

# THE CULTURE OF MIGRATION IN BRITISH MODERNIST FICTION

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***Abstract:** Issues of migration and exile have been explored by a wide range of well-known postcolonial writers such as V. S. Naipaul, Caryl Phillips, Monica Ali and many others, whose work has gained interest since the end of the Second World War. However, in the first half of the twentieth century, before the boom of the Caribbean and Asian migration novels, leading figures of the modernist movement had also dealt with experiences of exile, alienation and displacement, whether forced or self-imposed. This essay will examine a selection of texts by four representative modernist novelists – Joseph Conrad, James Joyce, Virginia Woolf and D. H. Lawrence – to show how, long before the postcolonial period, they addressed the essence of migration.*

***Keywords:** British, exile, fiction, migration, modernism*

## 1. Introduction

The phenomenon of migration has existed from the beginning of civilisation and has touched every corner of the world, fluctuating through various historical contexts. Today, it seems that we are flooded with news reports dealing with asylum seekers and refugee crises, as a result of armed conflicts or economic hardship. Similarly, issues of migration, exile and diaspora are being discussed by a large number of contemporary postcolonial authors. The anxieties of displaced life concern a wide corpus of writings by recent successful novelists, such as Caryl Phillips, V. S. Naipaul, Timothy Mo, Monica Ali, Hanif Kureishi, and many others from the Indian and other diasporas. Nevertheless, in the first half of the twentieth century, before the boom of Caribbean and Asian migration novels, leading figures of the modernist movement had also tackled experiences of exile, isolation, language barriers, cultural shock, segregation, and displacement, whether forced or self-imposed. Some of these authors were themselves migrants as well. Although modernist novelists have usually been linked to formal experimentalism and a rejection of realistic representation, the line of argument followed here is that modernist fiction is also concerned with social issues, such as migration. This approach goes along with research that encourages a reassessment of the social and political dimensions of literary modernism (Booth, Rigby 2000, Caneda 2002, Berman 2011). This essay will examine a selection of texts by four representative modernist authors – Joseph Conrad, James Joyce, Virginia Woolf and D. H. Lawrence – to show how they addressed the nature of migration long before the postcolonial era.

In recent years, the interest in postcolonial literature and theory has brought about many studies on the experience of migration. Some authors, among very many that could be considered here, are Homi Bhabha (1994), Bruce Bennett (1998) or Gillian Bottomley (1992). Very often, types of migrations are presented

in simple dichotomies, such as international and internal, temporary and permanent, regular and irregular, or voluntary and forced. Edward Said even distinguishes between “actual” and “metaphorical” exiles and migrations (1994: 39). However, sometimes these are hard and fast categories that offer problematic distinctions. For instance, voluntary migration is sometimes used synonymously with terms like “economic migration” (Keely 2000: 50), but we all know that even the voluntary migrations of this economic type or those meant to reunite families include some kind of pressure on the migrant’s free choice. Moreover, this type of voluntary economic migration might be very different from the voluntary bourgeois exile, done for pleasure, that Homi Bhabha evokes at the beginning of his essay “DissemiNation” (1994: 139). In the following lines, different types of migrations will be discussed, but the focus will be on how these modernist novelists understand the immigrant experience, what the determinants and consequences of the migration are, and how those who move experience departure, migration and settlement.

## 2. Joseph Conrad

Conrad’s experiments in style and technique made him one of the early representatives of British modernist fiction. In fact, he was not born in Britain. He was born Józef Teodor Konrad Korzeniowski in the Russian-occupied Poland. His father was arrested for being involved in the underground resistance to the Russian authorities and the whole family was exiled in northern Russia. When he was still a teenager, already an orphan, he went to Marseilles and began a maritime career with the French merchant fleet. Then, he spent some time working on various English ships before he settled down in England and became a British subject, at the age of 29. As most critics have pointed out, his stories were often inspired by his own life experiences at sea, travelling and living away from his native country. Therefore, themes of exile, expatriation and loneliness dominate his work. Many of his characters are expatriates who isolate themselves from their own cultures and countries, are exposed to extreme situations and do not often survive the tests they must face.

