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Cultural Memory as a Bridge between the Past and the Present: Sheena Blackhall's "The Irish Famine"

Geçmiş ve Günümüz Arasında Köprü Olarak Kültürel Hafıza: Sheena Blackhall'un "The Irish Famine" Adlı Şiiri

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Abstract

Cultural memory, which might be observed in monuments, museums, historicised buildings, objects and even literary works, transmits to contemporary generations many traumatic events of history such as holocausts, famines, mass emigrations, starvation, pandemia, and, as a result, builds a link between history and the present. The traumatic impact of the Irish Famine, too, is awakened within the present by means of monuments such as the Famine Monument and the tour ship, the Jeanie Johnston on the Custom House Quay in Dublin, and literary texts such as Sheena Blackhall's poem, "The Irish Famine". In this sense, the bronze statues in the monumental area that depict the Famine's traumatic impact upon the starving Irish, the ship which invites its visitors to take a metaphorical journey to the historical "coffin ships" adventures of the Irish, and Blackhall's poem that (re-)presents and reinterprets them become devices of cultural memory. In the stanza where Blackhall reinterprets the Jeanie Johnston, the ship that represents historical facts about the Irish diaspora, readers feel a metaphorical slap in the face due to the unexpected reflection of a contemporary event: The African refugee problem. In the light of these discussions, this paper aims to discuss, in line with the concept of cultural memory, a Scottish poet, Sheena Blackhall's poem, "The Irish Famine" as a literary text that constructs a bridge between the past and the present by means of its (re-)presentation and reinterpretation of the Great Irish Potato Famine represented in the Famine Monument and the tour ship, the Jeanie Johnston on the Custom House Quay in Dublin.

Keywords: Cultural memory as a bridge between the past and the present, the Great Irish Potato Famine, Sheena Blackhall's "The Irish Famine", the Famine Monument and the Jeanie Johnston on the Custom House Quay in Dublin.

Öz

Anıtlar, müzeler, tarihî binalar, nesneler ve hatta edebiyat eserlerinde görülen kültürel hafıza, soykırımlar, kıtlıklar, kitlesel göçler, açlık, pandemi gibi tarihin pek çok travmatik olayını günümüz nesillerine aktarır. İrlanda Kıtlığı'nın travmatik etkisi de günümüzde Dublin Gümrük Binası İskelesi'nde bulunan Kıtlık Anıtı gibi anıtlar ve bir tur gemisi olan Jeanie Johnston aracılığıyla ve Blackhall'un "The Irish Famine" adlı şiiri gibi edebî eserlerle yeniden uyandırılmaktadır. Bu bağlamda, Kıtlığın açlık çeken İrlandalılar üzerinde oluşturduğu travmatik etkiyi tasvir eden anıtsal alandaki bronz heykeller, ziyaretçilerini İrlandalılar'ın tarihi "mezarlık gemi" maceralarına metaforik bir

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seyahate davet eden gemi ve onları (yeniden) sunan ve yeniden yorumlayan Blackhall'un şiiri, kültürel hafızanın birer aracı olurlar. Blackhall'un İrlanda diyasporası gerçeklerini temsil eden Jeanie Johnston'ı yeniden yorumladığı kıtada, okuyucular, Afrika mülteci problemi gibi güncel bir olayın umulmadık bir şekilde yansıtılmasından dolayı yüzlerine metaforik bir tokat yemiş gibi hissederler. Bu tartışmalar ışığında bu makale, kültürel hafıza kavramı doğrultusunda, İskoç şair Sheena Blackhall'un "The Irish Famine" adlı şiirini, Dublin Gümrük Binası İskelesi'nde bulunan Kıtlık Anıtı ve bir tur gemisi olan Jeanie Johnston'da temsil edilen İrlanda Patates Kıtlığı'nı yeniden sunup yorumlayarak geçmiş ve günümüz arasında köprü oluşturan bir eser olarak tartışmayı amaçlamaktadır.

Anahtar sözcükler: geçmiş ve günümüz arasında köprü olarak kültürel hafıza, Büyük İrlanda Patates Kıtlığı, Sheena Blackhall'un "The Irish Famine" adlı şiiri, Dublin Gümrük Binası İskelesi'ndeki Kıtlık Anıtı ve Jeanie Johnston.

Introduction

> *"How can I do any less than remember and salute them?"* (Quinn, 2018, p. 110)

Memory studies has recently received great attention. Particularly cultural/collective memory which has been observed as a topic in cultural studies, sociology, history, art, psychology and literature has been a widespread interdisciplinary area since the 1980s. There are many traumatic events that have been topics for these areas, and that are experienced by mass numbers such as starvation, mass emigrations, pandemia, severe epidemics, famines, and holocausts (among many others). What is common among these tragic events is that even if centuries pass over these tragedies, their psychological and cultural impact might be transferred to the following generations via the genes, and/ or the stories or objects, museums, historicised buildings, monuments and literary works, which make the continuous remembrance possible, and which might be regarded as cultural or historical symbols of cultural memory, also known as "collective" or "social memory".

