CONTEMPORARY BORDERS: INTERCULTURAL RELATIONS AND FEMALE AGENCY IN RODDY DOYLE'S SHORT STORY *THE PRAM*[1]

FRONTEIRAS CONTEMPORÂNEAS: RELAÇÕES INTERCULTURAIS E AGÊNCIA FEMININA NO CONTO *THE PRAM*, DE RODDY DOYLE

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ABSTRACT: The so-called Celtic Tiger, from the mid-1990s to the mid-2000s, was a period of outstanding social and economic development in the Republic of Ireland; and its political stability, high employment rates and unprecedented prosperity attracted a large number of immigrants to the country. Roddy Doyle's short story *The pram* looks at the relationship between locals and outsiders, portraying a scornful treatment that a Polish nanny receives from her Irish employers. This paper examines the position of Alina as a female immigrant in twenty-first century Ireland, to establish a view of how her agentic potentialities outgrow the prejudiced treatment she receives. I will argue, using the concept of "agency" (MCNAY, 2016), that Alina, from being a voiceless maid, achieves transformation into an empowered woman.
Keywords: Irish literature. Roddy Doyle. Borders. Agency.

RESUMO: O período conhecido como Tigre Celta, de meados de 1990 até meados de 2000, foi um período de grande desenvolvimento econômico e social na República da Irlanda. Estabilidade política, altas taxas de emprego e prosperidade sem precedentes atraíram muitos imigrantes para o país. O conto *The pram* de Roddy Doyle problematiza a relação entre os nativos e os estrangeiros, revelando o tratamento desrespeitoso que uma babá polonesa recebe de seus empregadores irlandeses. Este artigo analisa o posicionamento de Alina como uma imigrante na Irlanda do século XXI, a fim de entender como suas potencialidades de agência superam o tratamento preconceituoso que ela recebe. Usando o conceito de "agência" (MCNAY, 2016), argumentarei que Alina transforma-se de uma criada subjugada a uma mulher empoderada.
Palavras-chave: Literatura irlandesa. Roddy Doyle. Fronteiras. Agência.

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INTRODUCTION

Partly as a result of being a member of the European Union since the 1970s, the Republic of Ireland experienced both international and local factors in its unprecedented economic development during the years referred to as the Celtic Tiger era. The mood at the time is insightfully exposed in the foreword to the short story collection *The deportees and other stories*: "It happened, I think, sometime in the mid-90s. I went to bed in one country and woke up in a different one" (DOYLE, 2008, p. xi). Irish people, as well exemplified by Doyle's speech, lived the "economic 'miracle'" (KEOGH, 2012, p. 333, emphasis in original) and experienced great changes in the "social ethos" (KEOGH, 2012, p. 333) of the country. The Celtic Tiger period was also a new era in terms of gender equality policies in the Republic. In the 1990s, two women presidents were elected successively, Mary Robinson and Mary McAleese, representing the growing desire of women to "challenge the bastions of patriarchy" (KEOGH, 2012, p. 350) in Irish society. In terms of education and employment, there were more women attending higher education and being employed in historically male-dominated jobs, such as medicine and law (KEOGH, 2012, p. 351-352).

Ireland's progress in this period was not, however, limited to the financial system. It took place over a broader range of factors that also involved the political and the social: restoration of political stability; the peace process in Northern Ireland; serious scandals involving the Catholic Church, which led to decline of that church's status as an institution; the return of a great number of Irish citizens – and the arrival of immigrants, whether in the status of refugees, asylum seekers or as part of the general labour force. During the Tiger years, due to the high employment rate and the lack of skilled workers in a few areas, and unskilled workers in many (LOYAL, 2003, p. 79-81) people from various parts of the world migrated to Ireland, attracted by the "healthy roar of the 'Celtic Tiger'" (KEOGH, 2012, p. 336, emphasis in original). The number of asylum seekers arriving in Ireland was a large proportion of the newcomers. Since 1991, immigrants from more than a hundred nationalities have entered Ireland (KEOGH, 2012, p. 352).

