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Cultural Boundaries and Hybridisation in Kate O'Brien's *Mary Lavelle*: Implications for Irish-Spanish Identity

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The work presented in this MA thesis is, to the best of my knowledge and belief, original and my own work, except as acknowledged in the text. The work in this thesis has not been submitted, either in whole or in part, for a degree at this or any other university.

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Abstract

This dissertation explores some of the ways in which Kate O'Brien's novel *Mary Lavelle* (1936) enables a reflection on Irish-Spanish identity through the dynamics of cultural borders and hybridity. Departing from the dominant reading of the relationship between the UK and Spain, it proposes instead to examine the connection between Ireland and Spain as a symbolic encounter that allows us to understand the tensions, both religious and national, present both in the novel and in the author's own life. Furthermore, it argues that the novel constructs a liminal zone in which hybrid, desiring and transitional identities question national and religious essentialisms. To this end, it draws on postcolonial theories, gender studies and the notion of the lyrical novel. Ultimately, it contends that the novel offers a critical reflection on identity as a dynamic and negotiated practice in peripheral European contexts.

Keywords

Kate O'Brien, *Mary Lavelle*, Irish-Spanish Identity, Cultural boundaries, Hybridity.

Resumen

Esta disertación se pregunta por algunas de las formas en que la novela *Mary Lavelle* (1936) de Kate O'Brien permite pensar la identidad irlandesa-española a través de las dinámicas de las fronteras culturales y la hibridez. Este trabajo toma distancia de la concepción hegemónica respecto a la relación entre Reino Unido y España, y se interesa por indagar en la relación Irlanda y España a la manera de una convergencia simbólica que acerca al entendimiento de las confrontaciones de naturaleza religiosa y nacional, las cuales se encuentran permanentemente en la obra y vida de O'Brien. Además, se propone la defensa de la novela como una obra en la que se encuentra una zona liminal que hace posible que las identidades híbridas y en movimiento cuestionen los esencialismos de carácter nacional y religioso. Para ello, se recurre a las teorías poscoloniales, los estudios de género y la noción de novela lírica. De esta manera, se defiende que la novela permite una reflexión sobre la identidad como práctica dinámica y negociada en contextos periféricos europeos.

Palabras clave

Kate O'Brien, *Mary Lavelle*, Identidad hispano-irlandesa, Fronteras culturales, Hibridación.

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1. Introduction

Due to the hyper-connectedness of today's world, it is no longer possible to talk about identity in a closed or essentialist way. In the face of all these changes, we have been constructing identity as something flexible, combining places, languages, experiences, heritages, and memories. In this context, literature, in general, stands as a source for studying diversity in this regard, as it helps us to understand how identities are mixed, agreed and changed. And works about travel and exile are a good example for elucidating the ways in which cultural boundaries are formed, shaken and hybridised. To approach one of the multiple forms, this dissertation will seek answers in Kate O'Brien's narrative.

One of the most distinctive features of Kate O'Brien (1897, Limerick – 1974, Kent), is her profound connection with travel and intercultural experience, which shaped her life and literary work. She began her studies at the French Laurel Hill School in Limerick in 1902. In 1916, she received a scholarship to study at University College Dublin. In 1919, she travelled to England to work as a journalist. In 1921, she emigrated to the United States with her sister and brother-in-law. The following year, she moved to Bilbao to work as a governess for the Areilza family. This trip proved to be a defining moment in her life, shaping her emotional and experiential connection with Spain and later influencing her literary work. In 1923, she returned to London and completed the most years of her residence in one place, since —despite travelling every summer between 1931-36 to Spain and multiple trips after the Spanish Civil War, including one to Valladolid in 1972, just to visit this Department of the UVa where I am studying— she did not move until 1950, when she returned to live in Ireland. Finally, in 1960, she moved back to England, where she lived until the last day of her life.

However, this theme of travel and movement can be traced not only in her life, but allusions to it can also be found in her works. To mention but a few, in 1923, *Distinguished Villa*, her first work, the product of a bet, was published, which was inspired by her experience in Euskadi. *Farewell Spain*, published in 1937, also speaks of her experience in Spain, only this time in the form of a political book about the Republican side in the Spanish Civil War. *That Lady*, from 1946, and *Teresa of Avila*, from 1951, portray the issues that O'Brien was confronted with during her time living in and visiting Spain. In *As Music and Splendour*, the development of the two protagonists takes place through their journey to Rome to enter the world of opera. And *My Ireland*,

published in 1963, confirms this constant, as it corresponds to a travel book. However, a work such as *Mary Lavelle*, from 1936, is presented as an auto-fictional portrait of O'Brien's experience in Bilbao, as the similarities between her and the protagonist allow us to weave relationships about what this migration implied for the author and the development of her identity, as it served as a means of her discovery, in emotional, personal and cultural terms.

In her third novel, *Mary Lavelle*, O'Brien draws heavily on her experiences of living abroad. The novel addresses key themes such as social conventions and the constraints of a conservative society. It also delves into the various emotional and cultural landscapes navigated by its protagonist. Throughout the narrative, space plays an important role because it represents the possibility for the protagonist to free herself from the stifling environment of her origin, with its established pressures and relationships to which she must respond, and to enter a new and exotic environment as Spain, specifically the Basque Country, where she has come to work, seems to her to be such a place. It is an opportunity to escape the mandate that has fallen upon her simply because she is a woman and was born into an Irish Catholic family. This novel is also Lavelle's encounter with the unique beauty of the landscape and the fascination she feels in making the world a little less alien. As she states at the beginning of the novel, in the letters she sends to her loved ones in Ireland to let them know that she arrived safely:

> I wish I knew how to describe this place so as to make it seem real to you—but I never could. You see, it's entirely unlike everything you and I know, but it is not a bit like my idea of Spain—or yours, I imagine. And if I say that already after twenty-four hours I feel familiar with it, you'll say I'm mad. But I mean it. Perhaps it's the sea under my window that gives me the illusion— because now the tide is out, and the smell of seaweed is coming into the room exactly as if I were in Kilbeggan. I suppose that makes me feel less strange. (O'Brien *Mary Lavelle* 6)

In this novel, O'Brien tackles complex issues for the time, some of which are still relevant today, such as adulterous relationships, female sexuality with lesbian overtones, and the protagonist's desire to escape the choice between being a daughter or a wife.

In 1936, the novel was censored in Ireland due to its depiction of an extramarital affair and active female sexuality (Finlay-Jeffrey). Specifically, it was argued that the novel should be banned because it was "suggestive of, or inciting to, sexual immorality or unnatural vice, or likely, in any other similar way, to corrupt or deprave" (*Censorship of Publications Act* Article 2). This also referred to the lesbian love story between Agatha Conlan and Mary, two of Altorno's governesses.

