

Looking back on the American Dream: Irish female migration and return in two contemporary novels

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Irish migration and literature

- ▶ **Migration:** the old, old issue. The USA had been the preferred choice of Irish women from the early nineteenth century, whereas from the early twentieth century Britain became the most popular destination, especially between the 1950s and the 1980s. This trend changed by the end of the last century when other European destinations became more attractive (Walter 2004). “*A naturalised feature of Irish daily life*”.
- ▶ An increasing production of Irish narrative addressing issues of exile and diaspora  A need to express cultural identity negotiations, in particular those of women abroad.
- ▶ Recent literary expressions: William Trevor’s *The Story of Lucy Gault* (2002), Sebastian Barry, *On Canaan’s Side* (2011), Colm Tóibín’s *Brooklyn* (2009), Anne Enright’s *The Gathering* (2007) and Edna O’Brien’s *The Light of Evening* (2007) have been acclaimed for dealing with female protagonists and their troubling sense of place



Irish female migration

- ▶ Women and the land: The feminine icons of Mother Church and Mother Ireland (or Erin) had been gaining ground since the nineteenth century for nationalistic purposes, and from the first decades of the twentieth century, women were ‘actively interpellated as national subjects through identification with territory, soil, land and landscape’ (Gray 1999). This gendered project targeted women to limit their access to work and public spaces in order to produce ‘decent women inhabiting virtuous spaces’ (Crowley and Kitchin 2008).
- ▶ Motivations for female emigration
 - ▶ Dissatisfaction with subsistence rural lifestyles (Stoddard 2012).
 - ▶ Poor labor and social prospects and dissatisfaction or disagreement with certain aspects of Irish society and morality (Gray and Ryan 1997).
 - ▶ The existing networks of immigrants abroad and the marked tendency to get married late were an incentive.

As a result, there are tensions between an assimilated Irish cultural space and the actual space of opportunities ahead

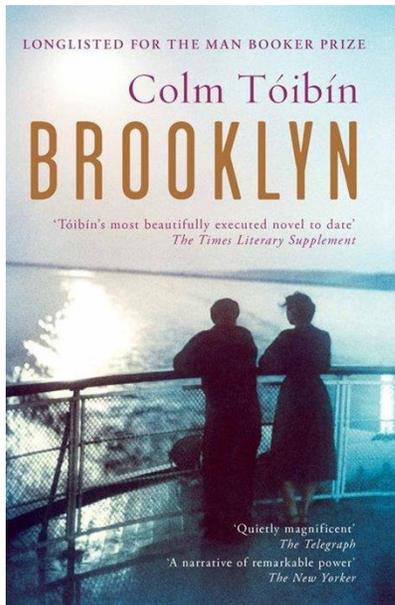
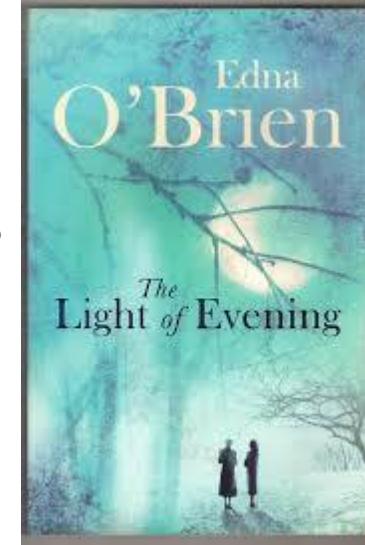


Physical and emotional (dis)locations problematize the traditional representations of Irish womanhood and women’s place within Irish society.



Literary representations

- ▶ *The Light of Evening* (2006): plot set in the 1920s and present time.
 - ▶ Double migration flows:
 - ▶ Dilly to America in early XXth century (short term).
 - ▶ Eleanora to UK in late XXth century (long term).



- ▶ *Brooklyn* (2009): plot set in the 1950s.
 - ▶ Eilis to North America (long term).

A troubling sense of place is explored through the testimonies of emigrated and returned Irish women.



Intersectionality as a framework analysis

- ▶ **Intersectionality** postulates that the differences between people, such as gender, class, race, ethnicity, age, sexuality, etc., intersect, creating unique positionalities in the matrix of social power. Categories of social difference that are mutually constitutive (Yuval-Davies 2011)
- ▶ As applied to the selected works: intersectionality illuminates how contemporary novels use migration to question female identification with the unitary national subject and how *“the heterosexual economy of the state and the mythology of the Irish nation [...] encapsulate its women within much narrower roles than its men”* (Thompson 2010, 3).
- ▶ It also deconstructs a reading based upon sets of binary oppositions: home/foreign land, belonging/estrangement, insider/outsider, family/strangers, duty/desire, constriction/freedom (Stoddard 2012).
- ▶ It moves beyond single or group-specific identities and connects the particular with the systemic multiple forms of oppression in order to generate a better understanding of its origins, performances and solutions.
- ▶ Selected critical intersections:
 - ▶ The depressed Irish context and the existing networks that facilitated migration.
 - ▶ The cultural and political forms of pressure for return.



A depressed Irish economy

- ▶ **A protectionist national policy:** rurally based, cultural and economic isolation framed by a nationalistic discourse. In terms of employment, by 1926 only 6% of married women were working outside the home and this figure remained low until the 1960s (O'Dowd 1987).