An interesting short story that illustrates all these themes is “Amy Foster”, first published in the *Illustrated London News* (December 1901) and later collected in *Typhoon and Other Stories* (1903). It is an anguished tale of migration and exile that Edward Said (2000: 179) read as “the most uncompromising representation of exile ever written”. It narrates the adventures of a poor illiterate man from central Europe, called Yanko Goorall, who, like the author, leaves his home to sail the seas. He is an economic migrant who, after a painful journey across northern Europe, sails with many others on board “an emigrant-ship” from Hamburg bound to America, in the hope of making his fortune: “for there was work to be got all the year round at three dollars a day in America, and no military service to do” (Conrad 1925: 116). But his ship sinks and he becomes a kind of “castaway” in a coastal village in England. At first, ignorant of the shipwreck, the people treat him as a dangerous beggar and a madman. Since he does not speak English, they are also frightened by his peculiar foreign language, and they give him no assistance. Eventually, an eccentric old local, Mr. Swaffer, offers him shelter and work. However, it is only after Yanko saves Swaffer’s grand-daughter from drowning that the latter begins to pay him regular wages. Eventually, he marries a dull and passive local girl (the Amy Foster of the title), who had shown him some kindness.

One day, when Yanko falls ill and starts raving in his native tongue, suffering from a fever, Amy, terrified, runs away. Yanko dies of heart failure the next morning, neglected, and bewildered. Then, we learn that he had actually been asking for some water in his native language.

It is true that nobody asks him for a passport or papers and he is not taken to a detention centre for illegal immigrants, as it might happen today, but Conrad here relates an anguished tale of an alien migrant in England, who suffered social rejection and isolation, exploitation, humiliation, loneliness, and who ultimately is reduced to the degree zero of existence. Despite his marriage, Yanko is still perceived in the locality as an outsider. Conrad uses a real event as the basis of his story and seems to reflect the experience of many other people who uprooted themselves in their search for a better life. It has even been read as “Conrad’s subterranean autobiographical reflection on life in England” (Israel 2000: 28). Though the story is narrated by Dr Kennedy, one of the few local characters who is sympathetic to Yanko, Conrad shows these terrible experiences through the emigrant’s naive and unsophisticated point of view. Yanko does not understand where he is or what is going on around him, but the reader is fully aware of his plight and the xenophobic reaction of the locals. This story is a clear representation of the traumas of displacement and transcultural misunderstanding. Yanko is baffled by the local customs and feels “like a man transplanted into another planet” (Conrad 1925: 132). What makes his situation even worse is that the locals never try to understand his feeling or his culture, which is utterly rejected.

One evening, in the tap-room of the Coach and Horses (having drunk some whisky), he upset them all by singing a love song of his country. They hooted him down, and he was pained; but Preble, the lame wheelwright, and Vincent, the fat blacksmith, and the other notables too, wanted to drink their evening beer in peace. (Conrad 1925: 132)

Yanko tries to integrate and learn the locals’ language, speaking at first what it is described as “a sort of anxious baby-talk”, then, using the language with fluency but a strong accent (Conrad 1925: 117). However, he fails in his struggle to perfect his English and to assimilate into a society that refuses to accept him. He never feels that he belongs.

### 3. James Joyce

Another representative modernist writer is the Irish novelist James Joyce, renowned for his playful experiments with language and new narrative techniques in works of fiction such as *Ulysses* (1922) and *Finnegans Wake* (1939). Though his books are about Ireland and the Irish people, he lived most of his life away from his country. Like Stephen in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, Joyce resolves to leave Ireland to encounter “the reality of experience” (Joyce 1982: 253) and to free himself from the nets of nationality, religion and family in order to become a writer. He fled Ireland into a voluntary exile in 1904 and did most of his writing in Trieste, Zurich, and Paris. In his work, Joyce often describes the Ireland of the emigration. A country with a tumultuous past and dominated by the English colonisation, it had endured several waves of mass emigration, particularly after the Potato Famine of 1848. Joyce wrote an autobiographical play entitled *Exiles* (1918), which concerns an Irish writer who returns home after living in Europe with his common-law wife and son.

To illustrate Joyce's views on emigration, we could take a look at "Eveline", a short story first published in 1904 by the journal *Irish Homestead* and later included in *Dubliners* (1914). Here, a young Irish working-class woman dreams of escaping a boring and oppressive life in Dublin, where she lives with her alcoholic and abusive father. A sailor called Frank urges her to go with him to Buenos Aires, where he has prospects. She loves him and, in secret, agrees to go with him. Argentina might be the place where she hopes to avoid her father's violence as well as her mother's "life of commonplace sacrifices closing in final craziness" (Joyce 1989: 41). However, Eveline, however, faces a difficult dilemma: to stay at home like a dutiful and submissive daughter or leave Dublin with her new boyfriend. At the last moment, when they are about to board the boat, she refuses to elope to America and stays in Dublin. The story concludes in a gripping and sad way:

"Eveline! Evvy!"