As David Rieff suggests, "the best psychological evidence suggests strongly that what trauma survivors suffer from is passed along for two if not three subsequent generations" (qtd. in Eide, 2017, p. 27). One of the most important of such impactful events is the Great Irish Famine (1845-1852), which is always associated with starvation, fatal diseases that followed the death of more than one million people due to these problems, and the emigration of still another million to particularly Great Britain, Canada, the USA and Australia. These traumatic experiences of the past are still felt by the contemporary Irish generations with strong bonds to their previous generations. This remembrance is triggered by some Famine monumental sites and literary works, too, as can be observed in the Famine Monument on the Custom House Quay in Dublin and its (re-)presentation in the poem, "The Irish Famine" (2015) by Sheena Blackhall[1] (b.

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[1] Blackhall is a regionally, nationally and internationally well-known Scottish literary figure who is famous for her expertise in the culture and the Scots language of North East Scotland. In 2009, she became Makar, Scotland's poet laureate, for Aberdeen and the North East, and, in 2019, became Makar for the Doric Board ("Sheena Blackhall's Screivins"). She is proud of calling herself as "100 per cent north-east Scots" (Blackhall, 2002, p. 26), and she says that "if asked to tick a box on ethnic origin, I'd choose the Celt category, because like most north-east Scots, I'm a kirn of European races. I'm a Celt because place matters to me, and every word of the Celtic poet Amheirgin resonates with me at the deepest level" (Blackhall, 2002, p. 28). The North East is a place where Celtic and Pictish folklore, tales and myths meet. As Hood accentuates, "[t]he folk beliefs and practices of the North East have not been greatly dissimilar to other areas of the United Kingdom with a Celtic speaking past or indeed to the rest of Western Europe" (Hood, "Folk Culture in North East Scotland"). Considered in relation to this fact and the common Celtic folkloric, historical and cultural heritage shared by Scotland and Ireland, the reason behind Blackhall's great interest in Ireland, Irish culture and history reflected in a great number of her poems might be understood. In addition to her poem, "Celts" in which she talks about the common characteristics of the Celts such as their warrior culture, the function of the bards in telling people the heroism of the warriors, the druids, Blackhall has a great number of poems particularly about Ireland. Two of the most outstanding ones are "Dublin" (2015) and "Glasnevin Cemetery, Dublin" (2015). "Dublin" consists of the enumeration of many symbolic figures, things and events that evoke Irish culture, literature and history such as William Butler Yeats, George Bernard Shaw, Jonathan Swift, Patrick Kavanagh, the Leprechauns, shamrocks, and the Famine. As for "Glasnevin Cemetery, Dublin", it is about Glasnevin Cemetery in Dublin where many revolutionaries, patriots, politicians and common people who had been associated with important historical, cultural

Sheena Booth Middleton) (1947-), a contemporary Scottish poet, novelist, short story writer, translator, illustrator, traditional ballad singer and storyteller.

Monuments, historicised buildings, the Great Irish Famine, the forced emigration that followed it separately have become the subject of much scholarly attention. However, representation and interpretation of the Famine and the forced emigration in line with cultural memory in literature, and by means of memorial objects, particularly in poems has received little attention. Blackhall's "The Irish Famine", invites the reader to a visit to the Custom House Quay where it is possible to come across the Famine Monument (which is reflected throughout the poem except for the last stanza) and the tour ship, the Jeanie Johnston (reflected only in the last stanza). As a result of this visit, the poem offers a metaphorical historical passage to the past. In the part where she reflects the Jeanie Johnston, she builds a connection between the Irish exodus of the nineteenth-century and the contemporary African refugees problem. What makes the poem a strong cultural memory representation is this connection between history and the present. In this sense, this paper aims to discuss that the poem, "The Irish Famine", beyond being merely an instrument for feeling sorrowful for the Famine victims, transmits the trauma of the Irish Famine experienced by the Irish in the nineteenth-century to the contemporary generations, and brings together two (historical and contemporary) traumas, that is to say, the forced Irish emigration during the Famine and the one experienced by contemporary African refugees. In other words, this paper, in line with the concept of "cultural memory", aims to discuss that the poem is an instrument that bridges history and the present; and it blurs the lines between the past and the present.

The Great Irish Potato Famine (1845-1852):

"Never Again Should a People Starve in a World of Plenty." (Irish Famine Monument, Cambridge, MA. qtd. in Quinn, 2018, p. 113)

Before the analysis of Blackhall's poem, "The Irish Famine" in relation to cultural memory, brief information about the history of the Irish Famine and its aftermath will be given in order to prepare the background for the discussions within the poem. Although the details about the time and means of arrival of the roots of the potato from Peru is not known exactly, it is well known that in the 1580s, the potato was an indispensable part of the Irish cuisine, and in the mid-1600s, it began to be considered in close connection with the Irish identity, and was called by the Americans as "the Irish potato" (Nikiforuk, 1991, pp. 110-111). Before the Famine, the agricultural life and diatary habits in Ireland were based, in Woodham-Smith's terms, "entirely and exclusively" (qtd. in Reader, 2008, p. 136) on the potato. Due to the fact that it was easy and did not require much effort or skill to grow the product, the Irish, even the poorest ones, preferred the potato for subsistence farming (Tracy, 2001, p. 346), growing the product enough only to live on and not to sell.