Pray for the Wanderer was published by O'Brien Press in 1938. It was a response to the socio-political and cultural realities of Ireland at the time. In the novel, London-based writer and former IRA fighter Matt Costello returns to an imaginary village in County Limerick with the intention of participating in discussions about the 1937 Irish Constitution. Costello represents O'Brien's views on the social control of literary writing and defends the freedom of artistic creation. In Spain, in 1943, publication was requested but not authorised. However, the censorship file does not include the specific reasons why it was not allowed to be published, although they could well be the same as in her native country (Morales Ladrón).

In short, this novel, on the one hand, explores a split subjectivity that emerges from contact with the other and, on the other, allows us to weave a dialogue on the limits of the religious, the national and the gendered, i.e., areas that are in constant change.

Building on these aspects, this dissertation explores how *Mary Lavelle* facilitates reflection on the processes of hybridisation and cultural borders that are central to the formation of an Irish-Spanish identity. This theme is pertinent because it leads to a reflection on the role of literature in presenting experiences of cultural negotiation and transit, specifically, from a female perspective that is situated at the crossroads between these two countries.

The question that drives this research is the following: how does Kate O'Brien's *Mary Lavelle* enable us to think about Irish-Spanish identity through the dynamics of cultural borders and hybridity? This question acknowledges how widely the author has been studied, while highlighting a field of research that has not yet fully explored her identity: the possibility of understanding the relationships she traces not because of the hybridisation between the UK and Spain, but because of the hybridisation between Ireland and Spain[1].

The hypothesis underlying this research is that this novel offers a space of symbolic encounter between Irish and Spanish cultures, which represents both Lavelle and O'Brien herself.

[1] With O'Brien, it is important to distinguish between Anglo-Spanish and Irish-Spanish identities, since the author made it clear in her writing that there was a significant difference between being English and being Irish. It was precisely this different understanding of reality that fostered her affection for Spain and her ability to feel part of it. The following excerpt from her travel book illustrates this, as she recounts what happened to her in the winter of 1922:

> The one who disliked the mud and the raw passions of Bilbao is English —and I am Irish. Mud was a common feature in Ireland when I was young, and passions— so long as they are not sexual —are familiar to us. So, the two things he found novel and crude, I suppose, were precisely those I took most for granted and felt most at home with. (O'Brien *Farewell Spain* 210)

Through lived experience, the protagonist reveals an identity that is permeated by change, borders and that which does not stand still.

To address this question, this research proposes a literary and interpretative analysis of *Mary Lavelle*, from a perspective related to border studies, the theory of hybridity and the construction of identity in transnational contexts.

2. Structure of this TFM

To analyse the way in which O'Brien's *Mary Lavelle* enables reflection on Irish-Spanish identity through the dynamics of cultural borders and hybridisation, it is necessary to reflect on how the literary processes present in the work contribute to the construction, fragmentation, and negotiation of this identity. This is why this dissertation will be structured as follows.

Firstly, I will review the state of the art, on the one hand, about the author in relation to the concepts of identity, desire, and nation, and, on the other, on the novel in question. The aim is to show that, although O'Brien's work has been discussed in terms of the exploration of identity, the dynamics of borders and hybridity in *Mary Lavelle* and their special relationship in the construction of an Irish-Spanish identity have not received much attention. Hence, this study aims to contribute to a greater understanding of these aspects by analysing the novel as a manifestation of identity tensions and negotiations.

Secondly, the methodology will be presented. It corresponds to a qualitative perspective based on a close and interpretative reading of *Mary Lavelle*. This exercise is supported by tools of literary analysis and theoretical frameworks of cultural studies that address both hybridity and borders.

Thirdly, the work is analysed to answer the posed question. The novel is contextualised within a scenario of migration, censorship and Catholicism. Next, the cultural frontiers explored in the concept of a borderline body are analysed, representing a form of the emergence of female subjectivity. Finally, religious and national essentialisms are reviewed to understand how the protagonist's image of Spain corresponds to the Irish imagination of the time, and the implications this has for constructing an Irish-Spanish identity.

Fourthly, the aim is to show how Kate O'Brien's *Mary Lavelle* provides a space in which to question Irish-Spanish identity from a border and transnational perspective. The main findings of this research will be synthesised and possibilities for future research that may emerge from this process will be proposed.

3. Literature Survey

Kate O'Brien is an author who has been widely studied in the field of twentieth-century Irish literature from multiple perspectives. The academic references that have been written about her can be categorised as follows. Firstly, there is the rigorous study carried out by Aintzane Legarreta Mentxaka, a Basque academic, literary critic and playwright, who devoted herself to researching O'Brien's work.

In 2011, Mentxaka published *Kate O'Brien and the Fiction of Identity: Sex, Art and Politics in Mary Lavelle and Other Writings*, a study of the novel *Mary Lavelle*, exploring its importance within Modernism, politics and the queer movement. She highlights O'Brien's semi-autobiographical experimentation and studies the identity reflections, mainly sexual, artistic and political, found in *Mary Lavelle*. In 2015, she published *The Postcolonial Traveller. Kate O'Brien and the Basques*. *La Escritora Kate O'Brien y Euskadi*, a book in which she studies O'Brien's link with the Basque Country, mainly the way in which her life in the region contributed to her literary writing. In this work, Mentxaka argues that, in general, the work of O'Brien and, in particular, *Mary Lavelle*, manifests a heterogeneous stance towards national identity. Finally, in 2022, Mentxaka published *Kate O'Brien. Key Irish Women Writers series*, a book in which she studies the triad of aesthetics, sexuality and politics, although not exclusively, as she also delves into the political effects of O'Brien's different concerns.

Secondly, the existing literature can be categorised on author-centred research basis. The publications that stand out in this respect are as follows: Volume 48 of *Irish University Review*, published in 2018, is a monograph devoted to research on the life and work of Kate O'Brien. It explores topics as varied as Catholicism, modernism and dramaturgy, censorship and convergences with Virginia Woolf. Curiously, however, O'Brien's identity and her journey through Spain are not explored in a clear and direct manner.

Ute Anna Mittermaier analysed O'Brien's literary and political representations of Spain in the 1930s, focusing on a travel book notable for its political commentary on the years leading up to and at the beginning of the Spanish Civil War. The article also explores the way in which O'Brien positioned herself in relation to Spain's past, present, and future.

Anne Jamison studied the construction of the self and the autobiographical style of O'Brien's late works. In this text, she presents a study of the archive of both published and

unpublished works held by the University of Limerick. Furthermore, it is argued that in these texts, the author presents processes of memory in which a self-articulation of the relationship between O'Brien —the self— and Spain —the place—, along with the people —O'Brien's relationships both sexually affective and with her female ancestors—, is gestated. At the same time her life is reconstructed from memory and indirect recollections.

Ann Catherine Hoag researched the interrelationship between gender, sexuality and citizenship. Drawing on *Mary Lavelle*, Hoag argues that O'Brien exposes some alternatives regarding the relationship that women construct with nationality. She also considers *Farewell Spain* a work in which O'Brien presents a reconstruction of Spain based on a vision of lesbian love.

Daniel Pastor García argued that Spain offered Kate O'Brien the opportunity to freely explore her affections and sexuality, providing an escape from the patriarchal power structures of Ireland. He also discussed the impact of Spain on her literary work and emphasised O'Brien's defence of personal freedom and women's right to control their own lives.

