

EXILE, MIGRATION, AND 'THE OTHER' IN CONTEMPORARY IRISH WRITING

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There is a substantial body of historiographical work on the experience of emigration from Ireland which refers to literary texts for purposes of illustration and which often notes that Irish emigrants viewed their departure as exile. However, there is little recognition and expression in Irish prose writing or 'writing in Ireland' of the relatively new immigrant experience of those who are currently moving from Europe and further abroad to Ireland. This article sets out to explore the possible link between the Irish literary notion of 'exile' and responses to immigration into the island of Ireland. For the purpose of this article I will focus on prose writing only, as additional investigations into poetry and drama would be beyond the scope of this study.

The history of exile literature is as old as the history of writing itself. The concept of exile forms an immensely powerful and enduring element (not only) in the tradition of Western literature and those literatures which grew out of the European experience. Most foundational texts, such as Homer's *Iliad*, the *Odyssey*, Flavius Josephus's chronicles on the beginnings of the Jewish diaspora, the Biblical scriptures, and the Koran, deal with conflict, separation, journeys, flights, and re-formations. However, exile has a special prominence in the twentieth century because of modern warfare and imperialism. According to the late Edward Said, himself a displaced Palestinian, the "quasi theological ambitions of totalitarian rulers" have created "the age of the refugee, the displaced person, mass immigration" (164).

Whether viewed metaphorically or literally, exile has profoundly influenced the relationship of innumerable storytellers, artists, and writers to their culture and it has contributed to the ways in which they have expressed that relationship in their works. Exiled writers who have been forced out of their homelands describe the pain that accompanies the loss of place and sense of belonging, the loss of their mother tongue and their cultural roots. Some writers exiled themselves from places they did not consider home to find places where they could write freely. Others are exiled less by geography than according to received literary criteria (genres, literary canons, etc.), which reflect aspects of the complex interactions of ethnicity, class, gender, and sexuality. For example, female authors in their native country often consider themselves as 'expatria in patria' due to their different social experience.¹

Obviously, voluntary exile and forced exile have different impacts on writing. However, what they have in common is the 'matter of exile,' which extends beyond physi-

1 It has to be noted that female writing in geographical exile is also quite different with regards to themes and motifs from male exilic writing.

cal or geographical definitions and thus becomes an abstract exile, which Said calls an “estrangement from the centre.”² What is most important is whether an exiled writer defines him/herself as such and that exile is seen as a psychological experience:

Exile, however, is a much broader term than the one that defines geo-geographical distance. It is a cross-cultural, cross-territorial and cross-linguistic experience. The cross-cultural and cross-linguistic experience of exile presents itself as a cultural challenge, which offers more colourful and varied means of artistic expression. (Olszewska 1)

Exile Literature and the Irish Context

‘Exile’ and ‘emigration’ are contrasting terms defining different states and allegiances: ‘emigration’ stresses the importance of being part of a community (of an ‘out-movement’), while ‘exile’ implies individuality and solitude. However, the idea of emigration as exile has deep roots in the Irish literary and historical tradition: Gaelic poets used the word *deoraí*, which literally means ‘banishment,’ to describe anyone who left for whatever reason (Miller 105) – thus referring to a displacement from home and the difficulties experienced in cultural and linguistic assimilation. Hence, the conceptualisation of ‘exile’ in its literary representation is mainly Gaelic, Catholic, and nationalist and associated with the rural, economic, and political imperatives of Irish Catholicism. The term ‘exile,’ the affective complex and social construct that surrounds it, and the way this term is understood, expressed, resisted, or ignored in oral and in written forms, is a distinctive and distinguishing feature of Irish literary history.

