

“Walking on the Wall” – Biculturalism and Interculturality in Blake Morrison’s *Things My Mother Never Told Me* and Hugo Hamilton’s *The Speckled People* *

Dore Fischer

Abstract: *This interdisciplinary article starts with a brief introduction to the concepts of biculturalism and acculturation, and continues with an attempt to apply these concepts to some of the main characters in Hamilton’s and Morrison’s books. Some significant commonalities and differences in relation to acculturation, biculturalism and interculturality can be found within the two books. The article deals in particular with the following questions: Can the mothers and sons be classified as biculturals? If so, what effect does their biculturalism have on themselves and on their social environment? It also investigates the strategies of acculturation which the mothers in particular applied and the level of success of their acculturation. In conclusion, the article attempts to assess if and how the bicultural characters in the two books have the potential to act as intercultural mediators.*

‘I’m walking on the wall’, (Hamilton 295) is how the I-narrator in Hugo Hamilton’s *The Speckled People* describes himself at the end of the book. This is symbolic of his realization of liberation, of freeing himself from a cultural conflict which has been tormenting him for most of his life. ‘Walking on the wall’ symbolizes the state of being between or, indeed above, different cultures. However, in order to arrive at this stage of liberation and independence, the author had to go through a long, slow and often painful process. In this, and many other respects, Hamilton’s book has a lot in common with Blake Morrison’s *Things My mother never told me*.

There are quite a few more similarities between the two books: they were published nearly at the same time *Things My Mother Never Told Me* was published in 2002, *The Speckled People* in 2003. Both books are best-sellers and can be labelled as ‘memoirs’. Both authors grew up in the 1950s and 60s. Blake Morrison was born 1950

in Yorkshire, Hugo Hamilton 1953 in Dublin. Both books emphasise the authors' relationships with their mothers. Blake Morrison's mother came from Killorglin in County Kerry. She left Ireland during World War Two and lived in Britain for the rest of her life. Hugo Hamilton's mother was German. She left Germany just after World War Two, and then lived in Ireland. And both books display interesting intercultural issues, such as biculturalism, acculturation and interculturality, and deal with the effects that living in two cultures have on two generations.

Many anthropologists and social scientists (Worsley 1999; Hofstede 1994; Hall and Hall 1990; Tomalin and Stempleski 1993), define culture as beliefs, values and behaviour shared by a social group. Biculturals usually have two, sometimes even more, cultural identities, or a single cultural identity that is a blending of two or more cultures.

Michael Byram (2003), one of Britain's leading interculturalists, points out that one has to make a clear distinction between primary and secondary socialisation. That means there is a big difference between biculturals who become bicultural through primary socialisation (i.e. in their formative years as children), and those who move to another culture during adolescence or later in life. In *The Speckled People* and *Things my mother never told me*, representatives of both categories of biculturalism can be found. For example, Hugo Hamilton's primary socialisation is bicultural, whereas the mothers in both books had their primary socialisation only in one culture. They only became biculturals as young adults when they moved to another country. However, as Byram (2003: 60) points out, "the power of primary socialisation is such that another set of beliefs and values cannot be accommodated, although it is possible to practice other behaviours". This observation is particularly interesting in relation to both mothers, Agnes O'Shea, alias Kim Morrison, and Irmgard Hamilton, nee Kaiser, as will be discussed later.

Closely linked to biculturalism is the concept of acculturation. Acculturation defines the "changes in an individual or in a group as a result of contact with another cultural group" (Berry *et. al.* 2002. 475). The Canadian psychologist John Berry who is one of the leading researchers in the area of acculturation, has described four acculturation strategies (Berry 1997). These four strategies describe the extent to which migrants identify with their home or their host culture:

1. Marginalisation: the individual fails to identify with either culture
2. Assimilation: the individual rejects the home culture and adopts the new
3. Separation: despite living in a new culture, the individual retains the home culture and fails to adopt the new one
4. Integration: the individual identifies with aspects of both home and host cultures.