Finally, Eibhear Walshe made a portrait of the author's life and work. Among the highlights of this work is the way it portrays O'Brien as a subversive and pioneering author of Irish women's literature. In addition, Walshe makes a premise that must be borne in mind when reviewing O'Brien's work: her novels appear to be traditional, mainly for stylistic reasons, but when approaching their content one can see O'Brien's radical stance. For this reason, Walshe proposes that O'Brien created a new literary identity.

Thirdly, many publications carry out comparative studies, on the one hand, between O'Brien's work and that of other female authors, and, on the other hand, between different works by O'Brien herself. For the purposes of this dissertation, the following are notable. Edward O'Rourke proposed a comparative study between O'Brien's *Mary Lavelle* and the recently discovered drafts of Maeve Brennan's *The Visitor* to argue that both works constitute a confrontation with early twenty-first century Irish patriarchal society, which sought to strengthen itself within traditional Catholic values, including gender roles. In O'Brien's case, O'Rourke argues that her life, work and the trajectory of her oeuvre manifest the contradictions between Irish hermeticism and cosmopolitanism.

Furthermore, Pilar Somacarrera-Íñigo has studied the meeting points between Kate O'Brien and Teresa of Ávila to highlight the deep affinity that O'Brien had with the Spanish author. In this

respect, Somacarrera-Íñigo argues that O'Brien's biography of Teresa constitutes a defence of the saint and a condemnation of those who censured her. In this same project, Somacarrera-Íñigo bets on the demonstration of a parallelism that O'Brien constructs between the mystical experience and writing.

For her part, Noélia Borges has examined the sexuality and eroticism present in *Mary Lavelle*, *That Lady* and *As Music and Splendour*. In doing so, she points to the way in which the main characters defy their era by confronting stereotypes and prejudices and allow themselves to be autonomous subjects who satisfy their needs and desires. In this study, Noélia Borges defines O'Brien as a pioneer in the representation of female sexuality and queer relationships in twentieth-century Irish literature. She does so because she recognises that the characters in these three novels challenge the social norms of their time and create an innovative vision of female identity and desire.

Finally, Yolanda González Molano, in her doctoral thesis, has analysed the work of O'Brien and Molly Keane through the triad of gender, nationality and class. In this process, it is argued that both authors represent conflicting and ambiguous identities, in which class privilege and gender subalternity coexist. Furthermore, here she proposes the house as a chronotope that allows us to study the literary genres used to represent it and the discourses that use class and nationality to sustain it. In conclusion, the author argues that O'Brien's and Keane's novels generate spaces in which alternative forms of female subjectivity can emerge, despite contradictions and religious and ideological tensions.

Fourthly, without a doubt, *Mary Lavelle* is one of O'Brien's most widely studied works. In this respect, Wanda Balzano analysed the various occasions on which Mary Lavelle manifested herself as a foreigner in three settings: the home, her role as governess, and the linguistic sphere, both Spanish and English. She also explored the figure of the foreigner, her social construction, and her relationship with the homeland, hospitality, love, sexuality and death.

Amanda Tucker unpacked the transnational feminism that is present in *Mary Lavelle*. This character can only develop —intellectually, sexually and emotionally— if she is abroad. From this, Amanda Tucker argued that O'Brien's female characters are at their most developed when they are abroad and that, in most of her works, the protagonists are Irish women who leave their native

country. This is a necessary work for an insight into the concept of the identity of O'Brien's characters.

Michael G. Cronin focused on how this novel explores the symbolic geography of Spain to reconstruct the concepts of autonomy, morality and desire in the context of the conservative and Catholic Ireland of the time. The author's interest in this essay lies in presenting Spain as a space in which the protagonist can reconsider her identity and desires, always in contrast to the conditions in her own country.

And O'Brien's bibliography includes both female and male queer characters, such as *Mary Lavelle*, *As Music and Splendour*, *Without my Cloak* and *The Land of Spices*. However, the study of her as a queer author and her characters was not undertaken until many years later. Tom Inglis, for example, has pointed out that this is because Irish sexuality in literature, in contrast to the British, did not interest the academic world. Emma Donoghue has noted that while such links are mentioned, they are never studied as relevant but are presented only to be named as insignificant. Against this background, Amy Finlay-Jeffrey has chosen to analyse *Mary Lavelle* as a liminal space to broaden this discussion of desire as manifested in a lesbian character.

Therefore, O'Brien's work has been widely studied from perspectives that certainly resonate with this research, such as identity, sexuality, national belonging, politics, queer theory and transnational feminisms. However, most of these approaches have been conducted with an understanding of Irish identity as separate from Spanish identity, as if O'Brien could only choose one of the two national identities in her writing and was forced to momentarily abandon the other.

For this reason, this context is valuable because it serves as a starting point for attempting to reconstruct the formation of an Irish-Spanish identity that is constituted autonomously and distanced from the British one, which is present in both O'Brien and Lavelle.

4. Methodology

As mentioned above, the analysis of this research is carried out from a qualitative and interpretative perspective of the novel *Mary Lavelle*, understood as a narrative space in which the concepts of belonging, border, and identity are posed, problematised and configured.

A close reading of the novel was carried out to identify those fragments in which the author allows us to glimpse the cultural crossings and tensions between Ireland and Spain, embodied in the protagonist. This situation allows us to speak of Lavelle as a subject who is in an affective and symbolic transition that challenges her in terms of religion, language, customs and geography.

This analysis has been carried out using tools from literary, cultural, and post-colonial studies, as well as the hermeneutic approach. From the former, it takes the necessary resources to define concepts such as *hybridisation* (García Canclini, Mignolo, Bhabha), *frontier* (Anzaldúa, Ortíz, Pratt), and *identity construction* (Mentxaka, Ahmed). From the second, we opt for the possibility of studying the novel from the narrative elements, such as characterisation and characters, spaces, and symbols, as well as from the cultural imaginaries that appear implicitly or explicitly in the text.

It is worth mentioning that this reading is also informed by an understanding of concepts such as gender, religion, and class. These concepts undoubtedly influence the experiences of both the protagonist and the author and are key to understanding the issue of identity.

Due to this methodology, the novel is approached as a symbolic mediation between affective and national contexts, which contributes to the reconstruction of Irish-Spanish identity through O'Brien's literary fiction.

5. Historical and Literary Contextualisation

To understand the multiple ruptures generated by *Mary Lavelle*, it is necessary to contextualise the political and literary issues in Ireland and Spain at the time. Firstly, the novel was published in 1936 against a backdrop of independence and Catholicism. Since 1922, Ireland had been formally independent, prompting a reimagining of national identity that was closely tied to Catholicism and resistance to centuries of British rule.

