

Representations of National Identity in Two Contemporary Irish Novels

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Abstract

The issue of identity is not just a matter of social sciences, but it is also a subject of literature, literary theory. In the current paper I analyze the issue of Irishness as represented in two contemporary Irish novels, John McGahern's *Amongst Women* and Jennifer Johnston's *How Many Miles to Babylon?* In the first part of the article I refer to the term "national identity" from a sociological point of view and I emphasize the fact that it is closely linked with ideas of Irishness, colonialism, political violence, the role of Irish language, the role of religion and stereotypes and the defining characteristics of "self-images". Further I discuss the subject of "national identity" as represented in Irish literature focusing on representative works. Contemporary novelists present the theme in an indirect way. Although they insert the romantic view of Irishness, they also tend to focus on coping with the past and finding a solution by demolishing the stereotypes and looking towards the future. In the succeeding part I examine the representations of Irishness in both novels and I also outline the changes that John McGahern and Jennifer Johnston have brought in the debate around the issue of Irishness in contemporary fiction.

Keywords: Irishness, National Identity, stereotypes

Each society has certain unique characteristics by which they define themselves in opposition to other societies: there is the "us" and the "them". What makes "us" different? These characteristics are called stereotypes. The difference between societies is that they reinforce or they oppose these "self-images". In this sense we think about cultural identity as distinctness and as continuity. All these issues of defining oneself, of belonging to a certain community, society, country, leads us to the complex concept of identity. Talking about the Irish identity is not easy because of the country's historical background, the political and social problems, which lead us to the idea of colonialism.

Colonialism is a process of radical dispossession. Colonized people are without a specific history and even as in Ireland and in other countries too, without a specific language. Colonialism in Ireland had a great impact on people's consciousness. In the process of finding its "true" identity a community often begins with the search for the origins, for something specific, that makes the Irish distinct from the British. This origin can be represented by a document like the 1916 Proclamation of the Irish Republic. In the case of the Irish we face a contradictory situation, which forms the ground for the debates about who came first, the "native" Irish or the Protestant planters, who can say that they were the first to create a civil society. It is like a quest for possession within which the naming of the property becomes important. All the various names for Ireland and for the Irish connection with Great Britain indicate the failure of self-possession: Ireland, Eire, the Free State, the Republic of Ireland, the Twenty-Six Counties, the Six Counties, Ulster, Northern Ireland, The United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland. There are also many ways of referring to literature: Irish Literature, Gaelic Literature,

Anglo-Irish literature, Irish literature in English. From the point of view of language, there are a lot of variants: Irish English, Hiberno-English and Anglo-Irish. (Deane 18)

It is hard to give an exact definition of Irishness because it is not something given due to historical circumstances. We have a "mosaic" of identities, of ambiguous situations: north-east, Protestant-Catholic, Irish-English. We may rather speak about the reconstruction of national identity and this can be achieved through looking back and finding the origins and demolishing the false stereotypes. This is a hard process since the stereotypes are interiorized and not just imposed by the colonizer and the colonized but they are also generative of each other in the sense that they influence each other. The English national character needed the Irish and they seemed to qualify for English purposes. They were white, rural and neither decadent nor intellectual. They were not even Irish; they were Celts. Their homeland was Europe, a place innocent of complex political, economic, military structures and it was inhabited by a poetic tribe. They took possession of these stereotypes and modified the Celt into the Gael, and began a new interpretation of themselves known as the Irish literary revival. The revival, the Rebellion and the War of Independence, the treaty of 1922, which partitioned Ireland into its present form, were all consequences that dealt with the idea of national character and destiny. (Deane 12)

Ethnic groups and nations have as one of their defining characteristics a perceived and essential relationship to a real, historically recognized territory or to a homeland to which they can only aspire. Every national identity involves views of the nation's relationship to the territory. We define nations and communities of people tied together through common culture, their political goal being the attainment of some form of independence, autonomy. (Deane 6)

From the point of view of national identity, borders become very important. Borders no longer function as they did; there are many factors that contributed to the opening of borders and the relaxation of state controls. These factors are linked with modernization, the globalization of culture, the internationalization of economics and politics and the decline of the Cold War superpower. Culture plays an essential role in the social construction and negotiation of these borders. State borders also show us the transformations in the definitions of citizenship and national identity. Boundary breaking and making within and between states is a political act, which can be seen to support or oppose that structure. Borders may serve as useful metaphors for understanding the rootlessness of many populations. Everyone lives within or between the boundaries of nation-states, and these boundaries are always more than metaphorical. (Donnan, Wilson 10) Borders are markers of identity and they are indispensable in the constructions of national cultures.

Boundaries have two kinds of meanings. On the one hand they are structural, which means that a social boundary marks the edge of a social system and on the other hand they draw a line between the inside and the outside, and an identity line between "us" and "them." A community exists only by virtue of its opposition to another community and this implies both similarity and difference. (Donnan, Wilson 24) These boundaries are constructed by the people in their interactions with others from whom they want to distinguish themselves. Within these interactions they give meanings to the boundaries and they define themselves.

The Irish border separates the twenty-six counties of the Republic of Ireland from the six counties of Northern Ireland, which is a political entity since the 1920's and it belongs to the United Kingdom.

In Ireland the border between Northern Ireland and the Republic exerted a definite influence on the pattern of social relationships in the area. It functions as a structure and symbol of differences between status, power and politics. Mostly it crystallized the opposition to each other of Catholic and Protestant. In Northern Ireland the majority population of Protestants is made up of Presbyterians and members of the Church of Ireland, their politico-cultural ideologies mark them as Unionists, supporters of the present United Kingdom and Northern Ireland's place within it. Their sub-group is called the Loyalists, who defend the union and the Protestant way of life. Very few of them claim to have an Irish identity because most of them label themselves as British. Ethnically they are Ulster Protestant or Northern Irish in a British state, they have British citizenship and they answer questions about national identity in terms of being British. The minority Catholic community claims to have an Irish national identity. They call themselves Northern Irish Catholics or Northern Catholics in order to distinguish themselves from their southern counterparts. This division of north and south is due to the partition of the island in 1921.

