

# The Madness of Freddie Montgomery of John Banville's *The Book of Evidence* (1989)

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**Abstract** In *The Book of Evidence* (1989) John Banville makes apt use of his unreliable narrator, Freddie Montgomery to elicit a subtext on the inevitable “madness” of the colonizer trapped in an anachronistic identity of superiority in a changing post-colonial environment. This argument suggests two ways of interpreting the madness of the outdated superior colonizer as depicted by Banville. On the one hand, the anachronistic colonial discourse of the colonizer appears to become categorized as madness by the new dominating discourses of a changing society. Meanwhile, the inability to discard the identity of superiority in an environment in which the colonial structures of Manichean allegory and mimesis no longer prevail, leads to the colonizer’s alienation and ultimate mental degeneration into a disorder akin to Fanon’s descriptions of colonial psychosis in *The Wretched of the Earth* (1961).

**Key words** Post-colonialism; Banville; madness; hybridity; Irish; narrative

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Some argue that John Banville’s work springs from a Beckettian school while others perceive a Joycean influence<sup>1</sup>. There are those too who maintain his novels tell a single story, postmodern in essence<sup>2</sup>. In light of such arguments this paper sets itself a humble task; a post-colonial reading of *The Book of Evidence* (1989) in its

1 Powell, Kersti Tarien. “‘Not a son but a survivor’: Beckett...Joyce...Banville.” *The Yearbook of English Studies*. Vol. 35. *Irish Writing since 1950* (Cambridge: Modern Humanities Research Association, 2005) 201.

2 Jackson, Tony E. “Science, Art, and the Shipwreck of Knowledge: The Novels of John Banville.” *Contemporary Literature*. 38.3 (Autumn, 1997): 510-533.

own right. The following discussion proposes that the “madness” of the narrator, Freddie Montgomery stems from his inability to shed his colonialist identity for a more contemporary hybrid one. In *Inventing Ireland*, Declan Kiberd argues that “the seamless garment once wrapped like a green flag around Cathleen ní Houlihan has given way to a quilt of many patches [...]. Irish or English, rural or urban, Gaelic or Anglo, each [with] its part in the pattern” (653). Freddie Montgomery of Banville’s prize-winning *The Book of Evidence* would seem the last stand in a long history of resistance within his own family to this Irish post-colonial hybridity which corrals his outdated discourse of ascendancy into the discourse of madness. Without an inferior colonized Other to define it, Montgomery’s identity presents as an act.

Application of the narrative theories of Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan unravels the intricacies of Montgomery’s character from the subtext of his story. Banville’s subversive presentation of Montgomery as an unreliable narrator has the effect of continually focusing attention away from Montgomery’s story and back onto Montgomery himself, allowing a story of colonial madness to unfold somewhere between our narrator and the book of evidence he thinks he is writing.<sup>1</sup>

Meanwhile, although Montgomery’s lifelong role as colonialist could well stem more from mimicry than his mother’s Dutch ancestry, regardless of the root of this assumed identity of superiority, the root of Montgomery’s insanity can be argued to lie in his inability to shed this acquired identity for a more authentic contemporary one. This discussion offers two interpretations of the apparent psychosis that ensues due to Montgomery’s inability to discard the role of superior colonizer when colonial discourse no longer prevails. On the one hand, in clinging to an anachronistic identity, Montgomery, the colonizer experiences alienation and the subsequent onset of a madness akin to Franz Fanon’s descriptions of colonial psychosis in *The Wretched of the Earth* (1961). Alternatively, the colonizer’s outdated colonial discourse of superiority can be interpreted as having become marginalized into the discourse of madness by newer societal discourses for which the Manichean allegory of superior colonizer/inferior colonized bears no relevance.

### **Mimic-man Montgomery on the Colonial Stage**

“For it is the condition of the ruler that he shall spend his life in trying to impress

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1 Jones, Patricia, and Jennifer Lee. “The Madness of Lemuel Gulliver.” *The Jungang Journal of English Language and Literature* 58.2 (June, 2016): 1-22. With Jennifer Lee I have applied the same theories (on colonialism, madness and first-person narration) to offer a similar colonial interpretation of the madness of Lemuel Gulliver of Jonathan Swift’s *Gulliver’s Travels* (“The Madness of Lemuel Gulliver”).