According to Berry (2002), "this pattern has been found in virtually every study, and is present for all types of acculturation groups (368)". If one tried to order these four strategies in terms of their psychological health, marginalisation would be the least healthy, while integration would be the healthiest, with assimilation and separation

strategies somewhere in the middle (MacLachlan 2003. 38). Of course, the acculturation process is not only determined by the strategies which an immigrant adopts. The host culture has an important part to play in the whole process. Policy decisions and social attitudes by the members of the host culture play a major part in the inclusion or exclusion of the immigrants' cultural identity.

Let us investigate how these concepts of biculturalism and acculturation apply to the main characters in both books, i.e. the two mothers and their sons.

Agnes O'Shea, alias Kim Morrison, is the central figure of Blake Morrison's book *Things My Mother Never Told Me*, and in relation to her acculturation strategies, she is the most extreme character. Her primary socialisation is Irish. Born in Killorglin, Co. Kerry, in 1917, she was the second last of twenty children born to Paddy and Margaret O'Shea. They were relatively wealthy wool merchants. Agnes studied medicine in UCD, from where she graduated as a doctor in 1942. Her secondary socialisation is British. After her graduation, she went to England where she worked in numerous hospitals during World War Two. She married Arthur Morrison, and lived in England until she died in 1997. It is not until after her death that her son finds out about her past. The book centres on a series of letters written by his parents to each other during their courtship, while he was stationed in Iceland and the Azores and she worked in England.

Agnes, alias Kim, is a very good example of an immigrant who applies the acculturation strategy of 'assimilation', in which the individual rejects the home culture and adopts the new. Although Agnes is bicultural, she suppresses and denies her primary culture. She totally reinvents herself, abandons her primary culture and develops a new social and cultural identity. One example for this is the change of her name from Agnes to Kim. Arthur, her husband to be, doesn't like the name Agnes, she offers the Irish version, Oona, but he doesn't like that either. For a while, she is Gennie, but then he suggests Kim.

Her Roman-Catholic religion is also a constant and much more serious issue between her and Arthur and his family. It is the most difficult obstacle that they have to overcome, if they want to get married. Arthur is very much anti-Catholicism, and his father even more. Arthur makes it very clear that he would not marry a Roman-Catholic, nor ever get married in a Catholic church. After much deliberation, she agrees to marry him on his terms and they get married in a registry office. From then on, she denies her religion, and does not practice it any more. She does not bring up her children as Roman-Catholics either. As children, they don't even know that their mother is Catholic. However, after her death, her son finds some religious artefacts from her childhood which she held onto, and had hidden in her wardrobe.

Agnes rejects her home culture. For example, in 1944, two years after she had been living in England, she writes to Arthur from a holiday in Killorglin: "You suggest I spend three months at home here. No thanks, and if you lived in a dump like this you wouldn't stay three months either." (Morrison 16). Not only does she reject her home culture, she constantly denies her Irishness. Her two children are not brought into contact

with the Irish culture. She only brings them to Ireland once on a holiday when Blake is five years of age. She hardly ever mentions Ireland or any aspects of her Irish childhood to her children. Even towards the end of her life she is unwilling to talk about it. She does not mix with other Irish expatriates. Her Irish accent fades, and her accent becomes British.

Agnes avoids any contact between her husband and her Irish family. For example, he never meets her parents, whereas even during the years before they were married and Arthur is stationed abroad, she visits his parents regularly, and his sister becomes her best friend. After her mother's death she cuts all ties with Ireland. She does not keep any Irish traditions, and becomes an English middle-class mother and housewife, (even though she still works part-time in her husband's practice and the nearby hospital). When she returns briefly to her native Ireland for her father's funeral, she feels "suddenly lost at being home" and "sees Killorglin through alien eyes" (Morrison 70).

The examples mentioned above show how willingly Agnes gave up her primary culture in order to totally assimilate the new culture. The question is, why did she do this? One can only speculate about the reasons for this strategy. In the 1940s, 50s and 60s, Irish Catholics did not have a high status in England. Individuals with two cultural identities can be in conflict with society around them, as the two cultural groups may see each other as mutually exclusive (Byram 53). On a macro-level, i.e. in society at large, and also on a micro-level, i.e. in Arthur's family who despised Ireland and the Irish, Agnes/Kim most likely suffered under this cultural conflict. As a consequence she feels that her primary culture is something she should get rid of as quickly and as thoroughly as possible.

