Trauma and Theatre: Struggling to Make Devastated Female Bodies and Minds Visible

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Introduction

For the last several decades, Irish writers, poets, playwrights and movie directors have attempted to grasp the plight and trauma of socially marginalised women in Ireland and describe their damaged bodies and minds. Brendan Kennelly, a poet and dramatist, started writing his version of Euripides’ *The Trojan Women* (1993) by asking, ‘How could I find the words to let these women express the ever-deepening reality of their natures?’(1) Straightforwardly, he answered the question, ‘Well, I tried’. Aidan Mathews, a poet and playwright, was firmly gripped by the idea of adapting Garcia Lorca’s *The House of Bernarda Alba* to a contemporary play because ‘there are only women in the play’(2). ‘For all the male writers’, he believes, ‘it is a common ambition to be a woman in their works’(3). This ‘common ambition’ marked 1984, the year Tom Paulin and Aidan Mathews published their *Antigones*. These two plays were followed by Brendan Kennelly’s version at the Peacock Theatre in 1986. A woman in the audience praised the playwright for his achievement, saying, ‘You understand women’s rage. Do Medea next’(4). Those words ‘stuck’ in Kennelly’s mind.

*The Woman Who Walked into Doors* (2003), a play by Roddy Doyle, unflinchingly depicted an abused woman, Paula Spencer, who was persuasively embodied by an established actor, Hilda Fay. The audience watched Paula, quite punch-drunk, secretly being repeatedly raped within her house while her body was hanging from the ceiling of the stage, which revealed the clandestine and invisible nature of women’s plight. Like Roddy Doyle, a movie director Peter Mullan bluntly depicted the Irish clergy’s direct and/or complicit involvement in sexual and physical abuse in his film *The Magdalen Sisters* (2002)(5). The director has said that the work is ‘a fictional film that unfortunately happens to be true’(6). Ex-inmates have regarded the film as ‘accurate’, although some admit that ‘the reality was even worse’(7). The film broke the ‘shamed silence’ into which the victims of abuse in church-run institutions were forced through their fear that their local communities would accuse them, not their abusers, of being shameful sinners(8).

These attempts to grasp traumatic female experiences and to depict the devastated bodies and souls of women amply prove that male Irish writers have seriously engaged with these issues. This analysis can be
an accomplice in marginalizing Irish women, however, unless female writers’ achievements are taken into consideration. This study will investigate the extent to which theatre performances, with scripts that were written and directed by women in recent years, cope with the plight and trauma of socially marginalised women in Ireland and describe their damaged bodies and minds.

1. Hidden Vicious Circle of Unwanted Pregnancy, Illegitimate Childbirth and Separation

To excavate and recover female voices, female theatre practitioners have made unflinching revisits to the dark plights of women and relentlessly criticised the way they have been repressed in Ireland. For instance, a theatre performance by Calypso Productions, *Stolen Child*, co-authored by Bairbre Ni Chaoimh and Yvonne Quinn in 2002, investigates the grave consequences of sexual abuse. Its theme is conveyed in a deeply oppressive atmosphere on stage. The play grasps the sufferings of a raped woman and her child in full-scale anguish that includes rape, unwanted pregnancy, illegitimate childbirth, the unwished separation of the mother and child, forced adoption and many years of bitter twists and turns experienced before their reunion. By so representing its theme, the play undertakes to speak for any woman who has experienced the harshness of this typical chain reaction in Ireland.

The whole volume of material in *Stolen Child* is allotted for one ultimate end: the reunion of a raped mother and her adopted child. Two layers of stories are deposited as preliminary arrangements for this end: one layer for the mother, Peggy, and the other for her child, Angela. The child’s story is focused on her long-cherished project, a search for her real mother. Forty years after her adoption, her adoptive mother dies, and, as an efficient president of her own travel agency, she can afford her pursuit. A convenient opportunity to set out on her quest for her mother finally presents itself. Regarding her search for her real mother, the name of her company, ‘Ionian Dreams’(9), hints at Odysseus’s homewards voyage in the Ionian Sea to Ithaca. It reveals the core of her dream, a homecoming. In the theatre production, a picture of a woman gazing intently at a vast expanse of the Mediterranean Sea is framed on the wall that separates the daughter from her mother by a wide difference in level on the stage. the daughter’s flat is set in the centre at ground level in the theatre. In contrast, the mother’s flat is set on the stage’s left on a very high platform, and the top of its low walls are barely separated by the ceiling of the theatre. That was a straightforward visualization of their longing for a concrete family identity and the psychological gap to be bridged between them, a gap that was created by their socially imposed alienation.

