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MISOGINIA Y FILOGINIA:
Fuerzas discursivas simbólicas
en la narrativa internacional

José García Fernández, Giuliana Antonella Giacobbe, Rocío Riestra Camacho
(editores)

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en la narrativa internacional**

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FEMINISM AND MISOGYNY IN SALLY ROONEY'S NOVELS

FEMINISMO Y MISOGINIA EN LAS NOVELAS DE SALLY ROONEY

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Resumen

La autora irlandesa Sally Rooney ha sido nombrada la primera gran novelista milenial. Sus tres novelas hasta el momento, *Conversaciones entre amigos* (2017), *Gente normal* (2018) y *Dónde estás, mundo bello* (2021), que tratan sobre las complejidades de las relaciones personales entre hombres y mujeres jóvenes en la Irlanda contemporánea, han recibido muchos elogios. Este artículo se centra en la novela más reciente de Rooney para examinar la coexistencia de rasgos feministas y sexistas, y analizar cómo afectan a la caracterización de los personajes femeninos. El análisis del comportamiento masculino y las correspondientes reacciones femeninas sirven para esclarecer conductas paradójicas de empoderamiento y sometimiento en el marco de las relaciones amorosas. El estudio sugiere la coexistencia de una misoginia interiorizada junto a discursos feministas, una combinación que provoca efectos negativos en los personajes femeninos. Finalmente, el artículo concluye que ciertos éxitos de ventas contemporáneos como el de Rooney validan corrientes de feminismo populista que incorporan aspectos misóginos y tipifican y perpetúan modelos problemáticos para la juventud actual.

Palabras clave: misoginia, feminismo, Sally Rooney, milenial.

Abstract

Irish author Sally Rooney has been named the first great millennial novelist. Her three novels so far, *Conversations with Friends* (2017), *Normal People* (2018) and *Beautiful World Where Are You?* (2021), which dwell around the intricacies of personal relationships among young men and women in contemporary Ireland, have received much acclaim. This article concentrates on Rooney's most recent novel to examine the coexistence of feminist and sexist traits, and how they affect the performance of the female characters. Male behaviour and female reactions will be analysed to outline the paradoxical conducts of empowerment and subjection embedded within love relationships. The study suggests the coexistence of internalized misogyny and feminist discourses, a combination that causes negative effects upon the female characters. Finally, the article concludes that contemporary best-sellers such as Rooney epitomize and validate currents of popular feminism alongside with misogyny, and typify and perpetuate problematic role models for millennials.

Keywords: misogyny, feminism, Sally Rooney, millennials.

1. SALLY ROONEY, A MILLENNIAL WRITER

Sally Rooney is one of the most successful Irish writers of the moment. She has been labelled as the “Salinger for the Snapchat generation” (Godwin, 2020), for her successful portrayal of her protagonists, who represent archetypal individuals of the millennial generation. Rooney's three novels so far, *Conversations with Friends* (2017), *Normal People* (2018) and *Beautiful World Where Are You?* (2021), dwell around the intricacies of personal relationships among young men and women in contemporary Ireland, and their search for their place in the world. Hence, these novels explore the problematic articulation of identity formation to a greater or lesser extent, always framed within romantic relationships. Rooney's works tend to replicate a similar pattern: the intimate drama is usually shaped by complicated romantic relationships that allow minimalist descriptions and a close exploration of the characters' psychological processes. At the backstage, job insecurity, the

housing problem and casual sexual relationships coexist with different forms of physical and psychological violence and a strong sense of not belonging (Barros-del Río, 2022a).

After the huge success of *Normal People* (2018), bolstered by its TV adaptation,¹ Rooney's third novel, *Beautiful World Where Are You?*, focuses on the convoluted progression of two couples, Alice and Felix and Eileen and Simon, skilfully interspersed with the intimate and detailed emails between the two women². This extensive epistolary style allows the reader to know about their past, their fears and longings, and the difficulties they encounter to achieve full realisation in life. The object of this study is to examine *Beautiful World Where Are You?* under the lens of feminism to critically assess its presentation of female friendship and romantic love as means of (un)fulfilment for the young generations. The study draws on theories of feminism, postfeminism and misogyny, to elucidate how a millennial novel such as *Beautiful World Where Are You?* typifies and perpetuates problematic role models for millennials.