Religious identity in modern Ireland has been as socially significant as gender, class, ethnicity or sexual orientation. Being Catholic or Protestant has been central to family life, education, health care and social welfare and influence the schools people attend and the friends they choose. (Inglis 59) The Catholics are a minority in Northern Ireland but they constitute a majority in the island; they claim that they are in minority status because of the necessity of the border so that a Protestant community can gain power. In many ways Catholics and Protestants in Ireland occupied two different, divided social worlds; these are central and commonly held conceptions of national and individual identity. What made Ireland exceptional throughout the 20th century was that while the rest of Western Europe became increasingly secularized, religious affiliation remained a strong social marker for the Irish. Within the religious sphere or field there are generally a number of different, competing ideas, about how to be spiritual and moral; all these make up the moral system of rules, which govern a community. These ideas are put forward by religious virtuosi such as prophets, preachers and priests and are formed into religious teachings and practices within churches, sects and cults. In Ireland, the Catholic Church came to dominate in the Republic, while in the North Protestant churches became dominant. The history of 19th and 20th century Ireland can be seen as a struggle for economic, political and religious interests. People mobilized throughout the island to get ownership of the means of production, political power and religious domination. As a consequence, the Catholic bourgeois class emerged in the Republic and a Protestant bourgeois class in the North. Protestantism remained the religion of the gentry, who, as a minority, dominated Catholics economically through ownership and control over the land, politically through their allegiance to the British state, socially through their dominance of civil society and culturally through their higher levels of education. (Inglis 64)

One of the most important ways to explore identities is by the study of the symbols and rituals. All cultures are based on symbols, representations. Symbols give people a cognitive map of the world. (Donnan, Wilson 65) They have meaning for those who recognize them and they

are invisible to those who cannot decode them. These symbols represent the distinctions between communities and they serve to integrate disparate classes, occupations, ethnic groups, regions and religions. In Ireland the borders are marked by guard towers and flags, which constitute symbols. The people of the Irish border have their own means of marking their local, regional and national boundaries. There are many graffiti which stand for political resistance and sectarianism; they include such phrases as: "Eire Nua", "Provos", and "Pira". Besides the symbols there are significant rituals too, which are called the "Orange" marches. The most important of these marches take place in Belfast and they are a symbol of Protestant dominance.

Contemporary Irish literature is much less focused on colonialism than was the literature of the Irish Renaissance. We can state that contemporary Irish literature is a post-colonialist literature. Disarming of the past at the level of individual characters is often analogous of the wider re-examinations of history in which Ireland and Northern Ireland are involved

Representations of National Identity in Irish fiction

The purpose of much Irish fiction is to become involved in the Irish argument, and the purpose of much Irish criticism has been to relate fiction to the argument. The issues of reality and language have been problems in Ireland as Maria Edgeworth wrote:

It is impossible to draw Ireland as she now is in the book of fiction-realities are too strong, party passions too violent, to bear to see, or care to look at their faces in a looking-glass. The people would only break the glass and curse the fool who held the mirror up to nature-distorted nature in a fever. (Toibin 8)

Lady Morgan said about Irish fiction that:

... we are living in an era of transition. Changes moral and political are in progress. The frame of the constitution, the frame of society itself, are sustaining a shock, which occupies all minds, to avert or modify, under such conditions there is no legitimate literature, as there is no legitimate drama. (Toibin 9)

When we speak about the Irish novel, it is important to mention the novelists before Joyce too. One of these novelists is George Moore, and his best novel *Esther Waters* (1894) is set in England. He has an earlier novel, *A Drama in Muslin* (1886) that is set in Ireland. They are the first efforts to explore this hidden Ireland since William Carleton; also they stand in relation to the stories in Joyce's *Dubliners* written in the same decade. Both writers, Moore and Joyce were concerned with the same ideas: how to find a formal structure and a tone in language which would not only reflect the Irish heritage-the mixture of poor realities and grand dreams-but to become the Irish heritage. (Toibin 13) Joyce realized that he had to bring something new, to develop a unique style, form and language. Joyce's sense of Irish society, as we discover in his work *Dubliners*, was more vivid than that of contemporaries like Moore. Most of the Irish fiction before Joyce was written for an English audience and much of it described Ireland's history and landscape and people as peculiar. Most of the talented writers such as Oliver

Goldsmith, Joseph Sheridan Le Fanu and George Moore set their novels in England. Compared to these writers, Joyce set almost all of his work in Ireland. In *Ulysses* the city described is not the centre of paralysis, but rather the centre of the world. It is full of local references, streets, places. Joyce shifted the focus on Ireland in the sense that he handed Ireland back to Irish readers in his book, thereby making Ireland the centre of the known world. (Toibin 15)

In Irish literary history the tradition of Gothic fiction is essential and it can be placed between Carleton and Joyce. This phenomenon includes Maturin, Le Fanu, Stoker, Yeats and some elements also appear in the work of Elizabeth Bowen. The importance of the Gothic tradition is that history is an unfinished business.

Writing about Ireland brings about the issue of “insider” and “outsider”, just as in social sciences we have these concepts, meaning that the researcher is a foreign person or he or she belongs to the researched community.

When talking about identity, having in view the definition of it which states that a nation defines itself in opposition to another nation; there are certain features that have made the Irish national being different from the English national being. Corkery identifies three major aspects: the Religious Consciousness of the people, Irish Nationalism and The Land. These three aspects become important in Irish fiction. The question is what makes Irish fiction Irish? There are certain themes and motives, by which the reader can tell that this is an Irish piece of writing. There are stereotypical elements that appear in most of the novels. The motif of the dance appears as a degree of misery for the individual, offers a microscope so we can see how harsh and vicious the society is, or how isolated the individual is. Another important feature is that nobody writes about happiness. Even Mary Lavin’s story *Happiness* is about death.

One of the major subjects is the burning down of houses or the sense of fire as the final part of the novels: Frances Sheridan’s *Memoirs of Miss Sidney Bidulph* and *The Vicar of Wakefield*; Elizabeth Bowen’s *The Last September*. There was fear and decay around the “Big House”, which was an important theme in the works of Bowen, Jennifer Johnston, William Trevor and John Banville.

The killing of woman by men is also an important subject: John Banville’s *The Book of Evidence*, Patrick Mc Cabe’s *The Butcher Boy*.

Family and relations within family members, especially fathers and sons, becomes an essential subject matter too. These novels are full of violence, hatred and they show the battle between love and fear. An example of such a novel is Bernard Mac Laverty’s *Life Drawing*. The motif of dance as terror and the topics presented in the novels: the burning of houses, violation, terror and fear, the unharmonious relations within families, death, all belong to what we can call the Irish tradition.

The next phase is the emergence of a new accent: that of dramatizing the life of the Irish middle classes. Many writers in the 20th century set themselves to write about this class: Kate O’Brien, Mary Lavin and John Broderick. Kate O’Brien was interested in Catholicism, in many of her novels this theme appears in the background. In most of her novels treating this subject the idea of survival in Catholic Ireland becomes important. It is a country where the prospect of ruin still haunts the people and religion governs their life and actions and also their relations.

Writing about the issues of land, rural life in the sense of harshness, and loneliness becomes essential too. Images of the Famine appear in Carleton's *The Black Prophet* as well as in the works of Edna O' Brien or John McGahern.

Nationalism appears in Irish fiction from the argument about Parnell in Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* to the presentation of political violence in the works of Liam O'Flaherty, Frank O'Connor's *Guests of the Nation*, Seamus Deane's *Reading in the Dark* and Sebastian Barry's *The Whereabouts of Eneas McNulty*.

To all these representations Elizabeth Bowen added two other qualities, which make a novel Irish: "it is sexless", and "it shows a sublimated infantilism." Homosexuality is a theme that attracted so many Irish writers, beginning with Joyce, who deals with the subject in *An Encounter*, one of the stories in *Dubliners*. Other writers who choose this issue are: John Banville, Patrick Mc Cabe, Joseph O'Connor and Emma Donoghue.