Post-colonial Irish identity was founded on the pillars of strong nationalism, conservatism, and patriarchy. Additionally, there was a growing interest in a defence of traditions, both folkloric and linguistic (Foster). This panorama strongly influenced the creation of the novel and the way in which the author presented the protagonist's perception of Ireland, a concept that features frequently throughout the narrative. At that time, social and cultural life was responsible for restricting women's individual freedom, a situation that triggered Mary's desire to delay her transition from daughter to wife. In her words:

> To go to Spain. To be alone for a little space, a tiny hiatus between her life's two accepted phases. To cease being a daughter without immediately becoming a wife. To be a free lance, to belong to no one place or family or person—to achieve that silly longing of childhood, only for one year, before she flung it with all other childish things upon the scrapheap. Spain! (O'Brien *Mary Lavelle* 34)

As mentioned above, the Irish context of the time limited any expression that was considered dissident or transgressive in political, religious or sexual terms. *Mary Lavelle* thus appears at a time of quest for personal autonomy and urgency for the construction of national sovereignty, generating tensions between tradition and modernity. This was a defining feature of Ireland in the interwar period.

During the 1920s and 1930s, when O'Brien was living in Portugalete, Spain was a deeply Catholic and conservative society. At the same time, it coexisted with a European cultural imaginary that portrayed it as exotic, passionate and mysterious, as can be seen in literature and art from this period. O'Brien herself alludes to this when she mentions Washington Irving, whose chronicles and stories evoke the differences between Spain and Britain from a British perspective (O'Brien *Mary Lavelle*).

Throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, foreign writers such as Théophile Gautier and Ernest Hemingway helped shape the literary image of Spain as a place of repressed desire, emotional intensity, and exoticism. For European authors such as Violet Trefusis, Geraldine Cummins, Vita Sackville-West and O'Brien herself, the south functioned as a kind of "European other", a place where they could project themselves and explore tensions that, in their own Northern or Protestant societies (Varma), were unapproachable. It is possible to interpret such representations according to *contact zones* (Pratt) or *third space* (Bhabha), in which processes of negotiation of cultural frictions and diverse and unprecedented modes of agency are involved.

In *Mary Lavelle*, the phenomenon takes a singular form: the geographical journey to Spain —otherwise equivalent to O'Brien's— confronts her with the gendered and religious tenets, mandates and constrictions of Irish Catholicism. In this way, the journey implies a certain way of mediating or negotiating identity, as well as proposing itself as a critical stance and experience with respect to nationalist essentialisms, that is to say, a liminal experience. Moreover, in multiple sections of the novel, the author provides insight into the notion of desire in Spain at that time. She portrays Mary, who was seen as an attractive and complex "other" embodying both liberation and threat. This triggers ambivalence in the protagonist's feelings. Just as she is troubled by the comments of her pupils' music teacher, and responds with a faint smile when strangers comment on her body as she walks the streets, she also admits to liking the Spanish, whom she also sees as an "other". However, this attraction is not based on superficial ideals or physical attributes; it is a hidden gravity, as Mary defines it — a quality that inhabits almost all of them and leaves a deep impression on her. This creates an emotional and symbolic space in which the fixed divisions between self and other are blurred, as curiosity, desire and distance are intertwined in her imagination. As shown below:

> Mary, six weeks in Spain now, was finding that she liked Spanish people, individually and in crowds, liked the look of them. Not that she thought them excessively endowed with beauty. Indeed the townswomen, inclined to be dressy, were mostly rather comic, with pneumatic curves and lacquered, crimpy hair; and the men were often blue-chinned and fat. But the latter had—almost to a man, it seemed to Mary—a reserved gravity of eye that was arresting. It waited imperturbably behind even inane or hysterical liveliness and when a face fell into repose usurped it with a sobriety so profound that it held the attention as beauty might. Mary was startled sometimes to observe how persistently she had come to watch for this. (O'Brien *Mary Lavelle* 103)

Hence, the concept of "Spanishness" in the novel is not merely an exoticism, but it is rather presented as a form of otherness that challenges pre-existing cultural references and suggests a personal journey. The protagonist's ambiguous feelings remain unresolved, becoming one of the narrative drivers of the work and prompting reflection on the concept of non-essentialist identities that are open to contact and transformation. The protagonist goes from contrasting the idea she had of Spain:

> Mary had walked on their slopes already, had seen the trucks descend the valleys with the raw wealth which founded this glossy splendour. [...] It was an unlooked-for Spain. Busy, rich, common and progressive on the one hand—on the other, grave and pitiful. Where were the castanets and the flowers in the hair? (O'Brien *Mary Lavelle* 74)

To recognise how the image she has changes and Spain becomes part of it to the extent that she inhabits it, to the point of interweaving it with who she is:

> She had studied her map and accepted the vastness and regionalism of Spain, and understood already that the north is not the south; already she had taken her place, felt attached, and might even smile at tourists. She had caught a hint of Spanish realism and Spanish vulgarity, a little of bourgeois routine. She felt a little at home. But, sitting here, in green shadow, while the Spanish afternoon dreamt and the strange sky gleamed with familiar homely tenderness —she felt an unexpected solemn movement in her heart. [...] It was as if what she looked on thus accidentally were ageing her, as if it were imposing knowledge. She was inert and puzzled; she felt as if she might never move again. (O'Brien *Mary Lavelle* 75)

Therefore, O'Brien's open-minded view of Spain creates a tension between fascination and criticism, in which Spain becomes a mirror reflecting the limitations and potential of Mary's identity. Furthermore, the dual act of censorship in both Ireland and Franco's Spain highlights the novel's radical power in challenging the dominant norms of gender, morality, and politics. It also highlights how the work was perceived as a symbolic threat in both countries.

Against this backdrop, it is worth mentioning that O'Brien also represented a break with the times. She is an Irish woman who is liberal, a migrant and critical. She is a liminal woman who portrays the space of tension between morality, desire and identity in her works.

Furthermore, O'Brien employs the journey as a narrative device that transcends the traditional boundaries of storytelling, presenting it as a political and ethical gesture. Mary's

migration to Spain symbolises a transition towards personal autonomy, the exploration of desire, and a break with social impositions:

> She becomes a miss because not her wits but her intuitional antennæ tell her that it is an occupation which will let her personality be; she becomes one because she does not want to be anything but herself for long, because she is in love with a young man in Ireland maybe—all the English governesses in Spain are Irish—or is in love with love, or with indefiniteness, or with her home or her religion—because in short she has that within her which makes her politely unconcerned with the immediacies. She knows her eventual place, and will be content to fill it. (O'Brien *Mary Lavelle* 16-17)

Therefore, the journey can be seen as a metaphor for the protagonist's journey of self-discovery and liberation, through which she challenges the rigid boundaries of nationalism and patriarchal norms. At the same time, this transit is a space in which closed identities are brought into tension, enabling O'Brien to create hybrid and complex subjects. It should also be noted that incorporating the theme of displacement into the narrative enables it to engage with the European context of the interwar period, as evidenced in the prologue and final chapter of the novel, as well as in Mary's letters, where she mentions being four days from Ireland, suggesting that a letter would arrive before her, as travel is viewed as a symbol of modernity and social change.