2. THE COEXISTENCE OF FEMINISM AND MISOGYNY IN CONTEMPORARY CULTURES

After decades of feminist advances, a paradoxical implementation of feminism can be detected in western societies. Lettow denounces the marketisation and domestication of women's emancipatory movements (2015), Driscoll (2002) alerts that female bodies are often aligned with notions of wealth and commodification, and Ging (2009) warns about the naturalisation of consumerism linked to practices of gender. In the economic arena, Murphy and Cullen (2018) have noticed an economic

¹ The series aired during the Covid-19 lockdown in spring 2020 and immediately became a global hit. It also received harsh criticism on the part of Catholic circles, especially because of showing long and explicit sex scenes. For a deeper analysis of this TV adaptation see Barros-del Río (2022b). *Conversations with Friends* was also adapted into an Irish television series in 2022.

² Epistolary exchange is a narrative technique favoured by Rooney, who had also used it in *Conversations with Friends* and more sparingly in *Normal People*.

regression marked by gender patterns. The ideological repolarisation of class and gender is evident in western societies where, as Negra demonstrates, “postfeminism fetishizes female power and desire while consistently placing these within firm limits” (2009: 4). Postfeminism is a useful analytical category to capture “a distinctive contradictory-but-patterned sensibility intimately connected to neoliberalism”(Gill, 2016: 610). In other words, some strands of feminism have been domesticated by neoliberalism so that female roles adapt to the needs of the markets to the point that inequalities may be perceived not as “the result of sexism but of natural differences and/or of women’s own choices” (Banet-Weiser, Gill and Rottenberg, 2020: 5).

To rein feminism effectively, neoliberal societies display different mechanisms. Gill has detected that “alongside all these different iterations of contemporary feminism is an equally popular misogyny” (2016: 619). Misogyny is a cultural practice that serves to maintain power of the dominant male group through the subordination of women and “it results in a fear, hatred and devaluing of women and the feminine” (Piggot, 2004: 15). For Szymanski and Kashubeck-West (2008), misogyny, or a hatred and devaluation of women, are a core construct of sexism. Yet, there are different forms of misogyny, and because of the strenuous work of feminism during decades, contemporary western societies tend to reject evident forms of sexism and let go more subtle forms. In this regard, benevolent sexism is a very efficient tool that can push women into providing the best justification for gender inequality. By “objectively” performing poorly, women facing benevolent sexism can hardly contest their own (group) subordination (Dardene *et al.*, 2007: 777). Furthermore, benevolent sexism, as opposed to hostile sexism, is viewed as “a more positive attitude (often paternalistic, but not necessarily) toward women that appears favorable but is actually sexist because it portrays women as warm but incompetent or weak individuals in need of men’s protection and support.” (Dardene *et al.* 2007: 764). Acceptance of this male behaviour is a form of internalized misogyny that “intensifies the relationship between external sexism and psychological distress.” (Szymanski, Gupta, Carr and Stewart, 2009: 108) and results in self-objectification and passive acceptance on the part of women.

In the light of these considerations, Rooney's most recent novel is analysed for two purposes. First, to assess the coexistence of feminist traits and internalized misogyny. Second, to typify the model of female young woman projected in the text. The subsequent discussion and conclusions will illuminate a critical reading of the selected work from a feminist perspective and offer a case study of misogyny in contemporary millennial novels.

3. *BEAUTIFUL WORLD WHERE ARE YOU?: A FEMINIST NOVEL?*

Alice and Eileen have been friends since college. Now, in the context of post-crisis Ireland and societal collapse, and about to turn thirty, they live apart from each other and have not met in person for a long time. Both characters epitomize the ideal of independent working women. Eileen works as an assistant at a literary magazine and Alice is a best-selling author. Yet, they live in a state of permanent dissatisfaction. Eileen struggles with paying her rent in Dublin and fantasizes with being married to Simon. Alice, on her part, is recovering from a psychological breakdown caused by her huge success as a writer, lives alone in the countryside and finds it hard to go back again to writing. Their emails steam a pervasive sense of loss, self-dissatisfaction and contempt: Eileen confesses that she feels "like a failure" (Rooney, 2021: 42) and Alice describes her own work as "the worst culprit" (Rooney, 2021: 96).

