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Asst. Prof. Maysoon
Taher Muhi (PhD)

The University of
Baghdad \ College of
Education for Women

Email:

maysoon.tahir@coeduw.uo
baghdad.edu.iq

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"Afraid of being trapped. Afraid of being buried alive": Memory and Nostalgia in Brian Friel's Philadelphia, Here I Come!

A B S T R A C T

The analysis of memory and nostalgia in Philadelphia, Here I Come! (1964) by Brian Friel highlights a recurring theme of memory in Friel's plays. The play explores the memories and nostalgia of the characters, particularly Gar and his father, S.B. O'Donnell, and how these memories are linked to their cultural and social identities as Irish people. Through the lens of cultural memory theory, the play is analyzed in terms of how the characters remember and represent the past and how collective memories are transmitted across generations. Cultural memory theory provides insights into the cultural and social context of the play and offers a deeper understanding of the complex relationship between memory, nostalgia, and cultural identity. Philadelphia, Here I Come! examines Gar's encounters and engagements with various individuals as instruments to illustrate the complex, multifaceted nature of memory. Friel's portrayal shows how memory molds one's self-perception and influences decision-making processes. The play underscores how memories are haunting individuals and making them ambivalent.

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متخوف من أن أحاصر. متخوف من أن ادفن حيًا: الذاكرة والحنين
في مسرحية براين فرييل "فيلادلفيا، ها أنا آت!"

أ.د. ميسون طاهر محيي
جامعة بغداد/ كلية التربية للبنات

مستخلص

تحليل الذاكرة والحنين في مسرحية فيلادلفيا، ها أنا آت! (١٩٦٤) لبراين فرييل يسلط الضوء على موضوع متكرر للذاكرة في مسرحيات فرييل. تستكشف المسرحية ذكريات وحنين الشخصيات، ولا سيما غار ووالده إس بي أودونيل، وكيف يرتبط هذا الذكر بهوياتهم الثقافية والاجتماعية كأشخاص أيرلنديين. من خلال نظرية الذاكرة الثقافية، يتم تحليل المسرحية من حيث كيفية تذكر الشخصيات وتمثيلها للماضي، وكيفية نقل الذاكرة الجماعية عبر الأجيال. توفر نظرية الذاكرة

الثقافية روى حول السياق الثقافي والاجتماعي للمسرحية وتقدم فهماً أعمق للعلاقة المعقدة بين الذاكرة والحنين والهوية الثقافية. تستكشف فيلادلفيا، ها أنا آت! لقاءات غار وتعاملاته مع أفراد مختلفين كأدوات لتوضيح طبيعة الذاكرة المعقدة والمتعددة الجوانب. يُظهر تصوير فريل كيف يشكل الذاكرة تصور الذات ويؤثر في عملية اتخاذ القرارات. تسلط المسرحية الضوء على كيفية أن الذكريات تطارد الأفراد وتجعلهم مترددين.

الكلمات المفتاحية : الذاكرة الثقافية ، الذاكرة والحنين ، برايان فريل ، فيلادلفيا ، ها أنا آت.

1.1 Introduction:

Cultural memory is a concept developed within the field of cultural studies and social psychology which refers to the shared memories and narratives that shape our understanding of the past as a community or society. Cultural memory is not simply a record of historical events. It is instead a constructed and contested form of knowledge that reflects the cultural and social values, beliefs, and identities of different groups and communities. It is shaped by various factors, including artistic representation and discourse, social power dynamics, and historical events and contexts. Through artistic representation and discourse, particular events and experiences are remembered and represented in ways that reflect the interests and perspectives of those in power. Jan Assmann (2008), in an article entitled "Communicative and Cultural Memory", explains that cultural memory is "the key to the construction of individual and collective identities" and it is a "form of communication that links the past and the present, and creates a sense of continuity and identity" (109).

Maurice Halbwachs (1980), a French sociologist and philosopher known for his influential work on the theory of collective memory, says that "memory is not a faculty that one can use as one pleases. It is not something that belongs to us. It is a social phenomenon" (p.40). Accordingly, memory is not simply an individual phenomenon but is also a collective and cultural one. Cultural memories are created, transmitted, and used to shape a society's understanding of its past and identity. These memories are selective, constantly evolving, and shaped by social and historical context. "[A] remembrance is in very large measure a reconstruction of the past achieved with data borrowed from the present, a reconstruction prepared, furthermore, by reconstructions of earlier periods wherein past images had already been altered" (Halbwachs, 1980, p. 69).

