

Post-Colonial and Feminist Reading of Mary Dorcey's "Nights Underground"

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ABSTRACT

"Nights Underground" is a short story, written by the contemporary Irish poet and author, Mary Dorcey. This story reveals how feminism and post-colonialism amalgamate in the English society during the time of the Cold War. The two main characters are Irish lesbian females who endure double colonization by the British and the patriarchy enveloping their lives with racism, prejudice, degradation, and othering. This study offers a post-colonial and a feminist reading of "Nights Underground," linking the two critical schools and offering a dual reading of the text. Dorcey sheds light on the dangerous and destructive effects of marginalization, alienation and discrimination that could lead to disruption of social order if intensely and continuously imposed upon a group of people. We aim at clarifying the correlation between Irish diaspora and lesbian/patriarchal predicament through highlighting how such theories as Post-Colonialism and Feminism are inter-related.

Keywords: Post-Colonialism, Feminism, Supremacy, Lesbianism, And Patriarchy.

Introduction

Mary Dorcey is an author on Irish feminism and lesbianism who has manifested her ideologies in writing poetry, novels, and short story collections. Dorcey's mastery of language and stylistics is unquestionable; she won the Rooney Prize for Literature for her short story collection, *A Noise from the Woodshed* that was published in 1989. The collection that includes nine masterful stories has been described by the Irish feminist, Anna Livia (1989), as "the most moving, sensuous fiction I've ever read by anyone, anywhere... right from the title story, which reminds us all, forcefully, tenderly, why we wanted a revolution like a lover." This research paper aims at deconstructing the last short story from *A Noise from the Woodshed*, "Nights Underground," presenting a feminist and post-colonial reading of the text in question.

"Nights Underground", revolves around the lives of two female protagonists, Aoife and Juno, who are Irish citizens living in England away from all their families and friends. The events take place during the Cold War, somewhat in the early 1980s. The readers are implicitly

directed towards the time frame through Juno and Aoife's extensive discussion of whom they had relationships with at the time of John Kennedy's assassination, which happened in 1963, as Juno comments that "it's more than twenty years ago" (Dorcey, 1989, p. 201). Through preparations for a possible Third War, the main characters along with all the other Londoners are lead to an underground shelter to practice "the Civil Defence exercise in damage limitation and crisis control" (Dorcey, 1989, p. 181). While in the underground shelter, Aoife and Juno, confused and frustrated as "Wartime planning exercises within Whitehall [in central London] were often incoherent," had nothing better to do with their free time but to contemplate their lives and remember their past experiences (Deighton, 2010, p. 116). Charged with emotions of nostalgia, suppression, and fear they discuss their various homosexual adventures, patriarchy and feminism, and get to experience firsthand discrimination directed towards foreigners, homosexuals, and females in general. Mary Dorcey presents her readers with the various types of struggles the Irish individual had to go through, striving for a better life in England during the cold war, through depicting an intensified atomic representation of the British society in the underground shelter.

"Nights Underground" is a short story that not only portrays the feminine struggle in the patriarchal world or

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the feminine strife in post-colonialist circumstances, it also brilliantly compares the difficulties females face, due to males' dominance, to the colonized relationship with the colonizer. Framing the story with the Cold War, shows that the feminine struggle with patriarchy is similar to a war in the sense that it is a continuous loop that has existed ever since the existence and evolution of mankind/womankind. In this story, Dorcey draws the reader's attention to the great resemblance between a colonized object and a female; both are 'othered' by their oppressors. The two main characters in this story are Irish lesbian females living in England and are spiritually (or doubly) colonized by both males and the British; for the females in the story are perceived as the weaker constituent of the species and of society as a whole.

Postcolonial and Feminist Theories

Postcolonialism, as discussed by Mishra and Hodge (1994) in "What is Post (-) colonialism," in any literature of "subjugation [is] marked by a systematic process of cultural domination through the imposition of imperial structures of power" (284). It follows then that in colonialism and postcolonialism the relationship between the two parties, the colonizer and the colonized, is a power relationship where the colonizer tries to control, use, and exploit the colonized for selfish purposes. Likewise, in feminist theories, the relationship between males and females is based on power and control. Toril Moi (2006) in "I am not a feminist, But...: How Feminism became the F-Word" claims that men fight against the independency of women because they fear women's liberty; being "free and equal" to men would mean having the same "power" of choice any male in society has (p. 1736). Therefore, Moi argues, the feminist struggle against masculinity is intensified pertaining to lesbianism because males fear the "destruct[ion of] family" which would be caused by the feminists' "hatred of husband." (p. 1737).