He rushed beyond the barrier and called to her to follow. He was shouted at to go on but he still called to her. She set her white face to him, passive, like a helpless animal. Her eyes gave him no sign of love or farewell or recognition. (Joyce 1989: 42-43)

This ending is usually seen as another example of the Dublin paralysis and frustration that dominate all the stories of this collection. Gerald Doherty, for instance, discusses this paralysis in *Dubliners* as a metaphor for the plight of the characters of these stories that see themselves in situations that they cannot understand or control, "and from which they cannot escape" (1992: 35). Eveline is paralysed either by fear of the unknown or by her sense of duty, since she promised her dead mother "to keep the home together as long as she could" (Joyce 1989: 41). In fact, it represents the contrasting pull that many women in the early twentieth century Dublin felt between a traditional domestic life and the prospect of a new married life abroad. On the one hand, Eveline feels ready to leave her hard existence in Ireland and emigrate to Argentina, but, on the other, she worries about what she would be leaving behind. In the end, familiarity becomes more important than adventure. She is different from other characters in the story that represent the constant emigration that typified Ireland: some neighbours of her childhood are gone (Joyce 1989: 37), a school friend of her father's also went to Melbourne (Joyce 1989: 38) and Frank will also live in Argentina.

There is also another possible interpretation of Eveline's refusal to go with Frank to Argentina. Perhaps the paralysis felt by most Dubliners is not the only reason that made Eveline stay in Ireland. Perhaps it was her fear of what might happen to her in America with Frank. There is one detail that might shed some light on this. When the relationship between Frank and Eveline is described, we learn that one day Frank, who is fond of music, takes her to see the opera *The Bohemian Girl* (Joyce 1989: 40). Joyce often incorporates allusions to operas and songs in his stories and they have been proven to be central to the understanding of his writings (Bowen 1974). It is important to note that *The Bohemian Girl* is a ballad opera about the fortunes of a girl who is abducted by some gypsies and taken away from her home in Bohemia. Also, at that time Buenos Aires was associated with prostitution. Historians like Ivette Trochón (2006) show that, at that time, Buenos Aires was the centre of the white slave trade between Europe and South America. So, perhaps, Eveline made the right decision after all. It is true that Frank has told Eveline that he intends to marry her, but he is a somewhat enigmatic

character, a charming sailor whose intentions might be devious. Eveline might have ended up as a victim trapped in the sex trafficking industry. Indeed, some critics suggest that Eveline may have understood this better than many readers thought and controlled her destiny, thus escaping an ominous future in Buenos Aires (Mullin 2000 and Barberan Reinas 2013). All in all, it is important to see how, in this story, Joyce introduces the theme of emigration and presents the difficult situation of Irish women at the beginning of the twentieth century. Like men, they could try and emigrate, looking for a better life, but they would depend on men like Frank to go abroad. And they would have very little opportunity to prosper, their options being to either become the wife of a man like Frank or to get involved in the world's oldest profession.

#### 4. Virginia Woolf

Our next author is Virginia Woolf, a prolific English novelist and essayist, biographer, and feminist, whose modernist style changed with each new novel. Her most famous works include the novels *Mrs Dalloway* (1925), *To the Lighthouse* (1927) and *Orlando* (1928), and the book-length essay *A Room of One's Own* (1929). She was not an exile like Conrad or Joyce, but a Londoner who just left England when she went on holidays. However, her narrative is concerned with the theme of migration in different ways. Her first novel, *The Voyage Out* (1915), relates the journey of a young English woman, Rachel Vinrace, to South America. It is a kind of voluntary exile that represents a flight from a cloistered life in a London suburb to freedom and a metaphorical self-discovery voyage, something similar to what Woolf herself had experienced in her life, when she moved from the repressive household of her childhood to the intellectual stimulation of the Bloomsbury Group (Johnson 2001). In another novel, *Mrs Dalloway*, Woolf includes two different types of real and physical migrations in the female characters of Lucrezia Smith and Maisie Johnson.

Lucrezia (usually called Rezia in the novel) is an Italian young woman from Milan, who met an English soldier, Septimus Warren Smith, at the end of the First World War. She was a hat maker, with her sisters, and loved her life in Italy, but she married Septimus and they both went to live in London. We could say that hers is a case of migration for love or marriage migration. In this novel, we see Rezia in a narrative that, running parallel to the protagonist's story, shows Septimus's struggles with his mental illness and final suicide. Rezia wanted a normal marriage, with children, but is now living with a war veteran, who suffers from delayed shell shock, who hears voices and speaks aloud with his friend Evans, who had died during the war. Although she makes every effort to help her husband and takes him to a renowned nervous disease doctor, she cannot avoid his tragic ending. Even though she is unable to support him throughout his fits of madness, Rezia is seen throughout as both protective and affectionate towards Septimus. She also appears as a powerful, resilient character, like Conrad's Yanko. Her refusal to leave her husband, as the well-intentioned but mistaken doctors suggest (Woolf 1986: 131) shows her to be brave and strong in the face of adversity.