the ‘natives’ [...]. He wears a mask, and his face grows to fit it” (Orwell “Shooting an Elephant” 19-20). The madness of Montgomery can be interpreted as having germinated from a colonial stage on which the colonizer was as much a victim trapped in his role as superior colonizer as the inferior colonized with whom he was in perpetual juxtaposition. While Orwell’s “Shooting an Elephant”(1936) highlights the psychological trauma the role of colonizer inflicts on the colonialist narrator within the colonial environment, *The Book of Evidence* demonstrates the inflexibility of this colonialist identity in more hybrid environments which challenge the narrator’s colonialist identity and subsequently instigate his madness: “I [Freddie] must be careful not to give in to despair, to that aboulia which has been a threat always to everything I tried to do” (219). Abdul JanMohamed argues that the dominant model of power relations in all colonial societies is the Manichean opposition between the superiority of the European and the supposed inferiority of the native (87). This Manichean allegory is reinforced, according to Stephen Slemen, by ideology, reintroduced through the strategic deployment of a vast semiotic field of representations in literary works, travelogues, exploration, maps, documents, etc., (47). However, as illustrated in Lamming’s *In the Castle of my Skin* (1953) the Manichean allegory of superior colonizer and inferior colonized is complicated by the concept of “mimicry”: “Direct contact with the landlord might have helped towards some understanding of what the others, meaning the white, were like, but the overseer who nominally was a mediator had functioned like a bridge which might be used, but not for crossing from one end to the other” (20). According to Homi K. Bhabha, colonial mimicry is the desire for a reformed, recognizable Other, “as a subject of a difference that is almost the same, but not quite” (*The Location of Culture* 122)<sup>1</sup>. Benita Parry argues that “for purposes of administration and exploitation of resources, the native was constructed as a programmed, ‘nearly-selved’ other of the European and not as its binary opposite ...” (37). However, the following extract, from Orwell’s *Burmese Days* (1934), illustrates not only how the colonizer, when necessary, promoted the native to the elevated position of a go-between or “mimic man” (in the image of the colonial

1 In *In the Castle of my Skin*, George Lamming portrays instances of mimicry which reflect the successful creation of “mimic men” by British governors in their colonies: Patrolling the land at all hours of the day were the village overseers. They were themselves villagers who were granted special favours [...] They were fierce, aggressive and strict. [...] Even the better educated who had one way or another gone to the island’s best schools and later held responsible posts in the Government service, even these were affected by [an] image of the enemy [...] and the enemy was My People. (18)

self), but also how the colonizer required the native to be inferior and Other:

“Butler!” yelled Ellis, and as the butler appeared, “go and wake that bloody chokra up!”

“Yes, master.”

“And butler!”

“Yes, master?”

“How much ice have we got left?”

“‘bout twenty pounds, master. Will only last today, I think. I find it very difficult to keep ice cool now.”

“Don’t talk like that, damn you. “I find it very difficult!” Have you swallowed a dictionary? “Please, master, can’t keeping ice cool” —that’s how you ought to talk. We shall have to sack this fellow if he gets to talk English too well. I can’t stick servants who talk English. D’you hear, butler?” (23)

In a way the colonialist identity of Freddie Montgomery resembles a case of mimicry gone wrong. Despite how well he plays the colonialist part, there are subtle but fundamental flaws in Montgomery’s role. For example, while he might describe his mother as exhibiting “the broad brow and high cheekbones of her Dutch forebears” (51), he also refers to her as barely literate (44) and with the “broad face and heavy hair of a tinker’s wife” (41). Montgomery’s father was not a Protestant but a “Castle Catholic”<sup>1</sup>. While Montgomery might at times refer to him as a country squireen, his mother describes her husband as “a mick”: “I should have known better, she said, than to marry a mick” (60). Neither does Montgomery’s sexuality conform to his colonialist identity. According to Ashis Nandy, colonialism “produced a cultural consensus in which political and socio-economic dominance symbolized the dominance of men and masculinity over women and femininity” (*The Intimate Enemy* 4). However, the colonial Victorian upper class was expected to “affirm its masculinity through sexual distance, abstinence and self-control” (10). This does not coincide with the picture Montgomery presents of his sexuality:

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1 Lamming, George. *In the Castle of my Skin*. U.K.: Longman Group Ltd., 1953. The term “Castle Catholic” suggests that Freddie’s family, apparently on his father’s side, descended from the Catholic Anglo-Norman or Old English community. The irony here is that these Old English Catholics allied themselves alongside the Gaelic Irish against King Billy at the battle of the Boyne and Aughrim (Fitzpatrick *Seventeenth Century Ireland* 1). Thus history would seem to undermine Freddie’s reference to his fellow Irish as Other.

