

DISPLACEMENT, BELONGING AND MARGINALISATION IN MICHÈLE ROBERTS'S *DAUGHTERS OF THE HOUSE* AND HILARY MANTEL'S *THE GIANT, O'BRIEN*

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ABSTRACT

Hilary Mantel and Michèle Roberts were born and raised in England and are therefore considered as mainstream writers; however they both come from different origins outside the UK, France in the case of Roberts and Ireland in the case of Mantel. For this reason, in many of their novels they have both dealt with topics that have been traditionally approached by writers of the so-called margins, especially by postcolonial studies, such as displacement, marginalisation and the search for one's own identity. In this paper, I have tried to show how these writers have approached these concepts in the novels where they are more clearly present, Roberts's *Daughters of the House* and Mantel's *The Giant, O'Brien*, and how, even though the feeling of displacement is similar, there is a difference in the characters who suffer from displacement in both novels, which is the relationship between the two cultures they live in, France and England or Ireland and England.

KEY WORDS: Displacement, hybridity, identity, marginalisation, otherness, postcolonial, Hilary Mantel, Michèle Roberts.

RESUMEN

Hilary Mantel y Michèle Roberts nacieron y fueron educadas en Inglaterra y por ello se les considera escritoras de la corriente literaria dominante; sin embargo, ambas crecieron en entornos ajenos al Reino Unido, Francia en el caso de Roberts e Irlanda en el de Mantel. Por esta razón, en muchas de sus novelas han tratado temas que han sido tradicionalmente abordados por escritores de los márgenes, especialmente por estudios postcoloniales, tales como el desplazamiento, la marginación y la búsqueda de la propia identidad. Este ensayo muestra cómo estas dos escritoras se han acercado a estos conceptos en las dos novelas donde están más presentes: *Daughters of the House* de Roberts y *The Giant, O'Brien*, de Mantel, y cómo, a pesar de que el sentimiento de desarraigo es similar en ambos casos, hay una gran diferencia entre los personajes que sufren ese desplazamiento: la relación entre las dos culturas donde viven, Francia e Inglaterra o Irlanda e Inglaterra.

PALABRAS CLAVE: desplazamiento, híbrido, identidad, marginación, postcolonial, otredad, Hilary Mantel, Michèle Roberts.



I. INTRODUCTION

In the last decades, Michèle Roberts and Hilary Mantel have excelled in the English literary scene because of their extensive literary production, which has been admired and praised both by critics and readers due to their narrative quality and innovation. As an example of this success, in the revised edition of *A Literature of Their Own*, Elaine Showalter suggests that Hilary Mantel and Michèle Roberts, together with authors such as Jeanette Winterson or Fay Weldon, should be included “in any female literary canon or tradition” (28). Moreover, their writings have been awarded with a great number of literary prizes. Apart from many other awards, Hilary Mantel is the first woman writer to receive the Booker Prize for Fiction twice, in 2009 and 2012 for her novels *Wolf Hall* and its sequel, *Bring Up the Bodies*. As for Roberts, her novel *Daughters of the House* was the winner of the W.H. Smith Literary Award and was shortlisted for the Booker Prize in 1992.

Even though, at first sight, Hilary Mantel and Michèle Roberts may seem very different writers in some aspects, as in the way they present themes and characters in their novels, they actually share many similarities in their lives and writings. Both writers come from Catholic background outside the UK: Michèle Roberts’s mother is French, and Hilary Mantel’s grandparents came from Ireland. During their childhood, they received a Catholic education; however, at an early age they rejected Catholicism. Despite this, the Catholic religion has been an important influence and has served them as a source of inspiration for their writings.

Apart from their preoccupation with Catholicism and also with feminism—let’s recall here that both authors started their writing careers coinciding with the so-called “second wave” of the feminist movement and that Roberts’s first novel, *A Piece of the Night*, was the first piece of fiction published by the newly founded The Women’s Press in 1978—both novelists share more common elements, such as their link with historical fiction and with the rewritings of historical events, their interest in the magical world of mediums, the contact with supernatural forces and the world of the unconscious, or their concern with the relationship between mothers and daughters, which is present in most of their writings.

