

**“THE CENTRE OF PARALYSIS”: REFLECTIONS OF IRISH
NATIONALISM IN THE JAMES JOYCE’S *DUBLINERS* WITH SPECIAL
REFERENCE TO “THE DEATH”**

Aneyes Ul Islam
Research Scholar,
Department of English,
Aligarh Muslim University,
Aligarh (U.P.)

Abstract

This paper tries to analyze James Joyce’s *Dubliners*, a collection of short stories, with a special reference to “The Dead”, by exploring the reflections of Irish Nationalism in it. This apparent complex work of linguistic experiment bring with it more conscious and deeper spirit of nationalism, for Joyce often wrestled with the concept of “authentic Irishness”. These stories were written when Irish nationalism was enraged in its drive for a new, independent identity, and *Dubliners* was first published in 1914, the year that brought the First World War and the greatest material and spiritual crisis that Europe had ever faced. Moreover, it depicts an Irish society which is trying to come to terms with its own historical crises. *Dubliners* become the melting pot of different crisis, and find a complex formation of related ideologies: aesthetic, political, and religious. James Joyce's “realistic sketches” of Dublin clearly demonstrate the “paralysis” that has absorbed Ireland. Even though there is a constant development in the characters and experiences of spiritual revelations, however, they are unable or unwilling to escape its destructive grip and incapable of self modification. They are “Sick of” their “own country, sick of it”. Joyce speaks against the Irish inaction, the centre of paralysis, more explicitly religious and political, and to the people of Ireland who refuse to make any enterprise towards positive change for themselves. In the whole collection and particularly in “The Dead”, he realistically attempts to begin the process of a move, from static "paralysis" towards a sense of collective agency for positive change. This paper will attempt to draw some attention to the background of the general rise of Irish Identity and through this prism some selected stories from *Dubliners* will also be discussed, however, the central focus of attention will be “The Death” .

Key words: Paralysis, Irish identity, Subjugation, Nationalism, *Dubliners*, Inaction etc.

In the recent past few decades, the publication of the works like Vincent Cheng's *Joyce, Race and Empire*, Enda Duffy's *Subaltern Ulysses* or Emer Nolan's *James Joyce and Nationalism*, the position of James Joyce as a major postcolonial writer has been established (Maitra 586). Most of the Irish writers in their works have pointed out their attitude towards their country. Whether it is Yeats, Joyce, Seamus Heaney, Paul Muldon, or sometimes even Beckett; they all have, in their respected works, bring forth their attitude and reflections of their beloved country—tracing its history and struggle for identity. This is also true of Joyce, whose attitude towards Ireland is certainly complex if not totally ambivalent. He is a kind of inverted nationalist, “that the nationalism which he rejects runs through him like a central thread”. His disillusionment with the prospect of Home Rule can be seen in his essay written in 1910:

The fact that Ireland now wishes to make common cause with British Democracy should neither surprised nor persuade anyone. For seven centuries she has never been a faithful subject of England. Neither, on the other hand has she been faithful to herself. (Joyce, “The Home Rule Comet” 212)

In his autobiographical novel *A Portrait*, through his mouthpiece, Stephen Dedalus, Joyce declares his artistic image, his sense of belongingness and his race and country when he says, “This race and this country and this life produced me”. Further, he claims his appreciation and belongingness of Ireland by saying, “Ireland must be important because it belongs to me” (Joyce, *Ulysses* 527). Joyce's description of Irish as a ‘gentle race’ is surely an attempt to ‘set the records straight’ and it is certainly an act of ‘reclaiming’ Ireland.

Looking at the background of the *Dubliners*, we find the people of Ireland in the blood dripping fight for their freedom from the cruel clutches of British imperialism, and it was during this period that like *Dubliners* many other nationalist writings came into existence, and in W. B. Yeats' term, “a terrible beauty is born”. Joyce in “Ireland, Island of Saints and Sages” unhesitatingly agrees that “...the English came to Ireland at the repeated requests of a native king, [Dermot MacMurrough, King of Leister]...” (162). Likewise, in “Ivy Day in the Committee Room” Joyce wrestled with the concept of “authentic Irishness” (Nolan 165) which has been further illustrated by Adams in detail as:

(Joyce) celebrated traditions of Irish hospitality which appealed to him as generous and happy qualities which he often exemplified. He dealt also with deep ambivalences in his own nature—including love of his country and hatred for it, love of his art and loathing for it, worship of his wife and inferiority before her. (83)