Patrick Ward suggests a multidisciplinary approach to the study of Irish expressions of exile, emigration, and internal marginalisation in an international and comparative context, which might aid the realisation that Irish experiences of exile are by no means unique. Next to the economic necessity, it can be argued that the nature of Irish exile during the twentieth century was cultural in two aspects: it meant an escape from provincialism and nationalism (as the source of xenophobia and intolerance) and the response to a crisis of culture and identity (as an expression of post-colonial hybridity). Within the context of the exile theme in Irish writing one can trace, following Ward (15-17), four general types of relationship with Ireland as the home place: first of all, an exploration of Irish identity, which involves an examination of community and attachment to place; secondly, a contrary theme of alienation and separation from place and roots. Thirdly, in Irish diasporic literature, a tendency to strive for objectivity and integrity may be identified, which also deals with the effect of separation on those who have departed. The fourth category is concerned with return and includes those texts, which deal with ‘internal exile’ and the return to the homeland. Despite a vast and varied tradition, exilic writing is generally perceived accord-

2 Said, “Reflections on Exile” 176-177. See also Böss & Gilsenan Nordin 8-9, and Böss, “Theorising Exile” 16-18, for a detailed outline of the historical, structuralist, and post-structuralist meanings of the term ‘exile.’

ing to a binary logic where 'exile' either produces creative freedom or it traps the writer in restrictive nostalgia. Often these notions co-exist within the same literary works, and Irish exile writing is no exception to this.

The Female Experience

Women make up a vast and often overlooked section of uprooted populations. Hence, the story of male exile is predominant not only in Irish literary works on exile and emigration. Notions of homelessness, frustration about conditions that left exile as the only option, the feeling of being dispossessed, and comparisons with Biblical exile are, however, core issues in Irish exile writing by both male and female authors. In particular, it is "the daughter's obligation to follow her father into exile or marriage experienced as an exiled state" (Olinder 13), which is one of the experiences specific to Irish women. Women, too, were part of a post-colonial, disenchanting, and alienated group of writers and artists,

who either endured the oppressive climate of orthodox nationalist culture with other inner exiles, or who chose to leave the country for voluntary exile abroad, like so many other emigrants who voted against 'de Valera's Ireland' with their feet. (Böss 28-29)

In this context, Irish exilic writing became more than a representation of individual experiences, but a critical reflection by, and literary expression of, those who felt "socially and culturally exiled" (Böss 29) or excluded from a nationalist Irish state. It does not come as a surprise that women writers – subjects to a patriarchal state, church, and Catholic-Gaelic conservative identity code – chose their works to be radical, realist, and often feminist (e.g. the works of Edna O'Brien, Deirdre Madden, Anne Devlin). One of Emma Donoghue's characters in "Going Back" makes the point that "I've felt more of an exile for twenty years in Ireland than I ever have in the twelve I've been out of it" (Bolger 160). Specific female themes – in addition to the usual socio-cultural reasons for going into exile – are the issues of children born out of wedlock and moral judgement, female sexuality, the need to get away from patriarchal structures, and the notion of female powerlessness as well as reflections on the mothers who are left behind by emigrating children. However, often it is the working-class woman who has remained voiceless with regard to her specific experience of exile and/or emigration. This silence is not only a result of being female, but a result of being female and *poor* – pushed to the margins even further by the marginalised of more privileged middle-class backgrounds.

The State of Irish Exile Writing

In the light of Ireland's economic miracle, known as the Celtic Tiger, the disappearance of British Rule (almost), the collapse of church authority, and the general impact of globalisation, the "twin concepts of exile and emigration" (Böss 38) have lost their traditional meaning and relevance. The Irish are now in the process of moving be-

yond a traditional, narrow, and insular notion of Irish identity by accepting the plurality of their cultural heritage as well as recognising the country's transition into a multi-ethnic society brought about by immigration to Ireland. Today, the experience of Irish life is linked as much to London, New York, Berlin, or Paris as it is to Dublin, Belfast, and Ballycastle.

Consequently, with regard to a contemporary literature by younger generations of Irish writers (e.g. Doyle, O'Connor, Binchy), the terms 'exile' and 'departure' suggest an outdated degree of permanency: Irish writers no longer go into exile, they commute, travel or stay at home. However, references to 'internal exile' are (still) common in contemporary Irish writing, with Roddy Doyle's 'Barrytown Trilogy'³ a principal example of working-class characters feeling alienated and excluded from Irish mainstream society as they have little access to the mainstream economy. The criticism voiced by Doyle's characters is thus directed not at foreign oppression of the Irish but at diverse social forces within Ireland that systematically exclude large parts of the population. Furthermore, critics have claimed that it is not the country but the writers who have not changed, in that "they cling to their outmoded culture of exile" and that their "adopted view of Ireland has become a stereotype" that refuses to die (Freitag 80).

