



James Joyce, Irishness and the Exile Aesthetics: A Nationalistic Perspective

Yi Zhang 

Department of Computer, Hunan International Economics University, Changsha, China

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Corresponding Author:

Yi Zhang

scholarzhangyi@163.com

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ABSTRACT

This paper delves into the construction of nationality within the literary corpus of renowned Irish author James Joyce, examining it through the lens of exilic aesthetics. The study aims to elucidate the mechanisms by which he articulates the concept of Irishness. Through the meticulous textual analysis and critical discourse, the paper ascertains that he dismantles the colonially entrenched Irishness by challenging and resisting the colonial narrative of Ireland, and subsequently reconfigures this notion through an exilic sense of belonging, informed by an international modernist geographical imagination. This inquiry facilitates a reappraisal of the construct of "Irishness" within his oeuvre and its implications for Irish historical and cultural contexts. Furthermore, it incites contemplation on the role of intellectuals during the colonial epoch in shaping national identities and their engagement in both colonial defiance and the pursuit of national emancipation.

KEYWORDS: Exile aesthetics, nationality, Irishness, coloniality

INTRODUCTION

James Joyce (1882-1941) stands as one of the most renowned Irish literary figures of the 20th century. His work is celebrated for its postmodern characteristics, particularly his innovative use of the "stream of consciousness" technique. The historical context of Ireland's colonization by Britain has positioned Joyce as a pivotal figure in both British and Irish literary histories, with a significant role in the development of "Anglo-Irish literature" (Linh, 2021). Joyce's oeuvre encompasses a variety of literary forms, with a particular emphasis on poetry and the novel. His contributions include the short story

collection *Dubliners*, the novel *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, the groundbreaking novel *Ulysses*, and the enigmatic *Finnegans wake*. These works are renowned for their intricate themes and challenging narrative styles, which often require a deep level of engagement and interpretation. Such complexity has made Joyce's work a subject of extensive scholarly inquiry and debate.

The exile aesthetics specifically refers to aesthetics with exile as the main theme, and is also one of the common aesthetic forms in literary works. Volková (2020) regards concepts such as exile, alienation, marginalization, and post memory as different concepts of exile, and believes that the "aesthetic resistance and inner turning" in early 20th century artistic thought is essentially a form of inner exile, which is not only a physical displacement, but also a spiritual alienation and inner exile. The exile aesthetics in Joyce's novels precisely belong to the category of "aesthetic resistance and inner turning", such as the ordinary but unique perspective of exiles in *Ulysses* - it not only resists ethics to showcase the beauty of emotional paralysis and disillusionment, but also affirms the inner turning of oneself, especially individual emotions, difficulties, and freedom.

Barth (2023) posits that in the past four decades, scholarly discourse has increasingly focused on the nuanced political dimensions within Joyce's oeuvre, particularly highlighting his satirical treatment of Irish nationalism and his anti-colonial stance. This critical examination of Joyce's work invariably intersects with the exploration of national identity within his narratives. Indeed, the national character in Joyce's literature is a critical element for interpretation, as Nolan (1995) articulates: "the Irish issue is the background of Joyce's works" (p. 3). The Irish sentiment and ethnic identity present in Joyce's narratives serve as essential keys to unlocking a deeper understanding of his work. By examining the interplay between Joyce's political subtleties and the Irish context, critics can gain a more profound insight into the multifaceted nature of his literary contributions and the cultural and historical milieu from which they emerged.

Here comes a question: How is the national identity constructed in Joyce's novels. A feasible interpretation method is to analyze the exotic aesthetics in Joyce's novels and identify the construction patterns and underlying principles, which is also the main theme of this article.

THE EXILE AESTHETICS AND JOYCE'S RESISTANCE TO COLONIAL IRELAND

Joyce's exile aesthetics were targeted at Ireland, a nation that had endured centuries of British colonization. The concept of 'exile' within this context can be interpreted as a sense of alienation and a form of resistance against the colonizing entity. Indeed, British dominion over Ireland extended beyond the realms of politics and economics, encapsulating cultural domination as well, which is vividly illustrated in Joyce's literary works (Nguyen, 2021). How, then, did Joyce portray contemporary Ireland, and how did he construct his own identity as an exile through his writing?

