

**Exile Depicted in *Deoraiocht* and *Grace and Truth* . A Comparative Study**

**Marilena Mocuța, Liceul Pedagogic „Gheorghe Șincai” Zalău**

**Keywords:** isolation, lack, crises, uncertainty, burden

**Abstract:** In a hundred years span, Irish literature of exile has definitely evolved. More and more writers decide to invade this succulent and luring matter of discussion. Their characters follow similar paths of rediscovering their hybrid identity or disclose enriched ways which improve the act of writing. The basis for their forced or desired intention of rupture is endemic but what prevail are the mandatory barriers which help the exiles to recreate themselves.

Talking about exile and exile writers means talking about generations of Irish intellectuals and common people. It is not a singular case but it most definitely characterizes the Irish race. This is due to the tragic history, the sufferings and oppressions and the inhuman aftermath of the Famine. So, writing about exile is writing about this land which gave an outstanding number of people who make a difference in the world. From the great area of literature ranging from the *Book of Kells* to the 2005's Booker Prize winner John Banville for *The Sea* (2005) I choose to discuss about the Revivalist writer Padraic O'Conaire (1882-1928) and his *Exile* (1910/1929) and Jennifer Johnston's latest novel *Grace and Truth* (2005). *Exile* marks the beginning of Modern literature written in Gaelic and *Grace and Truth*, a contemporary novel, represents the peak of a series of novels which appeal to a great variety of readers with its subject matters; both of them mark a strategic point in the development of Irish literature.

‘Respects are paid to one loved by the people;  
Ah, was he not-among our mighty poor-  
The sudden wealth cast on those pools of darkness,  
Those bearing, just, a star's faint signature;  
And so he was to me, close friend, near brother,  
Dear Padraic of the wide and sea-cold eyes-  
So, lovable, so courteous and noble,  
The very west was in his soft replies.’(from *Padraic O'Conaire Gaelic Storyteller*, by F.R.Higgins)

**Padraic O’Conaire-the first Modernist writer of Irish**

Padraic O’Conaire was born in the Western part of Ireland, in Galway in 1882. His family was a pub owner and their house on the docks is today a public one bearing his name. He was abandoned by his father, Thomas who left for the United States and vanished as he arrived. In 1893, at the age of 11 O’Conaire was orphaned of his mother, Mary too. He went to live with an English speaking uncle along with his two younger brothers Michael and Isaac. He learned Irish from the local people while staying with the Conroys who lived in Ros Muc. Later he confessed that abandonment and uncertainty given by absence of linguistic stability were essential experiences in his early life.

When his grandmother died the boys were moved again, O’Conaire ending up as a boarder in Blackrock College. He was expelled under mysterious circumstances and in 1899 at 17 he went to London to get a job. He joined the Gaelic League with the aim to maintain Irish language spoken in a period when this process was in serious decline because of the massive emigration and the replacement with the English. ‘Led a very active social life’, taught and ‘began to write winning Oireochtas prizes’ (Welch : 411)

At the age of 21, in 1903 O’Conaire married and had 4 children. He started to drink heavily and in 1914 he abandoned his family and returned to Ireland where he remained for the rest of his life. During this period he roomed ‘around Ireland, living off meager earnings from hastily scribbled and repetitive articles and stories, and off the generosity of friends’ (Welch: 411) He became a familiar character traveling the roads collecting material, teaching and telling stories. His life ended in 1928 in the Poor Ward of the Richmond Hospital as a result of too much drinking and ‘rough living’. His body work includes: 26 books, 473 stories, 237 essays and 6 plays; quite an extraordinary amount for this man with ‘wide and sea-cold eyes’ as F.R.Higgins described Padraic O’Conaire in his poem ‘*Padraic O’Conaire Gaelic Storyteller*’. His daughter remembers:

‘I used to watch him admire the beauty of the moon, the stars and the heavens above and listen to him recite Wordsworth. He was always reading, observing, asking questions and gathering information that was later to inspire his pen. He studied the works of the modern French, Russian and Swedish writers, in particular Dostoyevsky, Turgenev, Chekhov, and his favorite Tolstoy and Shakespeare a lot.