These two characters, each their own way, embody postfeminist traits of femininity, which Negra (2008) has identified as the necessity of marriage and the glorification of pregnancy, and the downsizing of the importance of work in women's lives. If feminism sought to instil confidence, resilience, and a positive mental attitude in women, postfeminism has domesticated women's emancipatory movements, affirms Lettow (2015), to the point that questions of feminine articulation are problematic (Cahill, 2017). Furthermore, young women are often associated with the neoliberal tropes of freedom and choice (Budgeon, 2011), yet their scope of agency seems to be curtailed by social expectations of successful femininity (Terrazas, 2022). This phenomenon is quite central to *Beautiful World, Where Are You?* and it is my belief that this novel incorporates distinctive

elements that suggest paradoxical conducts of empowerment and subjection embedded within love relationships to the detriment of the female characters. The following section will highlight the presence of popular feminism and misogyny in Rooney's latest novel.

4. INTERNALISED MISOGYNY AND ROMANTIC LOVE

As in Rooney's previous novels, identity subject construction in *Beautiful World Where Are You?* features in relation with others and interdependence serves to counteract the destabilising effects of materialism and commodification (Barros-del Río, 2022a). Female friendship stands as an anchor that helps the characters make sense of the changing world they live in. Eileen writes to Alice: "You should know that our correspondence is my way of holding on to life, taking notes on it, and thereby preserving something of my—otherwise almost worthless, or even entirely worthless—existence on this rapidly degenerating planet..." (Rooney, 2021: 15). As it is customary in Rooney's former novels, the positive effects of friendship counteract the aggressions coming from the world the characters live in and the upheavals of romantic and sexual engagements.

Parallel to Eileen and Alice's epistolary exchange, the plot unfolds these women's involvement with Simon and Felix, respectively. Eileen and Simon have known each other since childhood but despite their mutual desire, they seem unable to commit beyond occasional sex. Alongside, after a mental breakdown, Alice meets Felix on Tinder, a warehouse worker. In this case, what outlines their convoluted relationship is their class difference.

As in her previous novels, *Beautiful World Where Are You?* burrows into the emotional conflicts of the four protagonists, with a special focus on the development of their romantic and sexual relationships. These are embedded with different forms of internalized sexism epitomized by "passive acceptance of traditional gender roles and unawareness or denial of cultural, institutional, and individual sexism" (Szymanski *et al.*, 2009: 102). Paternalism, a benevolent form of sexism, is a practice where men "take responsibility for the welfare of women"

(Dardenne, Dumont and Bolier, 2007: 764). This form of patronizing entails a treatment of women as minors and lacking competence, and puts men in a position of superiority. Consequently, this imbalance exerts a negative effect upon the female characters, who frequently show signs of decreased self-esteem. This practice is detectable in the novel where, after a public interview in Rome, Alice plays down her intellect when questioned by Felix and describes her public speech as “superficial fluency”, insisting that she was not saying “anything really substantial” (Rooney, 2021: 89). This reaction suggests that her ability as a writer and her subsequent success are perceived as major threats to her relationship with Felix. In this instance, Alice voluntarily undermines her talent, and forsakes her right to an autonomous subject position, for the sake of a normative heterosexual relationship.

Similarly, Eileen confesses to Alice her inability to be a better person by herself without Simon's intervention:

I just have this sense that if Simon had taken me under his wing earlier in life, I might have turned out a lot better (...), and I will probably continue to make poor life decisions and suffer recurrent depressive episodes, and Simon will probably continue to be a highly competent and good-natured but emotionally inaccessible person. (Rooney, 2021: 248)

Eileen's inclination to self-doubt and underestimation is not only biased by the myth of romantic love, with marriage and motherhood as the ultimate goals, but also by her own conceptualisation of the ideal wife who, according to her, should be “(...) very beautiful. A younger woman (...) [n]ot too intelligent, but sweet-tempered” (Rooney, 2021: 157). With such an archetype of female perfection in mind, Eileen's low self-esteem finds solace in Simon's protective personality who represents every form of authority upon her: he is older, has a steady job, sticks to firm ethical values and displays exquisite manners. With him, she adopts a position of inferiority, she calls him “daddy” and adopts a submissive role during sexual intercourse:

For a moment she said nothing. Then she said: Will you tell me what to do?

In his ordinary, relaxed, half-amused voice he answered: Will you do what you are told?