When the calendars showed the year of 1845, however, the agricultural life to which the Irish were accustomed began to be shaken seriously, and the Irish were alerted by the great impact of *Phytophthora infestans*, a fungus which devastatingly affected the potato within their lands. As Nikiforuk accentuates, "the fungus rotted a potato the way armies of bacteria eat a dead man [...]. First it spotted the leaves purple and then ate the root. Because of the awful odour, peasants even called the disease 'potato cholera' and gangrene. It blasted more than half the crop of 1845, totally wiped out the crop of 1846 and returned again in 1847 and 1848" (1991, p. 118). This biological impact determined the fate of the Irish, as it culminated in the famine. As a result, Americans and Europeans added "national prefix", "Irish" to the word "famine" (Nikiforuk, 1991, pp. 110-111), and most notably the French began to equate Ireland with "famine" rather than with "the potato" (Neville, 2012, p. 81). The Famine in this period was not the first but the worst of the

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and social events and circumstances in Ireland are buried. (For example, Charles Stweart Parnell, Maude Gonne, Daniel O'Connell, and many "fallen women" who had been sent to the Magdalene laundries/ asylums as a punishment for their sexual promiscuity between the eighteenth and late twentieth centuries). So, "The Irish Famine", which is the focus of this article, is not her only poem about Ireland.

famines in Ireland. That is why it is identified by its impact and magnitude as "the Great Famine". Particularly in the winter of 1847, everything deteriorated due to "epidemics of starvation, scurvy, typhus, and dysentery" (Eide, 2017, p. 24), which had been aggravated by diseases such as smallpox and fever. These infectious diseases escalated into traumatic, psychological, biological, physiological and physical collapse of the afflicted, and more tragically, increased the mortality rate. Nikiforuk's following descriptions show the tragic situation of the Irish that prevailed at the period:

> With no potatoes in the crock, scurvy returned and people's teeth fell out. Dysentery assaulted crowds of skeletal beggars and many of the Irish literally shat themselves to death. Throughout the country children went blind with xerophthalmia from lack of milk and vitamin D. All in all, the famine and its ascendant microbes reduced the Irish to the same state as their blighted potatoes and restaged the horrors of the Black Death. Starving children aged so quickly that they grew hair on their faces and looked like decrepit old men or monkeys. Beggars lost their voices, walked on their knees and held up their dead children to passers-by as 'feed me' signs. […]. Whole families dragged themselves to cemeteries, dug their own graves and lay down, as wide-eyed English reporters found them, in 'the arms of death' or the 'jaws of starvation'. (1991, p. 122)

The fact that the diet of Ireland was particularly based on the potato prepared the ground for this catastrophic effect. These descriptions reflect how the Irish fell victim to the biological war, which pushed them into the pawns of death or, if they survived, which forced them to live in horrifying conditions of starvation and diseases.

In addition to these biological facts, there were problems that stemmed from the manipulation of the power upholders such as government members, landlords whose major concerns were based on economic profits within their farms and lands, manipulative figures who exploited religion for sectarian purposes by proselytisation while people were starving around. For many power upholders political and economic gains were more significant than the humanitarian assistance for the starving people. As Mac Annaidh explains, several religious foundations and various local relief committees opened soup kitchens. Quakers struggled to support the poor; however, many others religiously manipulated the poor in that they asked Catholics to be converted into Protestantism to receive aid. Furthermore, the government in this period preferred to aid the ones in need only in return for labour force according to their public works' schemes in which women, men and even children generally worked in road-building or any other work asked from them (2013, pp. 166-167). Besides these manipulative acts, the workhouses which were the institutions established in the early 1840s for the poor Irish - who could not financially support themselves - to work there in return for food were full, and could not take any other workers during the Famine. So, they turned back many Irish people who were in need of food and work. Although it is still hard to know the exact numbers of the people who attended the soup kitchens and who worked in the workhouses, it is estimated that in the summer of 1847, approximately three million people a day were present at the soup kitchens, and, in 1849, more than 900,000 poor people were kept in the workhouses, "which were maintained by local rate-payers" (Mac Annaidh, 2013, p. 170). Moreover, the following arguments brought into discussion by Joel Mokyr about the approach of the British imperial government to the appalling conditions in Ireland during the Famine bring to mind questions about the possibility of the negligence of the government although at this period Ireland was a part of the United Kingdom: After a meticulous analysis, Mokyr comes to the conclusion that

> in the frightful summer of 1847, the British simply abandoned the Irish and let them perish. There is no doubt that Britain could have saved Ireland. […] It is not unreasonable to surmise that had anything like the famine occurred in England or Wales, the British government would have overcome its theoretical scruples and would have come to the rescue of the starving at a much larger scale. Ireland was not considered part of the British community. Had it been, its income per capita may not have been much higher, perhaps, but mass starvation due to a

subsistence crisis would have been averted, and in that sense Ireland might have been less poor. (1983, pp. 291-292)

According to all these arguments, gross human negligence and poor operational practices had been among the primary reasons for the starvation and the increasing death tolls throughout the Famine. During the Famine, the poor in Ireland were generally left to their destiny, and, if/ when aid came, generally it was in return for labour force or conversion into Protestantism. Help coming from private charitable foundations was not enough. Necessary aid for the poor that was supposed to come from the British imperial government was not adequate. So, the poor in Ireland had to struggle with not only increasing death rates but also starvation whose impact increased due to ignorance and/ or inadequate aid.

