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Article

The Evolution of Immigrant Identity in Brooklyn

Yumeng Qi[1,*]

[1] Hangzhou Normal University, Hangzhou, China
* Correspondence: Yumeng Qi, Hangzhou Normal University, Hangzhou, China

Abstract: Brooklyn is the representative work of Colm Tóibín, which tells the story of Eilis, an Irish small town girl who immigrated to New York in the 1950s due to economic difficulties. After experiencing emotional belonging and identity confusion in a foreign land, she finally makes a life decision. Eilis gradually completed her identity transformation from passive adaptation to active construction amidst the multiple tensions of cultural fragmentation, hometown temptation, and foreign summoning. This process of transformation reveals that immigration status is not a one-time binary choice, but an open process that continues to be generated through dynamic negotiation, providing insights into how individuals integrate themselves between different cultures in the context of globalization.

Keywords: identity; evolution; immigration; Eilis; Brooklyn

1. Introduction

The research on identity in Brooklyn in China mainly focuses on three aspects. Research within the framework of cultural identity theory focuses on examining the dynamic changes in Eilis's identity, viewing it as a fluid rather than a solidified product. Scattered criticism places the text in the historical context of Irish immigration, focusing on the weakening of sense of belonging and dialectical reflection on the Irish community. The introduction of gender dimension into female growth narrative explores the shaping effect of emotional choices between hometown and foreign land on self subjectivity, filling the gap in the previous two types of research on gender experience. Overall, domestic research on this topic is relatively abundant, but lacks research on the internal mechanisms and dynamic processes of identity reconstruction. Foreign research mainly focuses on the dual dilemma of dispersion and belonging, gender dimension and female immigrant subjectivity. On the issue of dispersal and belonging, some scholars have pointed out that Eilis's experience of being caught between home and foreign land constitutes a typical sense of dispersal identity anxiety. She has never been able to obtain a complete sense of belonging. However, from a transnational perspective, some scholars believe that Eilis's identity is not simply changed from Irish to American, but is repeatedly negotiated between two regional identities. On the gender dimension, some scholars have analyzed how novels deconstruct stereotypes of traditional Irish immigrant women, while others have approached Eilis's identity negotiation from the perspectives of silent discourse and family obligations, pointing out that Eilis's identity negotiation is always mixed with moral responsibility for her homeland family and a desire for personal freedom in the new world.

In summary, research both domestically and internationally has revealed the dilemma of immigrant identity attribution in novels from multiple perspectives, including regional dispersion and gender politics. On this basis, this study focuses on examining the transformation mechanism of Eilis's identity from passive rupture to active construction, in order to deepen the understanding of the dynamic generation process of immigrant identity in the novel.

2. Lost: Identity Breaks in the Old and New Worlds

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When Alice first set foot on the land of Brooklyn, what she experienced was not just a geographical shift, but a profound ontological identity rupture. The novel begins by depicting the protagonist's predicament in her hometown of Enniscorthy. This small town can't provide any promising future for young women, the job in the bakery is demanding and has no prospects, and the social network is tight but suffocating. Eilis is well aware that "at least for the moment, no work for anyone in Enniscorthy, no matter what their qualifications "[1]. So, Eilis went to Brooklyn not because of new opportunities and freedom, but because of the pressure of her family. The backwardness and conservatism of the small town, as well as the intervention of the family, have resulted in Eilis's passive and silent cultural identity [2]. However, as the ship slowly sailed away from the Irish coast, the identity coordinates woven by blood, geography, and religion that Eilis was familiar with began to loosen. When she first arrived in Brooklyn, the novel presented the specific situation of Eilis's lost immigrant identity with delicate strokes. "She was nobody here. It was not just that she had no friends and family; it was rather that she was a ghost in this room, in the streets on the way to work, on the shop floor. Nothing meant anything"[1]. Eilis felt a sadness in the host family room that she couldn't even cry, and the root of this sadness was not simply homesickness, but a comprehensive disorder in her self-awareness system. Her multiple identities put her in a contradictory position in the public sphere: as a woman, an Irishman, and an exile, the triple label keeps her suspended [3]. In her hometown, she is known to everyone in town as the "Eilis". Her every move is placed in a transparent network of people, where her identity has a natural certainty and unspoken recognition. However, in Brooklyn, all of these have failed. The customers of the department store will not care about the name and past of this Irish girl. Although the host of the homestay is also Irish, she has formed a set of survival rules that are compatible with New York. What she provides is discipline rather than recognition.