The country that was once a "nation of emigrants" (FERGUSON, 2014, p. 52) became then "a home for immigrants" (p. 52). If the changes in the economic and political landscapes of the country granted its citizens extraordinary financial and career opportunities, the changes in the "ethnographic landscapes" (TEKIN, 2015, p. 86) presented a challenge to their historically constructed and strongly-rooted sense of nationhood. With the increasing number of immigrants in Ireland, the country and its citizens faced a new reality. While the State – through the Department of Justice – had to decide whether to grant a refugee status or a work permit to immigrants, or deport them (KEOGH, 2012, p. 350), people's lives

mingled with those of the newcomers. Since the establishment of the Irish Free State, in 1922, the country had been fighting to consolidate its sense of nationhood, which had included an enhancement of the Gaelic tradition, and institutionalization of the Catholic Church. However, with the emergence of the new, Celtic Tiger, era, and the consequent insertion of Ireland in a more globalized environment, such beliefs and pillars of Irishness were also put to the test:

> The hegemonic sense of Irish identity established during the 1920s and 1930s has been severely challenged by the rise of the Celtic Tiger. The two main pillars and regulators of Irish identity and conservatism since the foundation of the state – the Catholic Church and Fianna Fáil – have both been partly undermined by economic growth and various media discourses referring to clerical and political scandal. In addition, the assumption of shared values and experience so central to the Celtic imaginary has been challenged by the recent increase in foreign immigration. Migrants often expose the social and political fault lines of religion, ethnicity, class, gender and culture, which lie beneath the veneer of any "imagined community", and Ireland is no exception. (LOYAL, 2003, p. 83, emphasis in original)

Simultaneously with the optimistic scenario experienced in the Celtic Tiger period, the Irish state also went through several scandals related to excessive involvement of the public sphere with private corporations, and revelations of bribery and corruption involving important politicians. As Loyal mentions, several of the members of Fianna Fáil, the political party that had been in charge for a considerable time in Ireland, were involved in such scandals; while the Catholic Church, which until that period was still a powerful institution in the country, began to lose strength and influence after some serious scandals. Although the general feeling in the country was that "'we have never had it so good'" (KENNEDY, 2003, p. 95), people had to adapt not only to their new inner reality but also to the outer one. That is why the intercultural relations during the Tiger years, although unavoidable, were more problematic than they might have seemed at first glance for a country that until then had been isolated from the globalized trend.

Roddy Doyle's short story collection *The deportees and other stories*, which comprises eight stories that approach the relationship between locals and outsiders, and focus on the conflicted nature of such relations, portrays several such intercultural encounters. The stories were first written for *Métro Eireann* – an online newspaper which addresses the issue of multiculturalism in Dublin and has been run by two Nigerian journalists since 2000. Roddy Doyle explained that "[t]he

whole idea was to embrace the new changes in Ireland creatively, rather than see them as statistics" (ALLEN-RANDOLPH, qtd. in TEKIN, 2015, p. 86).

Although Doyle deals with the relations of the Irish and the various new types of Irish people in some of the stories, *The deportees* as a collection is unified in terms of its optimistic attitude in relation to multicultural Dublin, and it suffered some criticism for its overtly positive view of intercultural relations in the Celtic Tiger years. In the essay *Strangers in a strange land?: The new Irish multicultural fiction*, one may come across a not so sympathetic perception of Doyle's approach to multiculturalism in twenty-first century Ireland, for although the collection is one of the most praised pieces of literary work on multicultural fiction, its "friendliness and charity does not create a bridge across cultures" (TUCKER, 2014, p. 54), inasmuch as the stories "often downplay the difficulties of the migrant experience in Ireland" (p. 55). On the other hand, the article *Who is Irish?: Roddy Doyle's hyphenated identities* – which focuses precisely on the questions of cultural identity – sustains the point of view that Doyle challenges the concept of Irishness to the extent that he advocates for an Irish identity which accommodates "more than one nationality, ethnicity, culture" (WHITE, 2014, p. 95-96). Although most of the stories in *The deportees* start from the Irish viewpoint, they do approach race, gender and class issues, and raise awareness concerning the (mis)treatment directed towards immigrants.