Memory and nostalgia are closely connected to cultural memory as they are linked to how we remember and interpret our past. Memory refers to how individuals recall and reflect on past experiences. While nostalgia as defined in The New Oxford Dictionary of English (1998) is "a sentimental longing or wistful affection for the past, typically for a period or place with happy personal associations" (1266). Nostalgia is often associated with positive emotions, such as warmth, comfort, and happiness, but it can also be tinged with sadness, grief, or longing. Various sensory stimuli, music, smells, or visual cues can trigger nostalgia. Both memory and nostalgia play a significant role in shaping our identity and understanding of the world around us (Batcho, 2007).

Memory is a fundamental aspect of human cognition, allowing us to learn from experience, make decisions, and navigate the world around us. Memory and nostalgia can also shape

cultural memory as individuals and communities pass on their memories and stories from one generation to another. Nostalgia, in particular, can be a powerful force in shaping cultural memory, as it can create a shared sense of identity and belonging based on a shared experience or history (Batcho, 2007).

Cultural memory can influence individual and nostalgia by providing a framework for remembering and interpreting our experiences. For example, the cultural memory of a particular historical event, such as a war or a revolution, can shape how individuals not directly involved in that event remember and interpret it. It can be both a conscious and unconscious process and is influenced by various factors such as emotions, attention, and repetition. Consequently, memory and nostalgia are often intertwined, as memories of the past can evoke feelings of nostalgia. Nostalgia can also be a way of coping with the passage of time and the impermanence of life. We can find comfort, meaning, and a sense of continuity by revisiting memories. However, nostalgia can also be a source of longing and sadness, as it can remind us of what we have lost and can never regain. It can "function both as social satire and as an elegy, registering the loss of the communal aspects of cultural life" (Cited in Hashim, 2017, p.341) In literature and art, memory and nostalgia are often used to explore themes of identity, loss, and the passage of time. They are also important tools for creating a sense of place and atmosphere, as they evoke the emotions and experiences tied up in our memories of the past.

1.2 Memory and Nostalgia in Friel's *Philadelphia, Here I Come!*

Philadelphia, Here I Come! Premiered in 1964 in Dublin and then in 1966 in the United States, running for nine months on Broadway (Roche, 2006). The play is set in the fictional Irish village of Ballybeg and follows the protagonist, Gareth "Gar" O'Donnell, on his final night before he leaves for a new life in Philadelphia. Gar plans to leave his hometown of Ballybeg for Philadelphia to escape working in his father's shop and his failed relationship with Kate Doogan. He is portrayed as a person with two divided characters, Public and Private, and this duality illustrates the complexity of Gar's decision to leave.

The Irish playwright Brian Friel emphasizes the dramatist's necessary preoccupation with the "collective mind" in "The Theatre of Hope and Despair" (1967). He argues that the dramatist's role is to explore the collective mind of society rather than just the individual psyche. In other words, Friel says that plays should be concerned with more than individual characters' personal experiences and struggles and instead engage with broader social and cultural themes.

Friel's emphasis on the "collective mind" can be seen as a rejection of individualism and a call for a more coordinated approach to drama. He suggests that the most effective play captures society's collective experiences and perspectives, which requires a deep understanding of the cultural and historical context in which the play is set. Friel's argument can be seen as particularly relevant to Irish drama, which has often been preoccupied with issues of identity, history, and national consciousness. However, his ideas about the importance of the collective mind in drama apply to many different cultural contexts. They are part of a broader movement towards socially engaged and politically relevant theatre.

Throughout the play, Gar struggles with detachment from his family and community, a sense of unfulfilled potential and a desire for personal freedom. The play is structured around two parallel characters, representing Gar's personality's public and private aspects. Gar speaks to his public self, interacting with his family and friends, while the other character is his private self, providing a window into his innermost thoughts and feelings. Through this dual structure, the play explores the tension between identity's private and public aspects and how memories and nostalgia can shape our understanding of the past and our sense of self.

Throughout the play, Gar reflects on his life in Ballybeg and the people he leaves behind. He is torn between his desire to go and start a new life in America and his nostalgia for the familiar surroundings and people of his hometown. The play explores the complex relationship between memory and nostalgia and how they can be comforting and painful.

Gar's memories of Ballybeg are mostly positive, and he cherishes his relationships with his father, S.B. O'Donnell, and his childhood friend, Madge. However, he is also haunted by memories of his failed romantic relationships and his strained relationship with his father. Gar's nostalgia for his hometown and the people he is leaving behind is bittersweet, as he knows he can never truly go back and relive those moments.

