



Challenging Norms: Gender Identity in Martin McDonagh's *the Lieutenant of Inishmore*

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Abstract

Martin McDonagh is one of the most significant Irish dramatists in twentieth century Irish drama. This paper attempts to analyze how gender roles are confused in McDonagh's *The Lieutenant of Inishmore* (2003). Additionally, it provides insights into the concepts of backlash and stereotypes. The paper reveals how male and female characters obviously torn society-governed prejudices that many people succumb to. They confidently express facets of their identities that enable them to pursue their true selves, rather than conforming to societal expectations. This paper seeks to address the following questions: How are male and female identities portrayed? What is the reason for the reversal of these roles? In the play, do these reversed roles return to their original stereotypes, or do they remain distinct? Perhaps a thought that is 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.”

Keyword Martin McDonagh, *Lieutenant of Inishmore*, gender, identity, backlash

Gender refers to the socially constructed behaviors and psychological traits linked to masculinity and femininity (Gardner). Additionally, the term has historically been associated with women's rights and freedoms. While some critics argue that feminist thought has saturated discourse, it remains clear that gender issues are deeply embedded in societal structures and will persist as a significant concern. Consequently, the concept of gender serves as a rich field for interpretation, revealing endless layers of meaning, much like peeling an enormous onion. This complexity is a key reason why gender issues are a central theme in Martin McDonagh's politically charged play, *The Lieutenant of Inishmore*, which is the second part of his Aran Trilogy. This paper seeks to address the following questions: How are male and female identities portrayed? What is the reason for the reversal of these roles? In the play, do these reversed roles return to their original stereotypes, or do they remain distinct?

In the world of drama, McDonagh have not attended a drama school or earning a theatre degree. He spent his youth- in Camberwell, London, listening to punk music and watching films and television, and eventually, came to owe his personal dramatic art to Scorsese and Tarantino. McDonagh designed his plays as trilogies-such as *The Leenane Trilogy* and *The Aran Trilogy*, although *The Pillowman* stands out as a separate play not forming part of any trilogy. The second play of the Aran Trilogy is *The Lieutenant of Inishmore*, the others being *The Cripple of Inishmaan* and *The Banshees of Inisherin*.

The Lieutenant of Inishmore (henceforth called *Lieutenant*) received the Olivier Award for Best Comedy in 2001 and was also nominated for a Tony Award. *Lieutenant* deals with terrorism from a farcical perspective while eschewing lofty concepts like nationalism. The story revolves around two main characters, Padraic and Mairead, and their respective feline pets Wee Thomas and Sir Roger. The 'death' of Wee Thomas gives way to a number of twists and turns that eventually results in five deaths, including that of Padraic. Toward 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 walks onto the stage at the end of the play.

Despite numerous awards and critical acclaim, McDonagh spent more than three years trying to find a company that would produce *Lieutenant*. The play's debut was delayed because all three of the prestigious companies that premiered

his other works turned it down. Joan Dean argued that one reason for its delay was that it "requires difficult hazardous stage action, including a coup de theatre involving the assignation of a cat" (8). The Royal Court turned the play down twice on the pretext of "its lack of artistic merit rather than its incendiary subject matter"(Dean 9). In an interview with Sean O' Hogan, McDonagh said *Lieutenant* had likely been rejected because it was thought to be "so inflammatory that its production might threaten the Northern Irish peace process"(qtd. in Lonergan, "Too Dangerous to Be Done" 160). McDonagh elucidates his views in an interview with Penelope Denning:

The National refused to do it [*Lieutenant*] for political reasons. McDonagh's easy smile is suddenly hidden. "I can't quite accept the whole political question that the play's too dangerous to be done. The point of writing it was to be dangerous, so not to do it for those reasons smacked of crass stupidity and gutlessness"(Lonergan, "Too Dangerous" 161).

He received the same response from the Royal Court, "Just as gutless. I would have thought it would have been up their alley, their hip young theatre they're supposed to be"(qtd. in Lonergan, "Too Dangerous" 161). Seven years later after it was written, *Lieutenant* opened in a "protected" performance by the Royal Shakespeare Company in London and later went on to receive the Olivier Award for Best Comedy of 2001. It was next produced off-Broadway and then graduated to Broadway in 2006, where it was nominated for both a Tony Award and A Drama Desk Award for Outstanding Play.

According to several critics, the dominant theme of the play is the unwanted role of terrorism in solving political crises, although there are other themes in the play that while not quite as apparent offer scope for analysis and interpretation. One of these themes is the treatment of gender issues, which this paper seeks to explore in greater detail. Gender refers to the way a society perceives, evaluates, and normalizes male and female behavior. Pilcher and Whelehan define gender 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. (2004)

To understand the role of gender in the play it is essential to delve a bit into concepts such as the biological theory and the sociological theory of gender.