Immigration Literature as Exile Literature

As early as the late 1960s, but predominantly since the late 1980s, a steady stream of literature has been emerging from immigrant minority circles in many western European countries. In particular since the 1990s, multicultural literature from refugee authors who fled their native countries because of conflict (e.g. Bosnia) and started writing in their new countries of residence (e.g. Scandinavia) deals with the exile experience of flight, escape, and homelessness as well as with aspects of assimilation or integration into a new society. In this writing, the themes and motives of exile literature and immigration literature mix and the characteristics of both types of literature blur into one another. Most of this hybrid literature reflects phases of the socialisation of the migrant community: that is, coming to terms with (war) trauma and personal loss, reflecting the concerns of the 'guest worker,' the bi-cultural second migrant generation, the cultural ties to the native country (or the loss of these), and the often problematic and different female experience of acculturation or integration.

Ireland's economic miracle at the end of the 1990s transformed it from being an emigration country during most of the twentieth century (and before) to being an immigration country: the boom resulted in an increase in employment of almost 30 per cent between 1996 and 2001 and the emergence of widespread labour shortage. This shortage attracted relatively large numbers of migrant workers and asylum

3 The 'Barrytown Trilogy' consists of the novels *The Commitments* (1988), *The Snapper* (1990), and *The Van* (1991).

seekers. Consequently, inward migration has become a significant component of population change. These changes in Irish migration patterns raise the issue of what kind of society Ireland wants to become, and moves are afoot to promote a more pluralistic and diverse society. Ethnic minority media have also begun to emerge (mostly print and the internet), and some parts of the domestic media have appointed special correspondents to report on ethnic affairs or to present news programmes aimed at promoting cultural diversity and to combat racism. Nevertheless, there is ongoing a complex debate about the changing perceptions of Irish identity and culture, which have been prompted by increased immigration.

Issues of cultural identity and xenophobic reactions to ethnic diversity also form a dominant theme in immigration literature, such as the fear of foreign infiltration, of a country losing its national identity and expressions of racism against the newcomers. However, the history of all immigration teaches us that 'ghettos' dissolve as soon as the process of differentiation and social advancement begins among the immigrants: class ultimately becomes more important than ethnicity. In this process of acculturation, cultural conformity is mainly a question of time, usually a matter of three generations. "Turks in Germany," for instance, "first become German Turks and then finally Turkish Germans. They are already beginning to walk in the footsteps of the Szymanskis and the Cartellieries" (Sommer 291). The same process has occurred over time in the history of Ireland (with Normans, Vikings, Jews, Italians, etc.) and is evident at present: after immigration from African and Asian countries, labour influx to Ireland is currently for the most part eastern European. Already settled Asian or African communities as well as the more recent continental European immigrants will ultimately find their place on the island. Admittedly, by now the Celtic Tiger has lost much of its bite. But its teeth marks – in the form of social change brought about in large part by the boom – appear to be deep and permanent, and Ireland, today economically in line with other EU countries, has no other choice but to accept the fact that it has become and will remain an immigration country.

Literary Responses to Immigration to Ireland

In 2003, Mary Robinson stressed the importance of "accurate portrayals of the diversity in Ireland today," emanating from immigrants themselves. Such an approach, she rightly claims, counteracts the "tendency to homogenise the *other*, the tendency that sees *us* as individuals and *them* as a homogeneous and terrifying mass" (qtd. in Hughes & Quinn 28). Yet, substantial immigration to Ireland is such a relatively recent development that immigrants have only just become involved in the activities and institutions of Irish life. Also, much of the research on immigration in Ireland is focused on asylum seekers (and their special legal status) rather than on immigrant workers. Compared with other countries with substantial immigration this emphasis is rather unusual (Cotter) but most likely a result of the very rapid increase in the

number of applications for asylum in the 1990s and Ireland's lack of experience in dealing with the issue.