In 2003, this articulate visualization of the psychological gap between women in trouble was followed by a comparable example in Michelle Read’s play, *The Other Side*. In the play, two female actors are confined separately on each side of the divided stage, and they cannot see the other side. It is highly implied that two women of ‘around the same age and description’(10) are identical twins who part and lose all contact with
each other at the age of eight. One of them is Kate, who is adopted by a childless English couple and who grows to be a battered and socially deracinated photographer. As a child abandoned by her real parents in dubious circumstances, Kate is rootless because she has cultivated her ‘fight or flight’ tendencies. As such, she often becomes aggressive and easily abandons people, just as she is forced to abandon her own past. The other twin, Dervla, is born and raised in Ireland and goes on to have a successful career. This means she, similar to Angela in Stolen Child, can financially afford her long-time ambition — to search for her lost sister and her own concrete family identity. Unlike Stolen Child, the play displays a directly political extension, where these women are also forced to search for their personal and national identity in a country that has recently been subjected to a coup d’état and in which they are confined within a detention barracks. The play raises the question of male chauvinism in social changes as well as an unsupportive adoption system in a patriarchal society. Here, the women’s troubles are complicated because of the otherness of women in making the history of a country and the helplessness of children in adaptation.

Tara Derrington, the director of The Other Side, divided the auditorium, as well as the stage, so that the audience could only see one side of the divided stage. The audience is tantalised by the invisible but tangible presence of the woman on the other side, exactly as the women are limited on the stage. The director punctuated many of the scenes by inserting piercing radio noise, which not only was an objective representation of the chaotic state of human communication resulting from the social disorder but also can be read as the director’s assertion that the play was a dramatization of the urgency of tuning in to the voices of women in trouble. By this theatrical means, the play urges the audience to involve themselves seriously and vicariously in the troubles and psychological gap that the isolated women have to face.

The theme of the tragic chain reaction in unwanted pregnancy, illegitimate childbirth and separation was recently depicted afresh by Noelle Brown and Michele Forbes in their Postscript, which was first staged in 2013. Noelle Brown, an actor and playwright, plays the role of ‘Noelle’ in the play, which is based on her personal experiences, and tells the audience about her own adoption. The play focuses on the painstaking processes in which she makes desperate attempts to find her real parents. It is gradually revealed to the audience that her natural father ‘knew of [the] pregnancy but disappeared’ and her mother had no choice but to put her baby up for adoption. The storytelling in the play repels the risk of mythification of female experience in that the very presence of the actor and playwright, who based the script on her own experience, exemplifies the bodies and minds of women in plight.

2. The Voiceless Repressed Women

The Stolen Child also includes a long soliloquy by the isolated elderly mother, Peggy, which is delivered intermittently from the beginning until nearly the end of the play. This soliloquy begins with a fluent
monologue but then transforms into an awkward dialogue at the end of the play, when Peggy’s child, now a middle-aged, self-employed woman, eventually knocks at her door. This soliloquy is analogous to Tom Murphy’s _Bailegangaire_ (1985), where an endless monologue by a worn-out, senile Mommo, about her homecoming is brought to end only through the restoration of the bonds between her and her daughters. In _Stolen Child_, the mother’s endless soliloquy comes to an end through her reunion with her daughter. All the pains and efforts throughout the play await this ending. The simple fact that they have to undergo such a massive amount of pain and effort for their reunion forms a severe criticism of the accepted social order in Ireland, which can be difficult for adopted children and victims of rape.

One of Peggy’s tragedies as a victim of rape is the fact that her family, the church-run institute and the state fail to foster Peggy’s initiative in solving her problem. Instead, they destroy her initiative, and she is completely forsaken. The criticism of reality in _Stolen Child_ is heightened by quotations from W.B. Yeats’s ‘The Stolen Child’ (thus, the title of the play). The nonchalant nuns unwittingly choose that poem and order Peggy to commit it to her memory and to recite it in a cultural festival, hoping that the reading from the acknowledged poet will impress (and it indeed does) an authoritative visitor with the children’s decent education. A blind spot in the nuns’ minds is the fact that the Yeatsean vision of mysterious enticement in this poem is far from a pretty fairy tale. In the poem, a child, in order to free himself from weeping in the human world, has to abandon the most substantial attribute of human beings, namely, humanity itself:

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\text{Away with us he’s going,}
\text{The solemn-eyed:}
\text{He’ll hear no more the lowing}
\text{Of the calves on the warm hillside}
\text{Or the kettle on the hob}
\text{Sing peace into his breast,}
\text{Or see the brown mice bob}
\text{Round and round the oatmeal-chest}^{(12)}.
\]

Here, already affected by the fairyland, the child is obtuse about humane homeliness. Thus, the poem is, just as Declan Kiberd puts it, ‘not so much a plea for escape as an account of the claims of the real world and of the costs of any dream’\(^{(13)}\). When the child is described as going numb, the poet’s implication is not a justification of flight from the human world but ambivalence towards it. The hesitation in escaping from the concrete real world is articulated by the poet through his comparison between the poem and his general attitude for creative writing, stated as follows:
it [his poetry] is almost all a flight into fairyland from the real world, and a summons to that flight. The Chorus to the ‘Stolen Child’ sums it up—that it is not the poetry of insight and knowledge, but of longing and complaint—the cry of the heart against necessity. I hope some day to alter that and write poetry of insight and knowledge.

In the poem, the numbness, or rather abandonment, of the child’s heart inevitably makes it impossible for the poet to give further insight into the heart (which is not a human heart any longer), and its escape from the real world produces no further knowledge of the human world. Thus, the ‘flight into fairyland’ is disqualified by the poet for his aesthetic agenda for ‘the poetry of insight and knowledge’. Regardless, he is still dangerously attracted by the fatal enchantment of inhumaness, which terminates every human anxiety.

Yvonne Quinn and Bairbre Ní Chaoimh’s extension of the Yeatsean theme can be posed as follows: is the negation of the flight to inhuman numbness still valid when no humane homeliness is allowed to children in church-run institutions, like Peggy in Stolen Child? Thus, inhuman numbness is cynically suggested as a possible refuge for a socially and religiously voiceless nonperson. For the children in the play, there is no ‘kettle’ or ‘oatmeal chest’ to bring about a sense of ‘peace’ to them; only ‘pig swill’ (21) is provided. Which is then less painless, sensuous and spiritual petrifaction towards the real world or a continuous stay within their harsh reality? Unless they escape into an inhuman zone, criticisms of the real world should be inevitable. Severely abused in the institution, Peggy recalls her past life with her abusive father with a grotesque tint of nostalgia, simply because her life was relatively better then. The most tantalizing nostalgia overcomes her when she recollects the occasion when her father, in an attempted infanticide, nearly drowned her and her younger brother. For Peggy, the land of the dead is a fairyland, where death will surely terminate all her misery and sufferings in the real world and reunite her with her long-abused late mother. Adopting the alternative, she eventually leaves Ireland for England, swearing that she would ‘never set foot in that rotten country again’ (110). However, there is one thing that pulls her mind back to the real world of Ireland, and that is her daughter, who was adopted against Peggy’s will and therefore, is Peggy’s own stolen child. Despite her initial longing for the netherworld, she chooses against the petrifaction of her mind to the reality of Ireland, and instead raises fierce criticisms of it (which is already immanent in her bitter, invective swearing against the country), searching for a space for her to be heard in her endless subjective monologue. After she is strongly attracted by and nearly enticed into her fairyland, she comes back to the real human world, which is articulated by her reunion with her daughter at the very end of the play. Thus, the play is the story about a painfully prolonged homecoming of a woman in trouble, in which the socially and religiously voiceless women, the mother and the daughter, finally create their own subjective voice and find an attentive listener in each other.
3. Against Mythification of Bodies and Minds

Authors may run the risk of further marginalizing women if their depictions of women in plight lack social, cultural and religious contexts. Ignoring the whole structure of connected elements that Irish women face may even mythify those women, turning their concrete presence and their bodies and minds, into fanciful nonentity.

*Stolen Child* avoids this mythification by focusing on the social and religious nature of the traumatic experiences that their characters undergo. By doing so, they virtually criticise the two ultimate controllers of traditional values in Irish culture and the social norm—the Church and the State. The play, in one sense, epitomises plights that Irish women can face in their everyday life. Peggy is an abused child in her home. After her mother dies, she is put into an industrial school by the Catholic Church. Far from a rescue from certain death, she is daily tortured and humiliated by relentless nuns. At the mercy of this terrible care system, she is eventually raped and falls pregnant. When Peggy gives birth to her daughter, the baby girl is adopted against Peggy’s will—thus the child is ‘stolen’ from her. She barely manages to survive as a domestic in England. Her daughter, Angela, suffering from an unexpected pregnancy with a married man undergoes a family identity crisis and then, attempts to find her real mother, Peggy. In the painful process of the reunion, the targets of the play gradually become obvious to the audience: patriarchism in three different guises, the home, the church and the State.