Metaphors that draw upon cognitive mappings between time and space are a universal linguistic feature, and Joyce's intricate interweaving of temporal and spatial descriptions in his works reflects his probing into the collective national memory. Chan (2024) elucidates how Joyce employs a Picasso-esque cubist aesthetic to depict Dublin as a morally upright city. The illusory image synthesis crafted through montage in these aesthetic portrayals is, in essence, a call for the "true motherland" - a homeland whose authenticity has been compromised and obscured by colonial discourse within the

cultural sphere, leading to its nebulous and ambiguous nature. This characteristic is evident in the dreamlike aesthetic descriptions that permeate his work. For instance, the title of the novel *The dead* is inspired by the renowned Irish poet Thomas Moore's "Oh! Ye dead" from his Irish melodies in the early 19th century, which conveys a sense of homesickness through the spectral voice of Irish folklore. Consequently, Joyce's aesthetic narrative can be interpreted as an exploration of the question 'Who is Ireland?'

Easily overlooked in Joyce's exile aesthetic is the "body-subject" perspective, which, though intertwined with time and space in Merleau-Ponty's (1976) work, is an experiential expression of sorts. A pivotal concept in Joyce's writings is the reliance of the epiphany on the body's significance within the narrative. Through the poetic practices of "body-subject" and "ethnicity-discursive," Joyce articulates his contemplations on embodied nationalism. This notion is corroborated by Mason and Ellmann's (1959, pp. 168, 171) study, which employs the bodily metaphor of "paradox" to depict the oppressed Irish society. However, the discourse here is not a "normal-abnormal" dichotomy; it merely represents Joyce's portrayal of the colonial condition, not his comprehension of Ireland.

In Joyce's reflection on the aforementioned poetic practices, the colonizer (England) and the colonized (Ireland) are conceptualized as gendered bodies. Cairns and Richards (1988) incorporate this dyad into their discourse analysis of gender, race, and politics (pp. 42-57), while Loomba (2007) analyzes the relationship between the two gendered bodies: the female body symbolizing the invaded territory, becoming a site of male inscription and occupation (p. 154). The female body, as a symbol of "Ireland as the Other" (Scheible, 2015), has been further substantiated by Nohnberg's (2010) analysis - the male body's movement in "Ulysses" resonates with the "Irish masculine discourse" of the Celtic Revival. Joyce adeptly conveys the powerlessness of the nation and its individuals within colonial relations from this vantage point, extending it to the query of 'Who is Ireland?'

From this perspective, Joyce arrives at a novel understanding of the Irish predicament: comprehending the true Ireland necessitates liberation from British cultural colonial discourse. Previous feminist analyses of Joyce's work have posited it as embodying an anti-phallogocentric and "Feminine writing" (*écriture féminine*), as well as a psychoanalytic approach to feminist desire expression, transcending binary constructs. (Cixous, 1991; Scheible, 2015) The insights from these analyses can be extrapolated to the realization of Ireland's subjectivity through the dissolution of colonial binary oppositions, which is the wellspring of Ireland's self-expression.

Joyce's method of subverting the binary opposition inherent in colonial dynamics is achieved through the concept of "exile," which is not merely a metaphorical departure but a concrete embodiment of liberation from the binary structure within colonial cultural discourse. Mulrooney (2012) notes that Joyce's novels exhibit a dialogic, inclusive, and pluralistic understanding of the relationship between the UK and Ireland. This perspective suggests that the observation, experience, and sentiment regarding this relationship are articulated by transcending the binary framework that characterizes colonial cultural discourse. The identity of exile within exile aesthetics represents the intellectual's paradigm as an outsider, as it encompasses not only physical displacement but also spiritual transcendence and exploration (Said, 1996, p. 53; Admussen, 2012). In *A portrait of the artist as a young man*, a work classified as a "Artist Growth Novel" (*Künstlerroman*) that Joyce's (2000, p. 171) character Daedalus advocates for an escape from the discursive web woven by family, religion, and nation - a portrayal reflective of Joyce himself. Through the traversal of time, space, and borders, exiles emerge as

intermediaries between the "periphery" and the "center," the "self," and the "other." This exile signifies not only estrangement from the 'false Ireland' but also a form of rebellion against it, as evidenced by the central themes of Joyce's works such as *The sisters*, *Araby*, and *A portrait of the artist as a young man*, which challenge the prevailing Irish value system.

