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New Realities:
A Depiction of Immigrants in Maeve Binchy’s *Heart and Soul*

Although the immigration wave in Ireland has begun relatively recently, it has been unexpectedly rapid and its impact is visible in all fields, including Irish literature. In the majority of countries, looking at Germany as an example, it took decades before the issue of immigration appeared in literary works. Yet the first Irish authors have already been tracking and commenting on the ethno-cultural changes that have taken place in their country.

One of such writers is Maeve Binchy, who is often called a modern day Jane Austen, and indeed, in her relaxed, light in tone and sometimes humorous romance novels, she seems to achieve a lot as a social analyst and a subtle chronicler. Her success may be attributed to twenty-five years of journalistic experience as she wrote features first for *The Irish Times* and then for various newspapers in London. When interviewed, she frequently claims to write for changing Ireland and admits that she draws heavily on the media and newspapers in particular, for the topics of her novels. "If you are ever running out of ideas, newspapers are filled with them. You'd be weighted down with ideas after reading a paper thoroughly" (65), Binchy advises aspiring writers in *The Maeve Binchy Writers' Club*, a publication consisting of letters that she has written for participants of a writing course at the National College of Ireland.

Considering her inclination to search for topics in newspapers, it comes as no surprise that, in her latest novel *Heart and Soul* (2008), Binchy investigates the new heterogeneous realities in Ireland, with such precision. This theme, which has found itself as a target of widespread media attention, is similarly evident in the recent writings of Roddy Doyle, whose collection of short stories, *The Deportees*, and novel, *The Bandstand*, each featuring the life of immigrants in Ireland, were first published in instalments in Irish multicultural weekly *Metro Eireann*. Doyle's humorous remark on the nation-changing influx – "I went to bed in one country and woke up in a different one" (xi) – echoes Binchy's observations – "Ireland has changed so much since I started that it's a different world now" (*The Writer's Club* 65).

A short introduction to the current demographic shifts in Ireland may be helpful at this point to provide a backdrop for the analysis of Binchy's novel. The change started in the mid 1990's when, driven by Ireland's economic success, thousands of people from a whole host of nations arrived in the country. Suddenly, Ireland had turned from being the "sick man" of Europe, famous for high emigration rates, into the "Celtic Tiger," the success story of the EU and a destination for a great number of immigrants. In the last ten years the state has witnessed a greater increase in the percentage of inhabitants than Britain has experienced over the past half century (CSO 2006). The population on the isle increased from 3.8 to 4.3 million with newcomers from 150 different countries. Nearly half of the immigrants come from the twelve new EU accession countries that joined the union in 2004 and 2007,[1] and the "immigration leader" is Poland. As for non-European countries, there is a significant Asian and African minority in Ireland. Three quarters of all newcomers perform low paid and low-skilled labour, mainly in the service and catering sectors.

The influx of new inhabitants, in spite of fuelling the unprecedented economic boom on the isle, has also become for many citizens a source of fear of a multicultural future of the Irish society and has resulted in instances of individual and institutional prejudice. Such headings as "Faith before fairness" (Boland 1) or "EU report finds discrimination against minorities" (Coulter 7) have become a part of everyday news headlines. In response to the issue, the Irish government called into being the National Consultative Committee on Racism and Interculturalism, whose aim is to fight interethnic violence and encourage the integration of newcomers. The campaign for cultural hybridisation and cosmopolitan globalisation was further joined by academics. One of the most prominent cultural and literary critics in Ireland, Declan Kiberd, noted in his trenchant essay "Strangers in Their Own Country" (2001) that it was usually the energetic and enterprising people from poorer countries who decided to emigrate, and, through the subventions that they sent home, reduced poverty in their native countries. The Irish, many of whom lived in Britain and the United States for the same reasons, should understand this better than any other nation. Kiberd's words have reverberated in the cultural and literary world. Binchy elaborated on many of his pertinent remarks on the theme of changing Ireland and the place of immigrants in the Irish society in *Heart and Soul*, inter alia by introducing symbols.

For a start, Quentins restaurant, which is one of the main places of action in the novel, stands for contemporary Ireland. In Binchy's previous novel *Quentins* (2002), Patrick and Brenda Brennan manage to turn an unprofitable bar into one of the most stylish and popular restaurants in Dublin. The modernisations introduced at Quentins reflect the country's overall transformations: the economy is booming, citizens are becoming wealthier and the living conditions are improving. Similarly, the intersecting lives of the restaurant customers illuminate the cultural and social changes that take place in Ireland, and the most important of these are the halting of emigration waves, people becoming more liberal, and a significant decline in the influence of the Catholic Church.