However, in London, Rezia feels extremely isolated. She is away from home and family. She is in a foreign country and unable to communicate with her husband. She cannot understand his real suffering. Not only is the British culture dramatically different from her Italian roots, but she also really suffers because of Septimus's

mental illness. Making hats is one of her few joys in life. She makes hats for her landlady, Mrs Filmer, and for Mrs Filmer's daughter, Mrs Peters. She loves Septimus, but she is forced to bear the burden of his mental illness alone:

I am alone; I am alone! she cried, by the fountain in Regent's Park (staring at the Indian and his cross), as perhaps at midnight, when all boundaries are lost, the country reverts to its ancient shape, as the Romans saw it, lying cloudy, when they landed, and the hills had no names and rivers wound they knew not where – such was her darkness. (Woolf 1986: 23)

The comparison with the Romans is appropriate, since Rezia's country of origin is Italy. This loneliness and the "darkness" of his like in London, without anybody to share her pain with, make her suffer: "Never, never had Rezia felt such agony in her life! She had asked for help and been deserted!" (Woolf 1986: 8). Integration for her is impossible. The novel ends with Mrs Dalloway's party. It is significant that every major character attends the party, with two exceptions: Septimus and Rezia; Septimus because he is already dead and Rezia, ... well, she represents the outsider, the foreigner.

In *Mrs Dalloway*, there is also another type of stranger, Maisie Johnson, a young woman who has just arrived in London from Scotland. She is not a foreign migrant, but a representative of "internal migration", that is to say, migration within one geopolitical entity. But her motives are similar to Yanko's: she had come to London, a big busy city, to "take up a post at her uncle's in Leadenhall Street" (Woolf 1986: 25). When she is introduced, frightened by the Smiths (Septimus and Rezia) in Regent's Park, she appears as an outsider who reflects on the differences between life in London and her home in Edinburgh. It is a new world that bewilders her.

Both [Septimus and Rezia] seemed queer, Maisie Johnson thought. Everything seemed very queer. [...] now all these people (for she returned to the Broad Walk), the stone basins, the prim flowers, the old men and women, invalids most of them in Bath chairs – all seemed, after Edinburgh, so queer. (Woolf 1986: 25)

She is another unhappy migrant. At one point, after contemplating the differences between London and her home, in Woolf's complicated stream-of-consciousness style, we hear her voice expressing her feelings of despair with a phrase that reminds the reader of the famous words uttered by Kurtz in Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*: "Horror! horror! she wanted to cry. (She had left her people; they had warned her what would happen.) Why hadn't she stayed at home? she cried, twisting the knob of the iron rail" (Woolf 1986: 25). She has barely arrived and already thinks that she might have made a mistake when she decided to migrate to London.

## 5. D. H. Lawrence

Another distinguished British modernist novelist, D. H. Lawrence is today best known for novels such as *Sons and Lovers* (1913), *The Rainbow* (1915) or *Women in Love* (1920), which maintained conventional syntax and straightforward plots, although their themes and poetic prose challenged the traditions of English fiction. Lawrence left Britain after the First World War years and began what he called his "savage pilgrimage", a time of voluntary exile (Carswell 1932), returning

only for brief visits. He lived in Italy, Australia, Ceylon (now called Sri Lanka), the United States, Mexico and the south of France. Many of these places and peoples appear not only in his travel books, but also in his novels. His personal experiences in Australia are incorporated in the novel *Kangaroo* (1923), which also shows the context of the long history of British migration to this continent.

*Kangaroo* is concerned with the marriage relationship between Richard Lovat Somers and his wife, Harriet. Richard is an English writer who has gone to Australia “to start a new life and flutter with a new hope” (Lawrence 1974: 14). Like Lawrence himself, he is in a voluntary exile, to avoid what he feels is Europe’s worn-out restrictive culture. The novel deals with the political, social and racial anxieties of the day, including the rise of communism and fascism, the future of the British Empire and migration, specifically British migration to Australia. This was a time when a lot of British people went away to Australia, New Zealand, and Canada, looking for material gain and a better life. Substantial numbers of British coal miners, for instance, arrived in Australia during the 1880s, and between 1921 and 1929 (Jupp 2004: 77). Since these territories were politically, culturally, linguistically, and racially linked to the United Kingdom, one would expect that this type of migration might involve positive experiences with successful results. One of these migrants could be Joseph Cook, who during his early life had worked in the coal mines of his birthplace of Silverdale, in Staffordshire, and after emigrating to New South Wales, became Prime Minister of Australia. However, in *Kangaroo*, Lawrence portrays a negative view of migration, criticising its motives and its consequences.

