approaches feminism by placing a female narrator as a key character in the play. Since this narrator carries a critical perception about the Rising, Murphy suggests that women’s involvement in a nationalist state has been complex, and questions the very concept of nationalism. Although nationalist projects require the participation of women, there are imaginary lines restricting their place and role, almost always defining them as a passive group:

Nationalist movements invite women to participate more fully in collective life by interpellating them as ‘national’ actors: mothers, educators, workers, and even fighters. On the other hand, they reaffirm the boundaries of culturally acceptable feminine conduct and exert pressure on women to articulate their gender interests within the terms of reference set by nationalist discourse. (Kandiyoti 1996, 312-313)

Given this problematic of the nationalist movements, Murphy challenges this tradition by putting a woman in a central role who decides to focus on the part of the story that interests her. Murphy uses her to point out the perception women had of nationalism.

Both before and after 1916 Irish women lived in a patriarchal community in which they were denied any agency and ended up accepting gendered nationalist ideologies which portrayed them in traditional roles, assimilating this position and behaviour as an accurate enactment of who they were and how they lived. The symbolic roles of women were shaped by a nationalist atmosphere according to political purposes. One of the archetypes promoted by the Irish State, for instance, was the employment of a family iconography which subordinated women to domestic roles, and, women were relegated to a domestic sphere being expected to respect the limits imposed by socially constructed boundaries. The predominant role was that of the desexualised sacrificial mother, which provides the imagery of “Mother Ireland”. Marga-

ret Pearse is the other female character in *The Patriot Game* who contributes to Murphy's reflection on the impact of nationalism on Irish women. In real life, Pearse's mother represented the perfect embodiment of the Irish sacrificial mother for Ireland's society of the period. Her two sons, Patrick and Willie Pearse, were executed soon after the Rising, a fact which raised her to the status of mother of the nation and transformed her sons into national martyrs.

Murphy wrote the play in a period when the female role in Irish society was very different to what it had been in 1916. It seems that the female narrator reveals Murphy's own opinion about the revolutionary acts and ideas; his political convictions are more closely related to internationalism than nationalism. So, why does Murphy place a woman as his narrator? By choosing a female narrator, in addition to meditating on the role of women in the Rising, Murphy puts women in evidence and also questions the insistence by other playwrights in focusing on male roles. Most plays which retold the revolutionary events did not approach women's participation in the struggle nor the troubles they faced during the revolt:

Dublin's 1935 commemoration reinforced the idea that the Irishwoman belonged at home. The organisers of the spectacle erased the proto-feminism of the 1916 Rising and allowed the sacrificial woman to enjoy a notable pre-eminence. In this way, the complicated ambiguities of the original Easter proclamation were flattened and reduced in an easily-promulgated 'populist' form of theatre favoured by Fianna Fáil. (Moran 2005, 72)

Women did not play a great part in the insurrection itself; however those who did were almost deleted from the historical records in the years that followed the Rising. This situation implies the undeniable connection between feminist questions and nationalism. Strategically Irish politics tried to reduce female engagement in war in the years which followed the insurrection, especially when Ireland became an independent country and Éamon de Valera became the president. His government had an apathetic attitude in relation to the participation of women in the Easter Rising since this could act against the new political ideals, and hamper promoting the united family in the new State; "so de Valera's government camouflaged the ambiguities of the 1916 rebellion under the homogenised and anti-feminist carapace of Fianna Fáil" (*ibidem*, 69). However, Murphy was fully conscious of the link between new State's project and national policies, he once stated, "Eamon de Valera, an Taoiseach [Prime Minister], in a famous, much-commented on speech, saw us as a happy people, enjoying frugal comforts, with comely maidens dancing at the crossroads. [...] We didn't complain; we conformed. Nobody wanted 'to go getting their names up'. 'Be wise' could be said to be the slogan of the times" (Murphy 1992, xii).