It is in this context that the novel can be analysed to explore identity between, rather than within, two cultures. Theories of cultural boundaries and hybridity, which challenge notions of fixed and essentialist national identities, are useful for this analysis. The concept of the *third space* (Bhabha) helps us to understand the space that Mary inhabits, her desire to stay there, and how easily she adapts. This is in line with her longing for Ireland, and her attempts to combine her ideas of both countries with her emotions. This *third space* emerges as a place of negotiation and ambiguity, where the protagonist's identity is formed in a hybrid manner, resisting the binary opposition of choosing one country over the other.

Furthermore, Mary encounters a variety of *frontiers*, which can be attributed to her liminal character and her intersection with gender and culture (Anzaldúa). This enables us to perceive her identity as a dynamic and fluid entity. This highlights the *plural modernity* (Gilroy) that she experiences on her journey and the cultural crossbreeds that emerge in postcolonial contexts.

Taking these theories and contexts into account, *Mary Lavelle* is a novel that recounts a physical journey representing a cultural and subjective transition, in which the protagonist experiences the tension and fusion between Irish identity and Spanish culture.

6. Border Dynamics and Hybridisation Processes

In *Mary Lavelle* (1936), Kate O'Brien presents a narrative driven by movement. The physical journey from Ireland to Spain is also presented as a metaphorical representation of a subjective movement encompassing cultural and political dimensions. However, this journey moves away from a process of cultural rapprochement and moulding, instead opening a scenario that constitutes what Bhabha defines as a *third space* or *in-betweenness*. In this way, the work lies at the intersection of the notion of the cultural border as *contact zones* (Pratt), and the unfolding of a female identity formed through encounters with otherness, culture, and linguistic constructions that differ from one's own. Thus, the phenomena that emerge around the border and the dynamics of hybridisation simultaneously challenge Mary and rethink ideas about nationalism, the modernisation project in peripheral areas, and femininity.

O'Brien's work reconfigures an identity constructed through cultural and historical contexts, emotional experiences, encounters with the "other", and discourses and power relations (Ahmed). Following Mentxaka, Mary transforms her subjectivity by creating tensions with religious, sexual, and national norms. Identity is therefore defined as much by difference as by affirmation.

In the work, Mary is portrayed as a visitor, a transient figure and someone who is not dominant. She perceives Spain as both familiar and distant. This triggers a series of intellectual analyses and comparison practices, during her stay in the country, that prompt her to reflect on and investigate her sense of identity, her education, the foundations of her Catholicism, and her emotional and sexual experiences. In this sense, the symbolic and cultural borders between Spain and Ireland are perceived as permeable and shifting, and it is within these scenarios that Mary addresses the most significant aspects of her identity formation.

Nevertheless, Mary embodies several preconceived ideas related to exoticism, paternalism and colonialism, which influence her perceptions of Spain. However, O'Brien challenges these preconceptions by depicting a complex and paradoxical Spain that cannot be reduced to exoticism. As shown below:

> In the brief weeks of her acquaintance with Spain she had fallen day by day—she saw that now—a little more and a little more in love with it. This love had, timidly, fed curiosity, and curiosity, humoured somewhat, had refuelled love. It meant that much of her wages were spent at the

> bookshops and market bookstalls of Altorno. […] In skimming them, predispositions encouraged prejudice. Thus the white-skinned Western Christian in her could not bear the suggestion that Africa began beyond the Pyrenees, and all writers who, either in condescension or admiration, stressed Moorish Spain and made little of its Christianity, were held at arm's length. She could not possibly judge such judgments, but her hope turned from them. If Arab philosophy and Arab fiddle-faddle art were truly dominant in the peninsula, then great, good and stimulating to others as such a residue might be, it could never have her heart. […] Already, like Isabella the Catholic, her desire had built a city of Santa Fé. The Moor would fall. She could not lose her Spain. (O'Brien *Mary Lavelle* 214-215)

This quote shows that the emotional bond the protagonist forms with Spain is not spontaneous or innocent, but shaped by inherited cultural frameworks, particularly those linked to her Irish, white and Catholic identity. Mary's prejudices impact her enjoyment of Spain. She expresses her passionate love for Spain, while opposing any links with the Arab world or Africa. This perspective is part of Mary's attempt to reconcile her personal experience of living in Spain with Western narratives that portray the country as exotic. Similarly, her self-comparison with Queen Isabella the Catholic is a reference to conquest, which she makes her own.

This scene reveals the *third space* (Bhabha). Mary now finds herself in an ambiguous, intermediate place, experiencing a conflict between her own identity and that of others, between desire and denial. She cannot be fully Irish or completely Spanish. It is here that her hybrid identity is formed.

At the same time, *Mary Lavelle* is an introspective novel charged with emotional symbolism. It can therefore be understood as a lyrical novel (Freedman) in that it does not seek to be an action-packed story, but rather a novel of consciousness. It achieves this by focusing on the internal development of the protagonist, employing poetic language at key moments, and depicting migration as a journey of emotional self-knowledge.

This can be affirmed because Mary's subjectivity loses its stability due to a series of experiences —such as a meal, a gesture, a conversation or a moment— that imbue it with meaning without this translating into a narrative climax, as there is no such need. Rather than advancing the plot, these episodes enable us to delve into the protagonist's personal evolution. An example of this can be seen on the morning when Mary spends three hours trying to take in the scale of the works on display at the Prado:

> Her mind was hung with broken memories of paintings; she was tired and in so far as she considered herself felt irate against the smallness, impotence and ignorance of one tiny, silly, self-conscious human life. But she was inhaling too an air that was strange to her, blown in from abstract life, remote, impersonal, held in perspective as genius orders it. She was awestruck and tremulous, but not defeated now, or too much bothered by her own ignorance. For as to that she had reflected, standing before Rubens' "Three Graces," that she could no more have written *Kubla Khan* or explained how it was written than have painted this picture. […] Yet it would not occur to her that she had no right to read a poem, or no possible chance of understanding it. (O'Brien *Mary Lavelle* 227)

This passage, which conveys Mary's sense of being overwhelmed by both art and her own insignificance, exhibits several characteristics of lyrical novels, such as the use of abstract language, an emphasis on the inner world, and a contemplative tone. The prose becomes poetic to convey the protagonist's experiences and demonstrate that introspection is integral to the cultural hybridisation she is undergoing.

This is why *Mary Lavelle*, as a lyrical novel, expresses identity through a transformative process in which the protagonist doubts, questions, reconfigures and exposes herself. O'Brien's choice of this literary form allows the cultural transition to be represented as an affective and sensory process due to the attention given to sensory details, the protagonist's monologue and Mary's constant retrospection, as the narrative focus is constantly on her inner world.

Interpreting the novel in this manner enables it to engage with the concepts of *cultural borders* (Pratt) and *hybridity* (García Canclini), as this personal exploration of the self-portrays Mary's identity as an evolving and interconnected construction. Due to its introspection and high sensory content, the lyrical novel enables the author to depict the concept of *in-betweenness* (Bhabha), whereby identity is transformed through displacement, contact and desire. In doing so, the author demonstrates that culture permeates the intimate sphere.