In her article "Feminist, Female and Feminine", Toril Moi distinguishes among the three major concepts stated in the title. According to the article, "feminism (is) a political position, 'femaleness' (is) a matter of biology, and femininity (is) a set of culturally defined characteristics"(Moi 1989). While the biological concept refers to the differences between human male and female anatomy, it could also refer to external appearances. This biological concept is directly linked to the socio-cultural context, so on the basis of biological aspects, society seeks to determine socio-cultural prerequisites 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). It is usually customary for men and women to adhere to such pre-determined tenets, but sometimes there are a few outliers who wish to brush aside these stereotypical notions to be what they really want to be. Judith Butler defines gender as "a psychic and/or cultural designation of the self..." (1990). 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 the important themes of *Lieutenant*. Davey who exhibits a reversal of traditional gender roles, is the first character introduced in the play. He is described as "a long-haired, slightly pudgy neighbour of seventeen..."(7). He stands out from the very beginning of the play because of his 'unusual' outlook. Davey, with his long hair, his use of his mam's bicycle, and his soft and kind-hearted nature, rejects certain masculine behavioural expectations. His kindness is undoubtedly a part of his innate nature, as can be observed on several occasions in the play. Interestingly, his hair and use of his mam's bicycle may be labelled as 'nurture'.

Davey probably prefers to have long hair simply because he does not want to be called 'croppy' (like 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), a remark typical of girlish fuss and complaint.

In Scene Five, he tells Donny, "I love my mam. 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 has set for him. Davey is essentially kind and helpful by nature - a quality labelled 'feminine' and regarded in a derogatory sense in a patriarchal society. When Donny says he 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 his use of a lady's 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. While he calls Padraic a madman and says his ideas are wrong - something that even Padraic's father Donny does not dare to say this behaviour turns out to be ephemeral. Davey reverts to his timid, 'easily frightened' nature, shuddering to think of what will happen when Mairead gets a hint that Davey may have been indirectly responsible for the death of her cat. If Mairead was determined to blind him when she heard that he had killed Wee Thomas, 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 has become a changed person clearly looking like a man but with a nature still regarded as 'feminine' by male-centred society.

Mairead, Davey's sister, can also be termed a protagonist in the play whose character offers scope for analysis and interpretation of gender roles. She is more a tomboy than a woman i.e., she refuses to accept the gender identity that society prescribes for women, and consequently the other characters 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), symbolic of her masculinity. When Mairead hears that Padraic is coming to Inishmore, her

biological instincts lead her to don the mask of femininity by applying lipstick and some make-up. While she is of the impression that Padraic would be attracted to her beauty, converse things happen. Padraic essentially snubs her by responding negatively, saying “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 wounded by such a backlash from Padraic— a stereotypical man who upholds stereotypical views about gender roles in society. Mairead has tried to become feminine only to attract Padraic, and when that fails, she reverts to her original unfeminine self by refusing to grow her hair out and thereby express unwillingness to adopt the stereotypical image of a woman.

We can also see gender-related elements of the play in the portrayal of *backlash*. According to *The Cambridge Dictionary*, backlash, defined as “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 a male-centered society to feminism or feminist ideas. Judith Butler defines backlash as “a fierce rejection of an ideology by forcefully reiterating 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 itself in the media by stating that women are independent, by psychologists stating that independent women or single women have a usual number of psychological problems, or by people claiming that feminism has ruined people's lives. A final manifestation of backlash is glorification of the stereotypical or conventional image or role of a woman.

Mairead experiences further backlash when she makes frantic attempts to become more feminine most 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 than Mairead who wanders around like a vagabond shooting cows in the eyes. According to Padraic, her expertise at shooting is nothing, just a stroke of talent of a girl who wants to behave like a boy or a man.

In *Lieutenant*, backlash can best be seen in the play in Scenes 6 and 8. First, in Scene 6, when Padraic first meets Mairead, and asks him “have I grown up?” he advises her “to be at home”. Though Mairead is better than Padraic at shooting from a distance of 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, as can be observed in this exchange:

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 rifles, cocks it, and while Padraic still has his guns to her head, points the rifle towards one of his eyes. . . Pause.

PADRAIC: Do you think I'm joking?

MAIREAD: Do you think I am?

Padraic lowers his guns. Mairead pauses a moment [and], then she lowers it also. (35)

Mairead then desperately asks or pleads with Mad Padraic to let her join the INLA, which she thinks will be a launch pad for asserting her personality and proving 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)

Later in the play, Padraic tells her "Mairead, be staying home, now, and marry some nice fella. Let your hair grow out a tadeen (36).