The story *The pram* is a ghost story. The conflicted nature of an intercultural relationship is presented by a third person singular narrator who guides readers to sympathize with the female immigrant point of view through vivid descriptions of the unbearable conditions inflicted on her. Unlike the other stories in the collection, *The pram* does not have a "peacefully resolved" (TEKIN, 2015, p. 87) outcome of such an encounter (p. 87). Alina, the protagonist, is a Polish *au pair* who works for a middle-class family in Dublin and suffers as a result of the ill-treatment she receives from her employers – to the extent that she ends up murdering her boss in an ultimate act of despair. Initially, she seeks revenge by telling a horror story to the young girls that she minds, aiming to "scare them shitless" (DOYLE, 2008, p. 160). The story within the story reveals itself as a means of empowering Alina, for whom the only way of escaping the constant humiliation by Mrs. O'Reilly and possible sexual harassment by Mr. O'Reilly is through the ghost story she recollects from her own folklore. Set in the final years of the Celtic Tiger period, *The pram* exposes the conflicted relationship between the Irish and the immigrant – in the form of the scornful treatment received by Alina, and its consequences.

This paper examines the position of Alina as a female immigrant in twenty-first century Ireland so as to understand how her potential for agency outgrows the prejudiced treatment she receives. Within the context of the Celtic Tiger environment, I will rely on the material published on the subject of *The pram* – including *Reading the ghost story: Roddy Doyle's The deportees and other*

stories, by Molly Ferguson, and *Wicked female characters in Roddy Doyle's The pram: revisiting Celtic and Polish myths in the context of twenty-first century Ireland*, by Burcu Tekin. Lois McNay's essay *Agency* will also be an important resource for the analysis of the female protagonist.

"THAT'S SOME HARDCORE STORY-TELLING"[3]: FEMALE AGENCY IN *THE PRAM*

Roddy Doyle's *The pram* has the essence of Irish short fiction's hybridity at its core; the incorporation of a ghost story within the short fiction mode enabled the author, simultaneously, to approach the marginalized position of the female immigrant within a hostile environment, and to challenge those conditions through the "disruptive nature" (FERGUSON, 2014, p. 58) of the ghost story. While short stories carve out space for the "submerged population group" (O'CONNOR, 1985, p. 20), the ghost story can well be applied as a means of empowering these "outlawed figures wandering about the fringes of society" (O'CONNOR, 1985, p. 19), like the powerless female immigrant in *The pram*. Hence, it provides people like Alina with a possible pathway for overcoming subordination and retaking their emancipatory potentialities (MCNAY, 2016, p. 39-40).

In feminist theory, the concept of "agency" (MCNAY, 2016) has been discussed and reshaped by theorists that see it as an important characteristic for individuals to find a way out of the stifling regulatory rules imposed by social constructions. Although one may relate agency with words such as free will, choice and autonomy, it is also necessary to bear in mind that how an individual's potentialities for agency are realized varies according to the cultural context in which they are inserted, insofar as "the ability to act is always mediated by the dominant norms and relations of power that shape any situation" (MCNAY, 2016, p. 41). In addition, McNay argues that some individuals or groups may manifest more agency than others, and that the analysis of agency "denotes a cluster of actions considered to be categorically distinct from the types of unreflective, habitual, and instinctual which are held to be quasi-automatic responses to external structural forces" (p. 40). McNay opposes the idea of portraying agency merely as an attitude of objection or denial in face of a difficult situation or hostile environment, since people have different manners of assimilating, reacting, and their interpretations of possible constraining events is not straightforward. Considering that Alina is

[3] (DOYLE, 2008, p. 167)

systematically subordinated because of her condition as an immigrant, and that she is deemed to be inferior due to the paid relationship controlled by Mrs. O'Reilly, one could affirm that her agency is indeed severely compromised. Showing awareness of her subjugated condition, Alina figures out a distinct "pathway for empowerment" (p. 45) - in that instead of creating a direct confrontation, she demonstrates a type of agency that reflects her capacity to discern that the circumstances were impairing her power to take attitudes of emancipation.

