

Kurdi, Mária. *Representations of Gender and Female Subjectivity in Contemporary Irish Drama by Women*. Lewiston, Queenston, Lampeter: Mellen, 2010. 249 pp.

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Mária Kurdi is author and editor of several books and of innumerable scholarly papers and essays related to Irish literature and theatre. Her fourth published book is entitled *Representations of Gender and Female Subjectivity in Contemporary Irish Drama by Women*. With this new book, Kurdi enriches the list of recent years' critical writings that try to contest the view that the Irish theatre is the domain of male playwrights only. Kurdi's book joins works like *Gender and Modern Irish Drama* (2002) written by Susan Cannon Harris, Melissa Sihra's *Women in Irish Drama: A Century of Authorship and Representation* (2007), or critical articles of Cathy Leeney and Mary Trotter—to name only a few.

Kurdi's goal is to show that the works of women playwrights are worth considering instead of merely pushing them to the margins. By focusing on twenty plays written by women between 1983 and 2006, Kurdi undertakes to analyse the dramatic techniques and strategies these works operate with. Claiming that with these alternative dramatic techniques women playwrights not only manage to renegotiate or revision, but even subvert topics known from male authored dramas and that women in contemporary Irish drama are more likely to be credited a subject position.

The book opens with an "Introduction" in which Mária Kurdi maps the Irish dramatic practice, ranging from the Dramatic Revival to the present day. By relating gender issues to the British colonial ideology and to patriarchal nationalism, as the new form of domination originating from colonialism (see 3), the author claims that women had to endure double oppression. Demonstrating these through the works of the three canonical playwrights of the first Dramatic Renaissance, John Millington Synge, William Butler Yeats and Sean O'Casey, she reveals the dominance of male authors and their view of the woman figure as a mere abstraction in the nationalist struggle for freedom. She continues the chapter by discussing the developing, yet marginalized and fragmented writing tradition of female playwrights, about which one can hardly talk before the 1970s.

Following this thorough and carefully constructed introductory part that covers more than a hundred years of theatre practice, Chapter One discusses the "woman centred works" of Lady Augusta Gregory and Teresa Deevy, whom Kurdi apostrophizes as "the foremothers" (13) of contemporary women writers. Parallel to this, she introduces the reader into the history of Irish feminism and, among others, to such issues as abortion, contraception and divorce to provide a cultural background to the writings of female playwrights.

The main body of the book consists of six chapters which are devoted to the discussion of the dramatic forms and representational strategies deployed in the twenty analysed dramas written by thirteen contemporary female playwrights. The book is logically structured and systematically layered into chapters and subchapters that are consistent with each other. However, I am of the opinion that the structure of the book would be better if the sixth and seventh chapters were placed in reversed order. At the beginning of each chapter the author provides a brief theoretical introduction which is followed by nuanced analyses of respective plays. As the book is “arranged according to the strategies deployed in the plays” it “entails that each drama is discussed in more than one chapter” (13). This organizational principle may occasionally be confusing; however, after reading the second chapter this can be easily overlooked.

Chapter Two revolves around aspects of the body and how they are conceived in the Irish dramatic tradition. The chapter’s introduction portrays female corporeality as a site of oppression due to the heritage of the two systems of domination, that of colonialism and patriarchy, and the dogmatic teachings of the Catholic Church. Kurdi analyzes dramas that try to transgress and subvert the traditional view of the female body established by male standards. By so doing, Kurdi focuses on aging bodies, as in Marie Jones’s *Women on the Verge of HRT*, as well as on developing teenage bodies, like in Gina Moxley’s *Danti Dan*, or on rejected and abjected bodies respectively, in Patricia Burke Brogan’s *Eclipsed* or in Marina Carr’s Midlands trilogy. One of the strengths of this chapter is that it also includes a discussion on same-sex relationships, by introducing the reader to Emma Donoghue’s *Ladies and Gentlemen* and making the lesbian body, for many still a taboo in the Irish society, the subject of investigation.