All of this also becomes a focus of interest in *Heart and Soul*, where, additionally, Binchy includes a theme of multiculturalism through the introduction of a new employee who manages Quentins. The owner of the restaurant describes her in the following way: "I have a leggy blond from Latvia, impeccable English, great style. She is in there now and may well have taken the place over when I get back" (*Heart* 220). As the staff and customers of Quentins become more ethnically varied, Dublin changes; there appear small shops selling foreign goods, streets get crowded with non-nationals speaking different languages and the city turns into a vibrant place in which a happy modern life of a new multicultural population is possible.

Other symbols – important to the metaphorical reading of the novel – are two locations: the immigrant and the cardiology centre. The primary goal of the immigrant centre, run by a Catholic priest, father Brian, is to provide newcomers, mainly from Eastern Europe, with information and assistance that they need to successfully settle down in the new country, and this is done mostly through regular, well-attended meetings:

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[1] Ten accession countries that joined the EU on 1 May 2004: Cyprus, Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Malta, Poland, Slovakia, Slovenia, and two new accession states who joined the EU on 1 January 2007: Bulgaria and Romania.

> . . . people loved these meetings on different levels. Some were really interested in the country where they had come to live, others were hoping to meet people who would give them jobs. A lot of them were cold and lonely and relished the thought of a warm room and company. (*Heart* 168)

To be sure, Binchy frequently stresses that because of newcomers being very religious, churches in Ireland have started to play a vital role of educational and social centres where the integration process of non-nationals into local communities is initiated. While the writer acknowledges all efforts of the Catholic Church at social engineering, she nonetheless suggests that they are insufficient on their own and they need to become a part free-flowing cultural negotiations of individuals in civic society. Therefore, in the novel the inclusion of newcomers commences in the immigrant centre but evolves in the cardiology clinic, where Ania, the representative of non-nationals in the novel, is faced with the challenges and conflicts brought about by contemporary multiculturalism and, as a result, becomes a key member of the staff.

An important step towards her integration is the acquisition of the foreign tongue which has a symbolic meaning in the novel, indicating an effort that the characters make to communicate with one another regardless of their nationality or religion, and their attempt to create an open and eclectic society. Therefore, Ania's linguistic development is intrinsically linked with the girl's search for her place in Ireland, concurrently mapping her coming of age and acclimatisation in the local community. For Binchy, however, not only immigrants are obliged to learn the language of the host country but also the Irish should be encouraged to learn the mother tongues of newcomers and hence Tom studies Polish to the great surprise of his colleagues:

> "Well, he certainly keeps a Polish phrase book and he's been practising some phrases, tak and Dzien dobry, over and over."
> "What do they mean?" Hilary was interested.
> "No idea." (*Heart* 291)

Furthermore, Binchy compares the integration process to a long journey that starts each time with the appearance of a new immigrant. She exemplifies it in Heart and Soul with the arrival of Ania Prasky, a poor, uneducated girl from a village in

the south of Poland, whose introduction into the novel is typical of the clichéd perception of the newly-arrived at the beginning of the immigration wave in Ireland:

> A thin girl with long, straggly hair, carrying a chamois cloth, offered to clean her windscreen.
> "No thanks." Clara was pleasant but firm. "This isn't really a good place to get business, mainly staff who don't care what their cars look like or patients who are too worried about themselves to notice."
> The girl didn't seem to understand her properly. She was straining to get the meaning of the words.
> "Where are you from?"
> "Polski," the girl said.
> "Ah, Poland. Do you like it here?"
> "I think yes."
> "Do you have a job?"
> "No. No job. I do some things." She indicated her cleaning cloth.
> "What else? What other work?"
> "I go to houses to wash the cups and to clean the floors. I put the leaves from the trees into big bags. I see little boys clean car windows. I think maybe . . ." Her face was pale and peaky. (*Heart* 28)

Whilst the immigrants depicted in the novel, like Ania, show immense levels of energy and creativity, and prove very successful in finding new jobs, working oftentimes for several employers, they all nonetheless perform low-skilled, low-paid jobs, such as cleaning, catering and construction work. Not a single foreigner in the book starts a professional career, nevertheless, they all perceive Ireland as a promised land, which ironically recalls the 19th century perception of America by the Irish.