Those burning noons, in that room and countless others like it — my God, I tremble to think of them now. I could not resist her careless nudity, the weight and density of that glimmering flesh [...] I liked to watch the island men, too, hunched over their pastis and their thimbles of turbid coffee, swivelling their lizard eyes as she went past. That's right, you bastards, yearn, yearn. (8-10)

Meanwhile, Montgomery, despite the identity of superiority he assumes, seems only too aware of his sameness to his Other: "I looked in their eyes and saw myself ennobled there, and so could forget for a moment what I was, a paltry, shivering thing, just like them, full of longing and loathing, solitary, afraid, racked by doubts, and dying" (11). Indeed, at times he seems to class himself as inferior to the Irish Other: "Ah, these poor, simple lives, so many, across which I have dragged my trail of slime" (93). Montgomery's distinguished heritage is almost that of the colonizer but not quite and with the "strong mixture of Catholic and Calvinist blood [*coursing*] in [his] veins" (98), subsequently raises suspicions regarding its possible mimetic origin. However, regardless of from where it stems, the prime function of Montgomery's assumed identity is to distinguish him from the Irish: "I thought it hardly appropriate for a woman of my mother's position in society — her position! — in society! — to be so chummy with a stable-girl" (74). Whether it originates from a true colonialist ancestry or an Irish ancestry modelled into mimicry, Montgomery's assumed identity is, nonetheless, an inheritance of sorts, his father also having seen fit to distinguish himself from the Irish Other: "My father never referred to the place as anything but Kingstown: he had no time for the native jabber" (27).

### **Rejection of Hybridity**

Despite the complication of mimesis Montgomery's madness can be interpreted as stemming from his inability to re-adjust from the superior pole of the Manichean allegory to a position of hybridity more in tune with the times. Hybridity, according to Bhabha "displays the necessary deformation and displacement of all sites of discrimination and domination. It unsettles the mimetic or narcissistic demands of colonial power but reimplicates its identifications in strategies of subversion that turn the gaze of the discriminated back upon the eye of power" (112). In other words, hybridity both decenters and undermines the colonial Manichean allegory of inferior colonized and superior colonizer. Meanwhile, although the colonized redefines himself outside this colonial identity of inferior colonized, the new identity he forges, while not determined by its colonial roots, is still influenced by

the colonial experience. For example, in *Black Skin, White Masks* (1986) Fanon suggests that both the colonized negro and the colonizer whiteman must “disalienate” themselves from their previously held colonial identities in an “effort to recapture the self and to scrutinize the self” (231). For Bhabha, however, it is only through the exploration of the binary opposites of the Manichean allegory and hybridity, a third space between them, that the politics of polarity may be evaded (56).

However, hybridity, the gateway to “the others of ourselves” (56) is not so easily embraced by Montgomery, and unfortunately his assumed superior identity as one of the “gilded children of poor old addled Europe” (66) has definition only in its difference to an inferior Other: “We presided among this rabble, Daphne and I, with a kind of grand detachment, like an exiled king and queen waiting daily for word of the counter-rebellion and the summons from the palace to return” (10). However, Kiberd’s post-colonial Ireland would seem to have left Freddie and his lineage with no inferior binary opposite from which to mirror back a superior identity of the self. The following lines display Montgomery’s difficulty in adjusting his identity to more hybrid times:

I suspect she [Joanne] was as surprised as I when the will was read. I find it hard to see her as the mistress of Coolgrange. Perhaps that is what my mother intended-after her, the drip. Ah, that is unworthy of me, my new seriousness. I do not hate her for disinheriting me. I think that in her way she was trying to teach me something, to make me look more closely at things, perhaps, to pay more attention to people, such as this poor clumsy girl, with her freckles and her timid smile and her almost invisible eyebrows. (220)