Besides these problems, the Famine made traumatic mass emigration in the mid-nineteenth century and its aftermath a fact of life for the poor Irish. As a consequence of the increasing death rates, starvation, diseases and of the worsening conditions of the poor Irish who provided the landlords with the labour force in the agricultural lands before the Famine, the Relief Committee members met in the Town Hall in Ireland to decide upon solutions to these problems. They came up with the solution of the "assisted" emigration project, as a result of which, there were emigrations in masses to close and distant countries such as Great Britain, Australia, Canada and the United States. The massive emigrations lasted for nearly fifty years (Eide, 2017, p. 23). In 1847, only to Canada 100,000 Irish people had to emigrate (Mac Annaidh, 2013, p. 170), and throughout the remaining decades within the century, the mass emigration process continued with still psychological, cultural, physical and biological damage upon the Irish, in addition to the great change in the demography of the Irish population within the geographical borders of Ireland and the countries to which they emigrated. As Mac Annaidh puts forth, by 1900, nearly four million Irish people had to leave Ireland (2013, p. 170) for short-distance places like Great Britain and countries beyond the Atlantic Ocean. As can be understood, the Famine management project was seen as an economic, political and "ideological prism through which British politicians and economists could discuss and debate various solutions to this seemingly intractable problem" (Kinealy, 2015, "Saving the Irish Poor"), and the projects were mainly based on sending away the afflicted ones rather than on permanent solutions for the starvation and the diseases prevailing at this period.

Mary Robinson, who served as the President of Ireland between 1990 and 1997, during her visit to the University of Strathclyde on the 5th of July in 1996, depicted *An Gorta Mór*, the Great Potato Famine, as one of the "important strands shaping the sense of modern Irishness", as "the darkest time in [their] history", and as an "event which more than any other shaped [them] as a people", and she continued to say that "[i]t defined [their] will to survive. […]. It remains one of the strongest, most poignant links of memory and feeling that connects [them] to [their] diaspora ("Visit by President Robinson"). The following statements by Cusack about the impact of the Famine (particularly on the memory), too, are complementary to Robinson's arguments: "The Famine has become a presence that lurks beneath all formulations of Irish history and culture. At the same time, though, the Famine seems now to embody an essential aspect of Ireland's communal memory […]. […]. The Great Famine has left its deepest mark on that most complex, conflicted and protean of Irish qualities, the memory" (2006, p. 2). The Great Irish Famine and cultural and communal memory that emerged as a result of this tragedy bridge the past and the present of Ireland, connect the ancestors who experienced the Famine with the contemporary Irish generations, and the ones who had to stay in Ireland with the emigrants who had to emigrate to different parts of the world.

Cultural Memory as a Bridge between the Past and the Present

> *"My heart swelled in acknowledgement of their belief in a better life, their journey to a new world, their indefatigable hope . . ."* (Quinn, 2018, p. 113)

As the major focus of this study will be on the present and past reflections of cultural memory within the Famine Monument, and later within the tour ship, the Jeanie Johnston, both of which are on the Custom House Quay in Dublin, and their (re-)presentation within Sheena Blackhall's "The Irish Famine", literary,

architectural and cultural representations of memory will be among the central discussions in this article. The first three stanzas of the poem are representative of the bronze Famine statues in this monumental area, which depict the tremendous impact of the Great Famine upon the starving Irish, and explicitly reflect the *zeitgeist* of the mid-nineteenth century, understanding of what happened during this time, and the close relationship between history and memory. The first discussions of this part will be reserved for the significance of the monumental areas for the transmission of cultural memory to the following generations, the focus of which will particularly be upon the Famine Monument, and then, the discussions will continue with the (re-)presentation of the sculpture in Blackhall's "The Irish Famine", and lastly, with the reinterpretation of the ship, the Jeanie Johnson in the poem.

The Famine statues were the art work of sculptor Rowan Gillespie, who was commissioned by entrepreneur Norma Smurfit to build an art work in honour of the ones who suffered and lost their lives during the Great Irish Famine to commemorate the sesquicentennial anniversary of the Irish Famine. The work was donated to the Irish state or as written in the explanation within the monumental area about the sculpture, to "the people of Ireland" by Smurfit, and it was erected and is still located on the Custom House Quay alongside the River Liffey in Dublin. The sculpture is the production of cultural memory as it signifies "the journey into the past" (Huyssen, 2003, p. 10), carries the Famine legacy to the contemporary Irish generations, and hence, blurs the lines between the past and the present. It shows the social, cultural, political and psychological imprint of nineteenth century Victorian Ireland whose impact could still be felt in the late twentieth century (1997, in which the sculpture was presented to the City of Dublin is meant).

Figure 1. The Famine Monument on the Custom House Quay in Dublin
(These photographs were taken by myself on 26 May 2012.)