In *The Patriot Game*, as in other plays, Murphy brings two worlds to the stage, which means he leaps from past to present, and vice-versa, during

the play's course. The play is the story of a preceding event told by a narrator who is clearly a modern-day figure from the 1990s. Past and present are on the stage at the same time in the figure of the narrator and the participants in the insurrection. When her narrative is interrupted by historical sequences from 1916, it is her voice drawing something from the past into the present. Murphy's relationship to this historical event is, according to O'Toole's description, similar to the relationship between writer and history, it is not something existing "in isolation; it arises, rather, from his relationship to his own society and his own time"; so, *The Patriot Game* is, presumably, "a way of tilting the present at an angle in order to see it more clearly", or, at least, it is a way of rethinking the attitudes and feelings emerging from the nationalistic environment of 1916 (1994 [1987], 112).

In her first appearance on stage, the narrator reveals a discontented attitude as Murphy's stage directions make clear:

The NARRATOR, a young actress, comes in and watches from a distance. She is wary of PEARSE, both frightened and fascinated by him and, to conceal this, she tries to affect a detached superiority. (Offstage he could be a boyfriend or a brother who gets out of control.) The narration appears to her to belong to another age and in her modern-day image (leather-jacket and white dress) one suspects that she takes liberties with it – 'yeh?' She is determined to keep control of herself; she loses her resolve every now and again, as in her very first line; she doesn't like the emotion of nationalism, 'it doesn't exist'. (1992, 93)

The appearance of the individual narrator before the collective action represents the relation between the social mentality and the individual one, also, the connection between historical as well as political events and the intimate perception of individuals, recurring themes in Murphy's work. "And what is true of individuals, is true of societies also, that at times of change and crisis the past and the future come into collision and the unspoken traumas of the past demand to be uttered" (O'Toole 1994, 79). Therefore, in *The Patriot Game*, the collision of past and future takes place through the junction of the narrator and the participants in the insurrection on the stage, and she is in charge of uttering the consequent traumas, her own and those of society concerning the Rising. Through the individual mind it is possible to see what is happening in Irish society's consciousness mind and so Murphy puts into the narrator's mouth what were very probably the unspoken traumas of the whole of society. Reassessing the memory of the events from her own perspective, her voice makes the audience aware that the memories of the past are not exactly or simply what happened, they are also invented. In other words, when we think of past as the foundation for the present and future it is not based solely on facts but also on inventions, even tyrannical and stultifying illusions. She courageously manifests her feelings, her anger about the losses and the bloodshed, something very difficult for the

Irish people, afraid of exposing their traumas because they were nourished by the fixed belief in the glorious significance of having an original national identity. They were supposed to accept the battle as something necessary for the achievement of an authentic Irish identity; if they revealed their negative feelings towards the rebellion, they believed they would be dismissing the idea of a unified Ireland.

The opening moments of the play present the audience with an immediate contrast between the narrator and the rebels through her modern image. The author differentiates the narrator's time from the period of the event in a device that suggests an immediate sense of anachronism; she is from the contemporary world experiencing an event from a previous time. The men are from 1916, and the narrator is from 1991, or whatever year when the play is performed. That is what Murphy does with time, he dilates it.

Already, in his first full-length play, we have the roots of a notion which is essential to Murphy's theatre as it develops over a quarter of the century, the notion of time as being, not linear, but simultaneous. In Murphy's plays time does not pass in a straight line, with one event following another as cause follows effect. Instead, there is more than one time frame in operation on stage, with things being connected by the fact that they occur simultaneously in different time frames, rather than by the fact that they follow one another logically. [...] this notion is essential to the great leaps into magic of Murphy's later plays, and to the politics of transformation which informs them. (O'Toole 1994, 60)

Contrasting the period of the narrator's appearance and that of what she is narrating also has the function of suggesting the modern attitude of Irish people towards the rebellion in 1916. O'Toole comments on this particularity, directing our attention to the fact that *The Patriot Game* is composed by a past story being told by an individual from the modern generation (1994). When the narrator says, in the opening scene, "The Disgraceful Story of 1916, by Tomas Macamadan (Son of the Idiot)", she is distancing herself from the story and showing the audience that the other characters in the story are in a different time. Taking into account the fact that the play was written in 1965 and was intended to be performed in 1966, it is worth considering the changes in society that had occurred over those fifty years. When Murphy refers to the modernity of his young female narrator, besides indicating the present attitude of Irish society, he is showing how a revolt which took place fifty years before directly impacts on the new generation. The relationship between the story she tells, and the audience's real life is not one of the simple storytelling, but one of reflection, to think again about the insurrection in order to decide if people should change the way they feel about it or deal with it.

