

## ***Was it a Boy or a Girl : Exploring Gender Issues in Martin McDonagh's The Lieutenant of Inishmore***

**- Muhammed Sobhi Salama**

**Abstract:** This article aims at analyzing various views/definitions of gender and how these can be applied to Martin McDonagh's most political play, *The Lieutenant of Inishmore*. Further, it intends to provide insights into the concepts of backlash and stereotypes. The article illustrates how Davey and Mairead clearly break society-governed confines, which everybody else succumbs to. They boldly assert aspects of their personalities in an attempt to be who they are, and not who they ought to be. The conclusion is a summing up of the ideas and points discussed in the paper.

**Keywords:** gender, masculine, feminine, backlash, society, socio-cultural, stereotypes, Irish drama

The article attempts to provide answers to the following questions: How are male and female images represented? Why are these roles depicted as reversed? Within the play, do these reversed roles revert to their original stereotypical states or do they remain as they are?

This is fixt/ As are the roots of earth and base of all;  
Man for the field and woman for the hearth:  
Man for the sword and for the needle she:  
Man with the head and woman with the heart:  
Man to command and woman to obey;  
All else confusion- Alfred, Lord Tennyson

Catherine Villanueva Gardner (2006) affirms that "Gender is the set of socially constructed behavioural and psychological characteristics associated with masculinity and femininity." But, the term gender has often been related to women and women's rights and freedom. Although critics state that the world has seen too much of feminism and feminist thought and ideology, it is a fact that gender issues have pervaded the very existence of society and will continue to do so. Therefore, the concept of gender is undoubtedly an interpreter's Paradise that unravels layer after layer of interpretation endlessly like a humongous onion. This, apparently, is the reason for having selected gender issues as one of the central themes in Martin McDonagh's most political play and his second of the **Aran Trilogy**, *The Lieutenant of Inishmore*. The article attempts to provide answers to the following questions: How are male and female images represented? Why are these roles depicted as reversed? Within the play, do these reversed roles revert to their original stereotypical states or do they remain as they are? McDonagh entered the realm of drama in an unusual fashion, without attending a drama school or earning a theatre

degree. He spent his youth in Camberwell, London, listening to punk music and watching films and television. Eventually, he owed his dramatic art to filmmakers such as Martin Scorsese and Quentin Tarantino. McDonagh designed his plays as trilogies - **The Leenane Trilogy** and **The Aran Trilogy**. *The Pillowman* stands out as a separate play not forming part of any trilogy. The second of the **Aran Trilogy** is *The Lieutenant of Inishmore*, the other plays being *The Cripple of Inishmaan* and *The Banshees of Inisherin*.

*The Lieutenant of Inishmore* (henceforth *Lieutenant* in the article) received the Olivier Award for Best Comedy in 2001. It was also nominated for a Tony Award and Drama Desk Award for Outstanding Play. *Lieutenant* deals with terrorism from a farcical perspective thereby questioning lofty concepts like nationalism. The story revolves around two main characters Padraic and Mairead and their feline pets Wee Thomas and Sir Roger respectively. The 'death' of Wee Thomas gives way to a number of twists and turns that eventually results in five deaths including that of Padraic. Towards the end, Davey, who represents the voice of reason in the play, aptly says, "all this terror has been for absolutely nothing" ( ) when Wee Thomas coolly saunters in, at the end of the play. According to several critics, the dominant theme of the play is the unwanted terrorism in solving political crises. However, there are other themes in the play that may not be quite as apparent but which offer ample scope for analysis and interpretation. One of these themes is the treatment of gender issues, which this article seeks to explore in greater detail. Gender refers to the way a society perceives, evaluates and normalizes male and female behavior. Critics have defined gender in various ways by focusing on specific aspects. For example, in *Fifty Key Concepts in Gender Studies*, the concept of gender is more psychological. It is seen as

... the set of generally constructed behavioral and psychological characteristics associated with masculinity and femininity. Feminists began using the term gender in the 1960s for the social construction of what it means to be a woman, or a man, as distinct from the biological sex of an individual. The significance of this distinction was that it undercut the problematic notion of biological determinism: that women's biological sex determined a specific set of psychological characteristics and social roles. (Pilcher and Whelehan, 2004)

In order to understand the role of gender in the play it is essential to delve a little into concepts such as the biological theory and the sociological theory of gender. In her article "Feminist, Female and Feminine", Toril Moi distinguishes between the three major concepts included in the title. According to the article, "feminism (is) a political position, 'femalesness' (is) a matter of biology and femininity (is) a set of culturally defined characteristics" (Moi 1989). The biological concept refers to the human anatomy, which is different for male and female. It could also refer to external appearances. This biological concept is directly linked to the socio-cultural context. Therefore, society, on the basis of biological aspects, determines the socio-cultural prerequisite for male and female.