### The Colonizer Resists Decolonization

Gerry Smyth in *The Novel and the Nation* (1997) considers the violence of colonialism and decolonization one of the major reasons for the reoccurrence of madness as a theme in Irish fiction (48). According to Smyth, the decolonizing subject, should he attempt to resist the colonial logic of the Manichean allegory or mimesis, becomes in danger of alienation and may slip into a madness which only cements the opposition between (rational) colonizer and (irrational) colonized (49). Using the arguments of both Ashis Nandy and Franz Fanon, Smyth emphasizes how the decolonizing subject’s resistance to colonization from within the psychological rules set by the rulers means that the subject remains a victim of alien modes of thought, trapped within a colonialist logic of Self and Other (49-50). However, issues of decolonization preoccupy both colonizer as well as colonized as the

character of Mr Flory of Orwell's *Burmese Days* exemplifies, Flory, embodying all the characteristics, not of the colonized but of the colonizer in the process of mental decolonization:

Was it possible that they could go on [...] repeating word for word the same evil-minded drivel [...]. What a civilisation is this of ours — this godless civilisation founded on whisky, Blackwood's and the 'Bonzo' pictures! God have mercy on us, for all of us are part of it.

Flory did not say any of this, and he was at some pains not to show it in his face. (31)

Although Flory himself is tormented in his role as superior colonizer over the native Burmese he, nonetheless, conforms to it: “‘Steady on,’ he said at last, sullenly and rather feebly. ‘Steady on. There’s no need to get so excited. I never suggested having any native members in here’” (22).

How does this manner of resistance to colonialism apply to Montgomery? Freddie's identity can indeed be interpreted as stemming from the Self/Other logic of colonialism. However, his madness stems not from any attempt on his part to resist colonialism from either inside or outside the colonial system as described by Smyth<sup>1</sup>. His madness stems rather from a resistance on his part to decolonize. By way of example, a similar reluctance to decolonize could be argued to lie at the root of Gabriel Conroy's isolation from his housemaids, peers and wife in James Joyce's “The Dead” (1914)<sup>2</sup>. Although he does not descend into madness, Conroy

1 Smyth, Gerry. *The Novel and the Nation*. London: Pluto Press, 1997. According to Smyth, a decolonizing subject may also resist colonialism by refusing to conform to its structures of Manichean allegory and mimesis. If the decolonizing subject resists colonialism from outside its structures he, likewise, risks becoming alienated to such a degree that insanity may take hold (49-50).

2 Ellmann, Richard. *James Joyce: The First Revision of the 1959 Classic*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1982. Ireland's struggle to shake off the shackles of colonialism was underway long before 1921. In the biography *James Joyce*, Richard Ellmann describes in detail the backdrop of Irish nationalism against which Joyce's character was formed (33) and out of which Joyce was later to forge a lot of his writing (245). Ellmann elaborates in detail on John Joyce's devotion to Parnell's struggle for Irish Home Rule in the 1880s, stressing the impact of the father's politics on the young James. Ellmann also highlights the young James Joyce's own, at times, differences of opinion with Arthur Griffith of the *United Irishman* on the issue of patriotism in literature (112). Irish nationalism was much in the air in Dublin at the turn of the twentieth century due to Parnell's legacy but also due to the revival of the Irish language, Irish sports and the writings of W.B. Yeats

seems to have descended into an isolation instigated by his reluctance, in the face of Ireland's growing nationalism, to discard what could be described as a mimetic identity. Conroy, whom Miss Ivors reproachfully describes as a "West-Briton" (1595), asserts not only that Irish is not his language but that he is sick of his own country (1596). However, while Gabriel's resistance to Irish nationalism and the discarding of his (arguably) mimetic identity only seems to isolate him from wife, peers and servants, Montgomery's resistance to decolonization triggers the onset of his insanity. When deprived of an opportunity to play his superior colonialist role, Montgomery becomes adrift on a sea of random roles that he puts on or off like a life-jacket, only faster:

[...] for a while, for an hour or two, posing as Charlie's factotum, [...] I fell into a certain manner that was not my own and that yet seemed, even to me, no less authentic, or plausible, at least, than my real self. (My real self!) I became Frederick the Indispensable, Mr French's famous man, without whom that crusty, moneyed old bachelor would not be able to survive. (178)

### **Colonial Psychosis or Madman's Marginalized Discourse?**

Nandy stresses the mental damage that colonialism does to the oppressor as well as to the oppressed (2). Meanwhile, according to Fanon the "victors" in the colonial encounter "are ultimately camouflaged victims, at an advanced stage of psychosocial decay" (*The Wretched of the Earth* XVI). The following quote from Nandy illustrates the general inability of the superior colonizer, in this case a police inspector/torturer, to discard his superior colonizer identity outside its context and the inevitable psychosis which ensues:

But what really frightened him was one evening when his wife had criticised him particularly for hitting his children too much. (She had even said to him 'My word, anyone'd think you were going mad.') He threw himself upon her, beat her and tied her to a chair, saying to himself, 'I'll teach her once and for all that I'm master in this house.' (215)

Montgomery's petrified colonialist identity in a modern Ireland could be interpreted as running in a similar vein to that of the subject's in this example in so far as and others. "The Dead" was published in 1914. However, according to Ellmann, Joyce worked on the story between 1904 and 1908 and based the characters on relations and people he knew in the Dublin of his day (244).