In his description of her, Murphy defines her attitude towards national culture: "she doesn't like the emotion of nationalism, 'it doesn't exist'" (1992, 93). She seems to be the only person on stage aware of this national-

istic mechanism and, thus, for the most part, she is extremely critical of the insurrection, trying to indicate to the audience the dark side of nationalism. According to Poulain “she provides context and transitions between dramatic sequences and sometimes suspends action to voice her own disparaging comments, always striving to retain a tone of controlled irony [...]” (2006, 23).

When Connolly appears for the first time in the play, although the Narrator says “he was an internationalist”, she reveals in her following line that “the nationalist side of his nature would get him” (Murphy 1992, 96). Connolly was committed to wider issues, especially to the workers’ cause; he had spent some years in the USA and had given speeches at international meetings there in favour of the working class. Although the Narrator acknowledges that Connolly had a different sense of nationalism, she says that the power of the national spirit would suppress his internationalism. This proves to be true for Connolly was persuaded to join the rebels just months before the insurrection. On 17 January 1916 he was stopped by a car while he was walking on the street and was brought to a meeting with the other insurgents who did everything to convince him that his efforts to help the working class would only succeed if they solved Ireland’s question first, and they received Connolly’s agreement. In Scene 4, the Narrator says “and Connolly was goin’ his own road, bent on his own class of international revolution, but losin’ his personal battle to nationalism” (Murphy 1992, 103). The Irish atmosphere was full of the national spirit. At this time, Connolly was a popular and influential figure on the Irish scene, so his involvement in the nationalist cause suggests how influential and powerful national culture was in Irish society.

Murphy’s Narrator refers ironically to the national ideals of the leaders of the Rising, trying to show the audience the ambiguities of the national culture. Moreover, Murphy does so using a female figure who guides the audience attention throughout the play towards an understanding of the way women viewed and felt about the insurrection. In fact, there is a subversion of the predominant patriarchal discourse about the Easter Rising which frequently persisted in blurring the female participation in the event.

The play does not end hopefully; it breaks the bonds of illusion and provokes a profoundly disillusioned feeling in the audience. Portraying images of disillusioned people, in *The Patriot Game*, Murphy makes us reflect about the conditions of women during one of the most polemic periods in Irish history. He proved that “this breath of politic words”¹, touching women’s reality will be a topic to be discussed for a long time.

¹ From Yeats’s poem, “The Rose Tree”. It was written in April, 1917, and its theme is the Easter Rising.

3. Exile in the Cradle: *Sloughing Off the Genocide*

Lorne Shirinian was born in Canada in 1945, thirty years after the Armenian Genocide. This dreadful event has an outright impact in the writer's life, since his parents were survivors of this mass killing episode. His parents' families were killed in the genocide and then his father and his mother were raised in orphanages in Turkey and Greece until they were brought to Georgetown, Ontario, north west of Toronto to a farm home for Armenian orphans. His father arrived in 1924 and his mother in 1927. He grew up with the stories of the survivors as many would often come to his home in Toronto, and from then on, Shirinian has been trying to become these people's voice by making their experience known through his writings. He has also been a political activist, but since 2010, he has dedicated himself solely to writing. His memories are intimately connected to his work (Shirinian 2017). Currently, Shirinian is a retired Professor Emeritus of English and Comparative Literature at the Royal Military College of Canada in Kingston, Ontario. His area of research has been the way the Armenian Genocide has affected cultural production. Throughout his working life, he has also written about crime fiction, film noir, literature and film of the Holocaust. In addition, he has written many books of poetry, fiction and drama as well as scholarly monographs and essays (Shirinian 2017). He has published 25 books, and his recent work is a memoir titled *Motion Sickness* (2017)².