Part of the Agnes'/Kim's cultural conflict is anti-Irish racism both within her own family and in society at large. As Blake points out, "In the post-war English provinces, anti-Irish prejudice was rife" (Morrison 290). In order to disguise her feelings, she gets in there first. "She also told jokes against her tribe. The Irish as stupid, feckless, drunk, poverty-stricken" (*Idem, ibidem*). She even keeps a book of Kerry men jokes on her bed-side table. Blake only recalls one instance of his mother being upset and insulted, not by general anti-Irish racism but by her husband's negative attitude. The family is gathered for the Christmas dinner in 1960. An anti-Irish joke from the Christmas crackers is being read out:

Not many laughs. The jokes in the crackers got worse each year. But something prompted Auntie Mary to ask after my mother's family. 'Oh, they're all fine.' 'Do you never think of spending Christmas there, Kim?' My mother, busy with roast potatoes, ducked the question. My father, a glass or two to the good, laughed and said, 'What, Christmas with peasants? In the peat-bogs?' (Morrison 292).

Agnes/Kim, obviously upset about this, leaves the room. This incident gives Blake a new insight into his mother: "But something had opened inside me – a sudden

vista of a woman among aliens, orphaned and nostalgic for home. And though my mother was quickly 'herself again', she never was, for me." (Morrison 292).

Blake believes that his mother's increasing poor health and melancholy are connected to her feelings of disconnectedness and displacement. As Blake reads her medical records, he suspects that her evasiveness, her illnesses and her depressions, migraines, anxiety attacks, came from the struggle with her identity, from "the disjunction between the life she'd left and the life she'd made" (Morrison 24).

What effects does Agnes's / Kim's denial of her own biculturalism have on her children, especially on Blake himself? Despite their mother's biculturalism, Blake's and his sister's primary socialisation happens only in one culture. They are hardly aware of the fact that their mother originally comes from outside Britain. She does everything to conceal the Irish culture from them, and apart from a few occasional glimpses, they experience nothing of her Irishness.

Until after their mother's death, neither Blake nor his sister know the name of the place their mother came from. Shortly before she dies, Blake tries to interview her about her Irish childhood. But she is not inclined to give much away. After his mother's death, Blake realises how little he knows about her childhood and Ireland. That is when he decides to visit Ireland and do some research on his roots. Only then he finds out, for example, that there were twenty children in his mother's family, and that only thirteen of them survived beyond infancy.

While there is little or no contact between the Morrisons and the Irish family, they have a very close relationship with the father's family, especially his parents and his sister and her family. As Blake states, "Family meant Lancashire, and a web of my father's relations. Ireland seemed a continent away, and my mother's family as remote as an Amazonian tribe." (Morrison 12).

Unlike his mother, Blake experiences no cultural conflict with the society in which he is growing up. However, as a self-reflective adult, he becomes aware of the fact that he might have missed out on something important. He feels "a sense of betrayal" (Morrison 22), in that he has been deprived of an important part of his mother's (and also his own) identity, and he regrets the lost opportunity. When he reads his parents' letters, and discovers so much about his mother and her past, he feels shocked and "torn in half" (Morrison 189). "She'd reinvented herself – and done it so thoroughly that she failed to set the record straight with her own children." (Morrison 24). Like Blake's mother, Hugo Hamilton's mother, Irmgard, grows up in one culture, and as a young adult emigrates to live in another culture. She comes from a small town in Germany, where her family lived through terrible times under the Nazis. During the war she was abused and raped by her employer. Because of these traumas she leaves Germany to go on a religious pilgrimage in Ireland, where she hopes to find peace. Here she meets Jack Hamilton, an engineer, who has dedicated his life to the nationalist cause and the rehabilitation of the Irish languages. They get married, and she lives in Ireland for the rest of her life.

