

Recalling Female Migration in Contemporary Irish Novels: An Intersectional Approach

María Amor Barros-del Río

Abstract

Contemporary Irish literature is showing a strong tendency to look backwards and evoke Irish migrants' experiences, an issue that is witnessing much success in the form of fictionalised lives of Irish migrant women. Sebastian Barry, Edna O'Brien, Colm Tóibín and Anne Enright are reputed writers who have focused on the topic very successfully. This phenomenon indicates a general interest in female migration, a very attractive topic for the Irish community. It also suggests a need to express from different perspectives the complexity of cultural identity negotiations. In this regard, Edna O'Brien's *The Light of Evening* (2006) and Colm Tóibín's *Brooklyn* (2009) deserve close attention as they explore the troubling sense of place endured by emigrated and returned Irish women in the 20th century. In these novels, physical and emotional (dis)locations problematise the traditional representations of Irish womanhood and their place within Irish society. An intersectional approach illuminates how these novels use migration to question female identification with the unitary national subject defended by the Irish nationalistic discourse at the time. This analysis also unveils the real and symbolic contradictions lived by Irish women experiencing displacement and it demonstrates how issues of identity are affected by geographical and cultural spatialities. Also, through the lens of translocational positionality (Anthias 2002, 2008), negotiations within the boundaries of time and space can be explored in order to analyse how the experiences of belonging and not belonging become complex practices shaped by the intersection of categories and spheres that are not fixed but evolving. In sum, this analysis seeks to disentangle the complex and contradictory factors that shaped female Irish migration and to how these are represented in the literary corpus from a gender perspective.

Bionote

María Amor Barros-del Río is Assistant Professor at the University of Burgos, Spain. Her research focuses mainly on gender studies and contemporary fiction in English with a special interest in Irish fiction. Other fields of interest are critical pedagogy and second language teaching. She has published extensively in peer-reviewed journals such as *Estudios Irlandeses*, *Gender, Place and Culture*, *Journal of Research in Gender Studies*, *International Journal of English Studies* and *English Language Teaching*. She is the author of *Metáforas de su tierra: Breve historia de las mujeres*

irlandesas (2004) and *El trabajo de las mujeres pobres* (2010). Some of her contributions in collective works can be found in *Postcolonial and Gender Perspectives in Irish Studies* (ed. M. Morales Ladrón, 2007), *Single Motherhood in 20th Century Ireland* (eds. C. Ramblado-Minero and M. A. Pérez-Vides, 2006) and *La Novela Irlandesa del siglo XX* (ed. I. Praga Terente, 2005).

Women and Diaspora in Contemporary Irish Fiction

Recent research has demonstrated that Irish migration has been predominantly female, despite its underrepresentation in popular imagery and reports (Walter 2004). From the early 19th century, Irish women had chosen the USA as their preferred destination, a trend that changed during the central decades of the 20th century in favour of Britain.¹ But migratory phenomena and the ideological construction of the nation state have always maintained a complex relationship (Martin 1997; Walter 2004; Hickman 2012; Donkersloot 2012; Harte 2009; McDowell 2014; Miller 2008; Ryan 2008). In particular, in the Irish postcolonial context the performance of physical movement on the part of women has been problematic in terms of identification with the territory because the national project targeted women to limit their access to the public realm and identified them with the land (Gray 1999).

Ideologically, the feminine icons of Mother Church and Mother Ireland (or Erin) had been gaining ground since the 19th century for nationalistic purposes. This process, which reached its peak in the central decades of the 20th century, was legally supported by Article 41 of the 1937 Constitution where women were exalted as pillars of the home and guardians of Irish values. In this sense, female mobility and migration challenged the traditional representation of Irish womanhood and her place within Irish society. As a counter-response to the undeniable evidence of massive migration, the more the homely rural landscape was idealized in nationalistic discourses, the more other environments such as urban spaces or destinations, particularly in Britain and the USA, tended to be identified as materialistic and threatening (Ryan, 2001). Consequently, that set of cultural values engendered place and space affecting the Irish woman's sense of identity, both abroad and when they returned to Ireland.² Undoubtedly, the distance and the discovery of other cultural forms would weaken their ties with their relatives and their communities (Inglis and Donnelly 2011) and with the nationalist project to a further extent, resulting in a weakening of the symbolic ties that linked land and nation with identity, a phenomenon labelled as “the elusive sense of That Mother Ireland” (Wondrich 2000, 2).