This essay takes a special look at Shirinian as a dramatist and, more specifically, at his play, *Exile in the Cradle* (2003), a four act play which revisits the 1915 Armenian Genocide. There have been two productions, both in Toronto and directed and produced by Seta Keshishian and Jolanta Izmirlıyan, respectively. It was first performed on 23 April 2006 at the Sir John A. Macdonald Theatre and on 5 September 2006 at the Fairview Theatre. Its outset represents the early moments of the genocide and the imagery of such a deplorable period of Armenian history, then moves to the present in Toronto, where several generations of Armenians cope with the imminent break-up of their family. In this regard, the play has much to tell about the actual history. Although the Armenians are not in front of the disaster they faced at the time of the genocide, they are constantly confronted with its upshots, as the diaspora phenomenon, since about seventy per cent of the Armenian people live outside the Republic of Armenia. The first act, "Forgiveness", revives real moments of the bloodshed lived by this people. The two Armenian characters, Pierre Srabian and Hagop Kesserian, are victims of the Armenian Genocide which began on April 24. The second act, "Moon Monologue", is essentially an internal monologue by Pierre,

² For further information about Lorne Shirinian's life and work, access: <<https://www.lorneshirinian.com>> (05/2018).

who survived the Turk attack. This act sets the tone to what happens next in the play, the Genocide aftermath for this family. The other two acts depict Pierre's daughter, Armig, and her family, after the loss of two loved ones, dealing with aspects of living with genocide while family issues in all its complexities continue. The playwright refers to it in the epigraph at the beginning of the play: "for all those who suffered the Armenian Genocide and for those who still feel the pain" (Shirinian 2008). *Exile in the Cradle* is a play that spans several generations since the Genocide to show that the trauma and pain, like acid burns its way through generations of families (Shirinian 2017).

The first act starts in Istanbul with the representation of the moment when all the Armenian suspect of antigovernment opinions, especially artists, intellectuals and community leaders are arrested and taken to the police station. There are the characters, Pierre, a twenty-five-year-old poet, and Hagop, a wealthy fifty-three-year-old food merchant, both Armenian, sitting and facing each other on benches in a passenger compartment on a train. It is April 26, 1915, in Constantinople; they are arrested and taken into the police station, kept there for three days and then forced to get into the train without knowing what their future would be. Hagop, who is wounded in the chest, hopes he is going to be spared from the turmoil because of his friendship and commercial relations with influential Turkish men.

PIERRE: What do you think is going to happen to us?

HAGOP: Internal exile for a while, I suspect, until things in the capital calm down. Then, they'll bring us back. [...]

HAGOP: I have faith all will be well.

PIERRE: You're a fool, there's nothing to base it on. When the train slows, I'll jump. I'll go over the border to Yerevan or Tiflis. (Shirinian 2008, 34)

On the other hand, Pierre seems to be quite aware of what is going to happen to them if they stay on that train which has no final destination, except the loss of their lives. Thus, Pierre plans to escape to the mountains to avoid the fury of the Turkish soldiers and the wrath of Kurdish villagers (42). In fact, Pierre has been aware of the government's cruel methods of reform well before the bloody attack. As a poet, his writings about politics did not give the Turks what they wanted to hear, on the contrary, Salim, a member of the government who is in charge of the deportation of the Armenian intelligentsia from Constantinople, accuses Pierre of producing subversive contents. In the final conversation among the three in the train, Salim makes clear the real motivation of that deportation.

SALIM: Armenian no longer have any import in our new country.

HAGOP: But the empire has always been a place of many peoples. Armenians were here centuries before Turks arrived. We have always been a loyal community.

SALIM: When we push back the Russian and the British, there will be only the empire of the Turkish people, stretching through Armenia into central Asia. This is Turania! (36)

Furthermore, he assures Pierre that he and his group will not allow any record of brutal events:

SALIM: People will learn what we tell them. We will become the source. There will be no others. Against your rumors, we will produce archival documents detailing your ambitious and treachery against the empire. We have acted to prevent a civil war. [...] We have only to plant a single seed of doubt to succeed. (40-41)

Salim's words in the above excerpt are endorsed by the arguments that "two levels of authority were at work in the organization of the Armenian Genocide" and that "informal" methods were used to keep in secret or even to destroy unofficial messages (Winter 2003, 91). Bearing this in mind, the title for the first act, "Forgiveness", is purely ironic. In a collection of essays, *The Landscape of Memory* (2004), Lorne Shirinian wrote an essay titled "The Armenian Genocide and the Issue of Forgiveness". According to him, there can be no forgiveness given the level of destruction and pain and the continued denial caused by the Genocide (2017).