Dubliners is considered as a classic example of literary Realism. It depicts the realistic picture of middle-class Irish people of 1900s. But in a letter to his brother, Stanislaus, Joyce confessed that “his treatment of Ireland in *Dubliners* had been unnecessarily harsh and singled out Dublin's ingenuous insularity and its hospitality as especially important qualities that he had not shown in his stories”(Potts 84) (Letters II 166). He thus makes his attitude complex if not ambivalent as earlier mentioned. The first story in the *Dubliners* is entitled as “The Sister,” which serves as a prelude to the whole collection, and in which the whole condition of present Dublin is declared as the centre of paralysis:

Every night as I gazed up at the window I said softly to myself the word *paralysis*. It had always sounded strangely in my ears, like the word *gnomon* in the Euclid and the word *simony* in the Catechism. But now it sounded to me like the name of some maleficent and sinful

being. It filled me with fear, and yet I longed to be nearer to it and to look upon its deadly work. (Joyce 9)

This is the key to understand Joyce's attitude to Dublin. The characters in *Dubliners* are paralyzed, either physically or mentally. For example, Flynn's paralysis in "The Sisters", mental paralysis of the young narrator of "An Encounter", or colonial and financial paralysis of Doyle family in "Ivy Day in the Committee Room" etc. So, the central consideration of Joyce in his *Dubliners* is to eradicate the paralyzed inaction of Ireland, which proves his both conscious and subconscious attitude of Irish nationalism.

Last but the most important story "The Dead" in this collection apparently describes a Christmas party in which Kate and Julia Morkan, two elderly sisters who live with their spinster niece, are holding their annual Christmas dance. Gabriel Conroy, the central character of the story who is a sensitive professor and part-time book reviewer, also attends the party with his wife, Gretta. At the party Gabriel meets a young Irish nationalist, Miss Ivors, who accuses him of being a playful "West Briton". Another guest, Bartell D'Arcy, sings a beautiful ballad that affects Gabriel's wife very strangely and she lost herself in some past memories. Gabriel watches his wife listening to this song so seriously and the intensity of his focus on her or the music causes him feel both sentimental and lustful simultaneously. Later, when the party ends, both husband and wife stay in a hotel room, when he tries to approach her, she breaks into tears and confesses about the tenor's song that had reminded her of a former young lover named as Michael Furey. Further, she narrates him about the young boy's death which she believes that she was responsible for. This discovery shocked Gabriel, for he has misunderstood his wife's feelings. He realizes that she has never been so passionate about their marriage, like she is now. He understands the fact that whatever he was conceiving about her is not actually the reality, and his feelings and love for her is torn down in a moment. Moreover, while watching the snow outside, falling alike on both the living and the dead, he undergoes an epiphany, a moment of sublime understanding. He feels alone, strange and profoundly mortal, but spiritually connected for the first time with others.

Underneath this calm atmosphere of the Christmas party and hotel room description, there is running a high-speed nationalist current. In the story Miss Ivors is involved in the Irish Revival and stands as a symbol of Irish nationalism, and it is she who calls Gabriel a "West Briton" for his nonchalant attitude towards his homeland, both physically and emotionally. Nationalist Miss Ivors rebukes Gabriel, when he proposes for a "cycling tour with some fellows... to France or Belgium or Perhaps Germany... partly to keep in with the languages and partly for a change," (Joyce 234). Further, in her words:

"And why do you go to France and Belgium, instead of visiting your own land?...and haven't you your own language to keep in touch with—Irish?... and haven't you your own land to visit," continued Miss Ivors, "that you know nothing of, your own people, and your own country?" (Joyce 234).

These conscious raising remarks by Miss Ivors, indeed, refer to her sense of belongingness, her high spirit for her own country, culture and language. She is trying to awake the Gabriel's half-consciousness, though he too is, to some extent, very serious about the paralyzed condition of Dublin. The paralyzed city make Gabriel retort, "O, to tell you the truth, I'm sick of my own country, sick of it!" (Joyce 234-350). Joyce here does not critique the old Ireland, which was culturally and literary rich, but the hollow and dead present-Ireland which is in stupor and its people have welcomed the "death-in-life". One of the best-known passages in

Irish literature comes at the end of “The Dead,” where Gabriel Conroy becomes aware of the snow falling outside his hotel window and it here that Joyce has used story’s last and most significant phrase—“all the living and the dead”.

A few light taps upon the pane made him turn to the window. It had begun to snow again. He watched sleepily the flakes, silver and dark, falling obliquely against the lamplight. The time had come for him to set out on his journey westward. Yes, the newspapers were right: snow was general all over Ireland. It was falling on every part of the dark central plain, on the treeless hills, falling softly upon the Bog of Allen and, farther westward, softly falling into the dark mutinous Shannon waves. It was falling, too, upon every part of the lonely churchyard on the hill where Michael Furey lay buried. It lay thickly drifted on the crooked crosses and headstones, on the spears of the little gate, on the barren thorns. His soul swooned slowly as he heard the snow falling, like the descent of their last end, upon all the living and the dead. (225)

Kevin Whelan is of the view that the snow here is not just an objective correlative of Gabriel’s psychic desolation but “Joyce uses the falling snow to ease the scene from Dublin to the west of Ireland, ending in the desolate graveyard ‘where Michael Furey lay buried’; Joyce hinted to his brother Stanislaus that “The Dead” was ‘a ghost story’” (69).