From the outset of the novel, Mary's cultural hybridity is evident as she establishes connections between the familiar and the unfamiliar, and successfully integrates into the Altorno landscape, much as she did in her native Mellick (O'Brien *Mary Lavelle*). This feeling grows stronger as the novel becomes more complex. One of the most important aspects for understanding Mary Lavelle's cultural hybridisation process is the way in which the protagonist's desires are

presented. There are three key situations that can be analysed in relation to Mary's desires: bullfighting, her love for Juan and Agatha's declaration.

Regarding the first situation, Mary arrives in Spain determined not to attend a bullfight. She had discussed it with her fiancé and they had agreed that it would be best not to go, given that there could be nothing beautiful about it and that Mary was too weak to endure it. However, as soon as the opportunity arises, Mary does not hesitate to accept, as the novel describes: "So here Mary was at the bullfight, because she liked Spaniards and sought to understand them" (O'Brien *Mary Lavelle* 110). That "moment of truth" (140), which Milagros[2] —the youngest of her three pupils— teaches her is the culminating moment of the bullfight, transcends the sport and takes root in Mary. Here, intellectual and cultural desire is manifested: she wants to understand, belong, and participate. The following excerpt illustrates this:

> But the wound of the bullfight was in fact—though she tried to forget and ignore it—the gateway through which Spain had entered in and taken her. She did not know how much an afternoon in the bullring had changed her. But, young and very conventional, to have learnt through the movements of one's own nerves the difference between shock and revulsion. […] that is an awful lesson, most disconcerting to the gentle and orthodox. (O'Brien *Mary Lavelle* 129)

Although she recognises her limitations —she cannot paint like Rubens or write like Coleridge — she asserts her right to experience and interpret what was considered art in the popular context of the time[3], from her position as someone who is neither fully educated nor completely

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[2] It is precisely through Milagros, the fourteen-year-old girl, that O'Brien develops the role that bullfights play in the story, arguing that they influence the changes Mary undergoes:

> You think the corrida very terrible? Well, it is terrible. But we are not romantic. We are realists, and I think we are philosophically tragic. That is—we don't make a fuss or an illusion about tragedy, or think it very astounding, or better than comedy—simply, we are well acquainted with it, and we find it interesting and persistent and it doesn't make us squeal. Well, in the bullfight there is much accidental beauty, as it happens—you admit that?—but it is shockingly real. It is death and horror presented theatrically and really, both at once. But all the time the sun shines and we drink beer, and watch marvellous happenings. We are experts and have no illusions and we wait for success and failure in this and that detail. But we are spirits too and we cannot escape the thousand symbols, or the ache in our hearts. That is the bullfight—it is as symbolical and suggestive and heartrending as the greatest poetry, and it is also as brutal and shameless as the lowest human impulse. Nothing else can give you that in one movement. It is an immense thing—it must be faced. (O'Brien *Mary Lavelle* 138)

[3] Throughout the novel, the popular fondness for bullfighting and the idea of it as an art form are a constant source of tension. Of the governesses, only Agatha likes bullfighting, and it is she who invites Mary to her first bullfight. Of the Areavaga family, only Milagros likes bullfighting and insists on taking Mary to a bullfight to celebrate her birthday. The other family members reject it, believing it to be a distasteful custom associated with social groups different from their own. This rejection is based on cultural, intellectual, and class-related reasons: they are seen as an aristocratic, enlightened family, distinguishing themselves from popular passions, and the violence and magnitude of bullfighting. The contrasting perspectives of the two groups Mary encounters symbolise the difference between bourgeois tastes and popular culture and highlight the clear distinction they perceive between what is civilised and what is unacceptable for their social status.

ignorant. Furthermore, the protagonist's identity changes so much that, by the end of the novel, her friends and Areavaga family constantly insist that she has become cold. In Agatha's words:

> "Do you really mean that you're leaving Spain in a week or two?"
> "If I can arrange it."
> "They'll find you changed at home."
> "In what way?"
> "You've grown self-centred." (O'Brien *Mary Lavelle* 284)

Regarding the second situation, the heteronormative exegesis or that of conventional friendship does not explain the relationship between Mary and Agatha. Rather, their bond is an intimate one that challenges the principles of vision and the division of desire imposed by Irish society and the parameters of behaviour expected of a governess, impacting both of them. This special bond represents Mary's hybridity and her distance from the social norms of love, duty and femininity. At the same time, it challenges the religious ideals that both have grown up with. As described below:

> "You asked me if I'd ever had a crush. […] And I said I'd never had a crush on a living creature. That would have been true up to the first day I saw you. It's not true anymore." There was a long pause. "I wasn't going to say anything. I had just made up my mind, while you were in Madrid, to try being nice to a human being for a change, that's all. I didn't write; I was thinking about you too much to write […]." she laughed again.
> "Agatha —please!"
> "Are you shocked? I like you the way a man would, you see. I never can see you without—without wanting to touch you. I could look at your face for ever. Every time O'Toole calls you 'alannah' I want to murder her. It's a sin to feel like that."
> "Oh, everything's a sin!"
> "I knew it was wrong; but lately I've been told explicitly about it in confession. It's a very ancient and terrible vice. Good God!" She laughed again softly, almost tenderly. (O'Brien *Mary Lavelle* 284-285)

This assessment aligns with Mentxaka's view of O'Brien's work, which she describes as both queer and postcolonial. O'Brien's writing explores identity from various angles, including femininity, sexuality, and politics. According to Mentxaka, Agatha is a pivotal character whose unconventional and non-hegemonic affection for Mary implies loyalty, solidarity and empathy.

She embodies the discussions that arise throughout the novel in relation to sexual and affective identity.

Regarding the third situation, the bond between Mary and Juanito is a metaphor for the novel's proposal of symbolic crossbreeding. Beyond an erotic interpretation, this relationship presents desire as something that can transcend religion, language and the body. Juanito is characterised as a non-Irish masculinity that is aristocratic, melancholic, passionate, visceral and reflective, while remaining connected to the patriarchal structures in which he was raised. Through her desire for him, Mary discovers her sexuality and her role as a committed woman within the Irish nationalist imaginary. She also realises her potential for agency in terms of her sexual freedom and exploration.