"Research on masculinity-femininity and sexual orientation points to an unstated, if implicit, value judgment that permeated early research on masculinity-femininity... If you are a man, it's good to be masculine; and if you are a woman, it's good to be feminine (Lippa 41). Usually, it is customary for man and woman to adhere to these pre-determined tenets but sometimes there are a few who wish to brush aside these stereotypical notions in order to be what they really want to be. Judith Butler defines gender as "a psychic and/or cultural designation of the self..." (1990). Butler emphasises more on the socio-cultural and psychological aspects than the biological. People do not always conform to the gender they were assigned at birth or with gender roles in place in a given culture; some choose to adopt behaviour, dress, and values considered 'outside their own gender'. McDonagh's pivotal characters Mairead and Davey are the best examples of this.

Theories of gender identity elucidate important themes of *Lieutenant*. Davey is the first of the characters introduced in the play who exhibits a reversal of gender roles. He is described as "a long-haired, slightly pudgy neighbour of seventeen..."(7). He stands out right from the very beginning of the play owing to his 'unusual' outlook. Davey rejects certain masculine behavioural expectations with his long hair, the use of his mam's bicycle, and a soft and kind-hearted nature. His kindness is undoubtedly a part of his innate nature as can be seen on several occasions in the play. Interestingly, his hair and use of his mam's bicycle may be labelled nurture. It is probable that Davey refers to have long hair simply because he does not want to be called 'croppy' (an Irish rebel who cuts his/her hair real short as a mark of protest). Davey's outlook could also be due to his mother's overt influence on him. In Scene Three, when Mairead tries to shoot him in the eyes, he says, "I'll be telling mam on ya"(18), which is typical of girlish fuss and complaint. In Scene Five, he tells Donny, "I love my mam. Love her more than anything. Love her more than anything" (18). This reiteration is clearly indicative of an Oedipus Complex. Often, when a boy or man is obsessed with, or influenced by his mother, he is prepared to transgress the norms of gender roles and gender identity that society sets for him. Davey is essentially kind and helpful by nature - a quality that is labelled 'feminine' and looked at in a derogatory sense in a patriarchal society. When Donny calls him a lily-livered person and says he should have snatched the cats from the children and should have trampled their mothers if they showed resistance, Davey says, "It isn't guts at all. It's having enough of a heart not to make poor gasurs go crying" (23). Davey's feminine outlook - his hair and the ladies' bicycle - suffers a setback when Mairead damages his bicycle and when Padraic cuts his hair short. For a short while, Davey's timid nature also gives way to a courageous and outspoken personality. He calls Padraic a madman and says his ideas are wrong - something that even Padraic's father Donny never dares to say. But, all this turns out to be ephemeral. Davey reverts to his timid, 'easily frightened' nature when Mairead gets the hint that maybe

Davey was indirectly responsible for the death of her cat. He shudders to think of what will happen to him. Mairead was all out to blind him when she heard that he had killed Wee Thomas. If that were the case, what would she do to him if she knew that he was responsible for the death of her own cat Sir Roger? When the play concludes, Davey is a changed person. He looks no doubt like a man but his nature is still 'feminine' – a 'mote in the eye' as far as the male-centred society is concerned. Mairead, Davey's sister, can also be termed a protagonist in the play whose character offers a lot for scope for analysis and interpretation of gender roles. She is more a tomboy than a woman. In other words, she refuses to accept the gender identity that society prescribes for women, and the other characters, in turn, do not perceive her as feminine. Through stage directions in scene three, we know that Mairead is described as "a girl of sixteen or so, pretty, with close-cropped hair, army trousers, white T-shirt, sunglasses. She carries an air rifle" (18). This air rifle is symbolic of Mairead's masculinity. When Mairead hears that Padraic is coming to Inishmore, her biological instincts spur her on to don the mask of femininity. She tries to look more feminine by applying lipstick and some make-up. She is of the impression that Padraic would be attracted to her beauty. But things happen in the opposite. Padraic almost snubs her by responding negatively, "From a distance I thought, What's a boy doing sitting there with lipstick on?" Then as I got closer I realized it was a lass, just with shocking hair" (29). Mairead is hurt by the backlash from Padraic – a stereotypical man who upholds stereotypical views about gender roles in society.