1 For a comprehensive review of the Irish diaspora, see Piaras Mac Éinrí's introduction to *The Irish Diaspora*, edited by Andy Bielenberg (2013).

2 This unspoken conflict may be found in migration reports where Irish women express mixed feelings about their living abroad (Ryan 2008; Walter 2004).

Only recently have the lives and testimonies of Irish women outside Ireland received attention from a wide range of disciplines such as geography (Greiner and Sakdapolrak, 2013), psychology (Gray, 2002) and cultural studies (McDowell, 2014; Ryan, 2008), among others. This genuine sympathy for the issue entails personal and social implications, as it is estimated that, of the 3 million Irish citizens abroad today, approximately 30% were born in Ireland (Government of Ireland 2002). In particular, the gendered nature of these migratory flows has not gone unnoticed and several studies (Martin, 1997; Ryan, 2001; Walter, 2004) have analysed the patterns of origin, preferred destinations and labor opportunities of the emigrated under a gender perspective. For instance, between 1926 and 1936, more women than men left the Free State favouring Britain over other destinations and obtaining employment in the domestic service (Travers, 1995). All in all, between 1871 and 1971 there was a higher level of migration for Irish women than men (Tavers, 1995), an indisputable evidence of the engendered nature of the Irish diaspora. The representation of this problematic situation in contemporary Irish narrative is abundant and the success of novels dealing with women's diasporic experiences in the 20th century indicates that migration is as much a historical phenomenon as it is an issue of general interest and academic attention (Harte 2009; McWilliams 2013; Morales Ladrón & Elices Agudo 2011; Stoddard 2012). Particularly during the first years of the 21st century, Irish fiction has demonstrated an interest in Irish female experiences of exile. Authors such as Edna O'Brien, Mary Costello, John McGahern, Sebastian Barry, William Trevor, Colm Tóibín and Anne Enright have dealt with women's diasporic experiences during the 20th century. Using a personal and intimate approach, their works explore the real and symbolic contradictions that the fictional characters had to undertake both outside Ireland and once they were back home. Their plots examine how the protagonists deal with physical and emotional (dis)locations and to what extent these get in conflict with the feminine notion of "Irishness" previously discussed.

These complex negotiations are especially evident in two novels: *The Light of Evening* (2006), written by Edna O'Brien; and *Brooklyn* (2009), authored by Colm Tóibín. Despite the time span between the migratory venture recalled in the first novel and the second, both plots are inspired by

real experiences of female migration. They delve into the personal experiences of post-famine female migration to America, the former in the 1920s and the latter in the 1950s, and both reveal the tensions and contradictions that being an emigrated Irish woman entailed with regards to the motherland. Additionally, they both recreate the different ways in which Irish society claimed the return of the emigrated, and they complement each other with divergent endings: in *The Light of Evening*, Dilly, one of the protagonists, eventually comes back to Ireland and settles down; whereas in *Brooklyn*, Eilis resolves to go back to America after a short visit to her hometown.

Using an intersectional framework analysis, this chapter scrutinises the elements that take part in these two processes of (dis)location and explores how they intersect and influence the protagonists' decisions, and to what extent these narratives comply with or contest the ideological construction of the Irish nation in general and the Irish woman in particular. Although belonging and identity are close to each other, they are two independent notions. Namely, belonging stresses the emphasis on experiences of access and participation and frequently refers to a dynamic process. On its side, identity involves “a retreat from issues of structure and there is a tendency to treat it as a possessive attribute of individuals or groups, rather than a process” (Anthias 2008, 7). Despite the pressure exerted by Irish nationalistic discourses, in these novels identity negotiations take place on multiple levels, and these cannot be reduced to single categories or to binary opposites. On the contrary, the complex intersections of the different axes that shape the particular position of each protagonist in their migratory process require a thorough study.

Furthermore, the sense of belonging, as represented in these novels, cannot be understood as static or limited by geographical or spatial boundaries. As such, the dynamic intersections of axes that frame the protagonists' stories of exile must also be considered. Hence, it is necessary “to look at the way in which different social divisions inter-relate in terms of the production of social relations and in terms of people's lives” (Anthias 2008, 13) using an intersectional approach. Since the term “intersectionality” was coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw in 1989, this perspective has greatly developed, especially in the fields of politics, sociology or geography, to name but a few. In any discipline, the

use of intersectionality allows for a multi-level analysis that underlines the actual interdependence of structures, social categories and representations. These result in socially constructed forms of differentiation and exclusion, as well as varied practices of resistance and consent. Thus, intersectionality enriches the gender lens emphasising “the importance of attending to the multiple social structures and processes that intertwine to produce specific social positions and identities” (Anthias 2012, 106).