The two main characters in Dorcey's story are symbols of the subjugation Moi discusses; Juno and Aoife are two lesbians living in the country that colonized their homeland, Ireland. The inner thoughts and feelings of the females in this story mark effects of postcolonial othering and feminist alienation at the same time. With the British supremacy and the male domination that surrounds them at all times, Juno and Aoife experience unvarying fear. Undergrounds, in the shelter, instructions and directions were received from "the voice" that

"frighten[ed] people" through speakers that spread all over the shelter (Dorcey, 1989, p. 207). "The voice," in a way, embodies the restraints of both patriarchy and British colonialists and exemplifies their attempts at shaping the subconscious of minorities. This voice, for example, instructs the sheltered population to "surrender [their seats] when and if necessary, to senior citizens, young children or their mothers" (Dorcey, 1989, p. 181). On a different occasion, the voice asks "those in charge of young children," addressing mothers of course,

To exercise proper restraint and prevent [children] from endangering their lives and the lives of others by running uncontrolled about the platforms. Please do not allow any child to stray beyond the warning light at the tunnel mouth. We thank you for your continued co-operation, and ask you to remain calm until the all clear sounds (Dorcey, 1989, p.187).

The instructions directed towards motherly figures are just a simple reminder of the expectations society imposes upon females through stereotypical gender roles; women are the bearers and caretakers of children who should also be obedient and angelic when asked to fulfill a request.

That image of the submissive Madonna is levied upon Juno and Aoife by both British and Irish males. Ann Weekes (2000) in her article, "A Trackless Road: Irish Nationalisms and Lesbian Writing" argues that the "Irish men projected onto women images borrowed in great part from Britain" (p. 127). She further explains that in the British society "the argument was not that women failed to perform, but that participation in public life was against women's 'natural' role" (Weekes, 2000, p. 127). Aoife watches the male/female couples underground and ponders upon the "demands of gender,"

The men were being protective- solid and paternal. They stood feet planted wide apart, shoulders back. The arm about their partner's shoulder was clamped tight: custodial and anchoring. The women, in immediate response, made themselves fragile, uncertain, crouched a little, knees bent, and, leaning into the male torso, their upturned face was a clear pool in which he saw reflected his brave impassive gaze (Dorcey, 1989, p. 195).

It is intended that women are cautioned to be attentive and not forget what their role in society entails in most of what transpires in the underground shelter. The voice, that interrupts Aoife and Juno's conversations continuously, exerts power over the weak and othered by asking them to "facilitate" the passage of "local Civil Defence force" passing amongst them by "remain[ing] in their current positions" reinforcing subconscious subjugation and submissiveness (Dorcey, 1989, p. 193). In patriarchal societies female members are required to pay for their basic human rights because the "patriarchal heritage...plague[s] [our societies with] problems caused by assumptions of superiority" that patriarchs manifest in their behavior (Dustin, 1992, p. 327).

Superiority of the British framework adds up to Juno and Aoife's anxiety and tension. For they are not only apprehensive about sexism and typical gender roles but also experience diaspora and intensified nostalgic emotions as a result of the othering and discrimination that the British direct towards the Irish and foreigners. And while some critics, including Ralph Pordzik (2001), argue that the Irish situation does not fit in the colonial/postcolonial discourses, "Ireland is [still] central to the construction of British identity and to British colonial identity" (Gilmartin and Berg, 2007, p. 122). The dichotomy of Irish/British relationship limits Ireland's Prospects. For, revivalism and phoenixism, "The imagination of a better future," Ireland needs to "decolonize" itself from the aftermath "of the military forces of the colonizer" freeing the Irish of subjugation anxieties and the stigmatization of inferiority (Flannery, 2010, p. 358; Merriman, 2004, p. 625). The Irish, after all, are European and white, but are not equal to the white British slice of society neither in political status, nor in economic and social capabilities.

Subjugating the Irish through British colonialism obliterates Irish whiteness in England. In "Whiteness and Diasporic Irishness: Nation, Gender and Class" Bronwen Walter (2011) argues that the Irish population in England is reduced to the status of colored populations in colonial/postcolonial settings, for they are the poorer hardworking class, struggling to make ends meet (p. 1297). Walter (2011) further explicates that

The mutually reinforcing relationship between whiteness and Englishness continues to place a question mark over the connection between 'looking white' and belonging to the white

national collectivity. Irish people may be misrecognised as being 'the same' as English people but can still be placed outside white Englishness (p. 1306).