An important shift is that the individual becomes important, and it stands for the problems of society. Political and social problems are presented through the destinies of characters. We have as an example Mary Lavin, who set her work among Catholic Business classes, but she mainly focused on her characters, on the human heart, rather than on Irish society.

As an answer to our questions what makes a piece of writing Irish, and what constitutes the Irish tradition we may say that the common subject matters which most of the authors treat in their novels are: Ireland (the country as setting), land, history, religion and its implications, nationalism, The Big House, family relations (violence), class distinction, and recently the themes exploring sexuality, homosexuality.

In the 1960's Ireland evolved into a modern nation, North and South of the border, traditionally minded politicians were replaced by cautious reformers and modernizers. Insularity yielded to increasingly European perspectives, poverty slowly yielded to modest prosperity. The sexual revolution and the new feminism in England and in the United states eventually had an impact in Ireland.

The new themes that emerged, which for example, deal with homosexuality, or abuse, are part of the themes that contemporary Irish writers deal with. They are still occupied with Irish themes but they assumed a more Eurocentric perspective, they look towards European and world literature to provide images and analogues and a broader outlook on those themes.

The Contemporary Irish novel has a strong sense of both continuity and disruption. Interrupting the continuum of the past and the present involves reclaiming rather than rejecting tradition. In contemporary novels, identity for the central protagonist is a matter of fantasy arising from their sense of dispossession. (Peach 11) Homi Bhabha, a postcolonial critic uses the phrase "in-between" space or "time lag" which means that those who have been previously marginalized or silenced enter before they find their new identities, which is marked by uncertainty. It is an "interrogative space, allowing for a process of exploration, experiment and re-vision". (Peach 20) It is an aspect of the novel in which writers explore the nature of nationhood and national identity. Nationalism, initially finding expression in covert communities, organizations and activities, became a homogenizing discourse to which other subject identities based on class, gender, sexuality or race were subordinated. Identity is a construct, on the one hand based on differences and on the other it is a narrative. It represents

memories, how does a community represent itself; how do they tell their own story. A nation is a product of a historical narrative which reflects the voice of the dominant group. Nationalism can be seen as an idealized view of the past, stemming from the legacy of the Easter Rising in 1916 and the war of Independence (1919-1921). In the late 20th century novels characters are not defined in relation to themselves and their own bodies but to images generated by the consumer-oriented mass media society. For example Patrick Mc Cabe in his work *the Dead School* (1995) contrasts the radio with its conventional fare.

Jennifer Johnston tends to approach the contemporary “troubles” through the period just after the First World War. New themes appear: the “sense of Irish history as trauma”, a “need to recreate a history in which an overwhelming event could not be fully assimilated at the time of its occurrence and which must therefore belatedly be compulsively repossessed”.(Peach 17) In this sense the present may be seen as a disarming of the past. Contemporary writers explore not just the past or present, but they tend to present a view concerning the future too. In John McGahern’s work the fate of the Irishman becomes the fate of all mankind: alone, lost, in search of some whole, unbroken place which may have existed in the past, but which may be possible in the future too. Despite the conservative squeamishness, which caused John McGahern to lose his job as a teacher, after the publication of his second novel *The Dark* (1965), a new frankness in sexual matters became acceptable. In *Amongst Women* (1990) he signals the coming of age of Irish society and the eclipse of the old-fashioned patriarchy as the energies of the father, an IRA leader pass to his daughters. (Riggs, Vance 262)

Intertextuality plays a particularly significant role within contemporary Irish writing, much of which reflects the struggle of both individuals and collectives to come to terms with history which once appeared to offer a secure source of cultural definition, but which is now open to radical contestation. 30 years of intercommunal violence in Northern Ireland, paralleled by a period of rapid social and cultural change in the Republic, has deeply marked Ireland’s literary texts and compelled writers from all traditions not only to question inherited pieties, but also the authority of art itself. There is much uncertainty about how to respond to these disruptive socio-political narratives. There are traces of allegory embedded in the fabric of recent Irish fiction; the private individual experience often becomes a metaphor of the public and national destiny. (Harte, Parker 2)

The contemporary Irish novel confronts and contradicts the discourses defining Irishness, nation, home, belonging, exile, sexuality, desire, religion and spirituality.

National identity in John Mc Gahern’s *Amongst Women*

Amongst women is a novel expressing a profound disillusionment with the post revolutionary order in Ireland and it also gives voice to a deep disquiet about the prevailing atmosphere of contemporary society. It belongs to the dominant strand of Irish fiction in the 1990’s. (Harte, Parker 3) Though at first reading it may seem that it is a novel about a family, it is a profound novel within which we can analyze issues of individual and collective identities. The question of Irish identity in this novel is linked with religion, gender and sexuality. In the case of the Irish we don’t have a given, conceptualized definition of Irishness, we rather have

the sense of redefining which is due to historical circumstances. What happens when a nation wants to define itself, as discussed in previous chapters, is to look back, to redefine itself using the past and its events, searching for all those stereotypical elements that are unique and through which a nation can express its otherness. Contemporary writers bring something new to this. They not only look at the past, but they also suggest that the nation has to move on and look also towards the future.

In these novels we can discover the opposition between past and present, traditional (conventional) and modern, "here" and "there", "us" and "them", close and open, dependence and independence. In order to represent all these through the world of fiction, the writer chooses an event, which is central in the world of the novel, but also in Irish history. Everything is built around this event, and also it serves as a pretext for defining identity. This event is the war, represented through one character and it constitutes a link with the past, also it brings out such feelings as belonging and questions that are frequently asked by people, mostly soldiers in wartime: Who are we? Where do we belong? What are we fighting for? What are we fighting against? Where does this war lead us? War becomes a pretext of redefining oneself. All these are conveyed upon the family and the central character becomes a metaphor. The relations within the family are essential because it becomes a micro world through which the author analyzes broader issues of the whole country, of the macro world; how political issues affect the smaller unit of the family. The family and the individuals within the family become representatives of broader political problems.

McGahern's novel entitled *Amongst Women* interleaves domestic relations, religious discourses and public politics too. It represents McGahern's covert critique of the Irish state developing the idea of power and authority. Although it is concerned with the way fathers become or rather are allowed to become tyrants, placing family life in the centre of the narrative, the novel is also a critique of the damaging effect of Catholic discourse on families and on the lives of women in particular. McGahern said about his novel in an interview that: "The whole country is made up of families, each family a kind of independent Republic. In *Amongst Women*, the family is a kind of half-way house between the individual and the society." In the novel there is a passage in which the importance and also the definition of the family as the basic unit of society appears, it is when Moran speaks with Sean Flynn: "Both agreed that the family was the basis of all society and every civilization." (117)

The novel focuses on the disintegrating family of a former republican army commander who failed to win the position and authority he hoped for in the army of the new state. His tyrannical hold over his family is one of the factors that drive his children away, one by one to London and Dublin. The novel is the representation of oppressive male domination of Irish society. Moran attempts to exert authority over his family through aggression, affection and Catholic rhetoric. McGahern constructed the main protagonist on his own father. We know this from his famous work *Memoir*, where he relates issues from his own life. *Memoir* covers much of the literary ground of *Amongst Women*. He describes his relationship with his father who was a sergeant of the guardsmen, who policed independent Ireland's country villages.