Friel uses the character of Gar to explore the idea that memories can be both comforting and painful. For example, Gar's memories of Ballybeg provide him with a sense of comfort and familiarity, but they also remind him of the disappointments and regrets of his past. Similarly, Gar's nostalgia for his hometown gives him a sense of longing and attachment, but it also highlights the loss that comes with leaving behind a place and the people he loves (Roche, 2011).

Perhaps the most striking aspect of the play is its use of two actors for the character of Gar—called “Private Gar” and “Public Gar”, respectively. Although the other characters in the play are unaware of the onstage presence of Private Gar, the play displays Public Gar's interactions with his family and friends persistently censored when viewed alongside Private's uncensored commentary. The play *Philadelphia, Here I Come!* revolves around the relationship between Gar and his father, S.B. O'Donnell. Their lack of communication catalyzes Gar's move to Philadelphia and his longing for the rural life he is leaving behind. At the start of the play, we are introduced to Madge Mulhern, the housekeeper of the O'Donnell household. Initially portrayed as a comical character, Madge's role soon becomes more significant as she takes on the part of a surrogate mother to Gar, who lost his mother at birth. Madge manages the household chores and leads the family's Catholic devotional practices, thus serving as their spiritual facilitator. She tries to reconcile the broken relationship between Gar and his father while preserving the memory of Gar's mother through her litany, which she shares with Gar.

According to Richards (2004), the plays of Brian Friel are focused on the characters' inner world and how nostalgia plays a role in their self-deception. The Public Gar is the mask that hides Gar's true feelings, while the Private Gar embodies his internal conflicts and nostalgia for his homeland (Roche, 2011). Throughout the play, the character Madge Mulhern serves as Gar's surrogate mother figure and helps preserve his deceased mother's memory through her Catholic devotional practices. The play's unique portrayal of Catholicism as a more localized,

household-oriented spirituality is central to the story, with Madge resurrecting an older Irish strain of Catholicism that would later be considered pagan. Friel's reconfiguration of Catholicism in the play emphasizes its render to be a household-based approach to spirituality.

PRIVATE. You are fully conscious of all the consequences of your decision?

PUBLIC. Yes sir.

PRIVATE. Of leaving the country of your birth, the land of the curlew and snipe, the Aran sweater and the Irish Sweepstakes?

PUBLIC. I have considered all these, Sir.

PRIVATE. Of going to a profane, irreligious, pagan country of gross materialism.

PUBLIC.

I am fully sensitive to this, Sir.

PRIVATE. Where the devil himself holds sway, and lust-abhorrent lust-is everywhere indulged in shamelessly?

PUBLIC. Who are you tellin'? Shamelessly, Sir, shamelessly.

PRIVATE. And yet you persist in exposing yourself to these frightful dangers?

PUBLIC. I would submit, Sir, that these stories are slightly exaggerated.
(p.11)

The lack of communication between the father and the son simultaneously propels Gar forward into the modern world of Philadelphia and pulls him back to the agricultural landscape of Ballybeg. Throughout the play, Gar struggles with his memories of growing up in Ballybeg, including his love for his childhood sweetheart, Kate Doogan. He sings the song "Philadelphia, Here I Come" to express his desire to escape his current situation and start anew life.

Roche (2011) notes that in the play, there is a contrast between Public Gar reciting prayers for the dead and Private Gar's vivid and emotive description of his mother as a young and unspoiled girl. His mother becomes a powerful symbol of youth, beauty, vitality, and freedom. Significantly, Private Gar's description of his mother is accompanied by the music of the Violin Concerto. There is another flashback in the play where Gar tries to obtain information about his mother's wedding day from his Aunt Lizzy, who has returned from the United States. However, Aunt Lizzy cannot provide a complete recollection of the event. She is married to a good Catholic but flirts with Ben Burton, revealing herself as a more carnal version of Gar's idealized mother. The stage directions indicate that Aunt Lizzy is tactile, which is noteworthy in a play where physical contact is rare.

As she talks, she moves from one to the other, and she has the habit of putting her arm around or catching the elbow of the person she is addressing. This constant physical touching is new and disquieting to
PUBLIC. (p.49)

Gar agrees to Aunt Lizzy's invitation to accompany her to the United States. He is no longer conflicted between his idealized mother and his all-too-real father or between the allure of Hollywood's femme fatales and the mundane reality of a father removing his dentures at dinner.

PUBLIC. You were telling us about that morning. LIZZY. What's he talking about?

PUBLIC. The day my father and mother got married.

LIZZY. That day! Wasn't that something? With the wind howling and the rain slashing about! And Mother, poor Mother, may God be good to her, she thought that just because Maire got this guy with a big store we should all have got guys with big stores. And poor Maine -we were so alike in every way, Maire and me. But he was good to her. I'll say that for S. B. O'Donnell -real good to her. Where the hell is he anyhow? Why will S. B. O'Donnell, my brother-in-law, not meet me?