Therefore, its use as an analytical framework may offer a better understanding of the different positionalities and the scope of agency allowed to Irish migrant women both abroad and back home. In particular, the use of “translocational positionality” as a conceptual lens proposed by Floya Anthias (2002, 2008, 2009) is suitable to understand the contestations of normative female identities present in the selected novels because a translocational lense “is a tool for analysing positions and outcomes produced through the intersections of different social structures and processes, including transnational ones” (Anthias 2013, 16). As *The Light of Evening* and *Brooklyn* are novels of migration, mobility and circulation, this innovative and integral approach highlights the shifting power negotiations exerted by the protagonists during their migratory experiences, the complex relations with the homeland, their identity construction processes and the diversity of female diasporas to America, all of which will help to interpret and understand the alternative endings of the two novels. For these purposes, the concepts of space as a social construction of identification and membership that transcends physical place, and place as an inhabited geographical location, are of capital importance (Anthias 2012).

Women on the Move: *The Light of Evening* and *Brooklyn*

The connections between the selected novels are evident and have been explored elsewhere (Morales Ladrón 2014; Stoddard 2012) to the point that *The Light of Evening* has been contended a predecessor of *Brooklyn* (Morales Ladrón 2013, 280). Indeed, both novels share a common topic, that is, female emigration to America. Both plots are set in the 20th century and are based on other peoples’ accounts:

O'Brien's story is re-constructed upon the eight years her mother had spent in Brooklyn, a somewhat veiled episode that she recalls in her *Memoir* (O'Brien 2012, 253): "From Brooklyn my mother had brought a cache of memories that she kept locked, and only once, as she was confiding in another woman, did I overhear her talk of the man she loved [...]". Tóibín's inspiration also comes from somebody else's story, which he once heard, as he declared that (2009b): "A woman was talking to my mother, talking on and on, about Brooklyn where her daughter had been. I began to listen.". Despite these coincidences, neither of the authors has admitted any relation whatsoever between the two novels, which could indicate that female Irish migration is a topical and relevant issue *per se* that generates a genuine interest among contemporary writers. What both novelists certainly show is a common desire to put on display the silenced experiences of millions of Irish women who emigrated.

For Edna O'Brien, one could argue that exile is a state of being rather than a literary topic, as far as her work and her own life are considered. Her first novel, *The Country Girls* (1960), followed by its sequels *The Lonely Girl* (1962)³ and *Girls in Their Married Bliss* (1964), put into words the process of estrangement from the land and its moral codes told through the eyes of two young rural girls who first move to the city and later to the capital, London. Inspired by her personal experiences, this trilogy inaugurated a set of writings about exile that would characterise much of her work, as Ellen McWilliams has noted (2013, 67): "O'Brien makes for a revealing case study of the woman writer's experience of exile and is equally revealing of the Irish woman emigrant's relationship with homeland and hostland". This unresolved relation with the land has remained a major issue in her life and work to the extent that she has felt the urge to explore these issues again in her recent memoir *Country Girl* (2012; Barros-del Rio 2016). Also in her novel *The Light of Evening* (2006), she revisits exile from a double perspective, that of an aged woman, Dilly, who recalls her time in America where she worked as a young housemaid in the 1920s, and that of her daughter, Eleanora, who has also left Ireland and is currently living in London.⁴ Written in experimental form, O'Brien's narrative makes

³ Two years later this novel would be republished under the title *Girl with Green Eyes*.

⁴ This novel revolves around two recurrent themes in O'Brien's work, i.e., the difficult and complex mother-daughter relationship (see McWilliams 2011; Obert, 2012), and the problematic bonds with the land (see Murray 2013).

use of an omniscient narrator voice, stream of consciousness, intermittent memories of Dilly's youth in America, excerpts from her mother's letters and her own correspondence to Eleanora, as well as Eleanora's diary. As pointed out by O'Connor (2006, 886), the use of so many perspectives serves an ultimate goal "to fit the unique outline of each character's story, each story's geographical, emotional, and historical setting"—As the author's reconstruction of the female migrant experience in America is based upon her own mother's story, who left Ireland in 1914 and worked in Brooklyn for eight years (Lowery 2005), Dilly's memories deserve a careful examination in order to determine how this character situates herself "at particular axes through the social relations of differential power" (Smith and Watson 2009, 15). This analysis will provide valuable information about the scope of agency achieved during the female migratory flow to America in the first decades of the 20th century.⁵