This kind of identity breakdown is particularly prominent in the workplace. Behind the counter of the department store, Eilis must learn a brand new physical discipline and emotional performance. She needs to stand straight according to the supervisor's requirements, smile at customers, and show a confidence that she doesn't truly possess. This job requires not only mastery of skills, but also forced acceptance of a new way of self presentation. However, for Eilis, who has just arrived in the United States, the words, actions, social etiquette, and even physical posture she learned in her hometown seem out of place on the new social stage. This makes every social interaction she has become an adventure, an anxious experience that may expose her outsider identity. A deeper level is the identity rupture at the linguistic level. Although Eilis comes from an English speaking country, the subtle and stubborn differences between Irish English and American English form an invisible identity boundary. Her accent became a symbol on the streets of Brooklyn, an undeniable ethnic attribute. Language here is not only a tool for communication, but also a mechanism for social classification and identity allocation. Eilis soon realized that her Irish accent had been given a specific meaning in the social context of New York, implying immigration status, distance from mainstream society, and some kind of flaw that needed to be overcome or concealed. When Eilis speaks with a classmate in class at Brooklyn College, the other person's first reaction is not a greeting, but rather to categorize her by her accent. "Are you British?" After Eilis replies, "No, Irish," the classmate simply nods and smiles [1]. This brief exchange shows that accent instantly marks Eilis as an outsider and places her into a specific social category. In her interactions with locals in the United States, language differences constantly remind her: you come from elsewhere, you are not yet from here.

However, identity fragmentation is not only a negative aspect. Eilis's experience of unfamiliarity in New York provided her with a new mirror to examine herself. In her hometown, she never needed to ask "who am I" because the answer was given so naturally by the environment. In Brooklyn, when all familiar social symbols were stripped away, she was forced to face her naked self for the first time after shedding all roles. This kind of experience is painful, but it also laid the groundwork for later identity reconstruction. The rupture that Eilis experienced in Brooklyn was essentially an

interruption in her dialogue with the other in the old sense, and a new dialogue had not yet been established. She floats in the gap of meaning, experiencing a temporary but necessary state of identity suspension. During her first few weeks in Brooklyn, Eilis repeatedly read letters sent by her sister Rose from Ireland. These letters became the last link between her and her old identity, with each line carrying the breath of her hometown and the illusion of belonging. But at the same time, the messages conveyed by the letters are always messages from over there, constantly reminding Eilis of the physical distance and psychological rift between her and that world. Gradually, she began to realize that the life described in those letters was no longer in sync with her present moment, and what she was experiencing was something that no letter could truly reach. She is transforming into another person, and this process is irreversible. Eilis's separation from Ireland has occurred, her old identity has loosened, but her new identity has not yet taken shape. She is suspended between two worlds. She is no longer the Irish town girl , but she is far from becoming the person that Brooklyn life requires her to be. This state harbors both danger and the possibility of creative transformation.

3. Swinging: The Torn Identity between Returning Home and Leaving Home

Eilis's experience of returning to Ireland due to her sister's death involved her in a more complex identity struggle. This homecoming forced Eilis to confront a hometown reshaped by time and re-examine the self that was being generated in Brooklyn in this familiar environment. The experience in Brooklyn has imprinted a new temperament on Eilis, an unconscious confidence and independence. The people in the town commented on her improved taste in clothing and talked about her calm demeanor. Eilis saw a different version of herself for the first time in the eyes of others, and this different version of herself was the gift of Brooklyn life. This time, the gaze of others became a mirror that revealed a new self. Under the gaze of her hometown, Eilis was recognized as a more charming presence. This experience of being accepted and even appreciated by hometown constitutes a powerful temptation. Jim's appearance pushed this temptation to its climax. The most attractive marriageable man in town has shown a clear intention to pursue Eilis, representing the best life prospects that Enniscorthy can offer: a respectable marriage, a familiar social network, and a predictable and stable future. At the same time, the expectations of the mother and the persuasion of friends are weaving a soft yet resilient web of belonging. For Eilis, who once couldn't see the future in her hometown, this transformation has an almost magical quality. The small town that once excluded her from a decent life has now opened its doors to her. American identity reminds her to return to Brooklyn, while Irish identity emphasizes family belonging. The conflict between the two identities puts Eilis in a dilemma of identity. She has a strange feeling as if she has split into two people, one struggling through two winters and many difficult times in Brooklyn and falling in love there, and the other being her mother's daughter, the Alice everyone knows or thinks they know [2].