Firstly, the protagonist, Richard, who might be seen as a potential migrant to Australia, rejects the proposal of both competing political parties to settle down there and support their cause, leaving Australia at the end of the story. Australia might be an English-speaking territory, with a culture similar to that of the metropolis, but Richard sees himself as a writer-in-exile, suffering in an alien and barbarian environment:

He understood now that the Romans had preferred death to exile. He could sympathise now with Ovid on the Danube, hungering for Rome and blind to the land around him, blind to the savages. So Somers felt blind to Australia, and blind to the uncouth Australians. To him they were barbarians. The most loutish Neapolitan loafer was nearer to him in pulse than these British Australians with their aggressive familiarity. He surveyed them from an immense distance, with a kind of horror. (Lawrence 1974: 15-16)

Again, we see the “horror” of migration in the work of a modernist writer; a horror caused by differences between the two societies and the migrant’s social isolation. Richard and his wife feel very different from their Australian acquaintances. Harriet clearly states: “But I don’t want to spend my life with them. After all, that sort of people isn’t exactly my sort [...]” (Lawrence 1974: 61). For Richard, becoming an Australian carries the risk of degeneration, of losing his identity, his Englishness:

Yes he said to himself: “Do I want my blood to thin down like theirs [the Australian’s]? – that peculiar emptiness that is in them, because of the thinning that’s gone out of them? Do I want this curious transparent blood of the antipodes, with its momentaneous feelings and its sort of *absentness*? (Lawrence 1974: 148)

Another character in the novel that shows the negative side of migration is William James Trehwella (also known as Jaz), a Cornish migrant, who had gone to Australia with his brother when he was 15. Apparently, he represents the conventionally successful migrant who, after a childhood of hardships and poverty in England, leads a better life in Australia. Nevertheless, despite his material success, he could never completely integrate and, for some Australians, he remains an outsider. For instance, for Jack Callcott, the local organiser and activist of the political movement called Diggers, Jaz's nature is "secretive, may be treacherous" (Lawrence 1974: 57). What is more, Jaz himself feels he is still a foreigner. When Harriet asks him "You're Australian yourself now, aren't you? Or don't you feel it?", the way he answers suggests he is not very sure about it: "'Oh yes, I suppose I feel it,' he said, shifting uneasily on his seat" (Lawrence 1974: 69).

## 6. Conclusion

This brief discussion of how migration appears in four British modernist novelists is necessarily limited in scope. Without a doubt, many other authors could have been discussed here: Katherine Mansfield's *In a German Pension* (1911), Dorothy Richardson's *Pointed Roofs* (1915) and Jean Rhys's *Voyage in the Dark* (1934), among others. However, there is enough evidence to suggest that British modernist fiction offers abundant reflection on these issues of migration, displacement, exile, and alienation. We do not have to wait until the second half of the twentieth century and the boom of postcolonial literature to find moving and illuminating stories of migration. Even though modernist writers have often been considered as being committed to aesthetic experimentation rather than interested in social and political issues, the stories presented here reveal a different perspective. It is true that most of these novelists discuss exile as experienced by themselves and their stories draw on autobiographical details, but even Virginia Woolf, who only left England to enjoy some holidays on the continent, decides to address the problems of two migrants in her novel *Mrs Dalloway*. All this contributes to reinforce a more political and social reading of British modernist writers.

The reality of migration reflected in these narratives is far from being a romantic, liberating or enriching experience. Like many of those migration stories before and many of those to come, they show the dark side of the migrant's experience: loss, pain, fear, alienation, nostalgia for their homeland, loneliness and humiliation are often central to the characters who leave their country in search of better lands. Even for Eveline in Joyce's story, who in the end decides not to leave, the prospects were not very encouraging. Some characters are unable to overcome linguistic barriers; most often it is the cultural and environmental differences that make integration impossible. The challenges they encounter when trying to adjust to life in a new country are insurmountable. What is more, as we have seen, all these migration stories have dark or tragic endings. Finally, it is important to note that these modernist novelists introduce the theme of women in exile. Like the men, female characters – Eveline or Rezia – have little opportunity to prosper. However, they seem to face a double plight: on the one hand, the usual pains of displacement; on the other, their dependent position. They are each tied up to a relationship with a man, Frank or Septimus, which makes their migrant experience even more difficult.



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