He used to talk, read and drink a lot...He was really an outdoor man very much in tune with nature. He lived for the present '(Kenny)

This Galway writer who was immortalized in a statue in the city's Eyre Square used the oral tradition as a basis for his work. He seemed to favor simplicity and he is recognized as the first modernist writer of Irish. As a proof stands the novel '*Exile*' ('*Deoraiocht*') 1910 written in London in Gaelic and which has waited 19 years for an English translation. Aware of the fact that literature can't be founded on the Irish liquor and on potatoes he based his writing 'on his own perception on the human condition'. (Welch: 411)

His characters live in an internalized, isolated world due to the deception in love or lack of it and symbolically they are placed at windows, in claustrophobic places, peeping out on everyday life. This way of living habitually has as aftermaths: madness, violence, despair and even suicide. This novel category represented by *Exile* advanced in Irish literature of Gaelic speaking population the dominant theme of the psychological alienation, the surreal setting and the grotesque characters. This kind of theme, setting and characters were already encouraged in English literature by James Joyce.

The most thriving category in the Revival period was the short story, best represented by Padraic O'Conaire because his works were written in Gaelic and because they dealt with contemporary life in the West of Ireland. His best collection was *The First Stone*, published in 1914 and based on four characters of the New Testament, it dealt with themes of tragic love, jealousy, betrayal and displacement. The simple style and the treatment of psychological issues made the short stories accessible to a wide readership.

'...when you write a book, you are having a dialogue with one other person who is the reader-whomever that may be-and they have their own input into that, which is why I think it is terribly important to write in an almost minimalist way, because their imagination, or their sensibility, is working, and so every single person who reads your book comes away with a different point of view about it' (Jennifer Johnston, *Writers in Writing*)

**Jennifer Johnston-a feminine voice of our days**

Two years after Padraic O’Conaire’s death, in 1930, Jennifer Johnston was born in Dublin into an affluent Protestant household. Her parents were Denis Johnston, a playwright and Shelagh Richards, an actress and director, both of them distinct figures in the literary and theatrical world. She is trained and educated in the Park House School but the most important education she received from the drama community of her father’s. He took an active part in the famous Drama League and was a correspondent for the BBC during the WWII. Being brought up in a literary environment she read very much. She couldn’t accomplish her studies because she married at an early age with a fellow student from Trinity College Dublin and had 4 children. In 1970 Johnston divorced, remarried near Derry where she still lives.

In the 1970s she started a prolific and distinguished career as a novelist. The most important characteristics of her novels are ways of framing self identity and they are: isolation experienced by formerly ascendancy family in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, the possibility of love and loyalty between Protestants and Catholics, between old and young and the debate on the private inner world.

The choice of ascendancy mansions in her first novels *The Captain and the Kings* (1972), *The Gates* (1973) and *How Many Miles to Babylon?* (1974) determined critics to label Jennifer Johnston a Big House novelist, which she argues in the interview given to Roza Gonzalez:

‘As far as I’m concerned the Big House is just a means to an end in a way. I’m not really saying very much about that life, I’m trying to talk about the people and this just happens to be the setting.’

The other novels are set both in the Republic and Northern Ireland some of them being adapted for the screen. *Shadows on Our Skins* (1977) explores the tragic relationship between a Catholic boy and a Protestant teacher. With *The Old Jest* (1979) there’s a return to the ascendancy setting, a quest for personal integrity. *The Christmas Tree* (1981) is the touching story of Constance Keating who faces the end of her life. *The Railway Station Man* (1984) and *Fool’s Sanctuary* (1987) deal with the theme of private worlds of love destroyed by violence. In *The Invisible Worm*

(1991) Jennifer Johnston treats the subject of sexual abuse. *The Illusionist* (1995) tells a fascinating and mysterious tale of love and deceit. The book published in 1998 entitled *Two Moons* is a bittersweet story about love, betrayal and growing old while trying to deal with the sufferings from the past. *The Ginger Bread Woman* (2000) tells the story of two people who find the strength to cope with the crisis of their lives. *This is not a Novel* (2002) creates a beautifully knit game out of speech, words, images and echoes. Besides recollecting things of the past it deals with the concept of homosexuality. Jennifer Johnston's last book *Grace and Truth* (2005) is the account of a tortured soul begging to be set free.