Whereas some Race Theory critics, like Anthony Appiah (1994), argue that there is "no race" there is only what is called "human race," it is unquestionable that the "racialisation of the Irish," as represented in Mary Dorcey's story, subdues and holds back their progression as a nation (p. 55; Walter, 2013, p. 1305). The Irish, like Juno and Aoife, live an agonizing experience of never-ending dislocation and alienation. Homi Bhabha, in "Locations of Culture" (1998) and "Remembering Fanon: Self, Psyche and the Colonial Condition" (1994), explains that the feeling of dislocation accompanied with feelings of alienation and not experiencing any thoughts of belonging to the place one lives in are a result of colonialism and war (Locations of Culture, 1997, p. 1337). Imperial residue and its distorting effects on the colonized subject are pondered upon by Edward Said (1994) in his master piece, *Culture and Imperialism*:

After the period of 'primary resistance', literally fighting against outside intrusion, there comes the period of secondary, that is, ideological resistance, when efforts are made to reconstitute a 'shattered community, to save or restore the sense and fact of community against all the pressures of the colonial system.' (p. 252).

Geographical and spiritual wars along with identity struggles steer Juno and Aoife's lives in Dorcey's story.

The reduced status of the Irish diasporic community leads to attitudes of marginalization and discrimination against them, directed towards them by the white supreme British community (Rabaka, 2007, p. 2). Aoife and Juno experience otherness in the underground shelter recurrently, especially when approached with statements as, "I thought I saw a notice on the street- no Irish, Blacks, or dogs" (Dorcey, 1989, p. 194). Bell Hooks (1990) in "Postmodern Blackness" argues that there should be more focus on "otherness" in everyday life as well as in theory; awareness is needed to avoid othering people (p. 1719). Hooks further explains that "repressed voices" need to and will come out again to "challenge racist domination" for no one, expectedly, is to be able to endure discrimination pantomime without retaliation (p.

1720). Dorcey elucidates the hazards of alienation and discrimination of minorities when Aoife and Juno, Both, adopt defense mechanisms to shed away the effects of otherness by answering back any demeaning comments with defiance and determination. Following an insulting comment about the Irish, a stranger asks Aoife if she knows anyone who is Irish, and Aoife answers with, “oh nothing to speak of- just the odd aunt, cousin, sister, mother, that sort of thing...” and the stranger retreats nervously (Dorcey, 1989, p. 188).

With mixed feelings of alienation, otherness, diaspora, and intense nostalgia, Aoife worries that Ireland will not be able to face a Third War because of the various ways England has exhausted its resources. “How do you think they’ll manage at home? Aoife was asking now. They haven’t even an underground, let alone shelters. Where would they put people?” (Dorcey, 1989, p. 185). “Decimation” of Ireland and its subjects is a threat Aoife ponders upon repeatedly, “wishing [to be] back in Dublin” rather than spend a time of cataclysm confined in an underground shelter unwanted and rejected (Dorcey, 1989, p. 185; p. 188). English superiority clouds the air of the shelter with comments like, “in a national emergency you’d think we would get preference, wouldn’t you? There are an awful lot of Irish about too” (Dorcey, 1989, p. 188). The feelings of diaspora and dislocation intensify for the female characters in this story when it crosses their mind that there is no comfort in going “home” anymore. “When you went for a visit you felt like a foreigner” and to add to that, the Irish around England and the States merely “talk about going back... come to think of it... [they] probably would never return” (Dorcey, 1989, p. 189).

The panic episode Aoife experiences towards the end of the story is a result of a culmination of life-long suppression and restraint by the British white community and the patriarchal society. Even though the two main female characters want nothing more than to be left alone and live a tranquil self-chosen life, “individual lives are inextricably linked to wider social processes” and they find themselves persistently reminded of the limitations their Irishness sheds upon them in an English setting (Walter, 2013, p. 41). Therefore, come down to it, Irish women are “doubly colonized” and “doubly silenced” by both The British and the Patriarchy (Atfield, 2007, p. 10).

Lesbianism and Theoretical Application:

Juno and Aoife experience the state of being “doubly

colonized” at its peak, since they are not only Irish females living in a suppressing country, England, but they are also lesbians. “The heterosexual establishment is afraid of the power of lesbianism, because it is a radical threat to the system as we know it. It demands the empowerment of women, the autonomy of women, the freedom of women to define themselves,” hence surfaces the double rejection of Aoife and Juno as Irish and lesbians (O’Carroll and Collins, 1995, p. 43). Homosexuality, in Dorcey’s story, is reproached by the heterosexuals as a digression and rejection of the customary social assortment. Paula R. Pratt argues that Dorcey, in her writings, sheds light on “deviating sexualities” in an attempt to show that deviation and difference/change is not as bad as some people perceive it (p. 3). She adds that Dorcey uses her writings to “contribute to the understanding of this hybridity” that is needed in societies in order for all different types of people to intermingle and interact (Pratt, p. 4).

