Migration, Identity, and the Symbolic Weight of Place in Colm Tóibín's *Brooklyn*

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Abstract

The paper analyzes *Brooklyn* (2009) by Colm Tóibín through the lens of migration, identity, and urban symbolism, while placing it in a larger context of Irish literature's preoccupation with the themes of exile and belonging. *Brooklyn*, a celebrated work of modern Irish fiction, carries on the literary tradition of depicting the emigrant experience, which is a defining narrative arc in Irish literary and cultural memory that dates back, most famously, to Joyce and in this paper's case to Tóibín. Following the journey from a small Irish town of Enniscorthy to Brooklyn, New York, the novel is the best illustration of the psychological dislocation that accompanies migration, a theme that the paper will consider extensively as it remains especially relevant in today's globalized world, marked by economic displacement and the problem of belonging. Particular attention is given to the dual city-symbolism: Enniscorthy, the town of origin, and Brooklyn, the space of opportunity and personal transformation. Tóibín creates contrasting, liminal spaces as emotional and moral landscapes as a result of which, the city in Brooklyn acquires an agency of mediating identity, as a site of loss and transformation and a threshold that shapes identity. The Georgian translation of the novel (2021) adds special significance to the novel's resonance in a Georgian context, where questions of emigration and return are more relevant than ever in shaping the national psyche. The study examines how Tóibín's nuanced, emotionally restrained prose conveys the diasporic experience across cultures and nations.

Keywords: Colm Tóibín, *Brooklyn,* Migration, Modernism, Recessive Action

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Introduction

William Trevor, one of the most prominent, elder statesmen of the Irish literary world, offered an insightful judgment about the connection between writing fiction and the perception of social reality: "Novels have to roam, they even have to arrive in places where their authors have never been. Mixing experience with speculation and making something of the resultant compound" (Trevor, 1982, p. x). These words perfectly depict the most fundamental tension that characterizes the phenomenon of Irish literature: finding balance between the imaginary and real, between private vision and collective history. Trevor's remark is especially noteworthy because his literature gazes predominantly at Ireland. Since 19th century, Irish prose has been riddled with the question about what should be the main purpose of literature. 19th century Irish prose mirrors social issues and lacks experimental and creative feats that 20th century Literary Modernism established. Major works from this period are read as Modernist deviations which purposefully divert from English literary traditions. More specifically, it seems that *Ulysses* liberated and simultaneously burdened Irish prose by establishing an almost mythical standard of self-sufficient art. Despite this, the development of Irish literature opposes conventional literary standards. Asking what makes a novel "Irish" requires asking more questions: does it have to revolve around Ireland? Does it have to be written in Irish? Does it have to represent or refer to the country's history and politics? Essentially, these inquiries revive Irish prose and connect its past Realism tradition with current, Postmodern, introspective narratives.

In this literary-historical discourse, Colm Tóibín stands as one of the most sophisticated descendants of Realist and Modernist traditions. His renowned novel *Brooklyn* (2009) revolves around familiar topics of belonging and roaming; however, the migration narrative becomes not only a social and historical chronicle, but a psychological inquiry about the intricate process of identity formation that takes place between liminal spaces – Ireland and the United States, home and emigrant life abroad, memory and constant reinvention. Tóibín's reserved prose resembles that of Trevor's and mirrors the emotional intensity and repression found across Irish short story anthologies. However, *Brooklyn* manages to extend this tradition by appointing symbolic weight to geography, as a result of which a distinct Irish conflict is dramatized: Enniscorthy and Brooklyn, not only cities, but emotionally conflicted moral thresholds. Tóibín's frame of narration is significant as it depicts *Brooklyn* not only from a perspective of nostalgic retrospection but also as a novel which continues the century-long conversation over migration. If the 19th century literature is concerned with who speaks in the name of Ireland, 20th century Modernism poses a question whether it is possible for any narrator to undertake this mission. Tóibín inherits both questions, but applies them to the everyday. The threshold is no longer some kind of a manifesto; it is a door, a hall, a table at the store, etc.

The Purpose of Structural Recessiveness in *Brooklyn*

The novel opens with a fairly simple scene: gazing at the outside world, a young woman, Eilis Lacey, sits by the window in a small Irish town. Anyone who is remotely familiar with the cornerstones of Irish literature is instantly reminded of one of the most eminent predecessors of this scene: Joyce's "Eveline," where a young woman sits by a different window, contemplating her expatriation from Ireland: "She sat at the window watching the evening invade the avenue. Her head was leaned against the window curtains and in her nostrils was the odour of dusty cretonne" (Joyce, 1922, p. 26). "Eilis Lacey, sitting at the window of the upstairs living room in the house on Friary Street, noticed her sister walking briskly from work" (Tóibín, 2009, p. 3).