Only three years later, in 2009, Colm Tóibín published his novel *Brooklyn*, which became an immediate success. Here, Tóibín again deals with an Irish woman's story of exile, a topic he had previously explored in *The South* (1990). Now Eilis Lacey, a young Irish girl from provincial Ireland, leaves for America in the early 1950s. Overseas she is offered a job at a big store as a shop assistant, while she attends evening classes to become an accountant and meets Italian Tony, whom she eventually marries before returning home after her sister's untimely death. During her unavoidable visit to her town she feels impelled to resume her old life in the shadow of her deceased sister until gossip about her marriage in America forces her to leave for good. The last lines of the novel suggest a brighter future ahead for Eilis as the train moves away. Through the use of an omniscient narrator, the author explores what George O'Brien (2000: 53) named "the aesthetics of exile", a feeling of intimate uncertainty that is superbly expressed in the following passage (Tóibín 2009, 252):

And as the train rolled past Macmine Bridge on its way towards Wexford, Eilis imagined the years ahead, when these words would mean less and less to the man who heard them and would come to mean more and more to herself. She almost smiled at the thought of it, then closed her eyes and tried

5 From the start of the 20th century and up to the 1950s, more women than men left Ireland. Multiple factors accounted for Ireland's hemorrhage, i.e., confinement to the household within a rural farm economy, subjection to male control and imposition of conservative and patriarchal moral values. For an ethnographic account of Irish female emigration see O'Carroll (2015).

to imagine nothing more.

With this open ending, Tóibín suggests that Eilis' flight to America becomes a lifelong process of negotiation between what awaits her in the new land and what she has left behind. Memories seem to be more problematic for the emigrated who are caught in some way between two worlds. This situation forces them to perform “everyday acts of accommodation” (Savu 2013, 250) in an attempt to find their place somewhere between the two sides of the Atlantic.

In order to provide a coherent examination of the migratory processes represented in *The Light of Evening* and *Brooklyn*, special attention must be paid to the intersections of gender and class and how location modifies them. In the belief that these two narratives display critical information about the construction of female identities and the role that social structures play in their protagonists' lives, these characters' shifting positionalities will be studied in the context of three geographical milestones: first, departure from Ireland; second, life in America; and third, return to Ireland. Finally, the conclusions will highlight both the inter-categorical shifting relations between the Irish who stayed and those who emigrated, as much as the intra-categorical differences within the groups of emigrated Irish women.

Leaving Mother Land

In the two selected novels, emigration is represented as a customary performance, a form of “culture” in Fitzgerald and Lambkin's words (2008: 42) which pervades daily life, as *Brooklyn* quite simply illustrates when Father Flood offers to find “a suitable position” (Tóibín 2009, 24) for Eilis in *Brooklyn*: (ibid) “Many she knew had gone to England and often came back at Christmas or in the summer. It was part of the life of the town”. This familiarity of Irish population with migratory experiences is documented in several volumes that have collected the experiences of emigrated Irish women (Diner 1983; Nolan 1986; O'Carroll 2015) but at the same time, it also puts into question the degree of agency displayed in the performance of migration as a particular act. In fact, the selected

novels suggest that the actual journeys are rarely the result of personal resolutions.

On the contrary, these young women seem to be carried away by other people's decisions. That incapacity to take charge of their own lives together with the social pressure to migrate is clearly stated in *The Light of Evening* when Dilly recalls how she and her friends used to play by the Shannon lake and pretended to bid goodbye to a ship bound to America (O'Brien 2006, 29): "Maybe I decided then, maybe not. There was always so much talk about America, every young person with the itch to go". This indecisiveness can also be found in some testimonies of emigrated Irish women who acknowledged a lack of control in decision-making. For instance, Bridget McLaughlin, who immigrated to Boston in 1925, confessed (O'Carroll 2015, 53): "There was no need to leave there, but other people didn't feel that way". Although this was not the case for every Irish woman who went to America, it is essential to consider female migration not only as the result of a questionably conscious decisions but also as the outcome of a set of factors that coalesced and privileged mobility over personal desire for women of a certain age and status. As many of them were young healthy women living in modest or poor households with little or no prospects in depressed rural Ireland, there was little room for choice regardless of their own will, as *Brooklyn* openly illustrates through an account of the protagonist's feelings before migrating (Tóibín 2009, 29): "She would prefer to stay at home, sleep in this room, live in this house, do without the clothes and shoes".