The other three acts represent characters in a future time; among them, Pierre, in Act 2, is the only one who experienced the events by himself. The others, Armig and her daughters, did not live the Genocide, but on account of the painful living memories from the past, they still face the effects in their lives. In the second act, Pierre lives what he envisioned in the first act, just before breaking free and running into the night to take his chance at survival escaping from the Turkish hands. He foretells,

For generations, old and young will bear this pain. We'll be a people haunted by images of columns driven into exile and deathly visions in mountains and the eastern deserts, our life's blood gorging rivers. The sound of sabers and bayonets will steal our sleep. Village mobs screaming their hate for us as they tear children from their mother's arms will forever deny us peace. And always, the sound of this train. [...] Something must remain. Someone must remember us. (Shirinian 2008, 41-42)

"Moon Monologue" portrays Pierre as a ninety-five-year-old man living solitarily, surrounded by the ghostly memories of the Genocide. He does not have any one to share his pain and torment, but the moon "They came in the spring when the flowers were in bud and spilled our blood on the roses [...] Oh, moon, what I have seen. When they pushed us off the train at Ayash, I took off and ran and ran" (43). In this monologue he gives a detailed narration of the atrocities suffered by the Armenian intellectuals at Ayash, who in their majority did not survive. Pierre also gives more information about

what happened to him after the war: “[...] I returned to Constantinople and looked for my family, but none survived. [...] I went to Paris. I never thought I would see it again, but I returned and began to write. I taught poetry. I became human again. [...] I don’t remember why I came to Canada” (45). In the play, his character is represented as the last Armenian poet who survived the Genocide. In a conversation with his daughter, Armig, who also writes poems, he affirms that his poetry is not led by his own free will, but that it is “pure memory made flesh through the word” and a “final gasp of the old culture” (46-47). As if it was not enough being confronted with inescapable feelings of loss through death, these characters encounter a challenging process of assimilation and acculturation. Their writings, therefore, seem to be an uplift for their reason for living, and even a form of rethinking how they incorporate their own history and these cultural questions.

OLD PIERRE: [...] What will you call your new book?

ARMIG: *Sloughing Off.*

OLD PIERRE: What do you think you’re sloughing off?

ARMIG: Old habits, ways of thinking and being. (47)

In fact, the poetry provides them some relief and encouragement to continue, even under so many bitter remembrances. When Armig leaves Pierre’s house, despite his recurrent melancholic mood, he seems to be motivated by her daughter’s arrangement for a reading.

OLD PIERRE: It’s too good to be true, a reading, someone to listen to my work again [...], a last chance, sprig of hope against the final despair. My new manuscript. I must prepare...

(He rises very slowly from the chair, obviously weak. He stands and turns toward the audience with a deathly look on his face then falls back down into the chair. He recites.)

and so

the train departs

should you see my mother... (48)

Pierre dies. His final speech is concluded by the actor who represented the young Pierre in Act One. At this moment an interesting confrontation of past and present is given through a single character featured by two actors at the same time on stage, one representing the past, the young Pierre, who witnessed the actual events, and the other representing the present, the old Pierre, who faced the traumas of the Genocide in his old age. However, his death is not the end of the connection between the sorrowful past and the present, for such bond is still alive through the preserved memories of the Genocide.

The living members of this family seems clung to the Armenian past generations, although they are “exiled” in a diasporic community facing the

assimilation of a new culture and identity. In Acts Three and Four the characters are in a deadlock between living an exile from the past or from the future. It is interesting to see how the playwright highlights women's representation in these two last acts, unfolding the narrative predominately based on the three female characters, Armig and her two daughters, Liz and Helen. Pierre's death in Act Two is followed by Armig's husband death whose funeral is represented in the very beginning of the Act Three. Until the end of the play the female characters are in the foreground. That's a very significant inversion, since it seems women have been very often kept in the background of Armenian culture. According to Sona Zeitlian, they have not been treated fairly in literary history even though there have been many exemplary Armenian women (qtd. in Janbazian 2015).

In fact, women have held a relevant participation in national history and have been agents for a number of social accomplishments, since they constitute about half of the Armenian population. However over the years, they have been ignored and excluded from the narratives framed by men.

Nevertheless, in terms of commitment with the national culture, these female characters hold divergent points of view. Liz, Armig's older daughter, and her husband feel summoned to preserve their distant past. While her younger sister, Helen, constantly tries to escape from being defined as part of the Armenian community. Aversely, Liz cannot find her own identity. Even being born and living in Canada, she is not able to turn her back to her Armenian past. To her, being part of the community and preserving the past alive is a form of giving voice to those who suffered and maintaining her own identity and her family's.