One question that arises is to what extent have these societal changes been reflected in contemporary Irish literature – or in literature written in Ireland. So far, there has been limited research conducted on the emergence of media from the immigrant community, reflecting the fact that developments in this sphere are fairly new. Also, as with any community, most immigrants might not have access to the creative potential, the professional support or the drive to become writers or poets – pressurised, as many of them are, by the strains of making a decent living or achieving legal status. Furthermore, according to Abel Ugba, the motivation behind the emergence of ethnic minority media is often to redress the sensationalism in mainstream media rather than to create an outlet for artistic ambitions.

Since the very beginnings of *Metro Éireann*, Ireland's multicultural newspaper (with Ugba being one of its founders),⁴ the Irish writer Roddy Doyle has been a regular contributor. His first collection of short stories, *The Deportees*, published in 2007, began life as a series of fragmented stories written for *Metro Éireann*. Restricted to chapters of 800 words, these short stories of varying length all focus on different aspects of a changed Ireland, one where multiculturalism is a reality. With humour throughout, the eight stories in total address, among other issues, friendship, exclusion, inclusion, prejudice, racism, identity, and respect.

Maybe it was *Riverdance*. A bootleg video did the rounds of the rooms and the shanties of Lagos and, moved to froth by the sight of that long, straight line of Irish and Irish-American legs – tap-tap-tap, tappy-tap – thousands of Nigerians packed their bags and came to Ireland. *Please. Teach us how to do that.* (Doyle xi)

After this flippant introduction, Doyle educates his readers by explaining the real reasons for immigration – “jobs and the E.U., and infrastructure and wise decisions, and accident [...], education and energy, and words like ‘tax’ and ‘incentive’” (xi). The narratives in *The Deportees* are all about “someone born in Ireland meets someone who has come to live here,” and they all take place in the country's capital, Dublin. Doyle's loyal readership get an update on the lives of old acquaintances, such as Larry, the father from *The Van*, who has to face his own hypocrisy when his daughter brings home a Nigerian refugee. Or a slightly older Jimmy Rabbitte Jr, the protagonist from the author's first novel, *The Commitments*, who considers his multiethnic band The Deportees' rousing Soul music as the unifying marker of the band members' multicultural identity. Music figures here (as it does in *The Commitments*) as more than mere atmosphere: here Soul, the voice of 1960s oppressed black America, is used for the specific political purpose of trying to establish the same sense of brotherhood among multicultural Dubliners as it did among African Americans.

4 *Metro Éireann* was launched in April 2000. The paper started out as a monthly. Since 2007 it is a weekly, responding to an obvious need of expressing multicultural experiences in Ireland.

Identity is at the core of these narratives – national, cultural, ethnic and/or gender – whether the story deals with a young Irishman struggling, since he is black, to identify his Irishness (“Home to Harlem”) or whether the story’s focus is on immigrant exploitation (“I Understand”). Like some kind of contemporary multicultural *Dubliners*, Doyle’s stories introduce the reader to the experience of people living in a post-economic-miracle Dublin and, in analogy to cosmopolitan James Joyce’s narratives, in *The Deportees* the stories are linked by their themes. Doyle uses a range of perspectives and characters to examine, consider, and discard the reasons behind the obvious tensions and irrational fears which arise as a result of culture clashes or xenophobia. He reminds his readers that Dublin, and Ireland with it, has changed utterly and irreversibly and that the entire population must adjust and adapt, and individuals must learn accordingly not only ‘to tolerate’ but rather to accept ‘otherness.’ This notion is expressed quite powerfully in a story entitled “New Boy.” The story’s setting is the first day at an Irish school experience: new boy Joseph – a black African immigrant – has to deal with immediate racial abuse by two of his Irish classmates, which forces Joseph to learn quickly how to interpret and to negotiate the social codes that operate in the classroom as a microcosm of the dominant society. A victim of childhood trauma in his war-torn native country, Joseph proves ultimately capable of handling both the verbal and physical bullying inflicted on him by refusing victim status.⁵