Michael Moran is the central figure, who appears as a man and as a metaphor of the public and national destiny. He is a disillusioned republican veteran of the Civil War who failed to cut a figure in the army of the bourgeois Irish Free State. Like many soldiers after the war he

felt displaced, and he is in continuous war with himself and with his family. He has got three daughters: Mona, Maggie and Sheila and two sons Michael and Luke. Each of them left the family. Luke had a fight with his authoritative and violent father, so he decided to go to London. Violence is a problem within the family and this is analogous with the violence in Ireland too. Many inhabitants choose to go and live in other countries. But this violence is kept secret within the family. This is revealed in a scene when Rose talks with the girls: "People say he used to beat ye. People said that because Daddy never let us mix with them. Did he not beat ye? No... now and again when we were bold, but like in any house! Shame as much as love prompted the denial." (34)

Luke is perceived as different throughout the novel. He is the English; he belongs to the "other" side: "Luke is different. You'd never know what he is thinking. He is turning himself into a sort of Englishman". (148) At this point Luke is also aware of his position as he makes a remark about the two countries: "I am well here and I hope you are well there". (5) Michael goes to London too, with the difference that he does not deny and reject his father as Luke, but he admits that he is a tyrant and that they left because of him: "We all left Ireland. I'm afraid we might all die in Ireland if we don't get out fast". (155) Maggie goes to London and Sheila and Mona to Dublin and their individual identities fuse into one unit: "With the years they had drawn closer. Apart they could be breathtakingly sharp on the other's shortcomings but together their individual selves gathered into something very close to a single presence."(2) Their leaving stands for the struggle between dependence and independence.

As a setting we have the view of the rural west of Ireland: traditions of gathering the crops, working the land, all the representative elements of Irish life, Irish landscape, and Irish countryside which are in opposition with the urban. Life in this Ireland is seen as imprisonment. On a symbolic level we might interpret the picture of the country in the sense that it drives away its sons and daughters. The children want to escape on one level from the rural to the urban, modern Dublin and on the other level from the society governed by rules towards openness and to explore further to London: "On the tides of Dublin or London they were hardly more than specks of froth but together they were the aristocratic Morans at Great Meadow, a completed world, Moran's daughters" (2).

The family represents a world that is different, unique, it is in opposition with the "outside" world which is characterized by otherness as it is perceived by Sheila: "Suddenly the whole world was wide open to her" (87) Nelly Morahan is another character in the novel who takes part in this world, she is in the same situation, the difference though is that she travels to New York to her aunt to work and she feels life is much better there:

There, she showed the family trait of a willingness to work, first in an ice-cream factory, next in a dry-cleaning place and finally as a waitress, where she found that her good humour and energy could earn her more in a week than she could save in a year in Ireland. (102)

The characters all find themselves in the worlds they go to and they all establish an identity independent of the family roots. At home, governed by their autonomous father they couldn't achieve the aims they set for themselves. It is in the new world that they can accomplish their goals, where they can find freedom. This freedom also means that they escape from a society that is full of limitations. Both Mona and Sheila find work in Dublin, they become civil servants.

Sheila also won a scholarship to university but his father doesn't accept her aspirations: "I consider all my family equal. I don't like to see a single one trying to outdistance another". Sheila wished to become a doctor, but Moran can't accept this because in the war this profession had a higher status than he had, and this meant a threat to his authority: "All the members of my family are equal even if they think otherwise. They should never be looked down on or excluded." We can interpret his attitude again as authoritative, also in this sense the family can be seen as the extensions of Moran himself: "After years he had lost his oldest and best friend but in a way he had always despised friendship; families were what mattered, more particularly that larger version of himself-his family." (22)

Identification with Moran is a threat but it also gives them strength: "In the frail way that people assemble themselves he, like the girls, looked to Great Meadow for recognition, for a mark of his existence." (147)

Moran's desire for power and prestige expresses itself in his tyrannical control of his family over which he operates "a diminished form of home rule." All his attributes: his patriarchy, paternalism, isolationism, leads us to the figure of the postcolonial nation, Eamon de Valera, whose familial social vision is echoed in Moran's propagation of a cult of the family. (Harte, Parker 2)

Beneath all differences was the belief that the whole house was essentially one. Together they were one world and could take on the world. Deprived of this sense they were nothing, scattered, individual things. They would put up with anything in order to have this sense of belonging. They would never let it go. No one could be allowed to walk out easily. (145)

We can associate Moran's family with Ireland. On the one hand there is the familial identity, meaning that all people belong to a certain place, to a land, to their country to which they can always return. Many times in the novel Moran lays emphasis on the idea, that although his children went away they can come back any time to the house, to the home they belong to. The country becomes a location where people feel that they belong to and can go back any time: "After all these years it'll be a real house and home again. It'll be a place that will always be there for you to come back to." (27) On the other hand we have the individual identity because as Moran says within each person the "will" to belong exists. The individual can choose between staying and leaving, between remaining "inside" and exploring the "outside". Moran refused the outside: "Within the house the outside world was shut out". (93). Despite his will, he doesn't manage to keep the "outside" world at distance because whenever his daughters go home and also bring their husbands, they also bring that "other" world with them. After Moran marries Rose and they attend the concert, nobody recognizes them, they seem strangers, because they live enclosed within their home, not having contact with other people, with the outside world:

They knew all the people entering the hall, and those that occupied seats close to them smiled and spoke to them. They felt nervous and compromised...the small group became more the centre of attention than the stage itself. (32)

McGahern's portrayal of this family is analogous of the Irish Free State and Republic. This is a strategy that enables him to use the very notion of the family, on which Eamon de Valera based his vision of the new country, to expose it as a site of oppression and of division and conflict along gender, regional and class lines. It allows him to explore on the micro level the resistant and sometimes secret psychologies, which the Republic and its ideals brought into being.