In addition to these, there is yet another important point that these writers share, which is the autobiographical component that they include in their narratives. Their education at convent schools, the places where they have lived, and their connections with their origins—France for Roberts and Ireland for Mantel—are a constant in their novels. From this autobiographical component of having lived between two cultures, many of their characters suffer from a sense of displacement which can also be regarded as a reflection of the writers’ own lives.

In fact, one of the reasons why these writers are concerned with such topics as displacement and the search for true identity is because they have also felt themselves “others” in their own country, and have been many times displaced in their own lives. Thus, even though they were born and raised in England, when they are referred to as “English” or “British” writers in books or reviews, none of them feels absolutely identified with this definition: Roberts locates herself between two cultures, the English and the French and, although Mantel and her



parents are from England, she does not feel identified with what to be English means. To her,

when I speak or read abroad I am sometimes described as a British writer, sometimes as an English writer. To me, the first description is meaningless. “Britain” can be used as a geographical term, but it has no definable cultural meaning. As for calling me “an English writer”—it is simply what I am not. (*No Passes* 94)

Similarly, both writers have defined themselves as in-betweens. They feel they do not belong to any place, as well as many of their characters (the concept of the homeless woman looking for her own identity and place is a constant in Roberts’s novels and many of Mantel’s characters are not able to find their place either). Terms like in-between, the dichotomy of home and abroad, or concepts such as identity, displacement, otherness, and hybridity have usually been defined by postcolonial studies and have always been present in postcolonial literature. A great number of studies have tried to find a definition for these terms and have argued about their meaning and implications both in society and literature¹; however, they have not been so much taken into account in other contexts different from postcolonial or migrant literature. What I intend to do in this study is to explore how these concepts can be applied to both writers and are present in their narratives, and how they are differently portrayed when postcolonial issues are not directly involved. To do so, I have chosen Roberts’s *Daughters of the House* (1992) and Mantel’s *The Giant, O’Brien* (1998).

II. ENGLAND AND FRANCE IN *DAUGHTERS OF THE HOUSE*

As previously mentioned, Michèle Roberts’s French heritage has been very influential both on her life and her writings. In fact, Roberts’s stories and characters are related, in one way or another, to France. Most of her writings, both novels and short stories, are set in France or have French characters in them, and they are full of French words, food, people and places. Moreover, in them we can find countless references to Roberts’s own life in France, above all connected to her childhood, but it is perhaps in *Daughters of the House*, her sixth novel, where we can find more references to Roberts’s own experience as an in-between, and, consequently, where the sense of displacement for being a hybrid person living between two cultures, the French and the English, is most present, above all in the character of Léonie, who can be defined as a portrait of Roberts herself.

Daughters of the House, full of dualities and contrasts, deals—among many other topics such as the construction of history or the life of a saint—with the concepts of otherness, displacement and hybridity. The story begins and ends in

¹ See Homi K. Bhabha’s *The Location of Culture*, Boehmer’s *Colonial and Postcolonial Literature* or Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin’s *The Empire Writes Back*.



Normandy, with the gathering of the two protagonists, Thérèse and Léonie, twenty years after the summer when they discovered they were actually twin sisters and not cousins, as they had been told. Thérèse, who had become a nun after having told the vision of the Virgin that Léonie had seen, goes back to her house to revise her past for the autobiography she is writing, but while Thérèse wants to investigate the past, Léonie wants to forget about it, for she suffered a lot at that time.