Tony's letter represents a summoning of an emerging identity to her. These letters, written in broken grammar and filled with sincerity and anxiety, form the spiritual umbilical cord connecting Eilis and Brooklyn. Tony repeatedly expressed not only his longing in the letter, but also a confirmation of his identity. The question of choosing between Tony and Jim is about abandoning one cultural identity and recognizing the other. Tony represents the American side, symbolizing Eilis's American cultural identity, while Jim represents the Irish side, symbolizing Eilis's Irish cultural identity [4]. In the process of identity tearing apart, a key event was Eilis's encounter with her former employer, Mrs. Kelly. This mean woman, with her unique malice, attempted to expose Eilis's secret that she had been married in the United States. Mrs. Kelly represents the most suffocating aspect of small towns in Ireland: ubiquitous surveillance, intrusive attention to others' private lives, and public opinion violence in the name of morality. This encounter unexpectedly awakened Eilis's deep memories of her hometown, the suffocating feeling of being watched, judged, and restricted. Eilis understood at this

moment that Enniskosi's acceptance was always conditional, based on adherence to social norms, while Brooklyn gave her a freedom from surveillance.

Eilis's swaying precisely confirms the dialogic nature of identity recognition. Identity is not an essential and fixed attribute, but a process that is constantly produced in historical and cultural narratives. Eilis cannot simply be Irish or American, her self-awareness arises at the intersection of two cultural systems, neither of which can fully define her. The painful oscillation she experienced during her return to her hometown was the internal clash between these two cultures within her. Jim and Tony are not just two romantic partners, they represent two different lifestyles, two values, and two cultural scripts about a good life. Eilis's wandering between the two is essentially a difficult choice between two identity possibilities. The novel does not depict this tearing as a dilemma that needs to be quickly resolved. On the contrary, the author gave it ample narrative space, making it the most dramatic stage in the entire process of identity transformation. This narrative arrangement itself contains an insight: the transformation of identity is never a linear progression, it inevitably involves retraction, hesitation, and repetition. It is precisely during these wavering moments that the subject most deeply experiences the weight of identity as a problem. If Eilis had never returned to Ireland, her American identity would have been an untested fact rather than a conscious decision. The tearing of returning home forces the new identity that has been taken for granted in Brooklyn to enter the realm of consciousness, becoming an object of scrutiny and weighing. It is in this scrutiny that the originally vague outline of identity becomes clear. In the end, after experiencing various warm and cold alternation experiences during her homecoming, Eilis gained a more sober self-awareness. She began to understand that she could not find a sense of belonging simply by going back to the past, because that past no longer existed, and she herself was no longer the person who could live comfortably in it. Hometown is no longer a place to return to, but an inner landscape that cannot disappear but must be bid farewell to. This realization was painful, but also liberating. The endpoint of tearing is not collapse, but the emergence of a more mature sense of identity.

4. Reconstructing : The Dynamic Transformation of Immigration Identity

Eilis's return to Brooklyn is a qualitative change in her self-identity. At first, leaving Ireland was a passive escape due to economic difficulties, but this time returning to Brooklyn was the result of Eilis's active choice. Between passive and active, the identity of an immigrant subject undergoes a leap from object to subject. On the ship back to Brooklyn, Eilis met an Irish girl who was in a similar situation to her past, and began to give her guidance on American life as a senior. This plot has a dual function. On the one hand, it intuitively presents the change in Eilis's identity. She is no longer a confused new immigrant, but a person who has internalized American survival experience and can pass it on to newcomers. This transformation of identity marks Eilis's completion of the role transition from a beneficiary to a benefactor, implying a new sense of subjectivity. On the other hand, she also saw her past through newcomers and how her journey from Ireland to the United States shaped her growth. This reflexivity means that she is consciously transforming her identity into a storable and inheritable story to understand. In reflecting on her experience of returning home, Eilis achieved a transcendence of binary identity choices. She once faced a seemingly either or dilemma: either stay in Ireland or live in New York, as if she could only belong to one place.