This dialogue reveals two things: one is a satirical comment on the INLA implying that they are not clear about their ideals, and the other about how man sees a woman's position in society, i.e. women are stereotypically 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, either husband or father, by telling her it to marry and to stay at home because this is only what a woman is fit for.

The male-centred society sees women as a threat to their position as 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 cannot match a man's grit, but Mairead makes it a point to prove to Padraic that she is not someone to be waved aside. That is why she leads him to his trap telling him to go home, even though she knows for sure that his life is at stake there. She deliberately encourages him to go home quickly with the result that Padraic lands in trouble; Mairead's plan works and Padraic is held at gun point by the trio - Christy, Brenden 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 fecking eyes out.

CHRISTY: Are ye blinded too?

BRENDAN: We fecking 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 of the resulting shame. The quote also reveals how societal ideology sees women with respect to women's physical attributes. Mairead fails to fit into the 'normal' category because she is not buxom enough like many women or girls her age. She does not have long hair and above all, it is scandalising to find that she can handle a rifle with the absolute dexterity of a man.

Mairead can be seen as a foil to Mairead Farrell (1957 -1988), an Irish volunteer of the Provisional Irish Republican Army, 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 her superiority to him in defence tactics. There is a twist in the play when Mairead's personality undergoes further change, becoming more docile and submissive towards Padraic, and eliciting his opinion at every step. She even wears a dress to humour him, resulting in quite a shock to him. What needs to be specifically noted, however, is that Mairead attaches more importance to her national identity, 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, to a sudden and terrible death while claiming to be in love with him. She is now the Lieutenant of Inishmore and no longer has any desire to join the INLA- because of her disgust by their actions and their real intentions. In other words, she is aware that if she joins the INLA she will again be ignored and sidelined by the men like Padraic because they regard women merely as objects 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.

In a similar vein, one can see how gender is linked to Irish history. In an Irish context, for instance, Mairead's marginalization and attempts to push her into oblivion are symbolic of the way in which Irish historians have ignored the pivotal and significant roles played by women during the Irish Rebellion of 1916. Women played a fulcrum role in various parts of the country during the Rising only to find themselves sinking "Lethe-wards" in the pages of Irish history. Tom Clonan 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 CumannamBan, the women's wing of the Irish Republican Army. There are so many instances in Irish history where members of the CumannamBan have sacrificed their lives without the slightest hesitation for their country's cause, but like Mairead, their glories generally remain unsung.

There is a striking resemblance in the gender roles of the siblings Davey and Mairead. Toward the end of the play, one finds Davey and Mairead have been physically altered. Davey's hair is cut short by Padraic and Mairead damages his mother's bicycle. The result is that he 'looks' like a man, although he retains his soft-hearted nature – a 'feminine' quality in an androcentric society. Mairead, like Davey, begins to look more like a woman, with her lipstick, make-up and 'dress.', but, her 'masculine' attributes such as her individuality, valour, and presence of mind do not change. One does not know whether Mairead will ultimately revert to her 'masculine' self in terms of appearance.

In short, the reader sees how Davey and Mairead prefer to define their own gender roles in contrast to those 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 a thought 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.)

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تحدي الأعراف: الهوية الجندرية في مسرحية ملازم انيشمور لمارتن ماكдона

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المستخلص

تناقش هذه الورقة البحثية تحليلًا لبعض آراء النسوية وتعريفاتها، وكيف تم تطبيقها على مسرحية "ملازم انيشمور" (2003) للكاتب المسرحي الأيرلندي المعاصر مارتن ماكдона (1970-). كما يقدم البحث شرحًا لأهم هذه المفاهيم، مثل رد العنف والصورة النمطية؛ ومن ثمَّ ركز البحث على اثنين من أهم شخصيات المسرحية الذين حطّموا قيود مجتمعهم التي يستسلم لها الجميع ونجحت تلك الشخصيات وبجراً جوانب شخصياتهم في محاولة ليكونوا من هم، وليس من يجب أن يكونوا. تحاول هذه الورقة أن تقدم إجابات على الأسئلة التالية: كيف تُمثّل الصور الذكورية والأنثوية؟ لماذا تُصوّر هذه الأدوار على أنها معكوسة؟ في المسرحية، هل تعود هذه الأدوار المعكوسة إلى حالاتهم النمطية الأصلية أم تبقى دون تغيير؟ ربما تكون الفكرة التي يرغب ماكдона في تعزيزها من خلال هذه المسرحية: "المجتمع المتساوي في الجنس هو المكان الذي لا توجد فيه كلمة 'نوع': حيث يمكن للجميع أن يكونوا على طبيعتهم". وأزجيت في الخاتمة تلخيصاً للأفكار والنقاط التي دار البحث في فلكها.

الكلمات المفتاحية: ماكдона- ملازم انيشمور - النسوية - الصورة النمطية- العنف