HELEN: Just what is it what you're trying to preserve, Liz?

LIZ: Everything we remember. What we were and what we are. Some presence. Some way of being Armenian here. [...] We have to keep the faith with the past. (Shirinian 2008, 55)

On the other hand, despite the profound and crucial fissures left by their Armenian heritage, these characters are also depicted before the possibility of reconsidering this relation with their past. In contrast to Liz, Armig and her younger daughter, Helen, are gradually resisting to an identity dictated by the past events because they claim their future. In this sense, the play questions to what extent such unfair past offers a regulating framework for their transplanted diaspora identities, revealing the differences lived by these communities where the Genocide memories still echo. Helen, in a certain way, is in a constant denial of her Armenian past, she wishes to live "her" life without being held back by the Genocide. Her character is the most detached from the myth of her heritage.

HELEN: Armenians and Turks. I don't give a damn about them. They're never going to be free of each other. You, know, when we were younger and he talked about it, telling us the stories that his parents told him, and listening to Mom's Dad, I felt as if I were in one of the deportation columns, that my life was meaningless. I hated that feeling. I hate the Turk for what they did to us then, I hate them now for what they're still doing to us. But I can't let this be part of my life. I'm not going to be another victim three generations later. I can't live with this hate, these images. (52)

Seen in these terms, Helen is very different from her sister Liz. Even the memories of her father, telling them about the Genocide when she was a child, hurt her. She does not want to live her life based on what happened in her family's past, on the contrary, she wants to take control of her own life, creating space for new possibilities in the new culture she is placed now. "I want to be free to explore my potential. Being Armenian is a net" (53). While Liz and Helen seem to live in a constant tension because of the adverse way each of them deals with the Genocide issue, Armig presents herself prudently with respect to the conflict between her ancestry and the chance to begin again. Like Helen, her attitudes reveal she is open to the process of change,

ARMIG: Maybe we'll be Armenian in a different way. I know it sounds ironic, but it might be the only way to retain something meaningful of our heritage while everything else around us weakens and disappears.

HARRIET: It's such a risk. We can't give up our identities like that.

ARMIG: I'm not suggesting we do. We have to be open to the process. I'm afraid that before much longer we won't have a choice in the diaspora. The old world without a context in the new isn't encouraging (58),

but according to the author, she proposes a conscious change "as resistance and as a form of self-direction. This is her way of taking control of her own agency and creating a space that will allow for new possibilities of Armenian cohesion, unity, and solidarity in the diaspora" (73). Armig is aware of the importance of her past, she respects her family origins, since she even writes about it in her poems and, at the end of the play, retells the Genocide to her granddaughter, Yerchanig, fictionalizing it, motivated by the need to pass it on to the new generations; but at the same time, she refuses to impose the national question ostensibly to her family. Pierre's daughter observes that the Genocide has become a kind of *cliché* of Armenian history and that there is a certain emotional automatism every time it is mentioned. Through this female character, the play proposes a reconsideration of such overemotional reaction and what leads to it. Furthermore, it brings to light the fact that identity and traditions can be perfectly questionable and subject to change, especially in a diasporic context.

4. *Final Considerations*

These comparative considerations of *The Patriot Game* and *Exile in the Cradle*, first of all, make evident Skloot's statement: "The theatre's lasting influence lies in its ability to extend the limits of our language and imagination" (2008, 9). In this regard, Murphy's and Shirinian's plays broaden the literary dimension and engage more fully with the wide range of arts and as consequence both authors reach human and social spheres, demonstrating, through their text, a concern with humanity and a sort of global consciousness. Their works provide revisionism of very significant past events that occurred in their national history which took place more than one hundred years ago, but that today still impact directly in matters of national identity and culture. *The Patriot Game* is a revision of the history of the Rising, since the development of the ideas of the historical moment it revisits are different from the official or traditional ideas of a particular group, proposing new insights and reflections about the topic that are different from those of the Irish dominant culture. Murphy's play deals with a troublesome question which concerns "exclusively" the Irish. Although in a more profound analysis of the history of Ireland as a colony, the English share the responsibility in the causalities and deaths caused to the Irish people, the 1916 Rising was a bloody event premeditated and caused by the Irish themselves. In a certain way, Murphy puts the Irish against themselves in order to reassess their attitudes and choices. While *The Patriot Game* revives this Irish internal questions in need of revision, *Exile in the Cradle*, from another standpoint, revives the Genocide, in accordance to the history told by the Armenian people. Thus, initially, Shirinian revisits the historical moment not as a form of revisionism to deal exclusively with Armenian issues, but as an attempt to give voice to those who suffered in silence without any opportunity of survival: "[...] none of us is guilty of anything but being Armenian. That's our crime" (2008, 38). And it is when the play unfolds, that the dynamic between the characters and their dealing with heritage provide the adequate context to a reconsideration about the Armenian internal question.

