

Binary Oppositions in *John Bull's Other Island*

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Abstract: *John Bull's Other Island* is George Bernard Shaw's a rare play set in Ireland, which is doomed to reflect the problems between England and Ireland. According to Homi Bhabha's theory, it can be found that Shaw not only reflects the conflicts between colonizers and the colonized through the construction of the binary opposition but reveals how the colonized weakens the dominant power of colonizers by deconstructing the hierarchical power scheme and building a hybrid identity. Meanwhile, by virtue of Keegan and Doyle, Shaw expresses his cosmopolitan viewpoints, reveals that independence is not a panacea for the problems of Ireland and accurately predicts the future of Ireland in the coming postcolonial era, which gives an important warning to Irish and reference to other countries.

Keywords: *John Bull's Other Island*; George Bernard Shaw; binary opposition; colonizer/colonizer; cosmopolitanism/nationalism

1. Introduction

John Bull's Other Island is a long four-act play of the famous England playwright George Bernard Shaw. It is written at the invitation of poet W.B. Yeats for the ceremony of the Abbey Theater in 1904, when the Irish Literary Revival was in process, but rejected. Later, in the preface, Shaw claimed that "the play was uncongenial to the whole spirit of the neo-Gaelic movement, which is bent on creating a new Ireland after its own ideal, whereas my play is a very uncompromising presentment of the real old Ireland" (Shaw *Preface* 1963: 443). Although that, *John Bull's Other Island* was popular at the Court Theatre from 1904 to 1907 (Mcdowell 1967: 542), even the Emperor-King Edward VII came to see it in order to understand what lay behind the quarrelsomeness between two of his subject peoples and reputedly he laughed so hard at its comedy that he dislodged the arm of his chair (Levitas 2007: 21-22), which made for Shaw the breakthrough in his career as a playwright. Before then he (Shaw) had not staged any of his plays at mainstream West End theaters (GÜNDÜZ 2013: 9).

Set in Ireland and England, the play recounts how an England businessman Broadbent gets the trust of an Irishman through the "caterpillar strategy". As Saddlemyer notes, *John Bull's Other Land* is full of different themes and many binary oppositions (Saddlemyer 1999: 231), but he doesn't explain with more details. This paper is aimed at analyzing the binary oppositions of colonizer/ the colonized and cosmopolitanism/ nationalism in the play.

2. Colonizer and the Colonized

Concerned with England and Ireland, naturally, *John Bull's other Island* emphasizes the problem between the colonial power and the colonized. Although the background of 1904, Ireland is in the era of colonialism, it still can be expounded from the perspective of post-colonialism, just like what Edward Said has emphasized: "This is no mere antiquarian or academic squabble since what is at stake is nothing less than the whole question of Irish identity, the present course of Irish culture and politics, and above all the interpretation of Ireland, its people, and the course of its history" (Said 2003: 176). Based on Homi Bhabha's postcolonial theory, this chapter analyzes the relationship between colonizers and the colonized.

2.1 Power Scheme

The first is the establishment of the power scheme. In Edward Said's postcolonial theory, he portrays the colonizer as the absolute power, straightforwardly treating the colonized as the Other or the inferior. The otherness even has no discourse power, totally at the mercy of the colonizer. The power scheme is a straightforward exertion of power from top to bottom, from the colonizer to the colonized. The relationship between them is that of the superior and the inferior. It is through constructing stereotypes in the colonial discourse to construe the colonized as a population of degenerate types on the basis of

racial origin, to justify conquest, and to establish systems of administration and instruction (Bhabha 1994:70). In Act I, the play opens with the dialogue between Broadbent and his valet Hodson about the travel to Ireland. Meanwhile, stage Irish is introduced by Broadbent. "He's an Irishman, and not very particular about his appearance". In the wake of that is the appearance of the fake Irishman Tim Haffigan. "Haffigan is a stunted, short-necked, small-headed, red-haired man of about 30, with reddened nose and furtive eyes". He speaks with Ireland brogue and with repeated three catchphrases "top-of-the-morning, broth-of-a-boy, and more-power-to-your-elbow" which English think Irish always say. Haffigan deliberately demeaned himself to flatter Broadbent. All of what he said and did is to cater to Broadbent's sense of superior and at the same time, Broadbent just took him as a tool: "At all events, he's evidently the very man to take with me to Ireland to break the ice for me. He can gain the confidence of the people there, and make them friendly to me" (Shaw JBOI 2003:20). Here, the power scheme is a hierarchy, from the colonizer to the colonized. However, all of this is overturned when the truth is revealed, that is, Haffigan is not an Irish, but a Glasgow. Haffigan's intentional performance conversely becomes a kind of mockery of Broadbent's superiority, deconstructing the colonizer's absolute power.