Consequently, the behaviors of males/females at any rate, in a social setting, are always anticipated to fit within the normalization of gender roles that society expects. When the sirens go off and everyone starts marching towards shelters, “husbands” are “swearing” and “shepherding” the “wives” who on the other hand are “clutching hastily [to the] gathered provisions” and acting like angelic servants for the angry husbands (Dorcey, 1989, p. 182). After a long night in the underground shelter, remembering past homosexual experiences and pondering upon the binary opposition of heterosexual/homosexual, the narrator draws a picture of how the males and the females of the underground act when the shelters are being evacuated and the exercise ends:

Women grasped their children to their breast, men caught hold of their wives by the shoulder or waist, tugging them forward; now that all danger was past, resuming the role of guide and protector, leading them from darkness to light and home (Dorcey, 1989, p. 221).

Using patriarchal words like “protective, paternal, fragile, and uncertain” Dorcey explicitly makes this representation of the male and female relationship disturbing to a point where it becomes “detested at any time” to the lesbian statures present (Dorcey, 1989, p. 193).

Mary Dorcey's two main characters are defiant of stereotypical gender-roles, in both behavior and consciousness. In "Is Feminist Humor an Oxymoron?" Janet Bing (2004) argues that the "cultural representation of women" is a stereotypical one that shows them "as humorless" (p. 24). She explains that women are culturally stereotyped by men in many different ways that would represent women as being against everything that is "particularly important" for them because women are "the only subordinated group that is fully integrated with the dominant group [men]" and so any "alternative" to those stereotypes "is too dangerous" for men's domination (Bing, 2004, p. 22). Dorcey utilizes the lesbian struggle for acceptance, in this short story, as an example of the patriarchal enforced restrictions females face trying to emancipate themselves of the male dominance and suppression they undergo in their everyday lives.

Lesbianism is frowned upon tensely in the underground shelter, not only by men, but also by women who share their homophobic opinions openly. "We had to keep morale up come what might. But men were men then- and girls were girls. All changed now, isn't it. Mother nature isn't good enough for anyone anymore" one old lady says to Juno (Dorcey, 1989, p. 209). Challenged and made uncomfortable, Juno answers back, "nothing very natural about marriage or churches, bombs or air raid shelters, is there?" shocking the woman, whose face turns "pale" (Dorcey, 1989, p. 209). Male aggression and bullying is also plainly and freely directed towards Juno and Aoife in the shelter when they become physically intimate. Through a study conducted by James O'Higgins-Norman (2009) it becomes evident that the majority believe "homosexuality [is] a deviation from normal sexuality" and hence, "homophobic bullying [is] normal" (p. 14). One middle aged man "stares" at Juno and Aoife "in horror" and mutters: "we could do with a war to sort that kind out, teach them what their bodies are for. Round them up..." (Dorcey, 1989, p. 215).

The homophobic aggression frightens Aoife and reminds her once again of the recurrent haunting nightmare she keeps on having "of herself demented with fear" (Dorcey, 1989, p. 199). "Nightmare production is related to a personality style characterized by intense reactive emotional distress" (Levin and Nielsen, 2009, p. 85). And Aoife's distress is caused by the fear of abandonment and of loneliness, fear of being rejected to a point when she will be forced to struggle for survival

against all others around her. Aoife's nightmare of drowning with a sinking ship alone, because all the lifeboats are full, and Juno has abandoned her to reunite with a previous lover, is the embodiment and materialization of Aoife's "phobia," the "perfectly rational fear" of people (Dorcey, 1989, p. 208). "It wasn't death she was afraid of either. It was life. Of what people were prepared to do to survive... suffering, torture, the sadism necessary to save your own skin" was what filled her nights with horror and anxiety (Dorcey, 1989, p. 208). "Maniacs... had succeeded in keeping Aoife and millions like her in a state of terror...passive. That was their triumph" (Dorcey 1989, p.205).

Realizing how much fear has limited her drive in life, how much male supremacy and suppression has frightened her away from activism is what eventually stimulates Aoife to voice herself and react. She is no longer worried that the men around will mock her and make fun of her by saying: "sorry girls! We didn't know you felt so strongly!" for attempting to further "women's liberation" (Dorcey, 1989, p. 194; p. 196). She will do what it takes, regardless of the fact that "men have been acculturated" into being patriarchal to implement change where change is needed (Dustin, 1992, p. 330). Aoife, when leaving the shelter, causes a riot and fights the police officers with the help of a lesbian journalist/friend to save a dog from execution. She elucidates her reasoning to Juno by explaining,

If this is what they've planned for dogs- can't you imagine what they have in store for the rest of us? I mean who's next, for goodness sake- the sick- old people- queers? Who's going to decide who gets into a shelter and who doesn't? On what criterion? How can anyone decide who to save- and who to let die? (Dorcey, 1989, p. 226).