As Roberts, Léonie is also half-English and half-French (or this is what she and the reader believe until a particular point in the novel), born in England to a French mother and an English father and who spends summers in the family house in Normandy, just as Roberts did when she was a child. In an interview with Newman, Roberts has explained how during her childhood she felt “living in a double culture and feeling that I lived torn apart, or split, and didn’t know where I belonged. It felt like having two families and two homes, and you had to move back and forth across the sea to join them up” (124). And this feeling of being a split subject is precisely what has been defined as a “hybrid” or an “in-between” in postcolonial theory.

As Mullaney points out, the concept of hybridity has developed from “being a way of speaking about racial intermixture or purity to one that ostensibly addresses forms of cultural intermixing or fusion that trouble received notions of cultural purity” (120). One of the authors who have studied the concept of hybridity in postcolonial theory is Homi Bhabha who, drawing on psychoanalytical theory (Freud and Lacan), has celebrated the hybridity of postcolonial cultures. Bhabha does also present hybridity as “consisting in two equally weighted cultures, whose interaction creates an “in-between” or “third space,” in which a speaker positions himself or herself” (qtd. Innes 38) and, therefore, in this development of the concept from racial to cultural, the term “hybrid” adapts better to the situation lived by Léonie. In this particular case, it could be said that the French and the English can be regarded as “two equally weighted cultures,” and that is in fact how the protagonist sees them, because from her we know how she enjoys living in both cultures.

However, in this position of being double-cultured, the in-between is at risk of being displaced in both, as nobody sees him or her as totally belonging to one of them; therefore, the in-between is always considered as the “other.” As Derek Walcott puts it, “this hybrid form of identity can result in conflicting loyalties and identity crises. It can lead to alienation and a situation in which the hybridized subject is always outside of belonging” (qtd. Edwards 140), and that is what happened to Léonie, and to Roberts herself; she was considered as an outsider in both countries, and thus she could not feel at home either in England or in France. When in England,

French was what Léonie forgot she could speak. Swore she could not speak. English people in the suburb where she lived despised and hated all foreigners. Wogs and wops they were called. Yids. Léonie was addressed by adults and children alike as Froggy. (*Daughters* 35)

Léonie had to hide her French side while she lived in England. When her classmates began learning French in primary school she had to conceal from them



the fact that she already knew it, so as not to be marginalised, so as not to feel different. Similarly, when she spent summers in France, she was seen as foreign, and in the same way she was called “froggy” in England, her mother and her “were referred to by the *others* as *les Anglaises*” (*Daughters* 28-29), despite the fact that Madeleine, Léonie’s mother, was actually born in France.²

Because of this double nationality, Léonie also had to face many difficult situations when she was in France as a child, even at home. For instance, her cousin Thérèse is constantly reminding her how she is not totally French, telling her she does not belong with the French culture and criticising her English culture and manners:

Everyone knows that English food is terrible [...] I don’t know how your mother could stand it, having to go and eat stuff like that. She stopped being really French, everybody says so. The English are just heathens, aren’t they Victorine? Heathens was a word Victorine applied to foreigners. Who were not Catholics. [...] Léonie frowned very hard so that she would not cry. (*Daughters* 47)

Thérèse seated opposite Léonie on the other side of the table, was scornful of this kitchen gossip. Oh, well, she’d say: I suppose you find it interesting because you’re *English*. You’re just a visitor after all. (*Daughters* 71)

And although Léonie tries not to feel bad about this:

Léonie told herself she would not be shy, she would not blush when addressed as *la petite Anglaise*, she would not mind having her fluency admirably remarked upon, she would not care that everyone in the shop would turn round and stare at her, the foreigner. Today it would be different. (*Daughters* 84)

it is impossible to do it, since other children attack and insult her because, following their parents’ opinions, they consider she is different. A clear example of this can be found in a passage where Léonie is coming back home from the bakery: “Baptiste, four other boys behind him, blocked her path. [...] *Engleesh Peeg*, Baptiste yelled at her. [...] the boys jeering as she ran away” (*Daughters* 85).