> Their eyes were open for each other as they went his road, and to each the near, white face of the other seemed now both deeply known and very strange. They searched their mutual experience while it stirred them. […] neither knew intellectually what the terrible storm was saying to the other—but grotesquely and harshly made one in the flesh by an urgency that wounded and overwhelmed, they were emotionally welded, not by their errant senses which might or might not play in unison, but by a brilliant light of sympathy which seemed both to arise from sensuality and to descend from elsewhere to assist and glorify it. (O'Brien *Mary Lavelle* 309-310)

In addition, Mary's interest in learning Spanish and her ability to express herself in this language after only six weeks in the country demonstrate that language also functions as a hybrid territory. The governess moves within a language that she does not fully master, but she does so, feeling it to be a part of her. This includes the mistakes, silences and misunderstandings that she may experience, to the extent that she is able to declare her love for Juanito in Spanish. She communicates with him in Spanish, calling him "Dear Love" (O'Brien *Mary Lavelle* 253) and declaring her love for him. That is why he can make requests such as the following:

> "Speak Spanish," he said, teasingly, in Spanish.
> She repeated her sentences in his language.
> "That's lovely. Speak Spanish all day."
> "I couldn't possibly."
> "I'll make you." (O'Brien *Mary Lavelle* 243)

However, it is not static. Although she can explain her complex emotions in this language, during the most intense moments she asks to switch back to English. This is yet another manifestation of the *in-betweenness* (Bhabha) she inhabits:

> "We're two of a kind," she said. "I'm Irish; you know nothing about me, except that I'm employed and trusted by your parents and sisters. I am a Catholic like you. I am engaged to a man who believes in me completely. So, if I ingratiate myself—oh, Juanito, let me talk English!" (O'Brien *Mary Lavelle* 245)

Language appears as a cultural mediation in this context, a space for negotiation between what one wants to say, what can be expressed, and what can be understood. Moreover, during moments of intense emotion, such as discussions, revelations and intimate encounters, gestures replace words. This demonstrates how the body, through its own language, also becomes an intercultural text. This is why intercultural contact transforms the identity of O'Brien's protagonist, reconfiguring her view of the world, of herself, of morality and of desire.

Hybridisation is a multidimensional phenomenon involving politics, language and emotion. Mary's confrontation with, and gradual transformation in response to, this complex reality is evident in the fact that when she arrives in Spain, she still retains certain ideals regarding her place in the world as a daughter, *fiancée*, citizen, foreigner and governess. However, this set of preconceived ideas gradually dissolves in the face of the possibility of making her own choices regarding love, language and how it is used, and whether it is maintained or abandoned. This transition from obligation and preconceived ideas to choice, reflection and transformation manifests the shift from a rigid to a flexible and mutable identity. Mary embraces her identity as a permeable and ever-changing entity. Breaking with the conventions of her time, she decided to learn Spanish and experience the world through a language other than her native tongue.

This transformation manifests as an ethical conception of the border, whereby it is possible to create a shared space with difference. However, the hybridisation explored by O'Brien contains multiple tensions and contradictions. Hence, it is a political hybridisation.

Mary Lavelle is a narrative and symbolic representation of the border, which is used to critique religious, national and gender fundamentalism. O'Brian constructs Mary's identity as one of constant change, largely motivated by contradictory encounters with the "other", the "alien", and the "non-self". From this perspective, the cultural border is not assumed to be a dividing line,

but rather a context of constant change and confrontation. The work explores physical and metaphysical journeys while simultaneously proposing a hybrid approach to experiencing and situating oneself in the world. Therefore, identity is understood as a relational construction between countries, rather than as something that occurs within them in isolation.

7. Influence of National and Religious Essentialisms

Like O'Brien's other novels, *Mary Lavelle* presents a critical view of the Irish nationalism and Catholic conservatism that characterised the construction of identity in post-independence Ireland in 1922. The author creates the protagonist to embody a narrative of subjective transformation that subverts the discourses of the feminine, the religious and the natural, which were considered immovable and unassailable at the time. The novel's criticism is contextualised through the protagonist's geographical displacement, placing her in the ambiguous space of confrontation, desire and estrangement that Spain represents, enabling her to observe her own culture with a critical eye:

> [Mary] had stood here before to watch this lovely dancing—nowhere, she believed, could everyday dancing be made to seem so noble as by the common people of Spain. Often standing there she had wondered what it would be like to be one of them, to dance to that raucous music, over the uneven earth, in and out of the shadowing trees. Young men had asked her often to be their partner, but she, under two traditions, that of a young lady of Mellick and of a 'miss,' had always had to refuse. But her refusals had been taken as friendlily and shyly as she tendered them. (O'Brien *Mary Lavelle* 188-189)

Throughout the novel, Mary's identity is constructed as a state of *in-betweenness* (Bhabha). The other governesses she meets at the Café Alemán make it clear that she is not quite Irish (O'Brien *Mary Lavelle*), and the physical exhaustion she experiences at certain events, such as going to a bullfight, suggests that she is not quite Spanish either (O'Brien *Mary Lavelle*). This hybridisation results in *transculturation* (Ortíz), which is the process of cultural assimilation that occurs through mutual dynamism. The rigidity of her Catholic upbringing is challenged by her experience of Spanish culture, which allows her to embrace sensuality, freedom, and moral ambiguity. This tension seeks resolution through decentring rather than assimilation. Mary is transformed and does not return to Ireland the same person. She has changed, as the other characters make clear: she is no longer the weak, docile woman she was in June 1922 when she arrived at Casa Pilar in Cabantes, as Don Pablo argues:

> She went away in trouble, thinner and more grave of face than when he first beheld her and with blue shadows always stressing now the blue of her eyes. What was her trouble? What could a stranger do, a dying man, to heal it? Spain had laid it on her—he was sure of that. Estéban might joke as he pleased, and she herself might weave uncertain fables, but she was not hurrying back in

> homesick eagerness to her eager lover. She was dragging herself home in pain, because she was too much hurt to stay. (O'Brien *Mary Lavelle* 317)

Furthermore, her hybrid identity causes her to question the nationalist discourses she has learned, which associate identity with religious affiliation and cultural purity.

> Mary, precariously at peace in this deep embrace, looked towards its logical end, which she knew now her love desired and half intended. And she saw that for Juanito's sake, not for hers, they should forbear. Were there such a thing as loving without exacting love, were it possible to save a lover from the afterwards built up already by himself, she would be Juanito's now contentedly, and disappear to-morrow to reckon alone with the repercussions in her of her own decision. […] she yet could see that time would make manageable to her and would keep her own the consequences on her side of her surrender now. The central sin against Catholic teaching would be her affair and Heaven's. […] For herself—ah, all that she would gain and lose by this one day would be her secret for ever. In direct relation to herself, she had no fear whatever of the gamble. Richer or poorer thereafter, what need it matter? She could earn a living, and the world was wide. (O'Brien *Mary Lavelle* 257-258)

Mary's concept of identity is viewed as a contested territory, challenged by desires, obedience, self-determination and norms. The transformation that the protagonist undergoes is an example of hybridisation, i. e., the process by which diverse cultural elements combine to create other identities and symbolic practices. However, it is not a calm and harmonious mixture because in this context, hybridisation between the local and the other, the modern and the traditional intersect, producing tensions (García Canclini). From this perspective, Mary's displacement, in its symbolic dimension, becomes a process of constant negation, forcing her to adopt *border thinking* (Mignolo). As the following excerpt shows:

> Mary stood among the shouting Spaniards, not knowing whether she shouted too or not. Had she been searching for means to describe her state of emotion then, she could have found no covering term, nor could she indeed in many sentences have accomplished any record of her immediate self. But that was not troubling her— yet. She was—perhaps this is the easiest phrase—outside herself. (O'Brien *Mary Lavelle* 315)

Both Ireland and Spain have a deep symbolic framework linked to Catholicism that extends to all areas of everyday life. However, O'Brien highlights the differences between the two religious traditions. In Ireland, Catholicism is associated with moral authority, the suppression of desire and

sexual expression, and a form of nationalism that defends "fundamental" principles. In contrast, Catholicism in Spain is expressed with a certain indeterminacy or ironic contradiction, despite the concrete experience of censorship and oppression —as exemplified by the character of Don Pablo—, for whom Catholicism does not obstruct desire.