On Berry's scale of acculturation strategies, she is nearly on the other end of the scale from Agnes/Kim. She can be placed near the category of 'separation', in which the individual retains the home culture despite the fact of now living in a different one. For example, she frequently talks about Germany, and constantly compares the two cultures: "In Ireland, you can't ask people anything, she says. It's not like Germany where a question is just a question. In Ireland, people get offended by questions, because it's a way of saying what you're thinking." (Hamilton 171).

Irmgard speaks only German to her children. When speaking English to others, she has a very strong German accent. She keeps her German culture alive, both for herself and for her children. For example, she keeps the German traditions and customs, and she makes German cake. She is often homesick, and feels isolated and homeless. But when she visits Germany after having lived in Ireland for a number of years, she too, like Morrison's mother, seems "sometimes lost" (Hamilton 210).

Irmgard's biculturalism often causes conflict (both inside and outside the home), as she is irritated by the host-culture, and vice versa, as members of the host-culture are irritated by her:

She doesn't understand Ireland sometimes, because they like strange things like pink cakes and soft ice cream and salt and vinegar. They spend all their money on First Holy Communion outfits. They don't like serving people and they don't like being in a queue either, because when the bus comes, they forget about the rules and just rush for the door. The bus drivers in Ireland are blind and the shopkeepers don't want to sell things to you. The butcher has a cigarette in his mouth while he's cutting the meat, and nobody knows how to say the word no. In Ireland, they nod when they mean no, and shake their heads when they're agreeing with you [...]. Sometimes Irish people don't understand my mother either. When she's trying to be helpful, they think she's interfering and being nosy. When she tries to warn some of the other mothers about their children eating too many sweets or crossing the road without looking, they say they don't want some German woman telling their kids what to do. (Hamilton 98)

Unlike Agnes/Kim, Irmgard gives her children insights into her own biculturalism, and makes them aware of the differences between the German and the Irish cultures. Thus the children become very much part of her intercultural conflicts. This brings me to the last person in my analysis of biculturalism and the question of what effect Irmgard's biculturalism has on her children, in particular on Hugo himself.

Hugo can be termed a 'second generation bicultural'. Unlike Blake who has no contact with his mother's primary culture, Hugo is constantly exposed to his mother's German culture. One could even call him and his siblings 'tri-cultural', as his father is a fervent promoter of the Irish language and culture. In the home, the children are only allowed to speak German or Irish, the English language is forbidden under strictest penalties. No English music is allowed in the house, no English books or

comics. They are not allowed to mix with other English speaking children in the neighbourhood.

As a child, Hugo suffers severely under this situation. He is confused about his nationality and his cultural identity; his decision to change his name from Johannes to Hugo is only one indication for this confusion. He is also confused about the three languages he learns and speaks; he experiences this as a language war, as something negative rather than positive. His upbringing is burdened both by the German and the Irish history. Both his parents are homesick for something which is passed. His mother is homesick for the Germany before the war, his father is homesick for an Ireland which does not exist anymore either. Hugo and his siblings suffer from being mocked and taunted by the society around them. For example, they are bullied by other kids, called 'Hitler', 'Eichmann', 'Kraut', and they are bullied and beaten because they are different:

The British are called Brits and the Irish are called Paddies and the Germans are called Krauts and that's worse than being either British or Irish, or both together. They still call us bloody Krauts even though we are bloody Paddies. Sometimes they tell us to fuck off back to where we come from, but that doesn't make any sense because we come from Ireland. One day they called Franz a fuckin' Jew Nazi and held him against the railings of the Garden of Remembrance. [...] they banged his head until it started bleeding. (Hamilton 277)

As a result of this, Hugo does not want to be German; he feels embarrassed and keeps emphasising that he is not German. Instead he wants to be "as Irish as possible so that I would never have to be German again" (Hamilton 2003. 238). He does not want to be different and wants nothing more than to blend in with the crowd. He longs for a belonging. Hugo and his brothers and sisters are trying to fit into a world around them where most people speak English, the Irish language is considered to be backward, and German alien and connected to recent war crimes. In the homogenous, predominantly English-speaking Dublin of the 1950s and 60s he feels isolated, homeless, like an outsider without identity. His father's explanation for this is that they are the 'speckled people', half-Irish and half-German. However, to Hugo it means something else: "I know it also means we're marked. It means we're aliens and we'll never be Irish enough, even though we speak the Irish language and my father says we're more Irish than the Irish themselves" (Hamilton 7-8).