The relation between Alina and the O'Reilly family discloses the encounter of two distinct worlds that have to negotiate space for coexisting: this makes the ghost story a particularly appropriate mode for exposing the complex configuration of such interaction. Through the mysterious atmosphere provided by the genre, Doyle elaborates on the central issues. First of these is the intercultural relationship between people born in Ireland and a person born outside the country. Alina, as the outsider, does not belong to the microcosm of the O'Reillys' home, and thus can be seen as the "haunting Other" (FERGUSON, 2014, p. 52) – the subject who provokes a sentiment of fear, uneasiness, and strangeness. Whereas Doyle dramatizes this encounter making use of supernatural elements, he also gives voice to the disempowered migrant who, through the ghost story, challenges imposed norms in order to "reclaim power" (p. 54) – since ghost stories "give voice to people at the bottom of the social hierarchy, disrupting the continuity of the powerful" (p. 54). Therefore, working on both angles, *The pram* allows readers to have a clearer view of the migrant's perspective through a third person singular narration that guides them to sympathize with Alina and also to witness the "contemporary anxiety" (p. 58) related to twenty-first century borders, personified by the O'Reillys' demeanour.

Alina's working conditions were intolerable: she was repeatedly mistreated by Mrs. O'Reilly, and felt threatened by Mr. O'Reilly's abusive conduct towards her. Although she spent most of the time with Cilian, the baby boy whom she adored, she was also responsible for his older sisters, Ocean and Saibhreas. We soon learn that she "loved the baby" (DOYLE, 2008, p. 155), but "she was not so sure about [loving]" (p. 155) the young girls. They were smart girls who did everything together; they were polite, well behaved and had good manners. Still, disturbing as it felt for Alina, she did not know exactly why she disliked them. Cilian, on the other hand, arouse maternal feelings in her: "She loved everything about the baby. The tiny boyness of him, the way his legs kicked whenever he looked up at her, his fat – she loved these things" (p. 154).

From the beginning, the loving depiction of Alina's connection with the baby mingles with the blurred and obscure relationship she establishes with his sisters, who had a "sneaky" (TEKIN, 2015, p. 88) behaviour – which becomes evident when they find out about Alina's romantic involvement with a Lithuanian biochemist, without even seeing them together. Consequently, Alina's horrifying relationship with the parents worsens when Ocean and Saibhreas

revealed Alina's affair to their mother: "Guess what, O'Reilly, they said, together. – Alina has a boyfriend" (DOYLE, 2008, p. 159). The already existing tension between the two women hugely increases with the revelation; Mrs. O'Reilly, who had already restricted Alina's space within the house and outside the property, reacts even more scornfully to the young woman's affair. Confronted by her boss, Alina – who could not even look at Mrs. O'Reilly's face – replied:

> – It is, she said, perhaps my private affair.
>
> – Listen, babes, said O'Reilly. Nothing is your private affair. Not while you're working here. Are you fucking this guy?
>
> Alina felt herself burn. The crudity was like a slap across her face.
>
> O'Reilly put one foot on the chair beside Alina.
>
> – I couldn't care less, she said. Fuck away, girl. But with three provisos. Not while you're working. Not here, on the property. And not with Mister O'Reilly. (DOYLE, 2008, p. 159-160)