2.2 Hybrid Identity

Apart from that, not only the relationship between Broadbent and Doyle but Broadbent and Irishmen in Russcullen are not typical rigid distinctions between the colonizer and the colonized, which can be understood through Homi Bhabha's hybrid theory. In his collection of essays, *The Location of Culture*, Bhabha claims there is a space "in-between the designations of identity" and that "this interstitial passage between fixed identifications opens up the possibility of a cultural hybridity that entertains difference without an assumed or imposed hierarchy" (Bhabha 1994: 4). Here, Bhabha means that both the colonizer and the colonized apply power on each other and there exists a "third place" where the identities of them are mutually constructed. The "third place" is the hybrid product of two countries, so are the identities of people living in two countries. The hybrid identity is achieved through what Bhabha calls "mimicry strategy", that is, pretend to be what others think you should be. It also is "a sign of the productivity of colonial power and the name for the strategic reversal of the process of domination through disavowal" (Gahan 2006: 112). In the play, this "mimicry strategy" is mainly applied by Broadbent and Doyle.

Doyle, born in Ireland and moving to England later, is Other in England. He behaves and dresses totally like an Englishman, even Haffigan didn't find he is an Irishman. From his relation with Broadbent, we can see that his mimic makes him have the same position as English. But just like Bhabha emphasizes that "Other, as a subject of a difference that is almost same but not quite" (Bhabha 1997: 86), Doyle is not quite the same as Broadbent. When Doyle expressed his hatred for Ireland and refused to come back to Ireland, Broadbent could not believe him. He thought Ireland is a nation with the strongest patriotism and the most inveterate homing instinct in the world. Actually, although criticizing Ireland full of imagination, he inadvertently presented his care for his motherland. When knowing Broadbent turned poor Nick Lestrangle out of the house and home (an old Irish fellow of Doyle), he felt angry. He also criticized the camouflage strategy English people use to exploit Ireland. Nevertheless, in Act II-IV, when Broadbent and Doyle left England for Ireland, all of the identity has changed, with Broadbent or Englishman as Other and Doyle or Irish as sort of colonizer. Broadbent, as an Englishman, was afraid of being attacked by the local Irish who held the power now. Therefore, he put on the fake mask and tried to get along with the local people. He appreciated Ireland and the Irish people. He praised the Irish that "Their faults are on the surface: at heart, they are one of the finest races on earth" (Shaw JBOI 2003:73). He complimented Nora's Irish appearance: "a type rare in England, except perhaps in the best of the aristocracy" (Shaw JBOI 2003: 82). In order to get the seat in Parliament, the imposingly expressed his support for Home Rule even much more than the Irishmen. Later, in his talk with Doyle, his intention is revealed, "I think I've done the trick this time. I just gave them a bit of straight talk, and it went home. They were greatly impressed: every one of those men believes in me and will vote for me when the question of selecting a candidate comes up. After all, whatever you say, Larry, they like an Englishman. They feel they can trust him, I suppose" (Shaw JBOI 2003:102). Likewise, having the same feature of "the almost same but not quite", Broadbent's assimilation is served for his exploitation plan for Ireland. Thus, whether Doyle or Broadbent, their cultural identities are a hybridity of Other and colonizer, which deconstruct the traditional ambivalent relationship of colonizer power and the colonized.

Aiming to introduce Irish to English and English to Irish, Shaw constructs binary opposition of colonizer and the colonized. However, the portrayal of Haffigan and Broadbent satirizes the stage images of Irish and English at that time. Based on Bhabha's theory, it is found that English and Irish construct

their hybrid identities in “third place” through “mimic strategy”, which kind of deconstructs the hierarchical power relationship between them.