Hugo, constantly aware of the fact that he is, and forever will be, different, rebels against his father for forcing them to be different from all the other children around them. But he also blames his mother for this: "It's my mother who left her own native shores, and that means we still end up living in a foreign country because we're the children from somewhere else" (Hamilton 33).

However, his feelings are ambiguous and he is not always opposed to his own biculturalism. His attitude is more positive when it is related to what happens inside the

home, or when the family visit Germany. Hugo loves his mother and many aspects of her German culture, such as bed-time stories, German books, music and cooking, and the German Christmas celebrations in their house. He loves looking at all his mother's German things. And even as a child he is aware of how she balances his father's extremism. Hugo's dual cultural identity allows him to experience an occasional distance, detachment from the Irish culture, because he sees it through his mother's eyes. His increasing cultural awareness extends to a realisation of national stereotypes and prejudices. When the family visit Germany, he becomes even more aware of the Irish culture, and the similarities and differences between the two cultures, and he even sees his father through different eyes:

My father was different in Germany. He wore a cravat and a new suit, and he also got a new pair of glasses from Onkel Wilhelm that had a brown tint and made him look more German. He stopped wearing his tweed cap and his face was brown from the sun, right down to the collar of his shirt [...].

My father drank beer and sometimes he was nearly as German as any of the uncles, telling stories and laughing. With his brown face and his new cravat he looked so German that I thought he was going to buy a car and start smoking cigars as well. (Hamilton 212-13)

The book is written through a child's narration, but underlying is, of course, an adult's perspective and analysis. As an adult, and through writing this autobiography, the author distances himself and develops an intercultural awareness. This becomes obvious in the following quote:

We are the German-Irish story. We are the English-Irish story, too [...] we have one Irish foot and one German foot and a right arm in English. We are the brack children. Brack, homemade Irish bread with German raisins. We are the brack people and we don't just have one briefcase. We don't just have one language and one history. We sleep in German and we dream in Irish. We laugh in Irish and we cry in German. We are silent in German and we speak in English. We are the speckled people. (Hamilton 283)

Hugo's developing intercultural awareness brings me to the final point in my discussion and to the concluding question, if any of the four characters analysed have the potential to act as intercultural mediators.

In the discussion on biculturalism, Michael Byram finds a remarkable absence of "any examination of it and how biculturals act as intercultural speakers / mediators between their two cultures" (63). He also points out that being bicultural does not necessarily result in acting interculturally, as this involves a level of conscious, analytical awareness (Byram 64-65). Byram defines an intercultural mediator as a person who is competent in intercultural communication. In particular, he/she

- is able to see how different cultures relate to each other
- is aware of similarities and differences between cultures
- is able to take an 'external' perspective on him/herself
- can mediate between him/herself and others
- can act as mediator between people who have been socialised in different cultures
- has the ability to analyse and, where desirable, adapt his/her behaviour and the underlying values and beliefs (Byram 2003 60).

If one applies the criteria above to the four characters analysed, what conclusions can be drawn about their potential to act as intercultural mediators/ speakers? Agnes/ Kim is clearly not an intercultural mediator. As a bicultural she would have had the potential to be an intercultural mediator, but she clearly fails. Even though there is no indication anywhere in the book of her being self-reflective about this issue, it is as if she deliberately decided not to be an intercultural mediator. All her life, she avoids any form of intercultural conflict with her second culture. If there is any conflict at all, she has been concealing it successfully, as some of her depressions and illnesses later in her life may indicate.