The reader/critic also sees gendered elements of the play in the portrayal of *backlash*. According to *The Cambridge Dictionary*, backlash, "a strong feeling among a group of people in reaction to a change", is a concept used by feminists to refer to the reaction of the male-centered society to feminism or feminist ideas. Judith Butler defines backlash as "a fierce rejection of an ideology by forcefully reiterate counter arguments" (3). The term backlash was coined by Susan Faludi in 1992 in her book entitled *Backlash: The Undeclared War against American Women*. Backlash manifests as the media stating that women are independent or as psychologists stating that independent women or single women have more psychological problems, or as people claiming that feminism has ruined people's lives. A final backlash is glorification of the stereotypical or conventional image or role of the woman. Mairead experiences further backlash when she makes frantic attempts to be feminine. For instance, this is best evident in scene Six in the conversation between Padraic and Mairead

MAIREAD: Good, cos there's a dance at the church hall Friday would you take me to?

PADRAIC: Amn't I after telling you? I'm interested in no social activities that don't involve the freeing of Ulster. (30)

Padraic emphasizes the fact that he is more focused and serious about his goals unlike Mairead who wanders around like a vagabond shooting cows in the eyes. According to Padraic, her expertise at shooting is nothing. It is just a stroke of

talent of a girl who wants to behave like a boy or man. In *Lieutenant*, backlash is best seen in the play in scenes 6 and 8. First, in scene 6, when Padraic first meets Mairead, she asks him "have I grown up" he advises her "to be at home". Though Mairead is better than Padraic in shooting from sixty yards, he does not want to take her to the INLA because she is both a woman and a threat to him. Mairead even can defend herself well

PADRAIC: Tell me the fecking message now, ya bitcheen. Has me cat gone downhill or what the feck is it? Eh?

*Mairead picks up her air rifle, cocks it, and while Padraic still has his guns to her head, points the rifle towards one of his eyes, so that the barrel is almost resting against it. Pause.*

PADRAIC: Do you think I'm joking?

MAIREAD: Do you think I am?

*Padraic lower his guns. Mairead pauses a moment or two, her rifle still up to his face, then she lowers it also. (35)*

Mairead then desperately pleads with Mad Padraic to let her join the INLA, which, she thinks will be a launch pad to assert her personality and to prove her mettle.

MAIREAD: Will you let me join up this time when you go back, so, if I'm such a tough oul feck with balls?

PADRAIC: We don't be letting girls in the INLA. No. Unless pretty girls. What was the message?

MAIREAD: (almost tearful) Unless pretty girls? Not even meddling-looking girls who can put a cow's eye out from sixty yards?

PADRAIC: No. We have no call for girls with them attributes.

MAIREAD: Unfair to women that sounds. (35)

Some lines later in the play, Padraic tells her "Mairead, be staying home, now, and marry some nice fella. Let your hair grow out a tadeen and some fella's bound to be looking twice (36). The previous dialogue reveals two things: one is a satire on the INLA as they are not clear about their ideals, and another about how man sees woman's position in society; women, in their stereotypical form, are designed for pleasure only. Gilbert and Gubar (1984) describe how patriarchy and its texts have "subordinated and confined women, denying them both an identity of their own and the right to authority" (44). Padraic sees Mairead as the property of the male whether husband or father by telling her it to marry and to stay at home as this is what a woman is fit for. The male-centred society sees women as a threat to their position as the guardians of power and justice. The most convenient backlash adopted by patriarchy to prevent women from displaying their courage is to brand them the 'weaker sex' and to affirm in all possible ways that they are no match for a man's grit. But Mairead makes it a point to prove to Padraic that she is not someone to be waived aside. That is why she leads him to his trap by telling him to go home. She knows for sure that Padraic's life is at stake at his place and wants him to land in trouble so that she can be his saviour. This time Mairead's plan works and Padraic is held at gun point by the trio - Christy, Brendan and Joey. Mairead's entry serves as the twist in the entire event when she takes them by surprise and shoots them blind. The reader finds further

instances of backlash in Scene eight when the trio is blinded by Mairead.

JOEY: She's had our fucking eyes out.

CHRISTY: Are ye blinded too?

BRENDAN: We fucking are.

CHRISTY: Was it a boy or was it a girl?

BRENDAN: It was a boy with lipstick.

JOEY: It was a girl with no boobs, sure.