> […] Mary knew by hearsay —from confessors, from school retreats, from missions, from the exhortations of the catechism—that she was a sinner, a weak thing of flesh. She remembered that when she first learnt to read and found her prayer book a useful field of exercise for the new accomplishment, she had frequently entreated God, in a long and resounding orison, to deliver her from her concupiscence. But to this day she was uncertain how to pronounce that word, and was glad that there never seemed occasion to utter it. She knew, however, in theory, a reasonable sufficiency about the tricky sixth commandment, and she was no fool. (O'Brien *Mary Lavelle* 180-181)

It is therefore considered that O'Brien suggests that life experience in Spain enables one to demystify and deconstruct dogma and propose a feminist critique. Furthermore, from a postcolonial perspective, O'Brien suggests that the contradictory movement generated by confrontation is a fundamental device for self-criticism, knowledge and recognition, whereby national identity is defined through difference with the foreign.

The notion of transnational Catholicism is presented through the contrast between rigorous, patriarchal and nationalist Catholicism, as exemplified by the Irish tradition, and a more contradictory, performative and ambiguous tradition, as exemplified by the Spanish tradition. This notion is related to postcolonial critique. In this novel, religion, national identity, duty and everything that was considered universal are presented as localised constructions that are culturally marked. In Mary's case, the "proper", or the Irish, can only be understood by considering the "other", or all that she knows and is shaped by her transit through Spain. This ratifies the notion of *plural modernity* (Gilroy) present in the novel.

Mary is a complex character, embodying the roles of governess, traveller and mediator. As a foreigner in Spain, she is placed on an epistemological plane from which she strives to understand a reality with which she is unfamiliar, one that gradually and radically transforms her perception of her own reality. This mediation, of course, has aesthetic and political dimensions. Indeed, *Mary Lavelle* is a work that explores the representation of marginal realities and experiences.

Undoubtedly, Mary's personal journey enables the development of a critical and permeable model of subjectivity that inhabits borders without the need to resolve them. Through her desires, languages and memories, the protagonist's portrait consolidates an affective and ideological map (Anhemed), in which identity is a hybridisation of cultures, bodies, places and times.

8. Conclusions

This dissertation aimed to demonstrate that *Mary Lavelle* is not merely a narrative about a journey, or a love story set in a foreign country, but rather an exploration of the interplay between gender, desire, language, religion and class in peripheral European contexts. In this way, the novel contributes to our understanding of borders as *contact zones* (Pratt), spaces in which identities are negotiated, friction occurs, and transformations take place without identities merging completely or becoming homogeneous. In this sense, the protagonist is presented as a *border woman* (Anzaldúa), embodying this ambiguity through her body, feelings and thoughts. She is a series of privileged governesses: a foreigner who is neither fully integrated into her new environment nor completely alien to it. The experience that O'Brien constructs in this novel is one of *in-betweenness* (Bhabha), in which the self and the other can be critically considered together.

One of this thesis' contributions was to decentralise the Anglocentric interpretation of O'Brien's work, which has been widely studied in relation to Ireland and the United Kingdom. Here, the proposal was to focus on the relationship between Ireland and Spain as two Catholic peripheries, both of which are characterised by similar, albeit historically distinct, systems of symbolic control. Irish Catholicism is presented in this study as a powerful system of female repression that Mary has internalised. This system is further exacerbated when she encounters Spanish Catholicism, which is more ritualised, sexualised and ambiguous. Spain is not simply presented as an "other" in the literature of the time; it acts as a distorting mirror that enables Mary —and, to a certain extent, O'Brien— to reconsider her notions of national identity, desire, and her own body.

Similarly, it has been suggested that *Mary Lavelle* can be understood as a lyric novel, a reading that is enhanced by the introspective rhythm, attention to emotional and perceptual detail, and fragmentation of experience, which enable an approach to transformation that is both ambivalent and gradual. Here, female subjectivity is presented as an evolving entity that grapples with idiomatic, erotic, political and religious tensions, as well as the experience of being a foreigner. The protagonist thus learns to inhabit this *hybrid territory* without any pretence of complete appropriation.

Throughout this work, the sex-affective relationship between Mary and Juanito has been interpreted in two ways: as a story of frustrated love and as a symbol of miscegenation and

multidimensional hybridity (emotional, linguistic, cultural and political). Mary Lavelle describes a bond in which desire encompasses vulnerability, contradiction and consensus rather than idealisation, submission or possession. This hybridisation, which is not without conflict, is also evident in Mary's Irish identity, which has been enriched by her life experience in Spain. Essentially, her conception of identity has transformed, moving away from viewing it as a fixed and deserved dimension of inheritance to viewing it as a permanent construction situated in a geographical, historical and political context.

In addition, Agatha's confession of love to Mary adds a queer dimension to the narrative, enabling an understanding of desire beyond the heterosexual norm. This reaffirms the affective identity (Ahmed) created when the intimate and the cultural are intertwined. Through this frustrated love, O'Brien explores alternative forms of connection that enrich the emotional and political fabric of the work, characterised by impossibility and displacement.

This novel also presents an alternative model of subjectivity and belonging, marked by the interstitial, the relational, and the shifting. Confronted with two exclusionary nationalisms burdened with religious essentialisms, O'Brien chose to respond with an ethic of the frontier. Her protagonist embodies a way of inhabiting the world that embraces the unease of hybridity, the transformative potential of cross-cultural encounters, and the courage of living in transit.

This study aimed to expand the scope of reading and analysing Kate O'Brien's works by adopting a lesser-explored perspective: the symbolic relationship between Ireland and Spain. *Mary Lavelle* is understood as a network of cultural exchanges that corresponds to this union between countries and allows us to question different forms of peripheral European identity. Furthermore, adopting a postcolonial, cultural and gender studies approach aimed to enrich the idea that literature functions as a space of transformation and subjective mediation.

Finally, this research opens the possibility of exploring Mary Lavelle's role as a cultural mediator. This suggests a new line of research that allows for comparison with other novels by Irish women authors who narrate displacement and exile, and who present representations of Catholicism in peripheral European literatures. This is particularly relevant in relation to the control of the female body and the symbolic resistances that arise in this regard. In summary, this dissertation invites us to reconsider the concept of *hybridity* and to view it not just as a colonial

category, but also as a means of studying lateral encounters between peripheries, which have their own inherent tensions, violence and opportunities.

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