The centrality of cultural identity and ethnic diversity is not a new feature of Roddy Doyle’s literary work: in his first novel, *The Commitments*, Irish post-colonial working-class identity plays a major part, and in his novel *Oh, Play that Thing*, about protagonist Henry Smart’s journey through the America of the 1920s and 1930s, Henry brings an outsider’s “clarity of vision to the intricate written and unwritten rules governing interracial interactions that a white American would have taken for granted in that period” (Reddy 374). As in most of his novels, in *The Deportees* Doyle strictly avoids multi-syllabic vocabulary (as it appears in many canonised texts), but, instead, achieves a rather conversational literary style by using everyday language (including a high level of profanity and slang) combined with little description and almost no authorial commentary – an overall ‘easy read,’ designed to reach a broad cross-generational and cross-cultural audience, irrespective of their social standing.

The absence of intrusive references to religion or to Irish politics is another aspect common to Roddy Doyle’s novels; instead of belabouring tribe or traditional questions of sin or nationality, Doyle explores significant problems in contemporary Irish society. (White 142)

In her short story “Pirates” (2006), published in a collection of fictions by Irish women, the Dublin-based Dutch writer Judith Mok takes on a young male Iranian’s perspective: fleeing from the Ayatollahs’ revolution in former Persia, Rashid Gallili immigrates

5 An eleven-minute film adaptation of “New Boy” by Irish-American writer and director Steph Green was nominated for an Oscar in 2009 in the short film category; see *New Boy* and also O’Grady.

to Ireland, where he starts working as a construction labourer. His earnings allow him to study English, and eventually he becomes a part-time tutor in Persian Studies at Trinity College. However, the narrative is not so much about an immigrant success story but focuses on the unfulfilling relationships of the exiled protagonist. Rashid's feelings of loss and alienation not only refer to his native country and the family he left behind but extend and are central to his relationships with 'the Irish' and Ireland: his young daughter Lilly becomes the main reason for Rashid to stay in Ireland, where he is alienated from his Irish lover as well as from his students and even from the Irish landscape:

Pale students, already tired of a life that hasn't yet started. Exhausted by the idea of having to record all that information in their hung-over brains. He looks discreetly at bulging belly buttons, the white, tender flesh spilling over tight trousers. Citrus trees, mimosa, clean tiled walls, splendid colours are what he wants now. (125)

Although the story's title refers to Lilly's interest in pirate films, it is the flat of fellow exile and compatriot Mrs Bahreini which becomes a secret harbour for both Rashid and the elderly widow and whose furniture, Persian porcelain, and large collection of books in old-fashioned Farsi provide not only a sense of home from home, but a safe island in their displacement. The exile experience makes them form an unlikely alliance, and both Mrs Bahreini and Rashid (and perhaps to an extent bi-cultural Lilly, too) are like pirates banned from their homeland, sailing through foreign waters.

Irish author Chris Binchy's third novel *Open-Handed* (2008) also captures the *zeitgeist* of affluent, multicultural Ireland. It is a recent example of Irish writing on post-Celtic-Tiger Irish society, with Dublin as the narrative's gritty backdrop. The novel's multiethnic characters are interacting in the narrow microcosm of the city's bars and a hotel, where they work as night staff and witness the hidden muck behind the capital's shiny façade. Binchy directs his readers' gaze to the underbelly of life in modern Dublin by observing fleeting moments in the lives of his five main characters, two of them Irish, three from Eastern Europe. Rumanian bouncer Victor (who pretends to be Italian, as Rumanian immigrants seem to rank lowest in Dublin's social periphery), Polish bar worker Agnieszka (whose employer offers her 'promotion' by becoming a prostitute), Polish night porter Marcin (a graduate archeologist), dubious Irish entrepreneur Sylvester, and his violent driver Dessie – all seek success from wildly different starting points and their lives intersect in a tangled web of corruption, exploitation, and violence.

Alienation, disillusion, and displacement are the core experiences addressed in this novel: there is wariness in every exchange, and trust comes with great difficulty. However, these experiences are not merely reserved for Dublin's new immigrant citizens but are also central to the 'indigenous' Irish characters' existence: even in close family relationships there is loneliness and a permanent sense of isolation. *Open-Handed* is a tale of culture clash and broken dreams. It is about cultural identity, morality, and integrity and describes the emerging social fabric of an urban environment that has witnessed an influx of immigrants who arrive hopeful, but sub-

sequently experience exploitation, dislocation, and conflict over allegiances and largely miserable working conditions.