Nonetheless, both novels note that these women's personal reflections were neither allowed nor expected to be voiced, so once the decision was taken, a social apparatus was set in motion to ensure the adequacy of the process of migration. Through a series of manoeuvres, both novels depict how the personal voyage becomes a social practice participated by forces of very different nature. In *The Light of Evening*, the reader learns that the night before the departure people gathered at the family home, a practice known as the American Wake (O'Brien 2006, 31): "Some neighbours had helped with the passage money and I was sent around the kitchen to shake hands with them and swear that I would repay them". It may be observed that, by transferring a personal act into the public sphere, the subject's freedom is undermined and the protagonist feels obliged to conform to communal

expectations and demands. Here, the intersection of age, gender and class position young Dilly as a powerless object with little or no agency at all.

Furthermore, the socialisation of individual mobility also brings to the fore a gender-biased conceptualisation of belonging. While the idea of going to America was commonly accepted as a particular performance, female mobility became contentious with the ideological construction of femininity as it confronted economic demands with national expectations of social reproduction and care (Gray 2013, 25). As will be seen later, this interrelation between the political, the economic and the emotional is recreated through the abundant correspondence exchanged between mothers and daughters, where the former frequently moan and complain of their daughters' absence to the point that their remarks become veiled accusations of desertion. Far from coincidental, the intersection of these three axes creates a form of social pressure, which must be read as a subtle allusion to the behaviour that was expected of young Irish women. In fact, this behaviour was also encouraged by both the Catholic Church and the Government, according to the national gendered project engraved in the 1937 Constitution (Travers 1995). In particular, sections 2.1. and 2.2. of Article 41 bound Irish women to maternity and the limits of the home, a message reinforced by Pope Pius XI's encyclical *Quadragesimo Anno* (1931) (Beaumont 1999). Accordingly, both novels invoke the role of caretaker embodied in the young women, and use the mother figure to claim them back when needed. Naturally, this request causes tense situations where implicit and explicit contradictions of displacement are revealed. In *Brooklyn*, it takes Eilis some time to realize that she is expected to keep her mother company after Rose's death even though she must cross the Atlantic while her brothers live in Birmingham:

“Before she had seen Father Flood, it had not occurred to Eilis that she might go home for a brief stay. But once it had been said and did not sound ridiculous and met with Father Flood's approval, then it became a plan, something that she was determined to do.” (Tóibín 2009, 194).

A more obvious discord can be detected in the following passage of *The Light of Evening* on the day after Dilly's arrival back home:

“My mother was crisp with me for coming down in my style and would not hear of me going out to the yard with her to do the jobs. [...] There was a gulf between us, she knowing I had already gone and I not knowing how soon I could break it to her.” (O'Brien 2006, 97).

These excerpts illustrate how physical (dis)location problematizes the traditional representations of Irish womanhood and their place within Irish society.

The Mating Calls of the World Beyond

The idealisation of the land – in this case America – is frequently used as a device to address the appeal of migration. However, both novels present America as a dystopian land, which Dilly would name the “Isle of Tears” (O'Brien 2006, 37), and which would cause a disappointing first impression. For the protagonists, the falseness of the American dream is especially shocking, a tale they had bought back home, and probably because of that, they are reluctant to debunk the myth: “I could not write back and tell her how strange and false everything was” (O'Brien 2006, 49). Here, personal frustrations must be considered without neglecting other equally important factors, namely, the social expectations left behind. Emotional and economic considerations burden the migrants despite the dreadful reality they live, which makes them feel entrapped in a world that is not what they expected. Although there has been little research done on the emotional terrain of Irish female migration (Ryan 2008), the contradictory feelings these protagonists have upon their arrival in America are bound by the expectations they must live up to. It is the emotional culture they carry with them that prevents them from admitting unhappiness or failure at the same time as they keep on perpetuating the idealised notion of America. In opting for keeping up appearances, their true experiences are silenced and they inadvertently preserve falsehood.