Blake has the potential to be a very good intercultural mediator, despite or perhaps, because of the missed opportunity of becoming a bicultural. As an adult he becomes deeply self-reflective on these issues. He realises the effect that his mother's self denial of her biculturalism has had on herself and on her children. Interestingly, in an interview with 'Kingdom Archives' (2003), he describes himself as being half-English and half-Irish. This newly defined cultural identity affects not only himself but also his children. After his mother's death he brings his own children on holidays to Ireland, meets relations he never knew he had, and keeps in touch with his new-found cousins.

Irmgard has the potential to be an effective intercultural mediator, even though she does not fulfil all the criteria mentioned above. She is not portrayed as being self-reflective; instead her interculturality is more intuitive, and as we have seen, not without problems. She brings her primary culture with her, and tries to keep it alive in her house through her language, customs, and values. Especially in her relationship with her children, she shows sensitivity and an understanding for their extraordinary situation. At the end of the book she shows signs of integration: "My mother went back to Germany one more time after my father died, just to visit everyone there and see where she grew up. But she was lost. She couldn't recognise anything. Now she wants to find a place in Ireland that she can remember" (Hamilton 296).

According to Hugo Hamilton himself, the writing of the book has had a therapeutic effect. In an interview with the *Irish American Post*, (Friedrich 2003) he says: "My family can finally talk about it. That's one of the biggest triumphs of the book. That it is out in the open. That I turned our childhood, which was always associated with shame and embarrassment, and have turned it into virtue." As an adult, he is deeply self-reflective, and shows a great amount of intercultural awareness. The conflicts,

dilemmas, sufferings are gone, and his attitude is now positive, as he sees all the advantages of being bicultural. He finally recognizes his true personal and cultural identity. The writing of his book would appear to have been an act of intercultural mediation itself:

I'm not afraid any more of being German or Irish, or anywhere in between. Maybe your country is only a place you make up in your mind. Something you dream about and sing about. Maybe it's not a place on the map at all, but just a story full of people you meet and places you visit, full of books and films you've been to. I'm not afraid of being homesick and having no language to live in. I don't have to be like anyone else. I'm walking on the wall and nobody can stop me (Hamilton 295).

Note

- * This article is based on two different papers which were presented at the Annual Conference of IASIL (National University Galway, 2004) and at the *Double Vision* Conference (University College Dublin, 2005).

Works cited

- Berry, J.W. "Immigration, Acculturation and Adaptation", *Applied Psychology: An International Review*, 46, 1997: 5-68.
- Berry, J.W. et.al. *Cross-Cultural Psychology: Research and Applications*, Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2002.
- Byram, M. "On Being 'Bicultural' and Intercultural". In: G. Alred, M. Byram, M. Fleming (eds.), *Intercultural Experience and Education*, Clevedon: Multilingual Matters, 2003. 50-66.
- Friedrich, A. "More Homesick Than Seasick", *The Irish American Post*, Vol.4 Issue1, 2003. (www.gaelicweb.com/irishampost/year2003/07jun-jul).
- Hall, E.T. & Hall, M.R. *Understanding Cultural Differences: Germans, French and Americans*, Yarmouth, Maine: Intercultural Press, 1990.
- Hamilton, H. *The Speckled People*, London: Fourth Estate, 2003.
- Hofstede, G. *Cultures and Organizations: Software of the Mind. Intercultural Cooperation and its Importance for Survival*, London: Harper Collins, 1994.
- MacLachlan, M. "Cultural Dynamics: Transition and Identity in Modern Ireland. In: *Mosaic or Melting Pot? - Living with Diversity. Proceedings of a Conference on Cultural Diversity*, Dublin: Royal Irish Academy, 2003. 31-53.
- Morrison, B. *Things my mother never told me*, London: Chatto & Windus, 2002.
- TCM Archives, The Kingdom, 2003/01/07, *Like her name, her accent, her origins, her siblings, she preferred to let it all go.* (<http://achives.tcm.ie/thekingdom/2003/01/07>).
- Tomalin, B., Stempleski, S. *Cultural Awareness*, Oxford University Press, 1993.
- Worsley, P. "Classic Conceptions of Culture", In: Skelton, T. & Allen, T. (eds.), *Culture and Global Change*, London and New York: Routledge, 1999. 13-21.