Huyssen writes that "[m]onuments, memorials, public sculpture, commemorative sites, and museums are being created at an accelerated pace the world over. The power of such sites to support public memory narratives rather than simply to freeze the past is very much at issue everywhere" (2003, p. 94). Therefore, monumental constructions of any kind are usually designed not only to represent a significant historical period in the political, cultural, social and economic history of a country but also to make a meaning for the contemporary generations. They also become a *lieu de mémoire* which might be, as Pierre Nora states, "relics of another era, illusions of eternity", and "anything having to do with the cult of the dead, the national heritage, or the presence of the past" (qtd. in. Kattago, 2015, pp. 183-184). In this sense, *lieux de mémoire*, places of memory, might be associated with the national identity-making process as they construct an invisible parallelism and link with the national and cultural historical events that happened in the past and the descendants of this past.

To put it in a more specific line, these "relics of another era" are not independent of the present nation-building process when considered in relation to Benedict Anderson's "imagined community" concept. In

Imagined Communities (1983), Anderson argues that nations should be considered as imagined communities due to the fact that the members of the nations are too many to be able to know each other. Therefore, to be able to enable the fraternity with all the members, members of nations should be imagined beyond space and time: "[T]he nation is always conceived as a deep, horizontal comradeship. Ultimately it is this fraternity that makes it possible, over the past two centuries, for so many millions of people, not so much to kill, as willingly to die for such limited imaginings" (Anderson, 2006, p. 7). This "imagined community" idea which is enhanced by the historical and cultural monumental structures helps the nation-building process of a nation which is generally understood beyond the limits of time and space. As Lambek and Antze put forward, to be able to set up themselves, their own presence, nations have to "discover (or construct) a past, a collective memory" for itself, and, "[i]n the memory of that past, trauma plays a role, whether suppressed […] or commemorated" (1996, pp. xxi-xxii). In this respect, memories fulfil a function for the national identity-building process, and, by means of the Famine monumental area, a shared past is constructed and the traumatic Famine memory becomes a nation's memory, and memory, national identity and national history, within this context, are shaped by collective means. In this sense, the Irish Famine might be considered in relation to the imagined community concept that bridges the mid-nineteenth century and the present, Ireland and the Irish diaspora, which makes the Irish ancestors who experienced the Famine and their grandsons and granddaughters who live in different parts of the world a family, a nation, an imagined community. And the Famine Monument is one of the *lieux de mémoire* sites that helps the construction and transmission of the Irish cultural and national identity, and "unitary national memory" (Corporaal and Cusack, 2011, p. 345).

Besides the monuments constructed in commemoration of national and historical events, literary works, too, might be considered as the embodiment of the historical facts about a nation's traumatic experiences such as the Great Potato Famine, which is associated with loss and trauma in modern consciousness. Literary texts that transmit the cultural memory about the Famine history to the next generations, in this respect, "produce, in the act of discourse, [the] very past which they purport to describe" (Neumann, 2010, p. 334). Within their works, writers and poets who write about the Famine reflect, from a contemporary perspective, the cultural and historical traumatic facts about this tragic event by re-telling its details such as death, starvation, diseases, emigration, the passage means to the diaspora culture or important Famine areas. This event, for example, is reflected within the poems of many poets such as Patrick Kavanagh (1904-1967), Seamus Heaney (1939-2013), Eavan Boland (1944-2020), Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin (1942-), Medbh McGuckian (1950-), Katie Donovan (1962-), Patrick Cotter (1963-) "as if in mitigation both for past losses and for the loss of the past" (Eide, 2017, p. 28). In a similar vein, the cultural/ collective Famine memory, the national memory, in this sense, how the Irish remember their past are (re-)presented within Sheena Blackhall's "The Irish Famine". As Lachmann accentuates, authors might employ contemporary and ancient texts that belong to their own culture or another (2010, p. 301). Similarly, Blackhall as a Scottish poet and writer is in contact with another culture, that is to say, with Irish culture and history in her "The Irish Famine", which is "a contemporary response to history, compelling vibrant collective engagement with the past but also patterning personal reflections through which readers might imagine themselves into another historical context and reflect on its challenges" (Eide, 2017, p. 25).

By means of "The Irish Famine", Blackhall manages to construct a semantic contact between literary and non-literary texts, that is to say, between the monumental construction and her poem. This poem, in a way, reads the traumatic, symbolic and/ or cultural memory traces of history in the sculpture. The sculpture constructed as objects in geometric forms describes the reflection of the tragedy of the Famine, the soul of a period in which "[t]he dream of food can become a reality – as it did in the Irish" (Murphy, Introduction xi), which is depicted in the poem as follows:

Gaunt cheeked, spindle-limbed
[…]
They carry dying children in their arms,
Themselves half dead, dogged by a skeletal cur
That waits to devour the stragglers
The comma of its tail wags in anticipation (Blackhall, 2015, "The Irish Famine"; Lines 1, 5-8)

Figure 2. The Famine Monument on the Custom House Quay in Dublin
(The photograph was taken by myself on 26 May 2012.)