Montgomery is unable to shake off his colonial role on the postcolonial stage where it is no longer appropriate. However, his madness can also be read in the Foucaultian sense of a discourse marginalized into the category of madness by society's more dominant discourses. Even in the face of a murder conviction, Montgomery seems unable to consider his situation outside an anachronistic discourse of colonial superiority: "That was when I realised, for the first time, it was *one of theirs* I had killed" (211). According to Foucault, the production of discourse or "will to truth" in every society is controlled, selected, organized and circulated according to procedures whose function it is to avert the powers and dangers of discourse (52). In other words, societal structures tend to nurture a discourse which maintains the status quo while marginalizing any discourse that threatens it. Consequently, dominant discourses may marginalize fringe discourses which they cannot assimilate into the category of madness. In *The Book of Evidence*, Freddie Montgomery emphasizes how public opinion considers him insane, an opinion Montgomery can well understand as his remarks indicate: "I smiled, Mad-dog Montgomery, captured at last" (198). However, for perhaps the Behrenses and others of his "set" (20) who move outside the parameters of conventional post-colonial Irish discourse, Montgomery's story still holds a truth. Inspector Haslet's scepticism regarding the truth of Freddie Montgomery's book of evidence, whether justified or not, is reminiscent of the historical reaction to the speech of the madman as outlined by Foucault:

He gave me a wry look. Did you put in about being a scientist, he said and knowing the Behrens woman, and owing money, all that stuff? I smiled. It's my story, I said, and I'm sticking to it. [...] Come on, Freddie, he said, how much of it is true? It was the first time he had called me by my name. True, Inspector? I said. All of it. None of it. Only the shame. (220)

According to Foucault, since the depths of the Middle Ages the madman has been the one whose discourse may be considered null and void, having neither truth nor importance and regarded unreliable as evidence in law. However, at the same time the madman's speech may have the power of uttering a hidden truth or of perceiving in naivety what another in wisdom cannot see (52-53). The only truth Freddie Montgomery admits to in his book of evidence is his shame. However, there is a reason why this truth is dismissed by Inspector Haslet as madness along with the rest of Montgomery's story. Montgomery's truth has relevance not for the post-colonial Irish masses, but for the few remaining others of his "set" (20). "Ever since

I reached what they call the use of reason I had been doing one thing and thinking another, because the weight of things seemed so much greater than that of thoughts. What I said was never exactly what I felt, what I felt was never what it seemed I should feel, though the feelings were what felt genuine, and right, and inescapable” (124). Montgomery reveals that his entire identity has been an act, which, as mentioned, he inherited from his family:

[...] the world, the only worthwhile world, had ended with the last viceroy’s departure from these shores, after that it was all just a wrangle among peasants. He [father] really did try to believe in this fantasy of a great good place that had been taken away from us and our kind — our kind being Castle Catholics, as he liked to say, yes, sir, Castle Catholics, and proud of it! But I think there was less pride than chagrin. I think he was secretly ashamed not to be a Protestant [...]. (29)

Montgomery has known since he possessed the use of reason that his identity is an assumed one. However, the truth of his text, relevant only to himself and others of his kind, such as the Behrenses and Frenches, is that the farce of such an identity fools no one. Montgomery’s reoccurring nightmare about the shame he feels, not at having committed a crime but at having being caught out, has a moral in it for others like him. He says of his dream in which he rescues his father: “I used to believe that in the dream it was death I was rescuing him from, but lately I have begun to think that it is, instead, the long calamity of his life I am undoing at a stroke” (89). While Montgomery’s book of evidence seems like the discourse of the insane to Inspector Haslet, his text may ring home a truth for the likes of friendless Charlie French (173) who “could act them all into a cocked hat” (134). The truth is that the colonial act is long-since up; time to melt into hybridity or face the shame of an identity past its use-by date.