The novel presents the figure of the father who has lost his authoritative powers. He is surrounded by his daughters who want to help him by organizing a traditional event in which Moran took part every year. The war is like a ghost and it brings out memories of his friend McQuaid. In the first paragraph of the novel Moran is portrayed as a man who is devoid of the power to control his family:

As he weakened, Moran became afraid of his daughters. This once powerful man was so implanted in their lives that they had never really left Great Meadow, in spite of jobs and marriages and children and houses of their own in Dublin and London. Now they could not let him slip away. (1)

This traditional day that his daughters want to bring to life is called Monaghan Day, the day of the local fair and in each year Moran celebrated it with his friend from war, Mc Quaid: "The end-of February fair in Monhill was Monaghan Day. Mc Quaid came every year to the house on Monaghan Day. He and Moran had fought in the same flying column in the war. Mc Quaid always drank a bottle of whiskey in the house when he came." It is a traditional day when the farmers sold their winter stock. By evoking this day we have a glimpse of an event that was specific and which belonged to the past, to a "different world", because this celebration does not exist in the present anymore; it lives only in people's memories. This event also marked class distinction between poor and rich:

It was always cold on Monaghan day, the traditional day poor farmers sold their winter stock and the rich farmers bought them for fattening. Moran was neither rich nor poor but his hatred and fear of poverty was as fierce as his fear of illness which meant that he would never be poor but that he and all around him would live as if they were paupers. (10)

They begin talking about the past by picking out a special day: "Monaghan Day had revived nothing but a weak fanciful ghost of what had been" (7) Facing the past is difficult and it also means moving away from it, coping with it and looking towards the future. Moran is unable to do this: "Just as he resented gifts he resented any dredging up of the past. He demanded that the continuing present he felt his life to be should not be shadowed or challenged." (3)

Monaghan Day, the significant family meals encapsulate the way nationalist historical discourse has transformed the War of Independence. The daughters create a feast, which mimics the original and in effect becomes a partial event that mocks Moran's authority and vision. (Peach 86)

The secret, "encrypted" aspect of the war exists alongside the nationalist, public view of it, but what is withheld affects those who live with the real or inherited memories of how the Republic was brought into being. It leaves them, as it leaves Moran, forced to brood in secret whether, with so many families disrupted and so many exiles, it was all worth it:

Many of them who had pensions and medals and jobs later couldn't tell one end of a gun from the other. Many of the men who had actually fought got nothing. An early grave or the emigrant ship. Sometimes I get sick when I see what I fought for. Moran said. (15)

The title of the novel encapsulates Moran's position in the family and in the community, he is indeed a man amongst women and invokes "The Hail Mary", one of the prayers of the Rosary, in which Mary is represented as blessed among women. This may be a reference to Moran as being blessed among women, but the Constitution and Rosary place women at the centre of affection in the home, Moran is haunted rather than blessed. (Peach 80)

Throughout the text Moran is associated with the Rosary. The prayer is very important for the family, it also stands for a traditional way of living, and this act of praying appears to be a kind of rule: "They say the family that prays together stays together, Moran said. I think that families can stay together even though they're scattered, if there's will to do so. The will is the important thing." (137). Praying is a key element in the novel, it represents religious identity. People belonging to the same country, family express their oneness through the act of praying which brings them together and becomes emblematic. Siobhan Holland points out, that Moran relies upon it "to promote his authority over his family and, in his use of prayer to support his claims to power." (Peach 88) The order of prayers in the Rosary, stresses Moran's dominance over his children and his wife. It makes authority vulnerable to parody. To repeat the Rosary in an Irish family context, then should be a means for Moran to reassert the divinely ordained hierarchy, which gives authority to fathers at home, in the state and heaven. The Rosary is a public prayer that reinforces a hierarchical social structure: it is presided over by the head of the family and the time is allocated from eldest to youngest in descending order of importance. The internal structure of this prayer emphasizes Divine fatherhood. There is a relationship between speech and action, the effects of words on gendered identities, the patriarchal effects of Catholic discourses about the Virgin Mary, but with the unintentional failure of patriarchal words to determine fully women's identities. (Holland 57) The element of reciting the Rosary appears many times in the novel, and each time something happens. What is significant around these prayers is that they have symbolic meanings. The Rosary represents Moran's authority because each time when he wants to start praying a negative incident occurs, somebody is missing. They cannot pray each time with the same people's participation. Maggie's husband Mike comes from London and when he visits his father in law and they recite the prayer he is very surprised, and finds this tradition strange, he is from the "other" world.

Like the colonizer, Moran is stripped of his authority. His powers weaken gradually through the women's rituals of observed rather than real obedience: "They were mastered and yet they were controlling together what they were mastered by". (46) He is gradually deprived of the strength to control the deployment of the Rosary and its emphasis on fathers; Moran cannot prevent the prayer being recited in ways that stress the benevolence of the blessed and adored mothers. If the Rosary is to keep the family together, it is through a redefinition of what constitutes masculinity and authority and through a re-examination of the family with the father figure at its head can we understand the situation of the Irish. The future of the family as a transcendent signifier in Ireland depends upon a redefinition of the family. (Peach 90) In this process of redefinition the mother has a superior role.

The moral authority of the mother is further developed in McGahern's novel through the women's appreciation of the beauty and vitality of nature, which for Moran is largely a place of work.

The title may be read directing our attention away from male or father centred perspectives to values and behaviors more traditionally associated with women. In the first part they are dear presences: "each field and tree had become a dear presence" (80). But the novel runs deeper than an exploration of the "masculine" in relation to the "feminine", even though at times McGahern does seem to be appropriating a familiar binarism in modern Irish fiction, building up stereotypical features, meaning that men are associated with violence and women linked with suffering. The authority of the colonizer is undermined by the behaviors of the colonized. Although we have the image of the women behaving like a "shoal of fish in the net", this is not necessarily absolute obedience. The rituals of obedience in the Moran household are based upon what we might conceive of as behaviors that accord to the will of the tyrant or colonizer, they think like the colonizer in terms of goals: "Then like a shoal of fish moving within a net, Rose and the girls started to clear the table, to brush away crumbs, to wash, to dry, to return each thing to its place." (79) They are disrupted by mockery within this apparent obedience: "the muted energy" whispers, joke, little scolding asides". Obedience can be merely a mimic of expectations: "Ingratiating smiles and words were threatened in and out of the whole whirl of business." (95) Moran loses power with the introduction in the family of her new wife, Rose. He is not only controlled by women, but also by the land: "Instead of using the fields, he sometimes felt as if the fields had used him." (130) Rose changed the household, she redecorated the whole house, and also she had a great impact on children's lives. She was the person who encouraged them to study and because of her Moran began to lose his authoritative powers: "Her true instinct was always to work behind the usual social frameworks: "family, connections, positions, conventions, the established forms that can be used like weapons when they are mastered." (24) Rose convinces everyone in the house that they are independent individuals and they have rights to choose what they want to do in their future. The writer ironically introduces the cat, which discovers that it has rights: "I thought she wasn't let in, Mona asked. Now, sometimes, we leave her be. She feels she has rights." (127)

Women have authority over men, this is also represented by the passages when Rose is in the garden with Michael: "He could often be found, at first helping Rose, then taking over and extending the garden...This both amused and irritated Moran...I suppose one of these days you'll be getting yourself a skirt" (64-65)

As Moran weakens, Rose replaces her husband as the most powerful person amongst these women, and her name, Rose (for the Rosary) helps to suggest that the focalization of the prayer on the mother figure represents a restoration of order. (Holland 75) Rose's figure is very significant, for the children she is salvation, she is the one who brings change, she "clears the nest" and also after their father's death she takes his place:

It was as if their first love and allegiance had been pledged uncompromisingly to this one house and man and that they knew that he had always been at the very living centre of all parts of their lives. Now not only had they never broken that pledge but they were renewing it for a second time with this other woman who had come in among them and married him. (183)

The feminization of men, this newfound masculinity will be significant in shaping the new generation: "Will you look at the men. They're more like a crowd of women." (184)

These concluding remarks have to be taken in connection with the speaker whose sister, without correction from the others, commented of their father: "He may be gone home but he'll always be with us" Maggie spoke for them all "He'll never leave us now" (183). There is a dark, ominous side to this that undermines what comes after as well as the revision of masculinity that appears to be championed throughout the text. It is ominous if seen as applying only to a particular generation to the daughters rather than their children-but if more than this, it becomes a depressing thought indeed. (Peach 96)

Speaking about the future and the next generation, it is characterized by hope, that it will be different, maybe the "next crowd will be better", not like the present run by "a crowd of small-minded gangsters out for their own good".