The association of Irish with dogs and blacks is a historical stigma that shapes the Irish postcolonial identity, and can never be forgotten by any Irish subject, especially if living in England. As Edward Said (1994) explicates of the English colonization of Ireland, "almost all colonial schemes begin with an assumption of native backwardness and general inadequacy to be independent, 'equal', and fit" (p. 96). Aoife looks at the "she" dog as an emblem of inferiority and weakness and therefore, feels obliged to step in and help, fighting, in a way, for her own right for equal treatment and honorable living

(Dorcey, 1989, p. 226). After all, Aoife, herself, is looked at as inferior and weak by the Superior British and the leader patriarch.

Conclusion

In conclusion, Dorcey demonstrates, fully and thoroughly, the effects of being “doubly colonized” through the representation of Juno and Aoife in her story “Nights Underground.” Being Irish citizens living in London, situates them in the diasporic inferior context, while choosing to be lesbian females deposits immense patriarchal repression and bullying. The underground shelter confinement the characters go through reveals the negative effects of female submissiveness in contrast to “the original man consciousness” that stereotypes women as caretakers, child bearers, weak/in need of protection, and inferior (Dorcey, 1989, p. 195). It is the vocalization of a group of widely suppressed women when Aoife expresses her desire and willpower to reformulate her life and take over control by saying: “I don’t want to survive on any terms. I don’t want to fight for life...I don’t want existence at any price. I want to be able to choose... to weigh the cost. Do you understand? And I want to have the means to choose... and the courage” (Dorcey, 1989, p. 228). Life should have more into it than trying to “make boys into men and girls into wives” (Dorcey,

1989, p. 196). Why would boys grow up to be men and girls to be wives instead of women side by side with men building society and living it and in it rather than being “exiled” in their own homes (Dorcey, 1989, p. 196)?

The idea that females are “hostages” of fate can be changed and should be changed through cooperative work amongst all forces of society to avoid the perilous results marginalization and othering could have on the intended harmonious social unit (Dorcey, 1989, p. 203). Dorcey plainly represents the unwanted, yet inevitable, results of discrimination when Juno and Aoife end up rebelling against their suppressors after being pushed to their limits for a long period of time. Rachel Gouin (2009) in, “An Antiracist Feminist Analysis for the Study of Learning in Social Struggle” argues that “patriarchy and white supremacy” are not merely “ideological” concepts, but more of “social relations” and as many other human relationships they could be changed (p. 162). Therefore, Dorcey highlights the fact that women, with patriarchal help, need to and really could work towards freeing themselves from the spiritual and figurative “shelters” they live within (Dorcey, 1989, p. 187). By so doing, they can make the world a better place to live in, where everybody is expected to play a crucial role.

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قراءة مزدوجة في إطار نظرية ما بعد الاستعمار والنظرية النسوية لقصة ماري دورسي ليالٍ تحت الأرض

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ملخص

ليالٍ تحت الأرض هي قصة قصيرة من تأليف الشاعرة والقاصة الايرلندية المعاصرة ماري دورسي. و هي تتحدث عما تكشف نظرية ما بعد الإستعمار والنظرية النسوية عن المجتمع الإنجليزي أثناء الحرب الباردة. حيث أن الشخصيتين الرئيسيتين هما اثنيان مثليتان من ايرلندا تعانيان من إستعمار مزدوج: الإستعمار البريطاني والنظام الأبوي الذان يهيمنان على حياتهما بالعنصرية والتحيز والإحتقار والتهميش. تنظر هذه الدراسة الى القصة من زاوية نظرية ما بعد الاستعمار والنظرية النسوية لتقديم قراءة مزدوجة للنص. فدورسي تسلط الضوء على الآثار الخطرة والمدمرة التي يجلبها التهميش والإقصاء والتمييز وما تؤدي إليه من اختلال في النظام الاجتماعي اذا استمرت في إيذاء مجموعة من الناس. تهدف هذه الدراسة تحديدا إلى الربط بين شتات الايرلنديين في إنجلترا ومشاكل المثليه في ذلك المجتمع الأبوي والى إيضاح التداخل بين النظرية النسوية ونظرية ما بعد الإستعمار.

الكلمات الدالة: الاستعمار، النسوية، قراءة مزدوجة.

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