BRENDAN: Oh, don't let me be killed by a girl, sweet Jesus. I'll never live it down. (42)

As the conversation illustrates, the most important thing for Brendan is not to be killed by a woman because it is a shame. The quote also reveals how society sees women and their ideology regarding women's physical attributes. Mairead fails to fit into the 'normal' category because she is not buxom enough like most women or girls her age. She does not have long hair and above all, it is scandalising to note that she can handle a rifle with absolute dexterity like a man. Mairead can be seen as a foil to Mairead Farrell (1957 -1988) an Irish volunteer of the Provisional Irish Republican Army and one of those who contributed to the liberation of the state. Unlike Farrell, whose valour was acknowledged by the PIRA and who was allowed to handle various bombing operations, Mairead is marginalized and never allowed to assert herself except within the narrow confines of Inishmore. One may say that "women are heroic, splendid... as great as a man, some think even greater" (Gilbert and Gubar, 1984). As far as the play is concerned, Mairead emerges the sole survivor among the rebels. She in fact proves to be the "Ace of Spades" or death card to all of them. When Padraic sees her dexterity at crisis management, he realizes how superior she is to him in defence tactics. He begins to accept her into his circle – a rare privilege bestowed upon a woman, to which Mairead responds by being more docile and submissive and eliciting his opinion at every step. She even wears a dress to humour him, which is quite a shock to Padraic. But, what needs to be specifically noted is that Mairead attaches more importance to her national identity, which is the reason behind her refusal to grow her hair. In other words, her national identity transcends her gender identity. At the end of the play, the reader sees that Mairead is indirectly responsible for the gruesome death of the trio and subjects Padraic himself, whom she claims to be in love with, to a sudden and terrible death. This is because her love for her cat, although irrational, is paramount. But, she has no further desire to join the INLA. She feels disgusted by its actions and real intentions. In other words, she is aware that if she joins the INLA, she will be ignored and sidelined by the men like Padraic because men see women merely as an object of pleasure. She calls herself the new Lieutenant of Inishmore because there is none to challenge or contradict her in Inishmore. She knows that she can reign supreme as an 'Irish national warrior' in Inishmore and nowhere else. One also sees how gender is linked to the concept of Irish history. In an Irish context, for instance, Mairead's marginalization and attempts to be pushed into oblivion are symbolic of the way in which Irish historians

have ignored the pivotal and significant role played by women in the Irish Rebellion of 1916. Women played the fulcrum role in various parts of the country during the Rising only to find themselves sinking "Lethe-wards" in the pages of Irish history. In his article, "The Forgotten Role of Women Insurgents in the 1916 Rising", Tom Clonan (2006) argues that

War is normally spoken of in the exclusively masculine sense—particularly by those with no experience of combat. Historical accounts of war tend to describe conflict almost solely in terms of participation as combatants—thus reinforcing the myth of combat as an exclusively male preserve. (1)

Clonan continues "... the role that woman played in the rising remains largely unrecognized in an ongoing debate on the legacy of the 'men of 1916' (4). The reference here is to the Cumann na Ban or the women's wing of the Irish Republican Army. There are so many instances in Irish history where members of the Cumann na Ban have sacrificed their lives without the slightest demerit for the cause of their country. But, like Mairead, their glories remain unsung. There is a striking resemblance in the gender roles of the siblings Davey and Mairead. Towards the end of the play, one finds Davey and Mairead altered physically. But, their nature and attitudes remain almost the same. In short, the reader sees how Davey and Mairead prefer to define their own gender roles in contrast to the ones prescribed by society. They muster the pluck to hold fast to their roles by being what they want to be, and refusing to be shackled by the stereotypical roles assigned by society. Perhaps that is what McDonagh intends to reinforce through the play – "*A gender-equal society would be one where the word 'gender' does not exist: where everyone can be themselves.*" ("Feminism Makes Love Easier", n.d.)

### References :

- McDonagh, Martin (2003). *The Lieutenant of Inishmore*. New York: Dramatists Play Service.
- Butler, Judith (1990). *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. New York: Routledge.
- Clonan, Tom (2006). "The Forgotten Role of Women Insurgents in the 1916 Rising". *The Irish Times*.
- Gardner, Catherine Villanueva (2006). *Historical Dictionary of Feminist Philosophy*. Maryland, Toronto, Oxford: The Scarecrow Press, Inc.
- Gilbert, Sandra and Susan Gubar (1984). *The Mad Woman in the Attic*. 2nd edition. New Haven and London: Yale University Press.
- Lippa, Richard A. (2002). *Gender, Nature, and Nurture*. London, New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
- Moi, Toril (1989). "Feminist, Female, Feminine." In *The Feminist Reader: Essays in Gender and the Politics of Literary Criticism*. Edited by Catherine Belsey and Jane Moore. New York: Basil Blackwell.
- Pilcher, Jane and Imelda Whelehan (2004). *Fifty Key Concepts in Gender Studies*. California, London, New Delhi: Sage Publications.
- Feminism makes love easier, says Gloria Steinem. (n.d.). Retrieved September 5, 2015.