In terms of morality, in the novel there are sets of imposed rules, and ethics concerned with the behavior of individuals in relation to the values that are advocated to them.

From the novel we learn that we can read history through the interconnection, which is sometimes concealed in an authoritative discourse of power, obedience and subversion and that we must come to terms with our own history in order to find ourselves. We should also look at the changes in our current life and the way in which these changes influence and shape the future.

National identity in Jennifer Johnston's *How Many Miles to Babylon?*

The most obvious point to make about the women who have chosen to write directly or indirectly about contemporary Northern Ireland is that they are concerned with the impact of the Troubles upon people's lives, especially upon the lives of women and children. Women's situation in early 20th century Ireland as in other countries was a function of class, education and geographical location. Many critics ask: why does Jennifer Johnston use male protagonists? The author stated in an interview that there was a time when she preferred to be a man, she says: "I didn't have the courage in a way to approach writing as a woman so I came at it obliquely through writing through the eyes of a man, and this was I think lack of courage". She also adds that very few women in Ireland are engaged in writing.

Adverse criticism of Johnston has included criticism of her tendency to sentimentality, her improbability of some of her plots. Most of this criticism comes from naturalistic or historical approaches to her fiction and do not offer the best frameworks within which to discuss it. However she does not appear to have set out to be a naturalistic novelist. Her characters are not meant to seduce us into believing that they are real. They are sites of ideological conflict or embodiments of ideological positions. (Peach 101) When analyzing her works, the reader must focus on patterns of motifs that occur many times, of the fusion of the natural and mythical in her work. She makes the reader think and question all that she writes, not just merely accepting and this is due to her farming devices:

I'm a very disorderly person and a very disorderly writer. When I start to work I have just say one or two ideas in my mind, and I just start sort of playing around with them... suddenly they take on a momentum of their own, the characters suddenly start to develop. I always know

where I'm going before I start, but I don't know how I'm going to get there. And so I actually allow them to grow organically. (Gonzales 8).

Locations in Johnston's novels are not mere physical landscapes or places, but also they constitute sites of various and usually competing discourses.

In her novel entitled *This is not a novel*, she presents the importance of speech and language. Mimicking the voice in the discourse becomes essential. The intertextual references (songs, nursery rhymes) introduced within the text have the aim of changing the pace of things; they constitute a part of herself. The Big House represents communication; it is not just a mere space. On the one hand it is about recollections, which are buried in our memory, but on the other hand it stands for change. This change is about discussing issues that writers couldn't deal with before; for example homosexuality: "Homosexuality is a sickness that must be stamped out and I hope for the boy's own sake that you will make every effort to cure him or to restrain him in some way from engaging in such acts in the future." While reading the novel, we have the feeling that it is about a war, a personal war of the narrator: the war for freedom of speech which on a higher level is linked with the freedom of Ireland, both from social and political perspectives. There are people on the one side of the river and there are people on the other side of the river too. The new relation between the nations has to be based on communication not on isolation but openness. One of the typical elements related to Irishness is closeness. The father in the novel was hidden behind the Irish Times. People are trapped within their own world not trying to look out and to a certain extent to accept otherness or change. This change means coping with the past and moving towards the future. She hates "the curtains pulled and the dark". In this sense Jennifer Johnston's works stand for this change. It is like she wants to break the silence and give voice to her thoughts through a young girl who wants to grow up, who wants to be independent. This girl may also stand for the country and the nation has to grow up and within this process to find its true identity. She presents the theme of Irishness indirectly and as in *Amongst Women* in this case too we face the problem of religion. Mathilde says: "I want to live happily forever in Ireland, so I think to myself, better to be a Catholic. That is the best thing to be. So I take instructions, classes teaching me how to be a good Catholic." Being Irish means and implies belonging to a religion, being Catholic. Jennifer Johnston draws our attention upon the fact that the past, the recollection of images and memory are important but in the sense of moving beyond. There is continuity between the past and present and future: "I love that feeling of continuity, of having been planted somewhere in the past".

From the point of view of Irishness, her novels embody a "writerly" concept of identity in which a character is marked by, but not necessarily constructed by socio-historical determinants because she has the capacity to recreate and re-imagine. Johnston's concern with place as embodiment of competing discourses with issues of identity and with the situated subject as changing and non-unified is rooted in her identity as an Irish writer and as a woman in environments which, as in her novels, are oppressively gendered. (Peach 103) Identity, identity politics in her work are presented from the collective (family, community and nation) to the individual and we find the male-female binarism. Johnston's novels are not exclusively hinged, as some critics have suggested, on an art for art's sake versus political commitment debate, though it is a topic with which they are concerned. Rather, they are primarily

concerned with the search for ways of achieving a sense of identity, disentangled from the determinism of the socially constructed and gendered linguistic and cultural environment. (Peach 105) As proved in McGahern's novel, the issues of identity are not given; there are no ready solutions. We face indirect hints, associations, representations, the re-configuring of identity from the collective to the individual emerging from a silenced position.

Irish identity has obviously in some sense been a super-identity, something to aspire to as well as to possess and the force-field created by issues of rebellion and independence may have been a distorting effect. (Rosslyn 241) When it comes to discussing what does Irishness mean and does it have any relevance in the sense that do Irish really need to identify themselves, to build up a barrier that divides them from other nation, Johnston replies that age doesn't matter, sex doesn't matter, religion doesn't matter. She is a very liberal person; this is due to her liberal upbringing. She doesn't believe that making distinctions is for the benefit of people, she prefers establishing a certain balance and to find a solution for any kind of "marking" or distinction. She also sees in the Irish the helplessness of the human beings who try to relate to each other or love each other, or just have some sort of warm and normal life. In defining identity, communication, relation, the concept of society and social relations becomes important. To all this she adds about the nation that "we are a great race". Through defining her own identity she hints to a general concept. She explores this in most of her novels, especially in *How Many Miles to Babylon?* The aim of her work is to enlighten people's minds and show them a way through which they can come to terms with the past, with the differences, which keep them apart. Her goal is to establish an identity on grounds which are not made up of violence but rather on mutual communication and social relations. She tries to do all this by looking at the events with a microscope, grasping every little detail. Jennifer Johnston also looks further, towards the future from which she expects hope and she also discusses the problematic of borders. We cannot just talk about one nation's identity, because within Ireland there is the North and the South and these two parts are divided. What makes them different is the way they look through different "telescopes" and their attitudes to each other are like "mirror images of each other." Johnston says that the problems are because of violence, people hating each other for nothing, they just have labels round their neck, which makes them different. Through demolishing these labels can the nation really achieve to build its identity? People have to become more liberal. Johnston is optimistic about the future of these border problems and the key concept is learning from the past and moving on: "We are a great race and we are starting to learn things about ourselves that we should have been learning for the last twenty-five years." In *How Many Miles to Babylon?*, there is a passage where she states that the future is unknown: "After all, the future whether here or there is equally unknown" (1). "Here" or "There" may mean the distinctions between England and Ireland but also between North and South.