She started laughing again. Yes. It's funny how much it turns me on. (Rooney, 2021: 152)

As this excerpt shows, validation of male dominance is naturalized in exchange of pleasure, which together with rationality is one of the two primal motives of modern life (Negra, 2009). Although Eileen and Simon's relationship epitomizes a form of female subordination, the novel projects a comforting perspective towards it when Alice confesses: "I do find his paternalistic beliefs about women charming" (Rooney, 2021: 335). Here, legitimation of paternalism as a form of benevolent sexism implies willing acceptance of inferiority on the part of Eileen. She represents women's inability to care for themselves and find happiness on their own.

Beautiful World Where Are You? comprises other forms of internalized misogyny, too. Unawareness and/or denial of sexism contribute to "reinforce the central male culture of devaluing women through acts of horizontal oppression and omission" (Szymanski, 2009: 103). An example can be found in a scene where Alice discovers Felix's interest in watching porn. Initially, she feels disturbed and humiliated, and confronts him. However, as he confesses other past offences, such as sexual intercourse with a minor, and an unwanted pregnancy after coercion for sexual intercourse, she begins to show mercy at his repentance and avoids further judgement: "Well, I can't judge you, she said. When I think about the worst things I've ever done, I feel the same way you're describing" (Rooney, 2021: 124). With these words, Alice validates remorse as a form of atonement without further consideration of the ideology underlying Felix's behaviour. Added to her acceptance of his past, which can be interpreted as a form of internalized sexism, she levels her own mistakes to his, in an attempt to minimise his guilt: "I can't make it better, what you did, she said. And you can't make it better for me either. So maybe we're both bad people" (Rooney, 2021: 125). Equation of their different forms of abuse results in a decrease of guilt and a

subsequent acceptance of dominant and degrading male sexual behaviour, a matter that Alice closes as follows: "I was horrible as well. What I said about those women degrading themselves for money, that was a stupid thing to say. I don't even think that, really. It doesn't matter, we were both annoyed" (Rooney, 2021: 125). All along this scene, the reader notices how Alice progressively withdraws her initial outrage and dismisses Felix's behaviour as sexist, then retracts from her own judgement, and finally devalues herself so that Felix's integrity and superiority is preserved. This form of internalized misogyny contributes to the perpetuation of gender inequalities.

In the last chapter, the novel accommodates to the myth of romantic love, which entails the fulfilment of female destiny. Eileen discovers that she is pregnant and tells Alice that Simon had even talked about getting married. In her own words, she is "almost painfully happy" (Rooney, 2021: 336). This conventional ending stresses Eileen's success over Alice's uncertain situation. The message, in the end, is that traditional forms of marriage and motherhood equate success and happiness for women.

5. CONCLUSIONS

Sally Rooney's *Beautiful World Where Are You?* explores the intricacies of contemporary relationships among women and between men and women. With a characteristic intimate style, the plot navigates both Eileen and Alice's friendship and their respective love relationships. Rooney's prose unfolds their longings and insecurities, as well as the power dynamics that sustain their liaisons, which entail several forms of internalized sexism among which internalized misogyny, self-objectification and passive acceptance of traditional gender roles have been studied.

On the one hand, Eileen epitomizes the feminine prototype in postfeminist culture, with exultation of domesticity accompanied by marriage and motherhood (Negra, 2009). Her relationship with Simon is based on a willing acceptance of benevolent paternalism, an attitude that puts him in a position of superiority and limits her agency to passivity and dependency. This goes

hand in hand with her low self-esteem, which improves only when she gets pregnant.

On the other hand, Alice's success and intellectual capacity become problematic in her relationship with Felix. To prevent his sense of inferiority, she downsizes her accomplishments and naturalizes degrading male sexual behaviour against women in order to preserve the normative hierarchical order within their relationship.

To conclude, the analysis carried out demonstrates that *Beautiful World Where Are You?* is an Irish millennial novel that displays several forms of internalized misogyny. It discloses the contradictions that result from attempting to occupy the subject position of successful femininity within heterosexual relationships. At the same time, it projects conservative social ideologies that place marriage and motherhood as the ultimate source of happiness and naturalize practices of submission for the sake of male dominance. It complies with postfeminist features (Negra, 2009; Gill, 2016) which present female success within the interests of neoliberal economies. We can conclude that the novel under study validates currents of popular feminism alongside with misogyny, and perpetuates gendered role models for millennials.

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