Pushed to the limit, Alina started to lose her temper with O'Reilly's ill-treatment. Forced to be an outcast, displaced and humiliated, the nanny has a grotesque idea: "Alina was going to murder the little girls" (DOYLE, 2008, p. 160). She soon changes her mind, and develops what she might have considered a more effective and painful revenge. The turning point is presented when Alina decides to terrify the girls by telling them a Polish ghost story about an "old and wicked lady" (p. 161) who would steal babies from their parents, put them in a pram and disappear into the woods. Her plan was clear: "(…) she would plant nightmares that would lurk, prowl, rub their evil backs against the soft walls of their minds, all their lives, until they were two old ladies, lying side by side on their one big deathbed" (p. 160). The pram – both in Doyle's plot and in Alina's storytelling – serves as the key supernatural element, representing the thin line between reality and fantasy, self-control and madness. When Alina says that "the pram had been moved" (p. 166) and that "the pram is haunted" (p. 174), she was clearly losing control of her mind and of the tale, inasmuch as she could no longer distinguish between what was real and what was not.

As Alina carried out her idea of revenge using the Polish myth, she adapted it to the Irish setting – needing to bring it closer to home so as to easily frighten those "practical little girls" (DOYLE, 2008, p. 163). As the tension in the story grew, so did the conflict between Alina and O'Reilly. Being referred to as "a bloody childminder" (p. 167), "my Polish *cailín*" (p. 169), "my Polish peasant" (p. 176) and "a fucking nightmare" (p. 176), and suffering in an environment in which

she felt entrapped and had her identity diminished, Alina found in her country's folklore a way of coping with the constraining elements surrounding her, even though by the use of "destructive means" (FERGUSON, 2014, p. 58). Mrs. O'Reilly's abusive demeanour towards Alina, and her supposedly superior position as the Irish person, the boss, and the mother, left Alina with no other option than to confront Mrs. O'Reilly's authority in shady ways, and thus reassure her own sense of personhood.

In an interview, Roddy Doyle defines Mrs. O'Reilly as a "Tiger phenomenon (…) making more money than she should" and who had "an inflated notion of herself" (TEKIN, 2015, p. 115), as exemplified by her insistence upon being called by her surname, for it "terrified her clients (…). It was intriguing; it was sexy" (DOYLE, 2008, p. 158). Spending most of the time at work, O'Reilly seemed to feel threatened by Alina's closeness to her children, particularly to Cilian, and by the possibility of Cilian seeing Alina as a mother-like reference; one of O'Reilly's reactions is to forbid Alina to use the Polish language with the baby, because she did not want him "confused" (DOYLE, 2008, p.157). This attitude may suggest that the baby's "hypothetical confusion might not only be linguistic, but perhaps he might also be confused about who his mother is if he heard Alina speak more often than her" (FERGUSON, 2014, p. 56).

O'Reilly's position as a busy career woman reflected the conditions for Irish citizens in the Tiger years. With the economic boom, women had more opportunities to undertake careers that were once a privilege of men. Irish women who once occupied unskilled employment positions, or who even migrated to work as childminders, were now on the opposite side: "(…) the economic boom not only led to more women entering employment and thereby creating work for foreign childminders but, in addition, saw the aspirations of indigenous workers rise" (LOYAL, 2003, p. 81). O'Reilly's household reflected the economic situation in Ireland, thus placing Mrs. O'Reilly and Alina in divergent stances, insofar as O'Reilly as the representative of Irish society embodied both the economic upgrade and the personal struggle to deal with the "haunting other" (FERGUSON, 2014, p. 52). In a review of *The deportees*, the dichotomies between these two women are one of the main issues approached: whereas O'Reilly was a "monster" (SPILLANE, 2008, p. 150) to the extent that she tyrannically dominated the disempowered migrant, Alina functioned as the "long-suffering erasure" (SPILLANE, 2008, p. 150), whose subservient position, both within the family unit and in a broader sense as an immigrant, might have bestowed her the silenced status.