These parallel windows – parallel thresholds – underscore constant anxiety that is found in Irish fiction: an emigrant, hindered at a threshold, trapped between a place of origin and a place which is elsewhere. A superficial overview of these parallel plots suggests that Tóibín's protagonist does not want to leave the family home but is forced to, in fact – twice, as her mother allows it, while in Joyce's story, a young woman wants to leave the family but is compelled to stay because of her mother's dying request. In terms of determining protagonist agency, both characters are acted upon, not acting. It is almost instinctual to connect these two young women and their fates together. This is where Paul Ricoeur's concept of the "(as yet) untold story" can be applied successfully, a latent narrative which a text includes, but does not follow. *Brooklyn* tells a tale of what could have been if Eveline had sailed. Despite offering an enriching literary continuation of common motifs and storylines found across prominent Irish stories about staying and roaming, the novel has been criticized for having a too straightforward plot, where "very little happens" (Young, 2014, p. 129). Through analysis of this "very little" action that the novel does include, the paper argues that Tóibín offers a sophisticated experiment: dramatizing migration as a sequence of thresholds which must be crossed by characters, a process during which identity is formed not by daring actions, but by trivial gestures and symbolic weight of a place.

The failure to perceive action in the novel can be seen, ironically, as an accurate reading of Eilis's character. She is ambiguous, hence a multitude of critical interpretations, majority of which follow Young's idea Eilis is agentless, trapped, re-worked version of Eveline. But the style of narration – concise, non-historical, simple – mirrors the inner tactics of the protagonist who attempts to process her life so that it can be made bearable. As a result, non-action becomes action because denying and staying requires louder self-expression than what Eilis believes herself to have. Thus, *Brooklyn* transforms Joycean paralysis into a special condition where it is not posed as an existential crisis, but as a structural recessiveness, a survival strategy, which the novel complicates and simultaneously aligns itself to.

According to Raghinaru, reading the novel from a lens of "recessive action" transforms ideas of "nothing" into events which are allowed to happen. Eilis's silence, for instance, is a telling form of recessive action, self-presentation as self-concealment, which explains her hindered process of attachment to places, "she is silent, and allows herself to be silenced, in a way that contravenes with the normative narratives of female empowerment in the private and public spheres." (Raghinaru, 2018, p. 47). There are multiple important silences in the novel: her life's biggest decision is, for some reason, made in silence. She is depicted as outwardly conformist but inwardly unsure as she denies the terms according to which she is deemed successful.

Immigrant novels like Adichie's *Americanah* often prioritize the pace and action as the future conditions of the novel must be set expeditiously. *Brooklyn* does not follow this trend. It emphasizes long episodes of watching, standing, thinking, etc.; episodes where Eilis learns how to smile, breath, and operate again. Even the episode which takes place back in Ireland, the narration is a dreamlike narrative. If character agency aligns with "recessive action" principle, it is the opposite for the symbolic weight of place. Enniscorthy and Brooklyn are never just geographical backdrops – they are moral and emotional thresholds which mediate identity. In a classical migration narrative, a new city is a place for tangible reinvention. Tóibín complicates this scenario because for him, Brooklyn is a threshold rather than a destination. It is a place where habits need to be revalued, a place where a character must catch up with its own identity. On the other hand, Enniscorthy is a place of origin, riddled with gossip and memory, but also a source of strange comfort upon return. Eilis goes back to Enniscorthy and suddenly becomes a promising woman with a better job and partner than she could have ever

imagined. Therefore, these two cities share masks – Brooklyn becomes a place of routine and discipline, while Enniscorthy is depicted as a town of opportunities and risk. The most serious anxiety of the novel comes from the fact that Eilis never manages to belong in America and the sense of belonging becomes a moving target for her, a target that is not reached. Upon her return to Ireland, her mother's house becomes a stage where several scenarios merge: a caring and loyal daughter who stays, a cosmopolite young woman that might go back, a wife but also a potential fiancé; however, one of Tóibín's achievements is that he manages to avoid creating melodrama.

The critics of the novel who prefer to see more distinct and tangible narrative development, a sort of development where a narrator explains why Eilis does what she does, tend to seek Realism in the text, which is deliberately obscured by the author. Instead of a deep psychological insight, Tóibín pressures the readers. If the texture of the novel is perceived accordingly, the motifs become self-evident. This is a Modernist trick, often employed by Woolf, who believed that a character is best expressed when no one explains who he or she is. Therefore, this characteristic, among others, puts *Brooklyn* in a discussion with Irish and European Modernisms. The progression of Campbell's quest hero monomyth is consistently undermined by Modernist fiction, a tendency which can also be applied to Eilin as she goes against every traditional heroic pattern. *Brooklyn* contravenes transformation and sentimental return; it also denies triumphant arrival. Returning to a home country is not associated with romanticized scenarios which remedy problems, neither is it connected to some sort of an ambiguous immigrant myth. Instead, it offers a view that migrant identity is recessive; it is made up of silently crossed thresholds and it is best expressed in unremarkable spaces like bedrooms, random streets, shop counters, and windows.