Ireland became the victim of dual colonialism, “The English tyranny and the Roman tyranny”, which erased the rich past culture of Ireland which no longer existed now. This dual colonialism of British imperialism and Roman Catholicism made Ireland “the scullery maid of Christendom” and the home of “the gratefully oppressed” (Whelan 65). Whelan further shows crisis of Irish Identity by highlighting a repetitive lexicon employed by Joyce in *Dubliners* and in *A Portrait*, to describe this colonized and oppressed Ireland—spectral, shriveled, stale, vague, mean, dull, dark, melancholy, somber, sour, sullen, gaunt, bleak, bitter, denuded, pallid, grey, servile, consumptive, narrow, tawdry, gloomy, listless (65). Thus it can be said that Joyce always has this concern of Irish nationalism, and this hollow pillar of Irish identity became the backbone of his works.

Kevin Whelan in his influential article “The Memories of “The Dead”” identified two broad strands within modernism. One is the “Right” modernism (Eliot, Pound) which aimed “a unified, authentic Western culture, of hierarchy and social order, with an organic cultural unity and no ‘dissociation of sensibility’”. The other is associated with writers like Beckett, Joyce, and Brecht etc., which accepted this cultural deracination. Uncompromisingly avant-garde and determinedly political, this strand of modernism finds expression in Dadaism, constructivism, and surrealism. The realistic description in “The Dead” is enhanced by Joyce’s use of certain modern narrative devices, such as: the use of the stream of consciousness in Gabriel’s monologue, death symbolism through the use of morbid vocabulary, poetic language, and the use of epiphany where a character has a special moment of self-understanding or illumination. Like many other stories in this collection, this story also presents the image of Dublin as spiritually dead, and this spiritual death is connected with the memories of the physical death which hunts the living that are physically alive but spiritually dead. Similarly, Joyce attempts to make people of the Dublin reflect on the present state of Dublin, which is portrayed as if it were in an eternal dark. This image of Dublin as an eternal darkness created by the British imperialism hunts Joyce more than anything. Gabriel, who is often related to Joyce himself, becomes aware of the world around him and the world of the dead, into which living passes. He

feels that the living and the dead are living peacefully together under a strange connection with each other to the limit that Michael Furey is more alive than him. In spite of the fact that some critics have described Gabriel as a living dead but at the end he realizes his new sense of self-identity with the world he is living in. Thus Joyce succeeded in presenting the Gabriel's struggle with himself, and also in engaging his readers with Gabriel's inner psychological state. Joyce proved that he had written these stories as a true nationalist more than a psychologist or a philosopher.

Works Cited

- Adams, Robert M. *James Joyce: Common Sense and Beyond*. New York: Random House, 1966.
- Attridge, Derek. Ed. *Cambridge Companion to James Joyce*. 2nd Ed. New York: Cambridge UP. 2004.
- Corkery, Daniel. *The Hidden Ireland*. Dublin: M. H. Gill and Son, 1925.
- Joyce, James. *Dubliners*. London: Grant Richards Ltd Publishers. 1914. Print
- _____. "The Home Rule Comet". *The Critical Writings of James Joyce*. Ed. Ellsworth Mason and Richard Ellmann. London: Faber and Faber, 1959, 209-213
- _____. *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*. Peacock Publishers. 2009. Print.
- Joyce, James. "Ireland, Island of Saints and Sages". E-artnow books, 2013. Web.
- Kain, Richard M. *Dublin in the Age of William Butler Yeats and James Joyce*. Norman: Univeristy of Oklamona , 1962. Web.
- Maitra, Dipanjan. ' "Victims of Hospitality": Joyce, Colonialism and the Question of Strangers in *Dubliners* '. *Rupkatha Journal on Interdisciplinary Studies in Humanities*, Vol.3 No.4, 2011, Ed. Tirtha Prasad Mukhopadhyay.
- http://rupkatha.com/V3/n4/16_James_Joyce_Dubliners_Colonialism.pdf
- Whelan, Kevin. 'The Memories of "The Dead"'. *The Yale Journal of Criticism*, Volume 15, Number 1, Spring 2002, pp. 59-97 (Article) accessed 15 Jan 2014
- <http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/yale/summary/v015/15.1whelan.html>