Alina, however, did not bow down to O'Reilly's rules, and made use of the ghost story as a device to "upset order" (FERGUSON, 2014, p. 57), albeit the outcome of that decision was disastrous for both of them. As O'Reilly arrived home and witnessed the girls frightened to death due to Alina's tale, she decided to fire the nanny, once again acting scornfully and dismissively, labelling her as "my

Polish peasant" (DOYLE, 2008, p.176). Alina, who could not put up with such behaviours anymore, ended up hitting O'Reilly's head with a "decorative and heavy" (DOYLE, 2008, p. 176) poker, which "had never been used, until now" (DOYLE, 2008, p. 176). O'Reilly's quick and silent death portrayed the fragile structure on which her overemphasised self-assurance was built. Whilst Alina – driven mad – committed a crime, the author gives the reader little or no reason to empathize with O'Reilly; and this certainly gives Alina a sort of victory, insofar as the disempowered immigrant, in the end, regains control and takes back her agentic potentialities. Indeed, although Alina ended up out of her mind, and haunted by her own story, her transformation from a voiceless maid to an empowered woman does portray a major structural image: the triumph of the ostracized immigrant over the prejudiced native.

FINAL REMARKS

When Doyle published *The deportees and other stories* in 2007, it was one of the first literary works to deal with the theme of multiculturalism in Ireland. Doyle is a Dubliner, and in many of the stories we do see him speaking out from an Irish point of view, but it is not an unaware perception, quite the opposite – in that he very frequently questions the Irish demeanour towards these people who were coming to the country, encouraged by the government, to assist in the development of Irish economy. People who, in spite of being important members of that structure, lacked rights in both the economic and the social spheres. In *The pram*, the crudest story in Doyle's collection – for it discloses the gender, class and race prejudices towards newcomers – Alina is the representative of this category.

Although the story is told in the third person, it succeeds in giving a view of Alina's perception of the events, to the extent that it reports her thoughts and feelings, in particular those related to Mrs. O'Reilly and the girls, who are the major characters in Alina's cultural conflict. Alina also goes through other encounters that to a certain extent strengthen her, for example her connection with the baby, and her involvement with the Lithuanian biochemist, who was in a position quite similar to hers (and thus may have unconsciously reminded her that there were many other people going through similar struggles).

Interestingly, Alina's path to empowerment includes a significant component coming from her own culture, since the ghost story she resorted to as a means of vengeance was part of Polish folklore. This is another factor that portrays Alina's lack of identification with the country she was living in, possibly reflecting the assumed relationship between O'Reilly as the Irish hostile

native and Irish culture itself. The ghost story also works as resource to reinforce her identity, which was being diminished by the overbearing Mrs. O'Reilly. She develops a repulsion for anything that could be linked to the stifling and embarrassing rules imposed by her boss. The clearest example is her odd relationship with the little girls. At the same time she worried about the possibility of sexual abuse by Mr. O'Reilly, since her room in the attic has no lock – providing a complement to her already desperate working conditions, although this is not fully developed in the plot. Her position as a powerless immigrant within a "hyper-masculine" (TEKIN, 2014, p. 115) household could have added a huge concern for her physical and psychological integrity.

Whereas we observe the story being subtly guided by the narrator to sympathize with Alina's point of view, an attentive reading might also disclose the reaction of the Irish, represented by O'Reilly's questionable demeanour on the occasion of the arrival of a newcomer, and the difficulties they find in dealing with this situation. On a broader canvas, Alina plays the role of the generally unskilled workforce that migrated to Ireland, also as a result of the Irish government's policy. In contrast, the O'Reillys represent the Irish that - as a people historically used to emigration - were challenged with the immediacy of a new reality. The internal borders (between the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland) were now no longer the major issues, but the international ones – and the challenges they represented. This struggle of Irish people is exposed in its crudest manner through the prejudicial mindset of the O'Reillys, while Alina takes the role of the surviving immigrant who fights to recover her own sense of belonging and personhood.

Short fiction in Ireland has always been bonded to the urgencies of the country's history (INGMAN, 2009, p. 119). That is precisely the case of Doyle's collection – inasmuch as the outcome of the twenty-first century presented this multicultural reality, in which a dialogue between the newcomers and the locals needed to be established, and Doyle's stories functioned as a means of giving voice to the people involved. In spite of the criticism on *The deportees,* especially the argument that it takes a privileged standpoint, Doyle in fact shows the other side of the coin in *The pram*.

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