The choice of an Ascendancy mansion is the setting of her three novels: *The Captains and the Kings*, *The Gates* and *How Many Miles to Babylon?* led to her being labeled a Big House novelist, a "category" she does not identify with, as she states in an interview, the Big House is just "a means to an ending".

How Many Miles to Babylon? was written in 1974 when the Troubles in the North of Ireland started. Jennifer Johnston stated that while she lived in England she felt an alien; she

said that she felt like an alien mostly during the period of the Troubles. These differences between the Irish and English are portrayed in her novel *How Many Miles to Babylon?*.

How many miles to Babylon is a very short novel and at first reading it seems so simple. It relates the relationship between two people belonging to different “worlds” and the way they cope with them. The whole novel is centred round the friendship between Alex Moore, who is Anglo-Irish and belongs to the Protestant Ascendancy and his friend Jerry Crowe, who is a Catholic stable boy. After a few years they decide to serve in World War I in France. The plot in terms of politics is underpinned also by family psychology; to tell the same story in terms of relationship. Throughout the novel, political positions begin as emotional positions and there is also interplay of religion and public life. The rebellion has consequences in everyday life. Even when free of colonial interference, Ireland still has to struggle with its Catholic heritage. The novel doesn't have a single message and we are free to interpret it in many ways. At first reading we might say that it is about friendship, and we learn that real friendship surpasses differences imposed by origin, class, education, religious and political allegiance. But as Jennifer Johnston states the novel doesn't have a plot or message in the real sense of the word: “I'll fly whatever flag you tell me to fly from the chimney stack. Maybe I'll write soft-centred books. Sometimes my fingers itch to write, but my mind is blank. I have neither plots nor messages.” (142)

Identity is questioned once the Protestant Irish and British share their views around the same table. The soldiers discuss their situation, raising questions about what it means to be Irish. They discuss about Ireland, mainly about what divides its people.

The novel begins with the presentation of Alex Moore, who he is waiting for his execution in France. He is sitting with a notebook in front of him and he is writing. This scene constitutes the frame of the novel since it also ends with this scene. Alex Moore narrates how he actually got into this position: “Because I am an officer and gentleman they have given me my notebooks, pen, ink, and paper. So I write and wait.” (1) Alexander Moore will be shot because he killed his childhood friend Jerry, whom army law classifies as a deserter. He doesn't want his friend to be killed by the army officers, in this moment friendship surpasses all the differences of class, of upbringing; in this moment the future becomes important, which is hard to understand and to accept: “They will never understand. So I say nothing. The guns throb constantly and louder up the line.”(156) He recollects all his memories, his life, how he lived with his parents, all of his past: “Memories slide up to the surface of the mind, like weeds to the surface of the sea, once you begin to stir the depth where every word, every gesture, every sigh lie hidden.” (20)

What we see of Alexander and his parents on their estate portrays very sharply the exhausted colonialism of the period, the father honourably strives to preserve and improve the land which he loves with a ‘peasant’ passion, but he shrinks from all his wider, human duties. (Rosslyn 242) One of the stereotypes with which the Irish are commonly associated with, is the love of the land and to cultivate potatoes: “there's nothing to do at home, but plant the seeds, then dig them up and eat them”. (3). The land becomes the most important element in life; it has a special emotional significance, it represents life itself, it is treated like a human being and it becomes a religion:

In this country the land is our most important asset. Yes, never be unkind to it, never skimp, never treat it with contempt. To be practical, rather than emotional, which I must admit I tend sometimes to be, the more you put into the land the more ultimately you will be able to take out. To love the land is more rewarding than any...I haven't learnt much. Where my pleasure lies. My faith. (33)

Moor's mother, Mrs. Moore is defined by her hatred of her husband and her wish "to be" British. The parents represent the differences between the two countries. He says that he never wanted to become an Englishman: "Yes I believe now, I am, but I have never aspired to being an Englishman. Nor have I such aspirations for my son." (40) All Mrs. Moore does is playing the piano, and she is the one who sends Alexander to fight in France. We have the picture of the country that sends its people to foreign places. She does this on purpose when she finds out that her son became attached to his father.

The landscape is associated with closeness, the country and the land means protection from the outside world: "the peaks of the hills, which protected us from the world...it didn't seem possible that war could ever touch us within the magic circle of hills." (21) The country stands for security but this magic world does not stay like this because it is changed by war. In this novel too as in *Amongst Women* there are oppositions between "here" and "there", close and open. Metaphorically in many of Johnston's novels, the window becomes the representation of a barrier between two worlds: "The windows were open still and the curtains back" (26) This is how the conversation starts between the parents and Moore, but it ends hinting at the outside world: "The girl crossed the room and closed the windows, it was not quite dark outside." (26)

Living within such family and conditions, Alexander finds a friend, Jerry and they become best friends, they ride, swim and fight together, he is the only source of naturalness for Alexander. Their friendship is almost broken by Alexander's mother, because she does not want her son to have any relations with boys like Jerry, a boy from the stables. It is a portrayal of the responsibilities and limitations of class consciousness: "The responsibilities and limitations of the class into which you were born. They have to be accepted. But then after all, look at the advantages. Once you accept the advantages then the rest follows. Chaos can set in so easily." (29)

Despite all these differences, both friends decide to be volunteers for the same regiment so they both decide to go to France.

The English army and its discipline give Johnston another element for presenting the two characters. The army despairs equally of both of them: both are Irish and potential traitors, and neither is willing to be made a man of or to obey any kind of rules that are being imposed on them. (Peach 242) They both have many adventures, they steal army horses and they go foxhunting. Major Glendenning is the person who imposes most of the rules, he is the leader. Jerry wants to work with regimental horses, also he allows himself to go and try to find his father who was reported missing, but they make him a deserter. At this point the friendship between the two characters is questioned and replaced by Alexander's loyalty, which in the end kills both of them.