In the play, the search for the real mother by the adopted daughter soon assumes a new aspect as an investigation of child abuse. Through the investigation by a private detective, the strong possibility arises that the real mother suffered from abuse in the past. By setting the story in both Ireland and England in 1991, the play conveys a climate of social and religious crisis, which arose as the result of the detection and disclosure of substantial numbers of child abuse. Those cases startled the world and caused a grave disturbance in England’s national conscience, accompanying the official allocation of social resources to cope with the problem of child abuse there. In 1988, Britain’s mass media started to make allegations about gross and satanic child abuse. In the same year, the results of an official inquiry into child abuse in Cleveland was submitted by the Secretary of State for Social Services in England, which reported that child abuse occurs ‘in children of all ages’ and ‘in all classes of society and frequently within the privacy of the family’. The critical conditions of children in England became public knowledge. The long period of time between the public notice of child abuse in England and in Ireland can be observed. As previously mentioned, in 1999, the significance of child abuse issues gripped public attention in Ireland.

Peggy, in *Stolen Child*, is physically abused by her father in their house. She is brutally beaten by him and her body is covered with bruises on a regular basis, but this doesn’t draw attention of her local
community. Even when she is hit in public, they connive at the father’s violence. Elaborate references to physical and psychological damage are measures to avoid the mythification and marginalization of women in plight, which is deliberately pitted against the public connivance, another motive force that makes such women invisible in their society.

Once Peggy’s mother dies after suffering long years of physical abuse by Peggy’s father, he puts Peggy and her younger brother into an empty potato sack and closes the top. He kicks and shoves them, and eventually he dumps the sack into a lake. At the final moment, Peggy and her brother are rescued by their uncle; however, this torture inflicts profound trauma on them. This long-term abuse does not draw public notice nor undergo any legal trial. The attempted murder is concealed from the public, and the power of life or death over her is totally left in the hands of the male members of her family and her relatives, without any trace of her subjectivity or knowledge of her own age.

Peggy’s plight is not limited to the privacy of her home, but is extended into a more social context. After she is put into an industrial school run by nuns, she finds herself constantly exposed to verbal and physical abuse by the clergy. In the institution, she is called number 62, being robbed of her name and given a serial number. Just like other children whose personalities are totally negated in the industrial school, she is not a person there but an object of control. Adults do not listen to what the children have to say, and no one explains what is going on to them. Peggy and other children ceaselessly undergo ‘beatings, starvation’ and ‘all kind of humiliation’, and their spontaneous wishes and personal views are always oppressed. Moreover, it is not rare that their life is put in extreme danger. When a sick girl has great difficulty in swallowing her food, a nun forces her to eat her vomit. After a brutal beating from the nun, the child dies, yet the incident is hushed up. The terror that the nuns represent to the children is so outright that all that Gert (an abused girl and Peggy’s friend, whose heart is already hardened against tender sentiments) needs to do in order to make all other children cry is to tell them that ‘heaven is full of nuns’. Constantly suffering mental and physical abuse by the nuns, Peggy wishes her father had drowned her. For Peggy, the institution is none other than a second coming, in a larger size this time, of the relentless patriarchism of her home, in that the clergy of the institution holds the right of life or death over children. Thus, her sense of subjectivity is destroyed.

It is not only her subjectivity but also her sexuality that is persecuted within the institution. Every slight trace of sexuality is regarded as a terrible sin, and it is subjected to a stern punishment. Peggy and all the other children are forced to sleep facing the wall, avoiding any possibility that they might cultivate sensuous feelings towards others. When a girl gets into bed beside her sister, who suffers from nightmares, the girl is brutally beaten with a cane by a nun. The consistent policy against sexuality is applied not only to homosexuality but also to heterosexuality. The only sex education that is given to Peggy is the concept of
misandry: ‘If a man ever puts his hand on your leg, slap him across the face’. Misogyny and misandry are thoroughly enforced as absolute principles within the institution. Therefore, when a girl makes friends with the son of a gardener, she is branded as a ‘dirty little trollop’ and is sent to the Magdalen laundry, where close cropping and confinement await her.(46)

Without any other outlet, the developing sexuality of young girls in Stolen Child seeks to vent itself through innocent narcissism at a cultural exhibition before adjudicators. Peggy and Gert are honoured respectively by an adjudicator with a medal for a beautiful recitation of a poem and for a brilliant dance performance. Peggy and Gert, who are already frustrated at the companionship between another girl and a gardener’s son, show off their medals and express their criticism of the girl, who was sent to a reformatory institution. The seemingly strange mingling of their narcissism with their harsh criticism against mixed company displays how they subconsciously compensate for their checked sexuality with a sense of personal achievement. However, even their natural self-respect is hindered within the institution when nuns take their medals away in order to prevent the sin of pride and twist the medals into a halo for the statue of the Virgin Mary. Thus, the children’s pent-up sexuality and energy, which finds an outlet in childlike narcissism and pride, are compulsorily integrated into the adoration of the Virgin Mary.