CON. He (Public) told you -he's away at a wedding.

LIZZY. What wedding?

CON. Some local girl and some Dublin doc.

LIZZY. What local girl? You think I'm a stranger here or something?

CON. (To PUBLIC) What local girl?.(p.51)

However, as Gar prepares to leave, he realizes his nostalgia for Ballybeg is more complicated than initially thought. He is torn between his desire to escape and his deep attachment to his homeland and its people. This inner conflict is manifested in Gar's split identity, with the Public Gar representing his exterior self and the Private Gar expressing his innermost thoughts and feelings. He finds himself trapped by his own old memories, fearing the sense of being buried alive within these memories. These memories though shape him as an individual, they become obstacles to achieve his true identity.

The character of Madge Mulhern, the housekeeper of the O'Donnell household, serves as a surrogate mother figure for Gar, whose mother died in childbirth. Madge helps to facilitate the family's engagement with Catholic devotional practices and preserves the memory of Gar's mother through her litany, which she passes along to Gar. Friel's portrayal of Gar's nostalgia for Ballybeg is not sentimental or romanticized but rather complicated and fraught with conflict. Gar's memories of his past are not straightforward. Still, they are instead filtered through the lens of his emotions and experiences, and he must come to terms with the complexities of his relationship with his hometown and his family.

Explores the theme of memory and nostalgia through the conversation between two characters, Private and Public, who represent the inner and outer selves of the protagonist, Gar.

Private, It's Madge – aul fluke-feet Madge.

They both stand listening to the sound of Madge flapping across the kitchen and out to the scullery.

Public (calls softly) Madge. Private drops into the armchair. Public stands listening until the sound has died away.

Private (wearily) Off again! You know what you're doing, don't you, laddybuck? Collecting memories and images and impressions that are going to make you bloody miserable; and in a way, that's what you want, isn't it? (p.46)

The attention to detail and sensory experience in this conversation emphasizes the importance of memory in shaping one's identity and experiences. At the same time, Gar's internal struggle between the past and the future reflects the universal human experience of wrestling with nostalgia and the passing of time. The Public then calls out to Madge, but Private drops into an armchair, suggesting his weariness and reluctance to engage with the outside world. The Public listens until Madge's flapping has died away, emphasizing the importance of memory and the past. Private then speaks to himself, reflecting on Gar's tendency to collect memories, images, and impressions that will only make him miserable. This reveals the underlying theme of nostalgia in the play, as Gar longs for a past that he cannot return to and is unsure about his future in Philadelphia.

The power of memory that shapes one's understanding of self and past is haunted Gar who is caught by the memories of his childhood, particularly his relationship with his emotionally distant father. These memories profoundly affect Gar's sense of self and his understanding of his place in the world. As he prepares to leave for America, Gar is forced to confront these memories and come to terms with how they have shaped him. Private Gar started reminding him of certain details from his childhood. He speaks to Screwballs, presumably a pet or a toy, wondering if Screwballs dreams of the past and remembers precious moments, which makes him question if he has been unfair to the toy. Private then reminisces about a specific memory from his past, where he and someone else were fishing on a boat on a rainy day. He describes the happiness and joy they shared at that moment as much richer than mere contentment. Private Gar reflects on his past and wonders if even inanimate objects hold onto memories. It also touches on happiness and how certain memories can evoke strong emotions and feelings of joy.

In Private's monologue, he contemplates the possibility of his memories from the past. He questions whether there are memories of precious moments stored within his mind behind his seemingly lifeless eyes and flat face. A Private's recollection of a specific moment from the past, such as the afternoon in May fifteen years ago, demonstrates the subjective nature of memory. He describes the blue boat with peeling paint, an empty cigarette packet floating in the water, and the slipping rowlock. These vivid sensory details emphasize the power of memory to preserve specific elements of past experiences. Private's memory also includes personal interactions and emotional connections. He recalls that someone had given him their hat and put their jacket around his shoulders due to a rain shower, saying: "You had given me

your hat and had put your jacket round my shoulders because there had been a shower of rain..."(76). These reflections align with Halbwachs' concept of collective memory, as Private acknowledges the potential presence of personal memories influenced by social interactions and the emotional bonds formed within a specific cultural and historical context. Gar is nostalgic for his childhood and the people and places he has left behind. This nostalgia is a source of comfort and pain, reminding Gar of what he has lost and the people he left behind. Through Gar's experiences, the play explores how nostalgia can enrich and complicate ones' lives and the importance of finding a balance between holding onto the past and embracing the future.