> Every week Ania wrote to her mother. . . . She told stories about Dublin, the wealth all around, the beautiful clothes; the handbags in stores costing a fortune, the young people who had cars that they parked at school and university. It was like the movies, it was just like Hollywood, she said over and over. (*Heart* 156)

The comparison of Dublin to Hollywood, even for a naïve Polish girl, seems a bit exaggerated and so seem the reactions of Ania who constantly flushes pink and her eyes fill with tears when she expresses her gratitude for all the good she has received in Ireland. This melodramatic analogy might have been intended by Binchy as a reminder to the Irish of their own diasporic history and, as such, to arouse sympathy for immigrants. All the more so considering that later in the novel the writer makes a suggestive set of connections between the experience of Irish emigrants and recent immigrants as Carl Walsh reminds his mother of the times when the Irish travelled overseas in pursuit of a better future:

> "People who are old enough to remember going to England when there were signs in the windows saying 'No Blacks, No Irish.' I was talking to a man whose mother was a maid in Boston and she was sent away from the family where she worked because she wasn't humble enough. She married a bank official and helped him climb to run a bank of his own."
> "That's a totally different –"
> "It's exactly the same, except it's worse for us. We have plenty. We have so bloody much in this country and we should be delighted to see all these new people coming in to join us. But no, it's a pecking order, isn't it? Even for us, who were at the bottom of the pecking order until not so long ago." (*Heart* 372)

Following in the footsteps of Kiberd, Binchy notes that because of the emigration experience, the Irish have a responsibility to propagate a classless society and to set an example, she refers to non-nationals as "the New Irish;" this politically correct term was used in the past in regard to the Irish emigrants in the United States. It is also interesting to compare *Heart and Soul* with *Brooklyn* (2009), the latest best-selling novel by Colm Tóibín which tells a story of Eilis Lacey, a young woman from Enniscorthy, who unable to find work at home, leaves her country and travels to America in the early 1950s. Eilis' experience parallels that of Ania in that they both stay in a crowded house, find a full-time job that allows them to earn a living, undergo a Cinderella transformation and mutually fall in love with a local man. The difference between the novels lies in the mood which is down-to-earth in *Brooklyn* and fairy-like in *Heart and Soul* where Carl Walsh is presented as a prince and his mother, Rosemary, as a witch.

If sometimes Binchy draws too heavily on fairy-tales to construct her characters, it is partly because she uses the black and white character distinction to illuminate progressive and conservative views on immigration prevailing in contemporary Ireland. The majority of her characters favour the influx of newcomers and are eager to accept them as equal members of their society; they also believe that the young generation may benefit from multiculturalism by opening up to different nations and taking an example from hardworking foreigners. However, there are also conservative opinions like those voiced by Rosemary Walsh, who is convinced that, by having allowed newcomers into the country, jobs are being stolen from the Irish and the country is falling into ruins. For this reason, she deems immigrants as inferior although interestingly she does not refrain from taking advantage of their inexpensive services.

By endowing Rosemary with numerous vices – egocentrism, snobbery, bigotry, duplicity and an excessive love for money, to name just a few – Binchy makes her the most dislikeable protagonist in the novel. At some point, Declan, annoyed with her behaviour, says: "May you get what you deserve in life" (*Heart* 425). As if by a stroke of fate, the woman turns around, walks into a ladder, on which a Polish painter is standing, breaking her arm and leg, and ends up in a hospital bed. Curiously enough, the Pole does not sustain any injuries. Binchy acts here as a moralist and follows a trite schema of the good being rewarded and the bad being punished, leaving no doubt that she sides with liberals and makes even Rosemary agree in the end that the effects of the recent immigration have been beneficial for Ireland:

> Vonni had loved-bombed Rosemary Walsh almost out of her wheelchair with her praise and delight for the new Irish, and how they have arrived just when the Celts needed them. Rosemary has never met such a forceful argument and found herself stammering agreement. (*Heart* 449)

Nevertheless, Binchy's depiction of close friendship between the Irish and newcomers seems idealized and stands in contrast with the sociological research which shows that 66% of Irish people have no immigrant friends (O'Mahony). Similarly, the writer's depiction of immigrants is somewhat exaggerated and patronising as it duplicates stereotypes that were created at the beginning of the immigration wave in the 1990s.

Despite these shortcomings, Binchy has contributed immensely to the debate over multiculturalism, painting one of the first literary pictures of recent immigrants on the isle and rendering academic ideas into an easy-to-read novel, making them accessible to a wider audience. Calling for a redefinition of what it means to be Irish in contemporary Ireland, she has become a leading advocate of cultural pluralism, showing a way to face the challenges of new heterogeneous realities.

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Chapter 4:

Fiction on the Road