The sculpture monumentalises the tragic physical, economic, physiological and psychological traces of the Famine, the experiences of the ones who suffered collective traumas of severe hunger in Ireland, which became "a lost homeland" (Corporaal and Cusack 344) for the starving Irish. The bodies of the figures in the monument, these non-human entities are the same size as a person really is, are extremely thin, skinny, are even lifeless due to illness and lack of food, the bundles they carry are really small, and they wear tattered clothes, which proves their poverty. Within the poem, the sculpture is given an 'agentic' nature and role, which makes the poem an object-oriented literary text. As Assmann puts forth,

> [w]ith respect to things such as […] artefacts, objects, anniversaries, feasts, icons, symbols, or landscapes, the term 'memory' is not a metaphor but a metonym based on material contact between a remembering mind and a reminding object. Things do not 'have' a memory of their own, but they may remind us, may trigger our memory, because they carry memories which we have invested into them, things such as dishes, feasts, rites, images, stories and other texts, landscapes and other 'lieux de mémoire'. On the social level, with respect to groups and societies, the role of external symbols becomes even more important, because groups, which, of course, do not 'have' a memory tend to 'make' themselves one by means of things meant as reminders such as monuments, museums, libraries, archives and other mnemonic institutions. This is what we call cultural memory. (2010, pp. 110-111)

As a matter of fact, an object might be an instrument of memory by means of which "unresolved difficulties of history" (Fortunati and Lamberti, 2010, p.129) are reflected. In this sense, the sculpture reflects how the Famine becomes a visual cultural manifestation of the memories of the Irish having experienced the tragedy. It is a realistic representation of the mid-nineteenth century in all senses including the physical descriptions

of the Irish and the depiction of the dying children due to starvation and illness, and the dogs that starve in a similar way to human beings. The ghostly looks of the figures in the monument reflect the Famine memory, and its appalling reality that as a ghost haunts the present.

Additionally, Blackhall's following interpretations of the punctuation marks such as the exclamation mark and the full stop in relation to their representations in the monument suggest great details about the tragic experiences of the Irish during the Famine: "This exclamation mark of life-sized famine sculptures / Frozen in time, pull you up to a full stop / On their way to the coffin ships on Dublin's Quay" ("The Irish Famine", 2015, Lines 2-4). The exclamation mark of the figures in the monument represents horror, uncertainty, the silent cries and protests of the ones who experienced the disaster against the terrible afflictions. The representation of these worries and horrors in the sculpture is caught forever in time, and the onlookers are exposed to this "frozen" time, which is explained by the full stop. In this full stop, the figures are waiting for an unknown future, they are in a limbo, an in-between space of despair and hope as they are about to experience displacement. As Eide notes, "they straggle along the quay as if intending to embark on one of the infamous coffin ships that crossed the Atlantic in the 1840s" (2017, p. 21). The onlookers are entrapped in this fixed moment, in this full stop, in this Irish cultural memory. The monument, in line with the transmission of cultural memory, plays a great role in the current period, which plays a central role in the construction of "a post-traumatic sense of Irishness" (Corporaal and Cusack, 2011, p. 345) for the ones who live "now".

The semantic encoding and crystallisation of the moment and "memory of the Irish exodus to North America and elsewhere" (Corporaal and Cusack, 2011, p. 344) is as outstanding as the physical and psychological (re-)presentation of the Famine in the Famine Monument and "The Irish Famine". The "frozen" moment in the monument, that is to say the perpetual waiting for the starving Irish for the coffin ships to come with worries brings to mind some other details about the Famine period in which the coffin ships "functioning as 'heterotopias' where the cultural clashes experienced in the homeland and the pending assimilation in the New World have to be negotiated" (Corporaal and Cusack, 2011, p. 345) were notorious during the emigration. The poem and the statue, in a way, construct a close link between Ireland as a homeland and the diasporic fact of life abroad, and mirror the harsh passages on the coffin ships upon the Atlantic Ocean, which is explicitly felt in the following lines:

> They have left behind their blighted, rotting crops
> Where the smoking turf of their rooves
> Still blackens the sky, like a question-mark to their God
> To face the horrors of the coffin ships
> Typhus, cholera, lice
> And the fierce Atlantic with its teeth of water
> Exacting a heavy tithe from those who cross it (Blackhall, "The Irish Famie", 2015, Lines 9-15)

Figure 3. The Famine Monument on the Custom House Quay in Dublin
(The photograph was taken by myself on 26 May 2012.)

The Famine sculpture and Blackhall's poem that depict these moments actually signify "the harsh shipboard realities" (Corporaal and Cusack, 2011, 344), and "memorialize[…] coffin ships, presenting a troubled version of this familiar icon of Irish diaspora, thus expanding the geography of the Famine to encompass the memories of Ireland's exiles" (Eide, 2017, p. 34). Blackhall, with the lines, "They have left behind their blighted, rotting crops" (Blackhall, "The Irish Famine", 2015, Line 9) / "To face the horrors of the coffin ships" (Blackhall, "The Irish Famine", 2015, Line 12) reflects the fact that while the starving Irish left Ireland behind in order to escape the tragic impact of the Famine, they were caught with another disaster that was waiting for them on the Atlantic Ocean: The coffin ships that were associated with the negative connotations such as death, disease, horror, trouble and emigration. As Eide points out,

[i]n its repetition of Famine iconography—blighted fields, work-relief roads, unburied corpses, coffin ships, and hunger—such writing [Famine writing] serves not to enforce memorial clichés but, rather, through its connection to the past to suggest how cultural memory might be made exemplary […]. Particularly, such iconography works to expand cultural memory from the island's boundaries to its transnational diaspora, from a rehearsal of historical grievance […] to an exploration of contemporary responsibility. (2017, p. 28)

In a similar vein, Blackhall delves deeper into the national history and culture of Ireland, and, as a literary work, "The Irish Famine" reserves central role for the traumatic and appalling experience of travel on the infamous coffin ships. The Famine and the terrible suffering that followed it left no choice for more than one million Irish people but emigrate to other countries, which prepared the ground for the Irish diaspora throughout the world. As Corporaal and Cusack state, "[b]etween 1845 and 1855, 2.1 million Irish men and women settled in Great Britain, the Americas, and Australia. They left behind a country that had been devastated by potato blight and the concomitant widespread occurrence of famine and disease, and which offered but bleak prospects for the future" (2011, p. 343). The starving Irish were pushed from an unsettled past into an uncertain and unsettled future.