### The Madman Narrator

Banville’s use of the first-person narrator has the effect of focusing the reader’s attention away from the story and back onto the narrator, Montgomery. It is in the subtext of Montgomery’s narrative that the story of his colonial madness unfolds. Roland Barthes distinguishes between story and discourse, story being what happened and discourse being how what happened is related (“...Structural Analysis of Narratives” 87). However, according to Rimmon-Kenan, a first-person narrator complicates the differentiation between story and discourse. To begin with,

something happens, in this case, a murder. The narrator writes a text based on this matter. However, in the mind of the reader a story may, nonetheless, unfold which is not necessarily the story the narrator thinks he is telling (*Narrative Fiction* 85-86). For example, in his book of evidence, Freddie Montgomery explains how people were afraid of Daphne and him. However, when he elaborates on the fear they instilled in others, the reader is left wondering if Freddie is not misinterpreting contempt or pity for fear:

People in general, I noticed it, were a little afraid of us, now and again I detected it in their eyes, a worried, placatory, doggie sort of look, or else a resentful glare, furtive and sullen. I have pondered this phenomenon, it strikes me as significant. What was it in us — or rather, what was it about us — that impressed them? Oh, we are large, well-made, I am handsome, Daphne is beautiful, but that cannot have been the whole of it. No, after much thought the conclusion I have come to is this, that they imagined they recognised in us a coherence and wholeness, an essential authenticity, which they lacked, and of which they felt they were not entirely worthy. We were — well, yes, we were heroes. (10-11)

The reader deciphers from the subtext a story very different from the one Montgomery thinks he is writing. Although Montgomery realizes the “coherence and wholeness”(10) which he displays is part and parcel of his assumed identity as exiled country “squireen” (95), complete in tweed and bow tie, he is slow to realize others besides himself can see through his act. Hence, he can understand that he might be able to intimidate Reck, his unpaid taxi driver, with an authoritative voice: “I knew who would be driving the taxi, of course. Don’t say anything, I said to him sternly, not a word! He looked at me in the mirror with a mournful, accusing eye” (87). However, Montgomery is perplexed when Reck allows him to leave Mrs Reck’s lodgings without paying:

Just popping out for a moment, I said, get a breath of air. I could feel my horrible smile, like something sticky that had dripped on to my face. He nodded, and a little flicker of sadness passed over his brow and down his sheep’s muzzle. You knew I was going to do a flit, didn’t you? Why did you not stop me? I don’t understand these people. (93)

For Montgomery it is necessary to blot out how transparent his identity is to others,

because as his dream indicates, the shame of exposure is too much: “What is peculiarly awful in all this is not the prospect of being dragged before the courts and put in jail for a crime I am not even sure I have committed, but the simple, terrible fact of having been found out. This is what makes me sweat, what fills my mouth with ashes and my heart with shame” (124).

Shlomith Rimmon describes texts where every bit of information points back at the narrator as stories about stories (“A Comprehensive Theory of Narrative” 52). In Banville’s *Birchwood*, the narrator, Gabriel Godkin, continually focuses attention back onto himself: “Am I mad, starting again, and like this?” (3). Montgomery’s narrative follows a similar vein. He continually focuses attention back on himself, Freddie, and somewhere between Freddie and the story Freddie thinks he is telling unfolds the story of the colonialist’s descent into madness: “[...] young men in cheap raincoats, and women with shopping bags, and one or two silent, grizzled characters who just stood, fixed on me hungrily, haggard with envy” (3). Montgomery sets the scene which supposedly occurred just after his capture. His reference to “cheap raincoats” (3), however, distracts our attention from the image of a raging mob back onto Montgomery. It is curious that someone accused of murder and surrounded by an angry crowd should register that they are wearing cheap raincoats let alone imagine them envious.

“It may not have been like that, any of it. I invent, necessarily” (*Birchwood* 170). According to Rimmon, in psychological novels a character can very often be described more as the sum total of his memories rather than the sum total of his actions (“A Comprehensive Theory of Narrative” 57). Different texts emphasize different levels of narratorial objectivity and subjectivity (Rimmon-Kenan *Narrative Fiction* 94-95). Montgomery focuses attention back on himself as narrator by both insisting on his objectivity and at the same time overtly emphasizing his lack of it. He describes his identity as a sham and a burden to wear. He is relieved by the murder: “When I thought about my past it was like thinking of what someone else had been, someone I had never met but whose history I knew by heart. It all seemed no more than a vivid fiction” (150). However, although Montgomery talks of the freedom the murder affords him from his identity, he still persists in using the identity to his own benefit. His “cultured and authoritative” (117) voice allows him to intimidate a witness and he consequently escapes capture. Meanwhile, he derives much pleasure from a shopping spree yet again afforded him by his superior colonial accent in conjunction with Charlie French’s credit cards: “I thought I detected a slight stiffening of attention when I produced Charlie’s credit cards — my God, did they know him, did he shop here? — but I turned up my accent