The fact that others make Léonie feel a foreigner in her own house goes on even when Thérèse and Léonie are adults and meet twenty years later. The day Thérèse goes back to the house, Léonie had made supper: “Soup just like Victorine [the servant] used to make, Léonie said,” but, as we can see from Thérèse’s reaction: “You think you’ve laid a real French supper, Thérèse thought: but you haven’t got it quite right. I know that. But you don’t. You grew up in England, don’t forget.

² Although Léonie’s mother had been born in France, she was criticized by her French neighbours and family, and was also regarded, if not as a foreigner, as someone who did not completely belong to their culture anymore because she now lived in England. This is an autobiographic detail that Roberts also mentions in her short story “*Une Glossaire/A Glossary*”: “Brigitte [Roberts’s aunt] criticises my Mum for her French accent, less pure than formerly, weighted with English sounds. She criticises Mum for abandoning France and the family, despite the fact that Mum returns every year” (142).



(...) If she were alive, Victorine would laugh at you” (*Daughters* 15). This situation shows that although they are adults and time has gone by, they are still rivals, and despite the fact that Léonie has embraced the French culture and that both know she is actually French, Léonie will never be considered as a real French by anybody.

Thus, even though the relationship between the French and the English cultures is not a postcolonial one, but that Léonie has grown up in both cultures since childbirth, one—the French—coming from her mother, and the other one, the English, supposedly from her father, the fact that she feels foreign and therefore displaced in both communities is real: Léonie has always felt like a split subject, with no land she could call her own when she was young.

However, as the story in *Daughters of the House* develops, Léonie discovers that she is very probably the daughter of someone she believed was her aunt, who had apparently been raped by a German soldier during the French occupation by the Nazi regime. Once she learns about this, she knows what it means: she is not half-English and has never been, she is probably half-German but as she has not had any connection with that culture she feels just French, and she is able to get rid of her English identity and embrace the French as her only culture, as the place where she really belongs. We can see this in a conversation with her boyfriend, a French boy, Baptiste, who would become her husband later on:

Thérèse has found out that she and I are really sisters, not cousins. Twins. My mother’s really my aunt. She adopted me. She’s not my mother at all. (...) I’m not half English at all, Léonie said. Maurice wasn’t my father. They just told me he was. They lied to me.

So you’re not *half*- French. You’re *French*. Now that suits you much better little French girl. [...] Half-French, half-*German*? [...] He examined her, as though her skin, her eyelashes, her hair, could tell the whole truth and nothing but the truth. He wouldn’t like her so much now. (*Daughters* 150-151)

But Léonie did not want to believe that there had been a German soldier involved. She thought, or it was easier for her to believe, that Louis, her aunt-mother’s husband, was the father of both girls. Thus, she was not a split subject any more, she belonged somewhere because she had suffered a lot for this, and also because, due to this discovery, she had realised that she had been and was an orphan, since her real mother had first abandoned her (she had given Léonie to her married sister when Léonie was born), and she was now dead, so this is the answer she gives to Baptiste:

Oh, I think I’m wholly French, she said: I’ve been working it out. I don’t think it was a German soldier at all. I’m sure Thérèse made it up. I think it was Louis all along. [...] the pain burrowed Léonie, tore at her with sharp claws. She’d been cast out, first by one woman and then by another. Tossed between them like a broken toy fit only for the dustbin. [...] Ripping off her Englishness and casting it aside was as easy as unfastening the collar of her dress. [...] Shaking off the idea of a German father was a wriggle of the shoulders. [...] Becoming French was taking Thérèse as her twin sister and then taking the boy she wanted. (*Daughters* 152)