The novels represent a process of building a view on the world completely detached from the stereotypes of Irish life based on the strong father figure or rigid religious beliefs and patterns of behaviour. Each book follows the path towards the depths of human life and understanding.

The source of her character typology is the women's position in Ireland which according to Jennifer Johnston has changed but not very much because few women write and exiguous number participate in public life. Being accused of creating man like protagonists she explained in the essay '*A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Girl*' (1987) that when she was 14 'she would prefer to be a man' entirely because of the women's struggle to become something. Given this, one can understand the characters' construction, the style and her oblique writing 'there was a lack of courage, I admit but I had to teach myself how to survive and how to write' she stated in the same essay.

According to Jennifer Johnston a writer needs to know where are the limits, to cope with the world, to focus on details, to write in such a way not to be ashamed of the work, to stir imagination and sensibility and as a target, the writer has to instruct and to educate. The burden of the past is for her not a distinctly Irish issue but a human problem which is handled by people in their particular way depending on their background, culture and knowledge.

Concerning the narrative strategies they are well chosen to support her conceptions about fiction writing with carefully depicted framing devices and a multiple point of view. The strategies are built to reveal her novel and her ideas growing organically as she confesses in the interview given

to Roza Gonzales. One of the achievements of Johnston's novels is her ability to express levels of complexity underneath the apparent simplicity and lyricism of her work.

Her imagination has triumphantly traveled in places where the steps have never taken her and challenged by the corollaries of historical events Johnston deals with male areas of life where few women successfully attempt: comradeship, battle fields, loyalty, hierarchy, stoicism, manly love and death and bishops' religious and moral duties.

Living in a world which changes enduringly, the human self finds a peculiar way of dealing with a crisis anytime this undergoes. In a different, hostile and anonymous environment the inner exile elicits untrained human reactions which play an active part in a domino-like game: loneliness triggers insecurity and insecurity gives birth to anxiety. All the continuous changes in a society, the insecurity of the self and loneliness are symptoms of modernity and it is outstanding how a relatively unknown Irish writer, who wrote in Gaelic alluded to these almost one century ago. Just like Michael Mullen, the societies and people living in the 21<sup>st</sup> century struggle with the same hunger of knowledge, money and peace and many, in their way of achieving their goals lose dignity, self-esteem, physical beauty and life.

The choice is unequivocal because the matter belongs to all times and all places starting with the expulsion of Adam and Eve from the Garden of Eden. It is an immortal phase the individual has to pass through in order to attain an enriched identity and a better knowledge of the self. The exilic experience, allegorical and emblematic, leaves permanent marks.

## **Bibliography**

### **Primary sources:**

Johnston, Jennifer. *Grace and Truth*. London: Headline Book Publishing, 2005

O'Conaire, Padraic. *Deoraiocht/ Exile*. Conemara: Indreaban, 1994

**Secondary sources:**

Gonzalez, Roza Jacqueline, Praga, Ines and Hurlley, Aliago Ester. *Ireland in Writing: Interviews with Writers and Academics: Jennifer Johnston interviewed by Rosa Gonzales*, Rodopi Bv Editions, 1998

Welch, Robert ed. *The Oxford Companion to Irish Literature*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996

Higgins, Frederick Robert. *Irish Culture and Customs: Padraic O'Conaire Gaelic Storyteller*

<http://www.irishcultureandcustoms.com/Poetry/FRHiggins.html>

Kenny, Thomas. *Kennys Bookshop & Art Gallery. Old Galway*. October 2nd 2003

<http://www.kennys.ie/News/OldGalway/02102003/>