Their dramatic arrival in America, where Irish immigrants were already too prevalent, is thus presented as a form of differentiation and exclusion, making place a determining factor that would fix their social position. If back in Ireland, Dilly and Eilis had been considered suitable for migration, and had even been encouraged to leave for their and their families' sake, once they arrived in America

they were treated as the outcasts of the new world. That is something Georgina, Eilis's cabin mate, had warned her about during her journey in the so called "coffin ships": "'Your suitcase is all wrong but there is nothing we can do about that.' 'What's wrong with it?' 'It's too Irish, and they stop the Irish.'" (Tóibín 2009, 49). The pejorative social perception of the Irish in America is well illustrated in *The Light of Evening* (O'Brien 2006, 37), where a passage gives detail of the embarrassing procedures the emigrants **had to endure**: "On the Island of Tears, we were subjected to every kind of humiliation -our tongues pressed, our eyelids lifted with a button hook, our hearts listened to, our hair examined for lice, hosed down by foreign ladies who had not a shred of modesty". Once there, these women **had to endure** hard living conditions, far worse than what they had left back home, as well as social contempt in the hope that they would eventually achieve a reasonable position. Therefore, upon their arrival, their social status reaches its lowest level to the point that Dilly identifies herself with a sign in Ellis Island that reads: "Cripples not wanted" (O'Brien 2006, 42). According to historians (Nolan 1986, 83), this shift down the social ladder was generally accompanied by the disdainful treatment of the Irish on American soil, thereby demonstrating how issues of identity are affected by geographical and cultural spatiality.

As was usual at the time, female migration to America was based on transnational networks that secured their insertion in the new land. Thanks to these connections, Irish women could easily join domestic service, which became their primary means of income in the first decades of the 20th century (Nolan 1986, 83), and survived into the 1940s and 1950s (Morgan 2011, 78). From a transnational perspective, these flows indicate that most of the Irish women who emigrated left behind a hard life of rural work to become caretakers in urban areas overseas. This transferability of a low cost labour force clearly entailed a gender bias that remained unchallenged through displacement. For instance, in *The Light of Evening*, Dilly reckons that her cousin is not the nurse she claimed to be but just someone that "[..] washed patients and dressed them, her hands pink and raw-looking from all the washing" (O'Brien 2006, 49).

Nevertheless, the migrant networks were crucial for the newcomers although the social

patterns of these connections differed greatly in terms of gender. While it was usually women, often female relatives, who welcomed and boarded them in the first instance, it was a male task, especially that of priests, to introduce them into the American labour market and to socialize them. According to biographical records (Diner 1983, 42), the nature of these transnational networks was overwhelmingly feminine. In these novels, this is rapidly detectable in the relevance given to the landladies. They were women who had been migrants before, kept alive their bonds with their homeland, adopted a mother-like role, and imposed chaste behaviour among their lodgers. Boarding at an Irish widow's was common among emigrated Irish girls and, as Dennis Clark (1991, 15) has pointed out, "immigrant girls often softened their adjustment to America by maintaining ties with older women from their homeland", a pattern that the selected novels accordingly illustrate. This provided immigrants with safe lodging and a familiar network of housemates and connections that would ensure their social integration. However, this option would also entail the acceptance of old social patterns and structures that they thought had been left behind. Also, these women enjoyed a certain status, as they were the watchers of morality overseas and provided surveillance on female newcomers.⁶ Furthermore, they would also feel free to impose punishment upon those who deviated from decent Irish behaviour, as in *Brooklyn*, when after a night together with Tony, Mrs Kehoe refused to speak to Eilis.

While all this took place within the private arena, male characters, namely the priests who played a significant role in the newcomers' destinies, dominated the public realm. In the selected novels they are depicted as active men who kept frequent correspondence with the homeland and acted as work agencies in America. They selected the type of work the newcomers were to perform and introduced them personally to the new employers, as the two novels illustrate. In *The Light of Evening*, Dilly joins the domestic service of a well-off family, a matter she should appraise according to the priest (O'Brien 2006, 51): "He reckoned I was lucky to be placed in such a select neighbourhood, what with the park opposite with its meadows and waterfalls, and moreover I wouldn't feel lonesome as there were

6 An interesting analysis of the social function these women played in the immigrant communities may be found in Dennis Clark's (1982) study of the Irish immigrants in Philadelphia.

sheep in it and I could hear them bleating at night.”