At that moment, Léonie preferred to think that her cousin could have invented the story of the German soldier in the same way that Thérèse had made up her vision of the Virgin, stealing Léonie's. In fact, at the beginning of the novel, the reader can already see how Thérèse and Léonie are opposites, and how there is something hidden between them that hurts them both. When Thérèse goes back to the house to investigate her past, we see how Léonie wants to forget about it, and when she discovers Thérèse's intention to write her autobiography, her words to Thérèse are very significant: "Leave my childhood alone: don't you dare take away anything more of mine. She added in a calm voice: if you tell any more lies about the past, I'll kill you. [...] You were always good at making things up, Léonie said: in your version I was the sinner and you were the saint" (*Daughters* 23). Léonie hated Thérèse because, to her, she had stolen many things from her, especially during their childhood: her mother, her vision, and even the image of her father (Léonie did not remember him, as he was killed in the war) and her English childhood. It was in fact Thérèse who told her that the Englishman who married her aunt was not her real father and how therefore during her childhood she had been living a lie.

It is also worth noticing how, to Léonie, becoming French was marrying Baptiste. To her, it was important that he had chosen her and not Thérèse (she was also in love with him when she was an adolescent) before he knew that she was not half-English; and it is significant that the boy Léonie loved was someone who had also been regarded as an "other"; in his case, he was considered as inferior and sometimes marginalised because he belonged to a lower class. We can see this, for instance, in a scene where the girls want to play with the cats and Baptiste is there. While it is easy for Thérèse to despise Baptiste, Léonie, although she does as she has been told, feels sorry:

Léonie and Thérèse pretended not to notice him. It was a way of preserving social divisions. A certain distance had to be kept [...] Léonie caught herself feeling sorry that this had to be so. That silent disapproval had to emanate from her and Thérèse to prove that they were young ladies. (*Daughters* 89)

And although it was Baptiste who bullied her for being half-English, he was the only one who did not criticise her vision of the red lady when everybody else did as Léonie was telling them what she had seen: "Baptiste flicked a look at Léonie. Comrades. They were not going to give each other away" (*Daughters* 89).

Thus, even though Léonie only spent summers in France, and despite the fact that she was born, raised and schooled in England, when she learns about her real origin, she is determined to forget about her English side and the German soldier, and to stay in France, get married and embrace the French as her only culture after all the suffering that being half-English had brought her.



III. IRELAND AND ENGLAND IN *THE GIANT*, O'BRIEN

Hilary Mantel was born in a small town near Manchester, in the north of England, but her family, both her mother's and her father's, came from Ireland. Although she has never lived in Ireland and, therefore, her case is different from Michèle Roberts's in this respect, Ireland and the Irish culture have been very influential on her life and writings. Mantel has defined her family as "an Irish family transplanted to England" (Galván 31) because of their way of life, their habits and Catholic religion. In England, as she has said, Catholicism is immediately linked to an Irish background, and it is due to this Irish origin that she has felt displaced, as she has explained in an interview with Galván:

I was born into a Catholic family, a poor family, an Irish family, and always these things go together. In my part of the country to be Catholic is, almost by definition, to come from an Irish background. And there is always a way in which one is socially marginalized and pushed away from the centre. (31)

It was her Irish background that made her feel different from other children when she was small, so much that she preferred, as she has explained in her memoir, to play games with "the Italian children, and the ones who at home speak refugees' languages, a flax-blonde Ukrainian child and a huddle of darned and desolate Poles" (*Giving* 75), rather than with other English, Protestant children. As a child, Mantel was very aware of her Irish Catholic roots; however, because of the deaths of her great-aunts and uncles as she grew up, together with the fact that her mother abandoned her father and took her to live with her lover, an English Protestant man, Mantel got separated from her Irish family and somehow lost her consciousness of being Irish.

Nevertheless, despite these events, she never forgot her Irish roots and she would go back to her Irish background as a writer, reflecting on the situation of Ireland and introducing Irish characters or characters with an Irish background as herself in some of her novels —at times in a very confessional and autobiographical manner³— and eventually revising her own Irish past and family in her memoir, *Giving up the Ghost*. As Mantel explained to Galván,

When I began writing it was in a sense with a mixed identity. [...] The first book I began to work on was *A Place of Greater Safety*, my novel about the French Revolution. So I was, I suppose, defining myself as a European writer as far as one could. I did not feel that Englishness was something I had as a possession. Englishness belonged to people from the south, to men, to the middle class, and I was off-centre, I wasn't quite English, I wasn't quite Irish. That means that I had to invent an identity for myself. (33)

³ For instance, Carmel, the protagonist of her sixth novel, *An Experiment in Love*, could be considered to be a portrait of Mantel's own life.