Furthermore, the following line in the poem mirrors the restless realities about the emigration process during the Famine based on the non-humanistic purposes and the commercial interests of the owners of cargo ships": "Exacting a heavy tithe from those who cross it" (Blackhall, "The Irish Famine", 2015, Line 15). As a response to the increasing demands for the passages into new countries, many profiteers used their cargo ships to carry the passengers who had already been enduring the poverty, starvation and terribly contagious diseases. As Mac Annaidh notes, "[s]hip owners and captains saw a chance to turn a quick buck on a trip that had been profitless just a few years before. The more unscrupulous among them got caught up in the profit margin" (2013, pp. 170-171). The more the numbers of the emigrants increased, the more the profiteers who began to 'thingify'/ 'objectify' the starving and diseased Irish as 'cargoes' rather than human beings exploited the disadvantageous positions of the afflicted Irish. "[U]pon their long journey, facing a stay of six to seven weeks below deck in overcrowded and insanitary spaces" (Corporaal and Cusack, 2011,

p. 344), and because of the inadequate provisions, more than one million Irish people who had already suffered from the tremendous impact of the Famine that showed itself with starvation and disease, this time, were entrapped within the 'claws' of these profiteers.

The diseases observed on the coffin ships and harsh and traumatic experiences on the ocean are mirrored in the following lines of "The Irish Famine": "To face the horrors of the coffin ships/ Typhus, cholera, lice/ And the fierce Atlantic with its teeth of water" (Blackhall, "The Irish Famine", 2015, Lines 12-14). Due to the horrifying conditions and high death rates upon the board, and that there were many ships that sank, the ships that carried the Irish, which were not constructed to carry humans but cargoes, were associated with death and began to be called as 'coffin ships'. The burial area for many passengers became the sea itself. As Corporaal and Cusack explain, within this period,

> [i]ndeed, transatlantic vessels were notorious for the high rates of mortality affecting their passengers: on average, up to 30 percent perished during the crossing, as the work of such historians as Michael Quigley and Susan Bartoletti has revealed. Similarly, an article from *The Times* of 17 September 1847 states that in the case of 'ten of the vessels that arrived at Montreal in July, four from Cork and six from Liverpool, out of 4,427 passengers, 804 had died on the passage and 847 were sick on their arrival.' (2011, p. 344)

Blackhall's choices of words to depict the harsh realities of the ocean such as "fierce" and "teeth", which connote eating, biting and violence, and to depict the traumatic experiences upon the ships such as "horrors" and "typhus, cholera, lice" to show the disease-ridden realities of the ships mirror the brutal fact of life about the difficult passages on the Atlantic to the diaspora realities at this period.

Until the last stanza, Blackhall's "The Irish Famine" represents the harsh realities about the Famine and its aftermath. In a way, till the last stanza, Blackhall constructs an unseen, yet, clearly felt link between the previous and contemporary Irish generations. In the last stanza, however, the central instrument for her to build the bridge between two different periods becomes a ship, the Jeanie Johnston[2], which is a tour ship on the Custom House Quay in Dublin. In fact, this ship is the replica of the original Jeanie Johnston, which was built in 1847 in Quebec in Canada. As explained on the official web page of "the Jeanie Johnston", the ship was "[o]riginally intended as a cargo ship for transporting timber, rope, molasses, rum, tobacco, tea, textiles, letters and more, she ended up carrying a very different kind of cargo – desperate men, women and children fleeing the Famine" ("History of the Jeanie"). Today, it functions as a living history museum that visualises the nineteenth century emigration experience of the Irish upon the coffin ships, and enables the visitors to explore historical, economic and cultural facts and adventures of the past. Moreover, on the Jeanie Johnston's main page, the visitors are invited to take a step to the "memories" of the past: "Discover Ireland's dark history. Follow in the footsteps of those who fled the Famine", and "[t]he Jeanie Johnston tells the story of the thousands of Irish people who fled the Famine and embarked on a treacherous voyage in the hope of a better life in North America. Step on board and be transported back in time, joining them on their gruelling journey across the ocean" ("The Jeanie Johnston"). By means of this invitation of the ship, cultural memory is once again awakened as these experiences upon the ship's board bring to the present the past traumatic events.

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[2] Blackhall, in her poem entitled as "Dublin" (2015), too, refers to the Jeanie Johnstone famine ship. As "Dublin" is the enumeration of the events, figures, places and things that connote Ireland, only the name of the ship is mentioned; hence, there is no detail about the ship in the poem.