to full force and dashed off his signature with aplomb, and everyone relaxed. I was not really worried. In fact, I felt ridiculously excited" (162). Consequently, Montgomery's interpretation of how his murder of Josie Bell freed him from his assumed identity appears to be unreliable. Montgomery would still seem to be availing of this identity of superiority and to his own benefit even after the murder. Apart from these inconsistencies pertaining to the discarding of his phony identity, Montgomery further undermines his own reliability as a narrator by blatantly indulging in still more inconsistencies in his story. His response to Maolseachlainn's cross-examination demonstrates this:

Maolseachlainn frowns [...]. Is it not true that I left my mother's house in anger only a day after my arrival there? Is it not the case that I was in a state of high indignation because I had heard my father's collection of pictures had been sold to Helmut Behrens for what I considered a paltry sum? And is it not further the case that I had reason already to feel resentment against the man Behrens, who had attempted to cuckold my father in — But hold on there, old man, I said: that last bit only came to light later on. (74)

The perspective of Freddie Montgomery focuses attention away from the story he professes to be telling. In the liminal area between his actual text and the tale he claims to be telling lies the story of madness initiated by his inability to discard his colonialist identity and embrace hybridity.

### **Vanishing Identity Props**

Montgomery needs an inferior Irish to reinforce his identity of superiority. However, Irish identity seems to be mutating from the inferior Other into something alien and uncomfortable:

Barefoot urchins ran along beside me whining for pennies. There were drunks everywhere, staggering and swearing, lost in joyless befuddlement. An amazing couple reared up out of a pulsating cellar, a minatory, pockmarked young man with a crest of orange hair, and a stark-faced girl in gladiator boots and ragged, soot-black clothes. They were draped about with ropes and chains and what looked like cartridge belts, and sported gold studs in their nostrils. I had never seen such creatures, I thought they must be members of some fantastic sect. I fled before them, and dived into Wally's pub. Dived is the word. (30)

Montgomery describes Ireland as a sinister place from which he must seek refuge. According to Stam and Shohat in post-colonial times “hybridity” has often served to disempower indigenous peoples of mixed heritage, who may be dismissed as not “real Indians” deserving of rights (375). Could it be that Freddie and the male generations of his family with their Dutch blood and Castle Catholic heritage were afraid of disempowerment in a post-colonial Ireland? Is it this fear that has fossilized generations of Montgomery males in an anachronistic identity? Freddie offers no evidence of persecution in his book of evidence. Still, he dives into Wally’s to escape the “drunks” and other “creatures.” However, the real threat to him stems, not from the urchins and drunks of Dublin, but from “stable-girls” (43)’ like Joanne who come legally into his family inheritance, solicitors with Irish names like Maolseachlainn and taxi drivers performing acts of charity for bankrupt, homeless colonialists. “Just popping out for a moment [...]. He nodded, and a little flicker of sadness passed over his brow and down his sheep’s muzzle. You knew I was going to do a flit, didn’t you? Why did you not stop me? I don’t understand these people” (93). These Irish do not pose a threat to Freddie because they dismiss him as not “real Irish” and subsequently undeserving of rights. They pose a threat in so far as they can no longer be classified as inferior colonized Irish Other and, consequently, function as a very unsatisfactory foil for his superior identity as colonizer.

Without the economic, political, legal and moral control of colonialist domination to preserve the Manichean allegory of superior colonizer and inferior colonized, Montgomery’s family, and Montgomery in turn, are left with diminishing opportunity to distinguish themselves from the Irish Other. Montgomery’s father still had financial resources to buffer his identity as superior colonizer as its inferior colonized Manichean Other disappeared into hybridity: “He felt sorry for himself. He was convinced the world had used him badly. In recompense he pampered himself, gave himself treats. He wore handmade shoes and Cravat ties, drank good claret, smoked cigarettes specially imported in airtight tins from a shop in the Burlington Arcade” (28). However, as the family money dwindles Montgomery’s mother, despite the “cheekbones of her Dutch forebears, King Billy’s henchmen” (51), seems to be losing her definition (of superiority) and merging into the backdrop, a backdrop which Freddie presents in a very inferior light. Having sold the family pictures to make way for a more viable business in ponies, she has developed a friendship with a stable girl, whom she now considers the son she never had: “The girl, Joan or Jean — I’ll compromise, and call her Jane — got up suddenly from her place, with a gulp of distress, and put her arm awkwardly around my mother’s head, clutching her in a sort of wrestling hold, and laying a hand along