Besides the approach on the national issue, both dramatists acknowledge and represent the feminine participation for they depict women as key and important characters. Both Armenian and Irish women have a remarkable track record in social and national history. Zeitlian points out that "Throughout Armenian history, women have held various roles in the national reality – from Armenian queens and princesses ruling in the medieval period, to female participation in the national liberation struggle of the late 19th and early 20th centuries" (qtd. in Janbazian 2015). There were several female members and ministers of Parliament during the years of Armenia's First Republic. Moreover, Armenia was one of the first countries to give women the right to vote and the

first one to appoint a female ambassador, Diana Abkar. Similarly, the experience of women in Ireland proved to have its own characteristics dating back to the dawn of Irish civilization. In the context of Gaelic tradition, for instance, women's status was very similar to men's in many aspects. But, unfortunately, the contribution of Irish women to history has been underrated because of the emphasis on the singularity of the Irish experience and due to the prioritization of the political track which drove the female participation away and assigned women a marginal role (Parra 2016, 50).

Therefore, the theatrical reconstruction of a historical past and its subsequent outcomes, predominantly, through female representations suggests an attempt at reading the real events from a different perspective, also concerned with how women have undergone these episodes. The Narrator in *The Patriot Game*, and Armig in *Exile in the Cradle*, do not only retell the story to others, but they express their feelings and conceptions about the influence of these national occurrences in their reality. Shirinian and Murphy could spotlight the complex female existence in national contexts, since although Armenian and Irish women have dealt with all the consequences of their national history, they are not remembered in historical records, being restricted to imaginary lines which define their place and role, almost always passive.

Another important aspect of the plays is the presence of two worlds on the stage, giving the audience a feeling of leaping from one world to another. The plays' collision of past and present takes place through the junction of characters that witnessed the actual events with characters that are living the consequent traumas which persistently remain. In *The Patriot Game* past and present are on the stage at the same time in the figure of the modern-day narrator, clearly from 1991, and those of the participants in the 1916 insurrection. *Exile in the Cradle* also embodies present and past, first because it is a play which begins exactly reviving the actual 1915 Genocide and finishes portraying an Armenian family of modern days dealing with the heavy burden of their national past. Second, as in *The Patriot Game*, Shirinian's play places past and present on the stage at the same time when Old and Young Pierre confront each other at the beginning of Act 2. Young Pierre speaks to Old Pierre of Toronto in 1985: "On some nights, I dream of Pierre, sitting alone in this apartment, dreaming of me" (Shirinian 2008, 42). In a sense, both playwrights offer their audience the possibility of experiencing simultaneously different times and spaces through a conflict that arises between memory and present understanding, which makes them able to rethink the attitudes and feelings emerging from the historical moments.

In conclusion, the analysis of *The Patriot Game* and *Exile and the Cradle* provides meaningful insights into the dynamics of how a past event can dictate the life of future generations. Furthermore, both plays surprise the audiences by placing some female characters, though depicted in different conditions and backgrounds, as subversive elements in the revision of a nation's historical past. Representing important moments in the national history of Armenia and Ire-

land, Shirinian and Murphy, respectively, invites us to reassess the implications of past episodes and the subsequent unspoken traumas they caused. Reassessing the memory of the events from the perspective of different characters contributes to expand the understanding about the past and the different possibilities for the future, suggesting that revisionism may also be a form of adjusting the comprehension of the past and overcoming unfortunate components from cultural traumas.

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