3. Cosmopolitanism and Nationalism

From the above, we have known that the focus of *John Bull's Other Island* runs counters to that of the Irish Literary Revival Movement, the leader of which W.B. Yeats is a cultural nationalist. Bernard Shaw as a migrant writer, his exile experience presupposes his cosmopolitan view. Shaw ever concluded in “*Preface to Heartbreak House*” his view of nationalism: “the art of the dramatic poet knows no patriotism; recognizes no obligation but truth to natural history; cares not whether Germany or England perish” (Shaw *Heartbreak House* 1919: 48). Thus Shaw suggests that any kind of loyalty is detrimental to the art of the playwright. In the *Essays in Fabian Socialism*, Shaw claimed that we should “take the world as a nation” (Shaw, *Essays in Fabian Socialism*.1932), Cornelius, Father Dempsey, and Haffigan are three representatives of nationalism. Shaw believes that the overemphasis on nationalism leads to a kind of parochialism that rejects any kind of non-Irish themes (GÜNDÜZ 2013:24). In Act III, confronting with Doyle’s definite viewpoints about church and land, they are too frightened to accept it, instead, they praise Broadbent’s blandishments. All of them just seize tightly their own interest, never considering a long-term future. Different from them, Doyle and Keegan have a broader view about future Ireland. Doyle and Keegan reflect Shaw’s cosmopolitanism stance on *John Bull's other island*. In spite of the differences in their nature and ideologies, both of them have had a supranational formation. Educated at foreign schools, they have both traveled immensely and gained a global perspective (GÜNDÜZ 2013:6).

In Act I, Doyle’s main criticism of Ireland concerns its provinciality and blind nationalism. He attacked Cathleen ni Hoolihan, a representative of Ireland in the patriotic play of the same name written by Yeats. Belonging to a “big world”, he held that “frontiers are hindrances and flags confounded nuisances” (Shaw JOBI 2003:31). Describing himself as an “internationalist”, he would eliminate ethnic barriers rather than raise them, and he would wish “Ireland to be the brains and imagination of a big Commonwealth, not a Robinson Crusoe Island” (Shaw JBOI 2003:31). He witnesses the backwardness and narrowness of Ireland and expects an economic turn in Ireland, calling for openness for capital and business.

As for Keegan, his travel and extensive knowledge of the world widen his horizon and decide his cosmopolitanism stance. Different from Father Dempsey who is educated in Maynooth College which was founded by the colonialist English to train Irish Catholic priests in Ireland rather than some center in Europe (Gahan 2006:), he accepted his education in Europe and avoided the thought discipline of colonial power. Analyzing Broadbent’s proposal from a more open and rational perspective, he has a clear picture of what the future Broadbent projects will entail. But he still “votes for an efficient devil that knows his own mind and his own business than for a foolish patriot who has no mind and no business” (Shaw JBOI 2003:157), looking forward to changing the rigid status quo of Ireland. What impressed readers most is his statement about the relationship among country, people, and the church: “In my dreams it is a country where the State is the Church and the Church the people: three in one and one in three. It is a commonwealth in which work is play and play is life: three in one and one in three. It is a temple in which the priest is the worshipper and the worshipper the worshipped: three in one and one in three. It is a godhead in which all life is human and all humanity divine: three in one and one in three. It is, in short, the dream of a madman (Shaw JBOI 2003:164).” Such a dream of trinity proves further his identity as a cosmopolitan.

At the end of the play, Broadbent’s project is destined to happen in Ireland. Despite all Keegan’s ironic gestures, this speech of Keegan implies the harsh truth of the time when nationalism and patriotism have to give way to the bigger world vision Doyle reiterates throughout the play. Concerning the conflicts between England and Ireland, Shaw provides Ireland with his “big world” conception.

4. Conclusion

The binary oppositions in *John Bull's Other Island* are colonizer/the colonized and cosmopolitanism/nationalism. On the top of Homi Bhabha’s postcolonial theory, it is found that in a couple of colonizers and the colonized, Shaw not only presents conflicts between these two but also reveals how the colonized resist the absolute power scheme through destroying traditional stereotype. Colonizer and the colonized construct a mutual hybrid identity, conversely, through which the colonized

weakens the colonizer's absolute dominance. As for cosmopolitanism and nationalism, Shaw is absolutely apt for the former and projects his viewpoints on the Doyle and Keegan. He holds that independence is not a panacea for the problems of Ireland and accurately predicts the future of Ireland in the coming postcolonial era, which gives an important warning to Irish and reference to other countries.

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