In summary, the aesthetic narrative in Joyce's works subverts the colonial discourse that obfuscates the true nature of Ireland through metaphors concerning Irish national memory, as depicted in the interplay of time and space. Specifically, the experiential, gendered expressions afforded by the "body subject" perspective of exile aesthetics elucidate the invasion and occupation of Ireland by colonial forces. In addition, Joyce's works, mediated through the lens of exiles, deconstruct the colonial binary oppositions with a diverse, inclusive, and dialogic understanding, in search of the concealed true nature of Ireland. It is important to note that this "true nature" or Irish nationalism is not the dominant Irish knowledge system of the time, but rather a rebellion against prevailing difficulties from the vantage point of intellectual outsiders within the framework of exile aesthetics.

REIMAGINING THE IRISH NATIONAL IDENTITY

Joyce's artistic liberation and personal identity were forged through exile, a state that is reflected in the enigmatic and idiosyncratic nature of his work. This includes a pretentious persona, a disdain for inhospitable surroundings, and an artistic mission that necessitated his exile. Consequently, his exile is imbued with themes of freedom, discrimination, solitude, and nostalgia. Furthermore, exile implies a quest for an intellectual's destination characterized by absence, marginality, and a lack of spiritual belonging—the denaturalization of language in Joyce's writing and its rhetorical and cultural symbolic functions represent a cultural dissection of thought, spirit, and soul. For instance, Angaye and Udisi's (2022) research highlights the pragmatic use of language in "A Young Man's Artist," revealing the illusion of the young artist. This suggests that the aesthetics of exile evoke two sentiments in Joyce: a sense of connection to his homeland and a pursuit of mental fantasy. Both sentiments are fundamentally a disorientation of self-exile, leading Joyce to conflate the two, as Deane (1985, p. 123) suggests that the sense of absence provided by Ireland was essential for Joyce's writing. This remarkable conflation also transforms Joyce's commitment to "rewriting oneself with a new version of the self" (Khan, 2020) into a reconfiguration of Irishness. Within this context, Joyce's depiction of a carnivalesque body, exemplified by androgynous descriptions (Joyce, 1986, p. 403) and the incestuous themes of the "Father/daughter inset theme" (Ford, 1998, pp. 120-145), serves as a metaphor for national liberation from colonial rule and a symbol of intellectual freedom. Through a de-logocentric language, Joyce dismantles the unequal, oppressive, and castrating colonial discourse promoted by Cartesian rationalism, just as he dissolves the secular constraints of everyday life, hierarchy, and utility for the intellectual.

Joyce's literary oeuvre is revered as an "encyclopedia work" due to its inclusive and comprehensive nature, a trait deeply rooted in his international approach to literary creation, which is underpinned by the concept of the "world theater" (Madigan, 2023). A case in point is the theme in *The dead* where the longing for exile on the European continent and the desire for Europeanization are prominent. As an author in exile, Joyce engages in cultural critique by reflecting on various regionalisms and nationalities within literature, thereby subverting the mythological archetypes and narratives of traditional culture and effecting a stylistic transformation of national theoretical concepts. Daas

(2001) characterizes this transformation and the international techniques used to achieve it as a "post-imperialist" endeavor to redeem colonial artistic and political constraints through linguistic experimentation, which constructs national identity and modernization.

The term "modernization" in Joyce's literary output is characterized by the "complete surrealism" that defines his work and the culture it articulates (Kiberd, 2001, p. 477). This characteristic is not merely a "mad depiction of debates on transculturalism and globalization" as seen in *Finnegans wake* for European modernists (Alexandrova, 2020), but also a profound exploration of individual identity, subjectivity, and social pluralism. Within this framework, the body as a metaphor for Irishness evolves from a symbol and object, devoid of subjectivity or as a "conscious other," to a subject that encompasses experience and consciousness. This representation is articulated through "the metamorphosis of materials" (Joyce, 1964, p. xv) and "modes of expressing commitment from within" (Dounia, 2021) to portray the diversity and complexity. For instance, in *Ulysses*, there is a skillful integration of cubism, futurism, and simultaneism (Budgen, 1972, p. 198), which also signifies that the Irishness in Joyce's writing is not confined to traditional linear narratives and fixed identity frameworks. This understanding of modernity is fundamentally an "embarrassment before all undeniable statements" (Joyce, 1963, p. 205). Through this, Joyce provides the legitimacy and impetus for a critical self-reflection on Irishness within the international strategy of literary creation.