From this citation we can see how, due to this feeling of displacement, not only because of living between two cultures, but also because of being female, and belonging to a lower class, Mantel had the need to find a new identity, something that is shared with Roberts. However, despite this feeling of non-belonging, the situation Mantel describes in her novels about Ireland and England is different from the one Roberts portrays with reference to the relationship between England and France. As the protagonists of Roberts's novels do, Hilary Mantel's characters are also looking for their own place; but Mantel's Irish characters are always portrayed in a lower fashion than the English ones. This is something that does not happen in Roberts's novels in the same way. And this is due to the fact that there is an element in Mantel's stories that is not present in Roberts's: the sort of relationship between both cultures.

In the case of Roberts, England and France are considered as equal countries, and the characters present in her novels are mainly middle class, both in England and in France, and, although it is true that they can be criticised for their language, habits and manners, when they are in the other country, there is no distinction of class; however, in the case of Mantel, because of the historical relationship between England and Ireland, the difference between the Irish and the English characters has to do with the Irish place in the English society, especially with class division. In this way, Mantel's Irish characters are considered inferior, and, many times, they are mistreated and oppressed by the English. Therefore, in Mantel's case, the concepts of displacement and being off-centre could be said to be more related to postcolonial issues than in the case of Roberts.

It is precisely the atmosphere of oppression that postcolonial studies talk about what can be found in the novels of Hilary Mantel when she introduces Irish characters. Her first attempt to introduce an Irish character who lives in England comes from the mid '80s, when she began to write a short story, "King Billy is a Gentleman" (1992) which is actually a very autobiographical piece of writing, about a boy with Irish origins who is marginalised in England. After that came the cases of Sister Philomena in her novel *Fludd*, and of Carmel in *An Experiment in Love*, who are both regarded as inferior because of their Irish origin. However, it is her novel *The Giant, O'Brien*, which is more directly related to Ireland and its relationship with England. This time the story has an Irish protagonist, a giant who is, unlike her other characters, born in Ireland and who travels to England because of his need of money.

Mantel herself has defined *The Giant* as her "progress report," and she has explained to Galván how

It took me quite a long time, because I decided I must learn Irish and tried, but didn't get very far because I was trying to study it by myself and I really needed a teacher. But it seemed to me that for the first time I was very conscious of loss, loss of language and loss of community. I suppose, you know, that through the giant and his story I was trying to express some of the stories of the people, who might have been my ancestors or my imagined ancestors. Those dead people who don't have a voice, like the people who died in my childhood, whom I perceive as my lost family. (34)



So, in order to write this historical novel, Mantel went back to 18th-century Ireland, and concentrated on the story of two historical characters: Charles O'Brien, an Irish giant, and his antagonist, John Hunter, a Scottish scientist and surgeon, who meet in England and their lives get connected. The protagonists share similarities and differences. On the one hand, they both come from humble origins in which poverty and death are always near. For O'Brien, life in Ireland is hard, and so he tells us when he talks about hunger, babies dying in the arms of their mothers because of lack of food and diseases, social deterioration, or economic oppression by the English. Hunter does also come from a very poor origin in Scotland. As the narrator tells us, he was the youngest of ten children who died when they were very young and only two of them and himself survived. There is a meaningful passage where we are told how he had to act as a scarecrow while "in other places they have a doll to do it, made of sticks and old clothes. He has heard of it: English luxury. Here old clothes are not wasted" (*The Giant* 19). Similarly, when the giant and his Irish friends go to London, one of the first things they see is an example of what they consider also as "English luxury": they see stairs for the first time in their lives: when they stood in London, they saw "buildings piled on buildings, one house atop another" and one of them, after they see this, asks if Englishmen can fly in order to go to the upper floors (*The Giant* 29). They did not know that staircases existed, had never seen one; only the giant was "familiar himself with the principle of staircases, but in the lifetime of these young fellows there had been no great house within a day's march, where they might see the principle applied" (*The Giant* 30). Nor they knew beds; so the first time one of them sees one, he asks if they have to sleep "up in the air on platforms" (*The Giant* 67).