Such patronising attitude is also detectable in *Brooklyn* (Tóibín 2009, 59): “On her first day, father Flood had taken her to the main office and she had had an interview with Elisabetta Bartocci, the daughter of the owner [...]”. From these examples it can be inferred that these male characters engendered confidence among the employers in securing the young women’s behaviour and performance. But it is worth noting that while these Irish women were submitted to a male authority, they also enjoyed new forms of integration in the American society that opened the door to a certain degree of autonomy. For Dilly, this took the form of a job as an apprentice seamstress, despite the terrible working conditions this employment entailed. On her side, Eilis could combine her job with night study in bookkeeping and accountancy. So, both novels agree that their protagonists’ desire for improvement gets fostered by the particular economic and social context of a dynamic America, which was just the opposite situation of what they experienced in agricultural and isolated Ireland, as O’Carroll has explained (2015, 34): “In the Ireland of the 1920s, therefore, whether a woman was part of the rural farm economy or a mill worker, her life was defined in relation to men”. Thus, in America, that particular intersection of place and gender situated the subjects in a more optimistic position than they would occupy in Ireland, where these chances could hardly have taken place.

Motherland Calling Back

The call of the Motherland claiming these young women back is particularly evident in the correspondence maintained between the mother figures and the protagonists, especially after the death of a relative, the moment when both Dilly and Eilis are requested back to perform care tasks. In her letters, Dilly’s mother laments her son’s violent death and shamelessly expresses her need for comfort, a commitment that only Dilly seems to be able to provide. Also in *Brooklyn*, when news of her sister’s sudden death arrives, Eilis is urged to return to Ireland all the way from America. Underneath these demands lies the concept of female emigration as a commodity, an allowance subject to the interests of the family unit as Eilis reflects before her departure (Tóibín 2009, 30): “Rose, she realized, in

making it easy for her to go, was giving up any real prospect of leaving this house herself and having her own house, with her own family". Unsurprisingly, the emigrated show reluctance to comply with this form of emotional pressure. And it is at this point when other morally respected voices, such as Father Flood in *Brooklyn* and Ma Sullivan in *The Light of Evening*, intervene to correct the deviation and encourage the young women to return whether out of duty or for their own good.

Eventually, this implementation of emotional and social corrective forces leads the young women to accept the terms of the socio-symbolic contract, which from a gender perspective is a "sacrificial contract" (Meaney 2012, 100). The effects of their return home are also contradictory. On the one hand, both women seem to regress to an earlier position of submission and speechlessness. Communal control upon the protagonists is particularly evident in *The Light of Evening* on the very day of Dilly's arrival (O'Brien 2006, 96): "How long was I staying? They both asked and answered for me. I would not leave a mother alone in her plight". Dilly is not given the chance to respond, nor can Eilis find the courage to contravene her mother's decisions or to reject the job she is offered in her hometown. Furthermore, her process of reintegration goes so far that she sees herself as a duplicate of her sister, acting as her "ghost" (Tóibín 2009, 218). These forms of consent demonstrate that the concept of place exceeds physical space as it entails cultural and symbolic performances that both define and limit the young women's degree of personal agency. On the other hand, once they are back in Ireland, both Dilly and Eilis are regarded as worldly and fashionable in the eyes of the Irish that had stayed at home. This involuntary upgrading in terms of class offers them some chances to improve their limited scope of agency: Dilly marries wealthy Cornelius, the owner of family estate Rusheen and Eilis enjoys respect and allows Jim Farrell to court her until gossip menaces to make public her marriage with Tony back in America and forces her to leave for Brooklyn. While these little allowances do not reduce the severity of social control and the patriarchal organisation of the Irish society, the protagonists enjoy a certain capacity to profit from this improvement within the limits of the roles they are expected to perform, i.e., caretakers within the structure of traditional marriage, both in Ireland and overseas. Thus, in the selected novels female migration turns out to be

a disruption of the nationalist gendered project. In order to restore it, personal, social and structural forces come into play and establish a pattern of behaviour to which the individual submits with greater or lesser docility. In *The Light of Evening*, total submission and replication of traditional patterns seems to be Dilly's only destiny, whereas in *Brooklyn* Eilis leaves an open door to a (slightly) different outcome in America.

Conclusion

In a prose full of nostalgia and lyricism, *The Light of Evening* begins with the description of an old photograph of Dilly as a young woman standing by her mother (O'Brien 2006, 1): "Despite the virgin marvel of the white dress and the obligingness of her stance, my mother has heard the mating calls of the world beyond and has seen a picture of a white ship far out at sea." This archetypal image of two generations of Irish women conceals the real and symbolic contradictions that emigration entailed for those who ventured. Both *The Light of Evening* and *Brooklyn* tell the stories of Irish women who immigrated to America at different moments in the 20th century and by doing so, they involuntarily challenged the ideological construction of Irish femininity (Gray and Ryan 1997). This chapter has analysed the tensions and contradictions that being an emigrated Irish woman entailed and to what extent the protagonists of the novels differently strive for autonomy. To illustrate it, the analysis has concentrated on the intersection of two key axes, gender and class, and how physical and emotional (dis)locations contribute to alter the traditional representations of Irish womanhood and their place within Irish society before, during and after the migratory process.