Joyce's modernist literary oeuvre, crafted in the English language, is a profound exercise in the reconstruction of English literature. His work transcends the mere subversion of British cultural hegemony and linguistic imperialism over the colonies; it represents a nuanced understanding of colonialism's dual impact on the colonized. Daas (2001) encapsulates this understanding as a "more tolerant attitude," which acknowledges the colonizers' role in the contemporary creation of the colonies and favors a hybrid identity. Joyce's conception of Irishness is not confined to an essentialist identity determined by the mother tongue but is instead an "imagined community" shaped by geographical imagination, as suggested by Anderson (2006). This is further supported by Newman's (2020) critical examination of Joyce's critique of nationalist historiography, which rejects the notion of a "national essence."

From the vantage points of "exilic consciousness" and "secular critical consciousness" (Barth, 2023), Joyce's homeland is akin to the "promised land" claimed by Zionism. The geographical imagination that underpins this perception gives rise to unique geographical thoughts and knowledge forms, exerting creative allure through geographical subjectification and placing geography at the heart of aesthetic practice (Alexander, 2024). For instance, Joyce's portrayal of the "Oriental other" and the ensuing emotions of fervor, hatred, and benevolence are essentially the materialization of utopian ideals (Liu, 2021). Similarly, Joyce's geographical imagination of Ireland is not grounded in realism; instead, it is fantasized as a nation destined to become advanced and civilized post-liberation from colonial rule. This stems from his misinterpretation, as an exiled intellectual, of the sense of belonging to one's homeland as the ultimate destination for the realization of all dreams. In *A portrait of the artist as a young man*, Stephen's subconscious harbors an Irish complex, which he is unable to confront and handle appropriately, ultimately regressing into a primitive and barbaric state (Thornton, 1994, p. 146). This construction of Irishness, founded on geographical imagination, is starkly different from, and even diametrically opposed to, the essentialist path commonly chosen by the masses. This explains Murphy's (2018) assertion that Joyce's works target the Irish people rather than the English colonizers (pp. 119-120). The reason is straightforward: an

anti-essentialist geographical romantic imagination is in conflict with the cultural identity constructed by grand narratives, not to mention that Joyce's cultural foundation is international modernist culture rather than the regionally distinct traditional Irish culture.

In short, Joyce's aesthetic of exile conflates the artist's need for spiritual fantasy with a sense of connection to their homeland through a de-logocentric deconstruction of colonial discourse, grounded in a free understanding of knowledge. Correspondingly, Joyce constructed two key concepts in Irish nationalism—national identity and modernization—through language experiments that critique nationalist cultures across various regions during his exile. Modernization, in this context, reimagines Ireland as a subject that encompasses both experience and consciousness, thereby providing the impetus for critical self-reflection. Thus, Joyce's articulation of national identity is not rooted in essentialist nationalism but in geographical romanticism, which serves as the ultimate destination of all dreams.

CONCLUSION

In Joyce's literary endeavors, he employs the aesthetics of exile to achieve a nuanced construction of Irish national identity. This construction is dual-faceted: it both alienates and resists the colonial incarnation of Ireland, thereby dismantling the Irishness entrenched within colonial discourse, and simultaneously constructs a national identity that embraces cultural diversity and artistic innovation as the essence of true Irishness. Joyce's perspective as an exiled intellectual informs his literary output, integrating his contemplation of Ireland's present and future into a distinct form of national identity. This model of national construction is prevalent in colonial literature studies, especially in the post-colonial re-evaluation of British-occupied Ireland. However, it is crucial to recognize that Joyce's construction is inherently limited to his own vantage point as an intellectual in exile. This viewpoint is characterized by a rebellious spirit that not only permeates his literary works but also signifies a burgeoning national consciousness in the face of colonial narratives. Concurrently, it is imbued with a pronounced national romanticism that distances itself from the cultural heritage and populace of the homeland, a stance that Fanon (1963) critiques as potentially aligning with the antithesis of the homeland's masses through the neglect of empirical realities. Thus, Joyce's endeavor to construct an Irish national identity through the aesthetics of exile represents an imaginative quest for national liberation within the specific historical and cultural milieu of Ireland at that epoch.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST DECLARATION

I hereby wish to declare that I do not have any conflict of interests to disclose. However, I declare that the manuscript has not been published before and is not being considered for publication elsewhere.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

I declare that this manuscript is originally produced by me.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR(S)

Yi Zhang is at the Department of Computer, Hunan International Economics University, Changsha, China. His research field is very broad, and his published articles cover Sinology, philosophy, media studies, and Christian studies.

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