Placing Tóibín in Irish literary tradition is especially interesting, mainly due to anxiety of influence. Similar to how it happened in this paper, discussions over his works often include Joyce's name, which is a tendency that follows, without exaggeration, every modern Irish prose writer that came after him. However, Irish literature is neither a social record about its history and politics, not a Modernist manifesto. It is a series of returns, where previous forms are reanimated into new forms (for instance, national tale transforms into an urban novel). Reading *Brooklyn* after "Eveline" does not necessarily mean submitting Tóibín to Joyce. It is a clear example of how an "untold story" can be told again, differently. This is also a part of Irish tradition, a talent for telling or retelling a story in a way, where a simple room is given a metaphysical weight.

Tóibín uses several thresholds for developing the plot. For instance, the opening window scene and the motif of window itself is a frame for recessive action. Eilis is never "seen" directly. She is fragmented and torn between choices that do not have any alternatives in a migrant's everyday reality. However, to reinforce the opposing side of novel's passivity concerns in criticism, this cannot be regarded as mere passivity of her character. It is a deliberate choice to refuse applying success metrics to personal identity only because modernity and migration demand it. Moreover, it is a narration technique which connects to readers so closely to the protagonist that they do not notice how the plot passes, because "nothing" happens; meanwhile, "nothing" happening is exactly what Eilin wants to achieve. This is what Irish literature does best; it roams among records and creative inventions, whereby the whole nation's arguments are squeezed in a small room. It is not surprising that the most memorable and distinctive revelation of the whole novel is said silently, "It had somehow been tacitly arranged that Eilis would go to America." (Tóibín, 2009, p. 26). The novel urges to feel the tension and to evaluate what kind of an identity can be built under such pressure. It is evident that the answer is not a

heroine with decisive gestures and eloquent speeches, but a recessive, Modernist anti-hero who delays, denies, and remains stubborn in her unchanging nature.

Brooklyn has been translated more than dozen times, but its Georgian translation (2021) came out during a period when the issues of migration, return, and cultural hybridity are alarmingly relevant. It is also interesting to connect the novel's prominent themes and motifs to Georgian migrant literary tradition. Tóibín's novel's translation gave it a new life in Georgian society. Much similar to mid-century Ireland, in contemporary Georgia, entire generations leave rural towns for distant cities – New York, Berlin, Athens, Rome, Barcelona – often through similar family arrangements to how it is portrayed in the book, where the decision is less chosen than tacitly agreed upon. In Georgia, as in Ireland, the emigration of young people in search of economic opportunity is not only a historical, statistical fact but a living reality. Therefore, the overwhelming reception of the novel's translation is understandable. Many Georgians are aware of what it means to become valuable elsewhere in order to send value home; to return and find oneself valuable in one's own city in ways which are both validating and alienating; to discover that the efforts made to survive elsewhere have taken roots at that place, against one's original intentions. Tóibín's trimmed dialogues, moments of restrained crises and silences help translate the diasporic experience into other languages without losing its intimacy. His style respects small gestures which often characterize migration: unsaid doubts, polite but confused smiles, which conceal nostalgy. The translation helps consider *Brooklyn* a part of global literature of journey and return. It shows how a mid-century Irish emigrant story can address the divided, conflicted sense of belonging that continues to define Georgia's and not only Georgia's present. This is, undoubtedly, Tóibín's great "message" and achievement: demonstrating that modern migration stories cannot be narratives merely about triumphant returns, but stories of cities themselves which act on characters while they seem to do nothing.

Conclusion

Tóibín's recent novel *Long Island* (2024) revisits Eilis twenty years later, demonstrating how unresolved the migrant threshold remains. The protagonist is in her forties, settled in an Italian-American part of Long Island, but still feels her strongest ties to Ireland. The book makes visible what *Brooklyn* left implicit – migration rarely ends with the first crossing of the ocean. Mentioning *Long Island* reminds us that *Brooklyn* is not simply a historical love story but the opening movement of a larger quest and conversation on exile, belonging and unfinished return, themes that remain central to literature of ethnicity and displacement today. While *Long Island* does offer a fascinating continuation of Eilin's story, the paper's focus was on *Brooklyn* itself and the way it managed to establish the complex migrant threshold as a literary problem. Much like the contemporary intermedial works that re-imagine textuality through different means, in Tóibín's case, restrained prose reminds us that the modern quest story is carried in tone and silence as much as in plot; it suggests that literature about migration urges to notice subtle acts and sensory experiences as sites where ethnicity and belonging are continually re-shaped and re-configured.

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