In the play, the forced adoration of the Virgin Mary accompanies not only the deprivation of sexuality and its alternatives, pride and self-respect, but also the coercion into martyrdom of children within the institution. When the neglect of the children by the clergy causes an accidental fire, the children are confined to their dormitories and forced to offer up a prayer of thanks to the Virgin Mary. One of the children is obsessed with the idea that the Holy Mother will visit them at any moment. Yet, just as in Paula Meehan’s poem ‘The Statue of the Virgin at Granard Speaks’, the statue of the Virgin Mary does not move or rescue the children. In the theatre production, the forced cult of the Holy Mother is not only referred to in Peggy’s recollection but also visualised on the stage by a framed picture. The picture of the Virgin is constantly caught in the beam of a spotlight while Peggy is looking back over her bitter experience in the religious institution. However, the picture is swallowed by darkness when Peggy recalls the disastrous conflagration and starts to mention the real names of the children who died in the destructive fire, which is an actual historical incident on which the play is based(18). The playwrights’ ironical suggestion is that the clergy strictly controlled the children as an all-seeing Big Brother within the institution and severely limited what they could do and could say, but were totally impotent at the crucial moment and abandoned them to their fate. In the play, thirty-five children are killed in the fire and Peggy barely survives to speak out against the hypocrisy of the clergy and the religious institution. After a tepid investigation by a whitewash tribunal, all the bodies are mixed up and put into eight coffins, and they are buried without gravestones depicting names or dates. Thus, any identification and human dignity of the children as independent persons are
eliminated by the agents of the Church. In the process of Angela’s search for her real mother, Peggy and an ex-priest, Mick, excavate this past fire case and poignantly point out the inveterate complicity between the Church and the State. With support of the ex-priest, Angela gradually uncovers the harmful patriarchism of the Church and the State by discovering how the institution was run by the Church on behalf of the State, and how the clergy is protected by the State and slyly escape any punishment by the law. Thus, Bairbre Ní Chaoimh and Yvonne Quinn united their thoughtful avoidance of the mythification of Irish women in plight and their criticism of the Church and the State into an elaborate and evocative play, which ultimately searches for the subjective voices of Irish women in plight.

Conclusion

Commitments by female Irish writers, such as Bairbre Ní Chaoimb, Yvonne Quinn, Michelle Read and Paula Meehan, to excavate the lost voices and dignity of women dealing with trauma represent serious attempts to grasp such female experiences. They have been accompanied by equally serious attempts by Irish male authors. Aesthetic constructs examined in this study provide support for the prediction that similar serious engagements by other female and male Irish writers, poets and playwrights will follow. Further, they reinforce the assertion that such work will be conducted afresh through a similarly deep praxis in terms of women in plight in Ireland.

Notes

(9) Yvonne Quinn and Bairbre Ni Chaoimh. *Stolen Child*, p.4. All the quotations are from the unpublished script and future references to this script will be incorporated in the text. The page numbers may be different when it is published.
(10) Michelle Read. *The Other Side*, p. 3. All the quotations are from the same page of an unpublished script. The page number may be different when it is published.

(17)  One of the sources of the play is perhaps the Kilkenny Incest Case, in which a ten-year old girl was physically and sexually abused on regular basis by her own father within the privacy of her family. See Kieron Wood. The Kilkenny Incest Case. Dublin: Poolbeg, 1993.

(18)  In 1943, St. Joseph’s Industrial School in Cavan was completely destroyed by fire. Thirty five girls and one elderly woman were killed. All the members of the Order of Poor Clares, who were in charge of the institution, got off scot-free in the subsequent inquiry. For the details of the fire, see Irish Times, 25 Feb. 1943. It is clear that Yvonne Quinn and Bairbre Ni Chaoimh owe this sequence to a book written by Mavis Arnold and Heather Laskey on the actual fire case of the institution. See Mavis Arnold and Heather Laskey. Children of the Poor Clares. Belfast: Appletress Press, 1985, p.114.

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