Figure 4. The Jeanie Johnston
(The photograph was taken by myself on 26 May 2012.)

In the last stanza, Blackhall builds the link between the past and the present by means of another context. She, with a masterly touch, with the juxtaposition of the ship, the Jeanie Johnston and what it reminds, prepares the ground for a contemporary political matter: The African refugee problem. The stanza in question is as follows:

'To be sure' the guide from the good ship Jeanie Johnston
Says in passing, 'Doesn't your heart go out
To those poor souls fleeing Africa today,
And not a country keen to take them on?' (Blackhall, "The Irish Famie", 2015, Lines 16-19)

Blackhall, here, forms a parallelism between the Irish diaspora culture[3] which emerged just after the "coffin ships" adventures of the Irish, and which was not welcomed abroad, and the African refugees who are not accepted by Western/ European countries. What the guide states upon the Jeanie Johnston in relation to the reluctance of the countries in the world to accept African refugees brings forth many important discussion points such as the forced emigration once the Irish experienced due to the Famine and now the African refugees experience due to wars, civil wars, terror, security problems, corruptions in the political system and extreme poverty. Once the Irish were not wanted in the countries to which they migrated such as the USA and Great Britain, and experienced discrimination. The example given by Christopher Klein about the Irish "refugee crisis" in the nineteenth-century clarifies the harsh conditions the Irish were in: "Forced from their homeland because of famine and political upheaval, the Irish endured vehement discrimination before making their way into the American mainstream" (2023, n.p.). Moreover, as Alexandra Day explains, "[t]hroughout the 19th century, Irish people were forced to leave the country by a wide array of factors, mostly to America and to Britain. In both instances, their reception was ambivalent, though frequently veering towards hostility" (2023, n.p.). Blackhall, in the last stanza, begins her metaphorical travel with the problematic Irish diaspora experiences after the Great Irish Famine and transcends the boundaries of the Famine geography to encompass similar African experiences. As Eide states, "[c]ultural memory is the

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[3] Blackhall has another poem entitled as "Emigration Stone" (2011), which is particularly centred around the theme of emigration, the "loss" of "heritage" which stemmed from this emigration and the sorrow of "Great grandfather" who "stood like a stone/ As the ship crossed the horizon" (Blackhall, "Emigration Stone", 2015, Lines 1-2). In the poem it is not certain where this emigration takes place; however, both this poem and her "The Irish Famine" reflect her concern about the fact of emigration and its repercussions. The concept of migration represented in these poems is not limited to the border of a particular country but covers a broader context.

process through which a community puts history to present use" (2017, p. 25). In "The Irish Famine", Blackhall seems to be making use of "cultural memory" as an instrument for her in order to blur the lines between the past and the present; to emphasise that what was once experienced is still experienced in the present by different peoples and different nations. Both the Irish who crossed the sea and the ocean upon the "coffin ships" and the Africans who try to migrate to particularly Europe at the risk, even at the cost of their lives on boats, which might be called as "coffin boats" represent "the forced dispersal of people across the globe" (Giles and Middleton, 2004, p. 48) and their attempts to survive. Blackhall manages to transmit cultural memory in "The Irish Famine", to juxtapose the past and the present, as a result of which the poem becomes a container of historical and contemporary events, and a "sketched-out memory space", which enables the readers to re-visit the past with the concerns of the present.

Conclusion

The discussions in the article aim to show that it is possible for cultural memory to be transmitted to the present by means of symbolic objects or literary works. As Assmann points out, "[c]ultural memory is a kind of institution. It is exteriorized, objectified, and stored away in symbolic forms that, unlike the sounds of words or the sight of gestures, are stable and situation-transcendent: They may be transferred from one situation to another and transmitted from one generation to another" (2010, p. 110), which is exemplified in the representation of the impact of the Great Irish Famine in the bronze figures in the Famine monumental area in Dublin. By means of these statues, national and cultural memory, in a way, is "objectified". The poem, with the re-reading of these figures in the monumental area, "works to establish new connections to that historic catastrophe, enlivening connections that help forge a diasporic, transnational Irish cultural consciousness in the present" (Eide, 2017, p. 22). The representation of the Famine in the poem and the Famine monumental area become striking symbols for the Irish national and cultural memory. By means of both of them, the Famine memory is kept alive, and they show that even if more than one hundred and seventy years have passed over the Famine, the catastrophe still haunts the following generations in the form of "heavily coded icons" (Eide, 2017, p. 27) or semiotic systems to be decoded by the contemporary generations according to their own meaning making process.

Moreover, in the last stanza, the objectification of memory is reinterpreted by Blackhall with a different perspective; that is to say, with juxtaposing the common historical and contemporary political issues such as the forced emigration and the refugee problems. Here, Blackhall brings forth a new object, the ship, the Jeanie Johnston, that awakens the catastrophic past in the nineteenth-century once again, and connects this event with a serious contemporary political event: The African refugee problem. As a result, Blackhall transgresses the boundaries of a tragic event associated with Ireland, and, in a simiar way to the Jeanie Johnson, invites the reader to travel first back to history, and then to the present, and to the exploration of the other geographical problems, by means of which she builds cultural and international links among many countries that experience similar catastrophies.

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