As suggested earlier, there is a difference in the historical and political fact of exile. Looking at post-colonial Irish exilic writing one cannot deny the fact that the nature of Irish exile appears rooted in an economic and cultural, rather than a political, context. Ireland was considered a place of moral oppression and provincialism, and exile was largely a voluntary experience, whereas in totalitarian (or war-torn) countries – for instance, Nazi Germany, the Communist countries before the 1990s, or the Balkans – it was a condition of forced excision. However, it was in particular the implementation of censorship laws in Ireland, making it possible to control all spheres of individual, communal, and artistic life (from 1923 until the end of the 1960s), which drove many of Ireland's intellectuals and artists (e.g. Edna O'Brien and John McGahern) into exile. The Irish meaning of exile, understood as the quest for a voice, springs not least from this particular experience of cultural isolation and curtailment of freedom of artistic expression:

Censorship created a massive rift between society and its writers, as it isolated them and prevented the exchange of ideas. Seán O'Faoláin saw censorship as fascist, as it created a dangerous and widespread intellectual indifference. (Olszewska 23)

Literary texts act as a filter of experiences such as exile and migration, and often help to mediate the associated problems of identity. Within both exile and immigration literature, *displacement* is a key issue as it is at the centre of human experience. Despite the individual reasons for leaving behind the homeland, what emigrants from Ireland and immigrants to Ireland have in common is the feeling of looking back for probably the last time, of facing a new and possibly hostile world. More so than generations of emigrating Irish before the era of budget flight companies and the internet, today's transmigrants in Ireland regard, and remain attached to, their native country from a base in another state. As it becomes obvious from the literary examples discussed here, a notion of "belonging despite distance, and despite identificatory investments in a new place, may generate new exile imaginaries and processes" (Allatson & McCormack 21). In particular with regard to Ireland, with its history of emigration and now of immigration, there is a possibility that – perhaps due to a common notion of emigration experienced as displacement – a reciprocal acknowledgement of differences, of the other's 'otherness' (Habermas), could become a feature of a (future) common identity.

Conclusion

By reflecting on traditional notions of Irish exile and on the present state of Irish writing, and by focusing on recent literary responses to immigration to Ireland, it becomes evident that by and large Irish exilic writing has become a feature of the past. It has broadened horizons by engaging with other cultures and nations which, in turn, encouraged "the dialogue with and in the native culture and tradition" (Olszewska

170). Exilic and multicultural writing in Ireland by non-native Irish and Irish writing on émigrés and multicultural issues *in* Ireland is likely to become a new and topical focus within contemporary Irish literature. For literature is part of the system of cultural representations through which national identities and national subjects come into being, through which communities are explicitly imagined and consolidated (Bhabha 1-8). Nations require narratives through which individuals imagine themselves as national subjects and align themselves to the national narrative. Thus, the inclusion of the immigrant's experience and perspective will contribute to cultural integration and redefine the relationship of the margin ('social periphery') to the centre.

Furthermore, I would argue that the new 'internal exiles' are the right-wing (Catholic) traditionalists, the uneducated, and the racists who are confronted with a changed Irish society, compelled in many instances to change by the European Court of Human Rights, with the next controversial issue of same-sex-partnerships already pending. These people are facing a complete reversal of fortunes, as the values of the very people they had in the past forced into exile, internal and external, are now the dominant ones enshrined in the state's legislation or enforced by the ECHR. The state no longer belongs to the Catholic Church (which has lost its special position once guaranteed by the constitution), its moral code no longer sets the standards for behaviour, and the arbiter of morals and social values is the ECHR. Not least because of this turnaround, the concepts of 'the other' and identity will continue to form principal themes of Irish writing. Our age of globalisation makes it impossible to ignore an ongoing confrontation with 'difference' that raises equally unavoidable questions about belonging or 'normality.'

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