her brow" (49). Meanwhile, Dorothy Montgomery's physical appearance seems more one of a lowly stable-hand than one of a superior colonial descendant of King Billy: "Her bosom, which cries out to be called ample, had descended to just above her midriff. Also she had grown a little moustache. She wore baggy corduroy trousers and a cardigan with sagging pockets" (42). In fact, Montgomery himself cannot help noticing his mother's similarity to Joanne, her "stable-girl": "Her name was Joan or Jean, something like that. Big bum, big chest — obviously mother had felt an affinity" (46).

Although his mother presents more as the hybrid than the superior colonizer, Montgomery, despite his poverty, is not yet ready to surrender his assumed identity as Western intellectual elite. Consequently, he makes use of the last prop available to him in distinguishing himself from the Irish Other: "Madam! I said sternly (she would later describe my voice as *cultured and authoritative*), will you please get on about your business!" (117). Bankrupt Montgomery's final prop in supporting his role of ascendancy is his cultured authoritative voice, which he uses on several occasions: "It's a taxi man, she said to me, looking for his fare. I took the phone and spoke harshly to the fellow. She watched me intently, with a kind of avid amusement. When I put down the receiver she said gaily, Oh, Freddie, you've got so pompous!" (38). It is only with the murder of Josie Bell that Montgomery claims he can finally lay to rest his role as colonizer: "Now I had struck a blow for the inner man, that guffawing, fat foulmouth who had been telling me all along I was living a lie. [...] To do the worst thing, the very worst thing, that's the way to be free. I would never again need to pretend to myself to be what I was not" (124-125). However, as we have seen, despite his proclaimed liberation from his assumed identity, Montgomery, nonetheless, continues to utilize it to his advantage and while in custody it is Montgomery who demands answers from his interrogators: "I banged my fist on the table and jumped up and shouted at him that I would do nothing, sign nothing, until I got some answers. I really did say that: *until I get some answers!*" (208). Consequently, despite his professed relief at being able to cast the sham of his identity aside, Montgomery, nonetheless, remains a prisoner to his role as superior colonizer in juxtaposition to a long-since vanished inferior Irish Other.

Nandy describes the "victors" in the colonial encounter as "camouflaged victims, at an advanced stage of psychosocial decay" (XVI). Freddie Montgomery's false identity and his irrational murder of Josie Bell would seem to classify him within these parameters: "I killed her because I could, I said, what more can I say? We were all startled by that, I as much as they" (198). To persist with the identity of colonizer without a colonized Other to authenticate it is madness in a hybrid nation

whose evolving “will to truth” (Foucault 53-54) has long-since channelled into history the fossilized discourse of colonial Manichean allegory.

### **Conclusion**

“You are a creature of the despotism, a pukka sahib, tied tighter than a monk or a savage by an unbearable system of taboos” (Orwell *Burmese Days* 70). In *The Book of Evidence* the unreliable testimony of Freddie Montgomery elicits a subtext on the inevitable madness of the colonizer trapped in an anachronistic identity of superiority in a post-colonial environment. This argument offers two ways of interpreting the madness of the outdated superior colonizer as depicted by Banville. On the one hand the anachronistic colonial discourse of the colonizer has simply become categorized as madness, in the Foucaultian sense, by the new dominating discourses of a post-colonial society. Alternatively, the inability to discard the identity of superiority in an environment in which the colonial structures of Manichean allegory and mimesis no longer prevail, leads to the colonizer’s alienation and subsequent psychological disorder akin to Fanon’s descriptions of colonial psychosis in *The Wretched of the Earth* (200-201). Nandy stresses how colonialism operates within and is legitimised by the mind (2). The psychologically controlling nature of colonial structures sets a credible backdrop in *The Book of Evidence* for the portrayal of the colonizer’s inability to discard his outdated identity in an environment where colonial discourse has been marginalized into the discourse of madness.

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责任编辑：李敏锐