Chapter Three is linked to the previous one, as it discusses the relationship between identity, performance and theatre, which are inseparable from the body. Drawing on some theories of performance, Kurdi claims that the performative strategies used within the plays, “subvert gender constructions and representation” (69) imposed on women by men. In this light, performance and performative acts, be they role-playing, as in Miriam Gallagher’s *Shyllag*, impersonation or masquerade as in Marina Carr’s *Low in the Dark*, carnivalisation, transgression or even death as performance, may lead to the formation of new identities.

Chapter Four deals with characterization and “the complex issue of women’s representation” in dramas of the first Dramatic Revival as opposed to the contemporary women writers’ tradition whose figures no longer “symbolize ideological or moral issues” (93) but rather depict women in their daily milieu. Chapter Five is introduced by establishing a link between theatre and the importance of narration and storytelling within the Irish tradition. Focusing on plays that use narration and storytelling as dramatic techniques, the use of the monologue form is discussed, especially in pointing to the fact that female playwrights are likely to use this form just as well as their male counterparts, if not better, by filling the monologue with “gender specific aspects” (130). While the fragmented narrative structure in Charabanc’s *Somewhere*

over the Balcony introduces us to the day-to-day conflicts of Northern Irish women, Mary Elizabeth Burke-Kennedy's *Women in Arms* creates a connection between past and present, first by using storytelling as an ancient Celtic art form, and second by drawing on "*The Táin*, the great medieval epic from the eighth century" (135).

Chapter Six discusses adaptation, rewriting and intertextuality as possible means of readdressing ancient myths to subvert outdated ways of women's representation by focusing on their gender specific aspects in the rewriting processes, as for example the reversing of gender roles or creating rebels as heroines to fight patriarchal expectations, like the female protagonist in Marina Carr's *By the Bog of Cats* (see 161, 164).

Finally the last chapter turns to one of the most popular fields and tools of research in recent academic studies, that of space. The chapter opens with distinguishing between the notions of space and place by explaining that "place is normally understood as location, concrete and physical, while space is a relational term" (see McDowell qtd. in Kurdi 187). Discussed along the ideas of home and journey, as a distinctive characteristic of many Irish dramas, Kurdi attempts to explore how the female consciousness and the space/place relate to each other in some of the analyzed dramas. However, by exposing the complex spatial systems reflected in the plays (221), Kurdi also demonstrates that it is not easy at all to distinguish between place and space, especially when the plays tend to cross spatial boundaries and utilize place/space to map the emotional landscape of their female characters, instead of using the Irish place as a site of cultural issues. Kurdi discusses the importance of represented and evoked space/place through several plays, e.g. *Treehouses* by Elizabeth Kuti or *On Raftery's Hill*, by Marina Carr, to name but two.

To discuss Irish drama and theatre written by female playwrights, Kurdi chose strategies and dramatic techniques according to how the individual dramas credit the female figures with agency to readdress and subvert the constructed roles and patterns of identification (215). Both Kurdi's treatment of the topic, and the wide range of reference literature used in the book demonstrate the author's wealth of knowledge and results in a well composed text. The hypothesis is laid down clearly in the introductory chapter and is argued throughout the book, which leads to nuanced and insightful analyses and a detailed conclusion. One of the great strengths of the present book is that it does not focus exclusively on dramas from the Republic of Ireland, but also considers works by Northern Irish playwrights, thereby offering a very complex view of the representation of Irish women within the plays. Furthermore, by reading the plays in dialogue with contemporary world literature the author also considers intercultural dimensions when discussing Irish drama.

The author's contribution to the list of studies in the field of Irish drama is more than welcome. As many of the plays are analyzed from more than just one angle, the book allows a thorough understanding of one particular drama within a single book. The book is useful not only for students or scholars of Irish drama and students of English, but—due to its clear and accessible language—for those as well who know only a little about this part of Irish literature.