As adults, both O'Brien and Hunter travel to London looking for a better life, the giant to be shown as a curiosity and make money out of it with the idea of going back to Ireland, and Hunter out of curiosity for science and especially the human body. From the very first moment when both arrive in London, differences between them begin to emerge. Hunter arrives in London to learn about anatomy, as the helper of his brother, Wullie, an already respected surgeon, who had studied in London and France, and was a lecturer in anatomy and member of the Royal Society. While we are told that everything was prepared for his arrival to his brother's house, and how Hunter arrived "on a fine evening with a mild air" (*The Giant* 34), O'Brien's arrival is totally different, for he and his friends arrived in an "undrained marsh, the air above it a soup of gloom. The clouds hung low, a strange white light behind them" (*The Giant* 34), and they spent their first night in London in a cellar of an alley "drowned in a muddy puddle in Chandos Street" (*The Giant* 35).

However, the giant and his friends were not alone. In the case of *Daughters of the House*, when Léonie went to France, she went to her grandparents' house, and even though she felt displaced and other kids made her feel different from them, she was still "accepted" by everybody else in town because of her class, even though she was for some things considered as a "foreigner". There was no violence and no marginalisation, and her case was unusual, she was just a half-English girl who travelled to France during the summer to visit the French side of her family. The same happens to Hunter, he moves from Glasgow to his brother's house in London. On



the contrary, when O'Brien and his friends go inside this muddy cellar they see a "rush light on exile's faces, the sound of a familiar tongue" (*The Giant* 38). Indeed, it was full of many other Irish who had migrated to England in search of a better life, trying to escape from the poverty and devastation of their country, so the giant's is not an isolated case, but he is another member of the Irish diaspora in England.

In the first pages of the book, Ireland had already been described as a devastated country, sunk into poverty: "The town was silent, and to the Giant this silence was familiar. It was the hush of famine" (*The Giant* 11). When the giant describes this town in ruins, he tells how the children there did not shout when they saw him as the English would do: "but they did not shout. They were weary of wonders. The wonder of a dish of potatoes and buttermilk, that would have made them shout" (*The Giant* 12). However, their situation in England was not much better. That first night in the cellar, after O'Brien had told them a story, he and his friends are told "a ballad about the circumstances in which we find ourselves" (*The Giant* 51) and it is then that O'Brien and his friends learn about the situation of the Irish in England, which is described as "the slaughter of a nation" (*The Giant* 53). From this ballad they discover how the Irish are mistreated and even capital punishment is applied to their fellow countrymen for stealing food for their starving children, pickpocketing or other minor offenses, and how it is for this reason that

rope is the first word of English that an Irishwoman learns. Hang is the word of her husband, hang him, the thief, he is a rebel, hang him for a rogue. Dog is the word of her children, kick them out, kick them out like dogs. These are the next words: Papist, and starve him, and let him be whipped. (*The Giant* 54)