However, when she wrote a letter to Tony on the ship, informing him that the return date had been set, she practiced a more complex way of identification. She chose New York as her place of life, but did not sever ties with Ireland as a result. She doesn't have to become an American in exchange for no longer being Irish, but can have both at the same time, establishing a dynamic identity space between the two. In fact, identity is the unity of rupture and continuity. Eilis's American experience did indeed distance her geographically and psychologically from Ireland, but this disconnect did not completely negate her Irish roots. On the contrary, her Irish traits precisely constitute an important resource for her survival in the United States. What is broken is the specific way of

survival, and what continues is the deeper cultural habits. Identity will be defined and reconstructed through differences. Through her experience traveling back and forth between the two places, Eilis no longer sees Irishness and Americanness as abstract opposing categories, but rather recognizes their different faces in the concrete differences of daily life. She didn't choose one and abandon the other, but found her place in the spectrum of differences between the two. Homi Baba pointed out that in cultural contact zones, there will be a mixed state that belongs neither completely to one side nor completely to the other. This state is not a sign of cultural decline, but rather a place where new cultural meanings are created. The immigration status that Eilis ultimately formed was precisely such a mixed identity. She retains a certain understanding of family, community, and emotional expression in Irish culture, while also absorbing the emphasis on individual independence and self actualization in American culture.

Eilis's identity reconstruction has undergone a transition from passive adaptation to active construction. In the early days of Brooklyn, she was more driven by her environment. The workplace required her to change her dress and behavior, the host family required her to follow rules, and social situations required her to learn new interactive etiquette. These changes have a clear passive color in the initial stage. However, over time, these passive adjustments gradually become internalized as part of self-identity. She began to appreciate the professional confidence cultivated in working in department stores, enjoyed the intellectual growth brought by night school studies, and began to appreciate the value of emotional autonomy from her romantic relationship with Tony. The self adjustment that was originally made to cope with external pressure has gradually transformed into a self choice of internal identification. This transition from passive to active is particularly prominent in love choices. Eilis's emotional development trajectory towards Tony is highly synchronized with the pace of her identity reconstruction. At first, Tony was just one of many dance male companions, a medium that could help her integrate into American social life. However, as the relationship deepened, Tony gradually took on a different meaning for her. Tony's simple, sincere, and unadorned American temperament contrasts sharply with the interpersonal relationship patterns she is accustomed to in her hometown. The Irish style courtship represented by Jim is implicit, circuitous, and carries the expectations of the family and the scrutiny of society. And Tony's emotions are direct, candid, and not bound by formalities. Eilis ultimately chose Tony, which was not only an expression of emotional preferences, but also a declaration of identity and position. She chose a lifestyle that matched it, a form of interpersonal relationship that allowed her to exist as her true self.

The journey back to the United States allowed Eilis to complete self-awakening. In this new homeland, she frees herself from family responsibilities and community expectations, and has the opportunity to reshape herself and integrate into diverse mixed cultures. The endpoint of immigrant identity recognition is not a fixed new identity, but a continuous ability to reconstruct itself [5]. Eilis's story won't end when she returns to Brooklyn. In the life experiences of immigrants, every overseas communication, every memory of their hometown, and every challenge they face in a new country are redefining who I am in small but continuous ways. The most valuable immigration experience Eilis gained may not have been finding a way to survive in the United States, but rather acquiring the ability to shuttle back and forth between different cultural worlds and integrate her own abilities.

5. Conclusion

In the context of contemporary globalization, the immigration story written in Brooklyn has long transcended the ethnic experience of Irish Americans in a specific historical period and gained a more universal anthropological significance. Eilis's life trajectory from Enniscorthy to Brooklyn, and then back and forth from Brooklyn, is a profound portrayal of the state of modern existence. The evolution of immigration identity is not the ultimate answer to a multiple-choice question, but a biography that is forever in writing. Eilis's three-stage evolution from lost to wavering and then to

reconstruction is not a standard procedure for personal growth, but reveals the universal dilemma of identity recognition. Modern people are increasingly forced to negotiate between different cultures, values, and lifestyles. Many people may not have crossed the ocean, but they have experienced the sense of disconnection from one world to another, and have also experienced the tug of war between two life possibilities. Returning is not a place, but the ability to integrate my own abilities between different worlds, perhaps the most precious inspiration left to readers by this novel. Kolm Tobin, with his usual subtlety and precision, wrote a seemingly mundane yet emotionally profound story, in which the individual's life trajectory resonates subtly with the grand narrative of history.

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