The Art of Living with Difference: Contemporary Troubles Fiction

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The Northern Irish ethno-political conflict whose period of relentless violence dated from the late 1960s to the mid-1990s, euphemistically called the Troubles, has continuously attracted the attention of the media, politicians, academics, social workers and others interested in conflict studies. Questions concerning the possible means to resolve the obstructions in the reconciliation process, however, have also been at the centre of numerous works of art, including fiction. While some might think that the impact literature has on our lives is but utopian, it helps us cope with the current as well as future challenges. It is true that the 800 novels on the Troubles which have allegedly been written are works of fiction. Yet, these novels offer an interesting insight that might enable greater understanding of the predicament. To use this opportunity seems appropriate as, the recent Northern Irish political crisis has illustrated, the conflict remains far from being resolved. Twenty-one years after the ceasefires which eventually led to the cessation of violence, the Troubles still resonate politically as well as culturally. It is thus advisable to consider the retrospective assessment of the conflict the Troubles novels provide as it shows new possibilities for the future that relate to its underlying causes and persistence.

One of the causes identified by the Troubles texts as allegedly posing the greatest obstacle to (re)conciliation are the ethno-political and cultural specificities the opposing communities claim distinguish them from the opposing side(s). Actually, it is the excessive, self-interested focus people put on inter-personal differences in relation to their self-identification the novels identify as problematic. The texts criticise the fact that while one's own difference is perceived as a virtue, the other side's is understood and presented as an existential threat. In fact, some novels attest that when no such threat is present, it is often fabricated in order to justify actions that would be otherwise considered legally or morally questionable. This issue, as Keith Baker's novel *Inheritance* paradigmatically documents, is further complicated by the fact that people often expend energy on vigilance against criticism of their identity/attitude, and on concealment of truth rather than on genuine self-reflection. It is this perception of difference and refusal to acknowledge responsibility, majority of the contemporary Troubles novels concur, which thwarts peaceful coexistence and inter-community engagement.

The necessary changes, the socio-political critique the texts put forward implies, consist in more critical self-examination and reflections on communal identity. This is essential in order for people to develop a greater, more tolerant understanding of the role inter-personal differences play in their identity formation. Thus the Troubles texts seem to embody the demands of a philosophical movement which has been termed as the 'ethics of the other'. The novels assert that although alterity of 'the other' might be discomforting, inter-personal differences cannot be contained or assimilated, neither in the name of nationalist myths of origin nor unionist grand narratives of British colonialism. Instead, they urge readers to recognize one's otherness through transformation of relations. Approaches ranging from recognition and tolerance of inter-community differences on the one hand, to self-introspection enabling people to learn about their own role in the conflict, on the other, have been proposed as means by which to achieve such transformation.

Some cultural critics argue that the above-mentioned critical perspective of difference and inter-community relations predominates in the post-1998 Agreement novels. While a number of works that predate the Agreement present this perspective as well, it is true that the level of criticism concerning the betterment of the said relations in Northern

Ireland has increased since 1998. Its scope has also widened, with more fictional works critically commenting on the role politicians and other community representatives have played in the peace and transition processes. A certain level of disagreement is quite common, if not desirable, in political debates. Nevertheless, the post-1998 novels suggest that post-ceasefire Northern Irish politics seems to have been blighted by overt oppositionism which has further contributed to the feeling that the predicament is irresolvable. The 1998 Belfast/Good Friday Agreement, some would suggest, is at fault.

The Agreement was a major political development in the peace process. However, it has been argued that it also enabled oppositionist politics and the antagonistic 'two communities' binary to become even more deeply rooted in Northern Irish society. Although originally meant to facilitate peaceful coexistence in a shared physical space, the way some of the involved parties have interpreted the Agreement prevents negotiation of post-conflict equilibrium. Some of the Troubles texts echo this criticism. Jason Johnson's novel *Woundlicker*, for example, concerns the claim that since politicians and community representatives actually seem to prefer oppositionist politics, the predicament appears to be 'frozen'. Consequently, through their criticism of the misuse of power, the Troubles texts appeal to the politicians to become more tolerant and truly inclusive if they want Northern Ireland to cease to be a deeply segregated society with little indication of progress.

However, what the narratives convey is not telling in relation to future of Northern Ireland only – their contribution reaches beyond the debates of the predicament. Indeed, what they communicate about 'the other' might enable us to cope with the negative impact of globalization which has contributed to the current world socio-political and cultural crisis. In his reflection upon recent political assassinations, sociologist Zygmunt Bauman asserts that because of the ongoing diasporisation of the world, people are increasingly forced to learn how to deal with all-too-real inter-personal differences. Indeed, 'the other', once distant stranger, has become the next-door neighbour whose close proximity threatens one's habitual, and thus seemingly secure, mode of being. The Troubles novels have reiterated the fact that it is impossible to retain habitual modes of being since identity is constituted in a changing nexus of social relations, and against differences which are not necessarily negative. Deeper understanding of the ethics of 'the other' is where the social benefits of the Troubles texts lie.

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