This plot throws interesting sidelights on Irish history, not least on how the bitterness of relations with England superseded Ireland's relations with the rest of the war-torn Continent

and led to the isolationism of its subsequent politics, from 1916 uprising to its neutrality in the Second World War. (Peach 242)

So far Irishness is made up of the love for the land and the distinction between classes, which also brings with itself the religious differences between Protestants and Catholics. This religious distinction on Alexander's part is represented by his mother, who wants to sacrifice him in order to destroy his father and his attachment to the land she doesn't like. This Protestant heritage is presented against the Catholic one. Catholicism here stands for the romantic nature of Irishness. Jerry's Catholic mother is worried about him, she takes care of her son: "how we'll do without the money coming in I do not know but it's about himself I am worried sick...God bless you son, and let you find your father" (134) Both friends have different religious identities but they supplement each other.

Besides land, which is the country's heart and religion, in this novel we can also discover other elements of Irishness. The discussions of the soldiers are full of stereotypical presentations of the Irish and English. Major Glendenning says to Alexander that he should mix and that he shouldn't think about himself as being better than everyone else: "Just pull yourself together and mix. You can go. Parade at nine and don't forget what I said." (71) Later, through a conversation between the soldiers we find out that the Irish are characterized by such stereotypical features as romantic and cynic, also that they live enclosed in patterns. These patterns refer to the labels, to the rules by which they live:

And I've been brought up to believe that you Irish were so romantic. There's nothing remotely romantic about all that, least of all the thought that we'll be in at any moment. You know-said Bennett-my life until now has really been indescribably dull. Patterns. Everywhere you look, patterns. This is the best thing that has ever happened to me. I'll either become a hero or I'll die. (78)

They discuss the differences in a very friendly manner, and this can be a starting point of demolishing all these labels that lead to conflict and violence:

The other thing I've always been told about you lot is that you're cynics. Maybe you'll allow that to be true. Don't be such a damn English snob. It appears to me that you attach the adjective English to anything you don't like. The solution is reconciliation, acceptance by learning more about each other: Maybe. It comes easily. I suppose we have a lot to learn about each other. (78)

We find remarks also about Ireland's dependence and independence. Irish are seen as not being able to rule themselves and they need someone else to help them: "Perspective is needed. You damn Celts have none. It's no wonder we don't think you're fit to rule yourselves." (97) The Irish stereotypes are called the "Irish disease", which means instability: "You never know with the Irish. You are not, I hope, tainted with the Irish disease? What's that? Disaffection. Disloyalty. Epidemics flare from time to time" (121)

The differences between the nations have to be demolished by accepting that the place where we come from doesn't have to affect our social relations: "Does it matter whose son I am? After all, it is what brushes off against us after birth that makes us what we are." (124)

A symbolic figure in the novel is the blind man, the fiddler, who stands for all the people who are blind in the sense that they are incapable of seeing reality: "The fiddler stood by the road's edge, his body moving like a wind-blown branch with each stroke of the bow. From where I stood I could see that he was blind." (49).

In the process of redefining identity, the nation has to look back and try to change the present by demolishing the stereotypes and also to look forward to the future. Past, present and future all become important. Johnston allows the characters to imagine for themselves a better future. Jerry looks forward to his war, which would be different, without borders, barriers: "It won't be like this. There'll be no trenches, no front lines. No waiting. Every town, every village will be the front line. Hill, rock, tree. They won't know which way to look. Even the children, for God's sake, will fight them. It won't be like this, I promise you that" (115) Alexander doesn't like this view of the future and says: "I hate your vision". He fights for other goals, a war that he does not want to take part in, he rather chooses art, and wants to be separated from this world that is governed by violence. He wants to find detachment in art, for this he prefers to live alone, to create, to write, and many times he repeats phrases, rhymes that also include the title of the novel: "How many miles to Babylon? / Four score and ten, sir. / Will I get there by candlelight? / Yes, and back again, sir (...)"

Conclusions

In the current paper I examined representations of Irishness in two novels: John McGahern's *Amongst Women* and Jennifer Johnston's *How Many Miles to Babylon?*.

Both novels deal with the issue of Irishness but they do not present a romantic view of it. Both authors look at the past and try to give a definition of the concept by re-defining that past. They also lay emphasis on the nation's present situation and try to find solutions also by looking towards the future. In this process of redefining oneself the ideas of social and political change are central for contemporary writers.

John McGahern and Jennifer Johnston compose their novels on certain patterns of opposition: "us" and "them", "inside" and "outside", "familiar" and "foreign". The distinction between the British and the Irish appears in both novels and it is represented by the opposing patterns. In *Amongst Women* three of Moran's children decide to live in London, the city which stands for the "otherness" while in *How Many Miles to Babylon?*, the soldiers belonging to the two different nations try to define each other

For John McGahern the family constitutes the central part of society through which he can discuss issues of Irishness linked with religion, gender, sexuality, and it is analogous to the Irish Free State and the Republic. He presents how political problems affect the smaller unit of the family. His novel is a critique of the Irish state developing the idea of power and authority. Michael Moran is the main protagonist, who is presented as a man and as a metaphor of the public and national destiny. His authoritative attitude drives away all his children. On a higher level this can be interpreted as the country driving away its sons and daughters. We have a romantic description of the landscape, a view of rural Ireland, the countryside, the tradition of gathering crops, which is in opposition with the "other world" of the urban. The Rosary and praying become important, as religious actions, which stand for Moran's authority, but these

are undermined by the presence and in the end by the victory of women. Like the colonizer, Moran is stripped of his authority; he is deprived of the strength and control. The situation changed, and this change appears as a hope for a better future, where there is no violence. This relationship based on mutual understanding and friendship that becomes more important than class distinction is explored in Jennifer Johnston's novel *How Many miles to Babylon?*

Jennifer Johnston belongs to that category of intellectuals, who believed that Ireland will not be a unitary state: "They all say the same thing but they are looking through different telescopes." What has been changed so far is the attitude to each other, the acceptance of one another. She explores the relationship between people and she thinks that through relations the conflicts within the country can be solved. Caring for each other is essential, because they cannot function without one another in a world of change. The Irish need to cope with their situation; she erased the tension of the Irish individual. The nation's freedom of thought is important for her ideals of the individual, which one may define as somebody's attempt to find a place in the world and to assert his or her identity.

There are two important things that have an impact on the Irish: the forces of the outer sphere and the emphasis on the past. Johnston believes that all these differences can be diminished; this is why she concentrates on regeneration and on the change of the paradigm. The Irish lived in violence and conflict and they need to envisage the future too, so she explores the ways in which people can cope with violence. She does this by portraying the way people relate to each other, the way they communicate and by how they feel and live. The burden of the past is not an Irish problem; it can be handled by the people. Most of her novels especially the one analyzed in this paper *How Many Miles to Babylon?*, represents a process of building a view upon the world detached from the stereotypes of Irish life and based for example on the father figure or on the strong family unit, heroic myths, religious beliefs, patterns of behavior and of living. Through the process of demolishing the stereotypes, people realize that reality is made up of someone else's ideals and that they need to show their real selves by reinterpreting their own history and looking towards their future.

It is Johnston's thinking in these fictions that a country which has made the possession of an identity a more urgent business than scrutinizing the nature of that identity needs to wean itself above all from the habit of special pleading. Her books are short, but they amount to a shelf of home truths that not only the Irish can be grateful for. (Rosslyn 249)

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