The networks abroad

- ▶ **Irish priests** (Catholic Church): to attest the migrant's origins and act as temporary work agencies.

Objective: To control morality and social mobility.

- ▶ **Landladies:** behavioural surveillance and reproduction of Irish values.

Objective: To limit female independence and progress.

Cultural and physical boundaries do not overlap. On the contrary, cultural spaces transcend and enfold physical frontiers.



Cultural and political forms of pressure for return

▶ Mothers are depicted as afflicted women abandoned by their daughters.

- ▶ Feminized relation of the land (Ireland) with motherhood. (Nash, 1993)
- ▶ Social construction of women as caretakers. (Article 41, 1937 Constitution)

Rose was thirty now, and since it was obvious that their mother could never be left to live alone, not merely because her pension was small but because she would be too lonely without any of them, Eilis's going, which Rose had organized so precisely, would mean that Rose would not be able to marry (In The Light of Evening: 31-32).

“Nationalism and all other identity projects of politics of belonging, often considered as masculinist, if not actually patriarchal, are dependent upon particular kinds of ethics of care” (Yuval-Davis, 2007)

➤ Absence of legal regulation of care for the elderly.

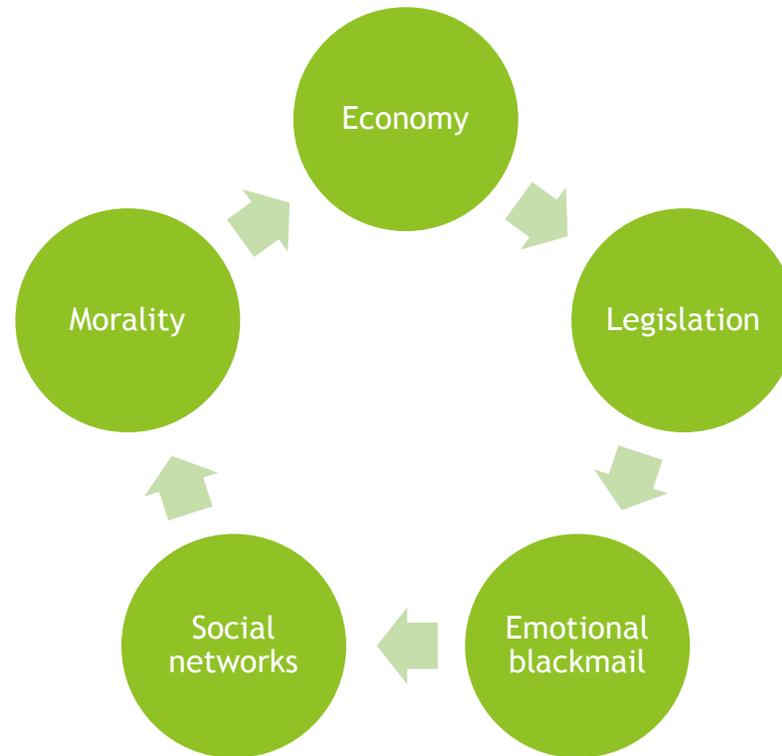
- The absence/presence of specific laws regarding the regulation of care, needs to be considered, among other parameters, as a pivotal regulator of social order. (Article 41, 1937 Constitution)



Intersectional approach

- ▶ *The Light of Evening* and *Brooklyn* depict Irish female migrants who are economically and emotionally forced to feel a strong bond with their homeland.

Multiple forces that
frame migrant women's
scope of agency:





Tensions and negotiations

- ▶ **Economically**: In America, they are employed as housemaids (Dilly in *The Light of Evening*) or as shop assistants (Eilis in *Brooklyn*): certain economic independence.
- ▶ **Legally**: Personal attempts at overcoming tradition and limitations: Eilis undertakes a two-year book-keeping course at Brooklyn College so that she can graduate from the shop floor to an office position.
- ▶ **Morally**: In both cases, Dilly and Eilis emigrate to Brooklyn as a young single women, but when they come back to Ireland, they are persuaded to stay, marry, and raise a family.
- ▶ **Socially**: Their return is specifically constructed as a sacrifice for the new nation, especially by the mother figures. In exchange, their status is elevated and they are socially perceived as modern and stylish.
- ▶ **Different Outcomes**: Dilly will sacrifice, submitting to national expectations and reproducing her mother's model (despite her regret throughout the novel), whereas Eilis will return to America forced by her former and secret marriage to an Italian immigrant (and let aside her dreams of a better job).
- ▶ “*The politics of belonging is, therefore, where the sociology of power and the sociology of emotions get together*” (Yuval-Davis 2007: 93).



Conclusions

- ▶ Space is a key aspect in the construction of a new society, but its geographical dimension is not enough to alter inherited social limitations.
- ▶ A feminized care work, supported and enhanced by political and economic decisions, restrains female scope of agency.
- ▶ The problematic relation between the **emotional** (belonging), the political and the economic (the politics of belonging) realms is at the core of an intertwined set of forces that result in a limited agency for the emigrated females.
- ▶ A shared tragedy: As long as the structural frames of social organisation are not altered, the construction of society remains biased and any attempt at challenging the norms will be at the expense of personal confrontation and exclusion. Both Ellis and Dilly seem unable to bear the costs of the outcast and they must comply to the normative behaviour for women: marriage.



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Thank you for your attention!

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