Initially, the novels present protagonists who feel impelled to emigrate. Their journeys are represented as the result of social and economic structural needs rather than the outcome of a conscious personal choice. This shows the relevance of political and economic factors to foster massive migration among young Irish women at the time. Also, the two novels depict America as a land of opportunities, but this idealisation is soon replaced by disappointment as the protagonists find themselves replicating the same kind of low-skilled chores they used to do in their homeland. But,

after much effort and ordeal, it is in America where they can catch a glimpse of the opportunities ahead, Dilly in the form of professional specialisation and Eilis through study. Naturally, these prospects make them reluctant to return home, particularly after being requested back by their mothers. Their initial hesitations to comply with their demands may be read as a form of contestation that menaces the status quo of the Irish society. In order to restore the patriarchal organisation of society, personal correspondence is used as a form of emotional pressure to return. On a social level, priests and landladies play their parts as delegates of Irish morale overseas and they actively push the protagonists to submit to their duties back home. Eventually, this active participation of citizenship in the shaping of certain politics of belonging ensures the cultural reproduction of gender, an ideological construction that geographical distance cannot annihilate. It is here where space defeats place in Anthias' conceptualization of the terms, and the act of emigration is revealed as powerless against the call of Motherland.

Yet, paradoxically, the migratory experience exerts a positive effect upon the social position of the protagonists once they are back in Ireland: Dilly and Eilis find themselves enjoying a higher status within Irish society, a class shift that clearly benefits the emigrated over the ones who stayed in Ireland. This upgrade grants them a wider scope of choice albeit circumscribed to the patriarchal marriage scheme and therefore, male dependant. This inter-categorical move illustrates how geographical spatiality can affect the intersection of categories dynamically and that the experience of migration adds some value to these female characters.

Although both protagonists seem to undergo a similar pattern in their diasporic experiences, some noticeable differences have been identified at the intra-categorical level. Time is a decisive factor with regards to the array of possibilities for empowerment these women encounter. At the beginning of the 20th century, Dilly's working conditions in America are limited to being a maid in a big house – a situation that improves only slightly when she finds a more skilled job as an apprentice seamstress. However, her abrupt return to Ireland and subsequent marriage stifle any further development. This scenario is sensibly different in the America of the 1950s where Eilis enjoys a

higher quality job as a shop assistant and is allowed to follow night courses to improve her chances of promotion and of becoming a skilled employee. Unlike Dilly, Eilis' return to Ireland encompasses better chances in the work sphere, and she is asked to join a local firm to do accountancy, "[...] the work she had been dreaming about" (Tóibín 2009, 219). However, she is aware that this dream job is not compatible with marriage and the novel's open ending leaves the reader wondering what future awaits Eilis back in the new land. Although training in America allows the emigrated a palpably different degree of autonomy, both in Ireland and overseas marriage remains incompatible with professional occupations for women, a scheme to which both protagonists eventually submit. All in all, for the most part of the 20th century, the cultural reproduction of gender relations is secured not only by law and institutions but also through the active role displayed by the networks of immigrants overseas and the relatives' emotional pressure through correspondence.

In the end, *The Light of Evening* and *Brooklyn* exemplify the conflict between collective national and individual interests in the context of Irish female migration in the 20th century. The detected variations in the positionalities occupied by the protagonists epitomize the relevance diversity and particularities of diasporic experiences and illustrate the dynamic intersections of class and gender according to time and space. These two novels represent different practices of consent and resistance to the ideological representation of Mother Ireland and the role Irish women were expected to play in the Irish society. These divergent processes can be seen especially in the sections devoted to the return to the homeland. The intersectional analysis deconstructs the unitary concept of the Irish migrant, challenges the essentialization of Irish women projected by legal and religious discourses, and highlights the plurality of the migratory experiences that millions of women, here embodied by Dilly and Eilis, endured during their journeys overseas and back home. It also underlines the changing scope of economic, political and social influences that shaped these women's degree of agency at each step of their odyssey. And, finally, it unveils the utilitarian nature of female migration for the purpose of the social and economic reproduction of a gendered national project.

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