Throughout the novel we can find many other examples of how the Irish are displaced and marginalised: "Their natural state is shadow. They don't count." (*The Giant* 151), and how it is even worse for women. All Irish women are called "bitch": "that is what we are all named, here in England. Shift my shit, bitch. Scrub my floor, bitch. Lift your skirt, bitch" (*The Giant* 68). Thus, we only see cruelty and violence against the Irish people in the novel, as in a passage where an Irishwoman is killed. In this scene, the giant and other Irish expatriates are thinking about what to do with her: "'Where can we take her?' the Giant said. 'I'm not familiar with the burial customs in these parts'. 'Some midden or tip' Mary said. 'It's the fate of our nation.'" Then, Mary reflects on why it was said

that the road from Ireland to heaven is a beaten track, worn smooth with the feet of all who tread it, but the road there from England is grassed and flowery, for it is walked but once in a decade. I understand this now, as formerly I did not. (*The Giant* 173)

Therefore, we can see how the account that Mantel offers is one of oppression, violence and marginalisation towards the Irish in England.

Going back to the figure of the giant, it has to be said that O'Brien was a learned man, who knew English, and who, as Léonie did, regained his command of English in the sea: "Conversing with the sailors [...] the Giant found he had regained



his command of the English language” (*The Giant* 26). In the same way, it is during the voyage in the sea between Ireland and England that the giant is given a new name and identity: “Charles Byrne. I think we’ll call you Byrne, Charles Byrne. It’s more select” (*The Giant* 25). Later in the novel, the idea of his change of name is repeated: “I have made up my mind on it now, we will call you Byrne, Charles Byrne. It meets with the approval of all here” (*The Giant* 58). So, he had to change his name to conceal his Irish origin, only to be accepted in England.

Finally, the last similarity between both protagonists is that at the moment their stories coincide, both Hunter and O’Brien are about to die. O’Brien is growing again, and that means that his death is near. In the case of Hunter, he was accidentally infected by a venereal disease when he was going to infect a homeless man with it so that he could observe the natural progression of the disease and how it affected the human body until death. At the end, it is O’Brien who dies first and Hunter who gets his body for analysis. Therefore, it could be said that Mantel subverts both initial figures: in the age of reason, the scientist, who would be supposed to be the respected, relevant and educated character, is presented as the rude, horrific character, while the giant is portrayed as the educated, intelligent, the poet and storyteller, a generous person. Actually, there is a moment in the novel when O’Brien compares himself with Hunter: “The fellow is mannerly enough. So far as it is in him. It is clear that he is gruff, unlettered, rude, whereas I am learned, poetical and fond of civil company” (*The Giant* 141).

Therefore, while O’Brien believes in myth and fairy tales (he could be regarded as a walking myth himself), and is led by emotions and feelings, Hunter is obsessed with science, reason and objectivity. While the giant lives in the glorious past of Ireland, telling fables and fairy stories, he actually has arrived in London to live as a marginalised person, in the gloomy and filthy streets of the lowest classes in London, where everything is ruled by violence and cruelty. On the contrary, even though Hunter’s “scientific” practices were made by buying corpses illegally and desecrating tombs, he is a respected surgeon and scientist although he also comes from a humble origin. However, the picture of both characters leads us to say that, in this case, Hunter is the monster, the freak, while O’Brien is the most sensitive and educated character.

IV. CONCLUSION

In these novels, both Hilary Mantel and Michèle Roberts have dealt with feeling as the “other” two countries. Even though they coincide in some descriptions and feelings of displacement and they have similar ideas on what being English means, the cases of their characters are in many ways different. In the case of Léonie in *Daughters of the House*, she feels displaced in both countries, England and France, and cannot feel at home in any of them, as she is always reminded that she does not completely belong to any. On the other hand, O’Brien and his Irish companions also suffer from displacement when they arrive in England; however, they can be said to be part of a diaspora, they are considered not only different, but inferior, and



they are marginalised, mistreated and oppressed by the English. In the first case, we can talk about hybridity of cultures; in the second, we face a case of diaspora, even a colonial relationship between both countries and cultures, where one (the Irish) is immediately regarded as inferior. In fact, as Elizabeth Klaver has pointed out, in the novel “Mantel deploys the act of human dissection as a means to tropologize a brutal class and colonial system” (21).

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