According to Roche (2011), Friel himself proposes that the memories depicted in the play are a blend of fact and fiction. Friel drew on his childhood experience of a fishing trip to a lake in Donegal as the basis for the memories depicted in *Philadelphia, Here I Come!* The memory that Friel portrays in the play is a brief moment of happiness shared between a father and son in a beautiful and balanced setting. Gar's moment of realization, which is conveyed to him through music, occurs while on the blue boat in Lough na Cloc Co:

GAR. Listen! Listen! Listen! D'you hear it? D'you know what that music says? ... It says that once upon a time, a boy and his father sat in a blue boat on a lake on an afternoon in May, and on that afternoon, a great beauty happened, a beauty that has haunted the boy ever since, because he wonders now did it really take place or did he imagine it. (p.164)

Friel and Gar both share a painful memory that cannot be confirmed. Friel reflects on how memories and reality are interconnected, and he concludes that his own memory of a fishing trip with his father cannot be proven to be true:

The fact is a fiction ... But I don't think it matters. What matters is that for some reason ... this vivid memory is there in the storehouse of the mind. For some reason the mind has shuffled the pieces of verifiable truth and composed a truth of its own. (qtd. in Richards, 2004, 180)

Public Gar's sense of self is unstable, as his thoughts and feelings about going to America and his lover, Kate, are not well-organized. When speaking to Kate, he lies about his future plans to avoid appearing regretful about leaving for America. He says things like "I'll come home when I make my first million, driving a Cadillac and smoking cigars and taking movie-films" (61) and "If I had to spend another week in Ballybeg, I'd go off my bloody head! This place would drive anybody crazy!" (78) to convince himself that leaving is the right decision. He deludes himself into thinking that he is "free as the bloody wind" while everyone else is trapped in Ballybeg and doomed to die there. However, Gar's pretentiousness and self-deception become apparent when he buries his face in his hands and calls Kate affectionate nicknames like "sweet Katie Doogan" and "my darling Kathy Doogan" (82) after she leaves. This suggests that Gar's struggling with conflicting emotions about leaving and about Kate became traumatic, so his public bravado is a facade for deeper insecurities and uncertainties. Moreover, the traumatic reliving seems like an awaking memory, yet returns only in the form of a dream or flashback. (Shalan, 2020)

Gar's attempt to reconcile with his father is driven by a desire to revisit a happier time in their relationship, as evidenced by his deliberate use of the phrase "once upon a time." However, his father's lack of recollection undermines this effort, highlighting the fragility and unreliability of memory. The memory of the "blue boat" incident also reveals the power of nostalgia and how it can color our recollections of the past. Gar's fondness for the memory clashes with the reality of his father's forgetfulness and Madge's denial, demonstrating how nostalgia can sometimes distort our perceptions of reality. Furthermore, the memories between father and son suggest that memories and emotions can be suppressed or hidden, only surfacing when one is alone and free to express them. This is exemplified by the father's private moments in the kitchen, where he can physically express his suppressed feelings towards Gar's departure (Khalaf, & Diyaiy, 2019). Throughout the play, Friel uses Gar's memories and fantasies to explore how pasts can shape present and future. His memories are often fragmented and disjointed, reflecting how our emotions and perceptions shape our memories. As Gar tries to make sense of his past and future, he is forced to confront how his memories have shaped his identity and understanding of the world.

Conclusion:

In Brian Friel's play *Philadelphia, Here I Come!*, Gar O'Donnell experiences a sense of entrapment and fear, both emotionally and physically, which eventually lead him to leave his hometown of Ballybeg and move to Philadelphia. One aspect of Gar's fear of being trapped is rooted in his tense relationship with his father, S.B. O'Donnell whose expectations and societal norms suffocate him. His fear of being buried alive metaphorically represents this fear of being emotionally stifled. Gar's emotional entrapment affects his ability to connect with others, including his love interest, Kate Doogan. Consequently, he yearns to escape to Philadelphia, where he can break free from the constraints of his current life and rediscover himself. His decision of leaving is expressed through powerful exploration of the themes of memory and nostalgia which shape his self-perception and his understanding of the surrounding. Friel's use of the two Gar characters - Public and Private - emphasizes the complexities of decision-making in the face of nostalgia and memory. Public Gar, the mask, is seen and heard by the audience and embodies Gar's desire to escape Ballybeg and start anew in America. Private Gar, on the other hand, represents Gar's innermost thoughts and feelings, including his nostalgia for his past and his hesitation to leave.

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