

A GENDERED UNION: AN ANALYSIS OF ANGLO-SCOTTISH GENDER AND POWER DYNAMICS IN ALASDAIR GRAY'S 'YOU' (1993) AND 'MAVIS BELFRAGE' (1996)

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Abstract: This article examines the representation of Anglo-Scottish power dynamics in Alasdair Gray's short stories 'You' (1993) and 'Mavis Belfrage' (1996) from an interdisciplinary framework combining history of Scotland, postcolonial theory and gender studies. The analysis of the Scottish and English main characters as potential national symbols provides insightful knowledge on Gray's literary conceptualisation of Scottishness versus Englishness. Both short stories integrate national and gender inequalities: weak Scots are dominated by powerful English. In conclusion, Gray's portrayal of Scottish and English characters as national symbols depicts the Union as a source of disempowerment for Scotland and emphasises Scotland's need for independence.

Resumen: El presente artículo examina la representación de las dinámicas de poder anglo-escocesas en los relatos de Alasdair Gray 'You' (1993) y 'Mavis Belfrage' (1996) desde un marco teórico interdisciplinar que combina historia de Escocia, teoría poscolonial y estudios de género. El análisis de los personajes escoceses e ingleses como potenciales símbolos de la nación proporciona conocimientos esclarecedores sobre la conceptualización literaria de la identidad escocesa versus la identidad inglesa en Alasdair Gray. Ambos relatos incorporan las desigualdades nacionales y de género: los débiles escoceses son dominados por poderosos ingleses. Finalmente, la representación de personajes ingleses y escoceses como símbolos de la nación en estos dos relatos retrata la unión con Inglaterra como una pérdida de poder para Escocia enfatizando la necesidad de conseguir la independencia.

1 INTRODUCTION

Alasdair Gray is considered to be a revolutionary contemporary Scottish writer for his radical remapping of Scottish identity integrating a poignant criticism 'against the

flawed politics and culture of Britishness' (Platt 2015: 178). For this reason, the study of Gray's literary production from a theoretical framework intersecting the history of Scotland, postcolonial theory and nation and gender studies may unpick new knowledge on the main aspects of Gray's politicised portrayal of Scottish and British identities in the 1980s and 1990s, his most productive decades as a writer. Alasdair Gray's short story collections and short novels constitute an almost untrodden research path in contemporary Scottish literary studies in comparison to the critical attention paid to his novels and especially to his masterpiece, *Lanark* (1981). Consequently, in order to seek unexplored analyses, this article aims to examine the literary conceptualisation of Scottishness and Englishness in Alasdair Gray's short story 'You', included in the short story collection *Ten Tales Tall & True* (1993) and the short novel 'Mavis Belfrage', included in the 1996 collection of the same name.

'You' (1993) and 'Mavis Belfrage' (1996) are included in the category of devolutionary writing (Schoene 2007: 7), meaning that they were published between the two devolution referenda held in Scotland in the 20th century (1979-1997) coinciding with the rising popularity of Scottish nationalism. The short story 'You' was published in 1993 and the short novel 'Mavis Belfrage' in 1996, just a year before the second Devolution referendum. Hence, when both stories were written, Scotland was still a nation within a Kingdom with no parliamentary representation of its own. In the 1990s, after the disappointing results of the 1979 Devolution referendum, expectations that the Scottish parliament would eventually be devolved soared (Marr 1992: 209). For this reason, the Scottish devolutionary period (1979-1997) constitutes a crucial framework for understanding the various branches of contemporary Scottish nationalism, both constitutionally and ideologically. An analysis of 'You' (1993) and 'Mavis Belfrage' (1996) from a framework intersecting national and gender politics can be tremendously useful for examining the representation of Anglo-Scottish national stereotypes in Alasdair Gray's work as well as understanding the gendered features which operate in the construction of national power dynamics.

The revision of the political panorama in Scotland between the Devolution referenda of 1979 and 1997, the so-called devolutionary period (Schoene 2007: 7), and a brief explanation of some of the reasons behind the key tensions and asymmetries between Scotland and England resulting from the Union will provide the historical contextualisation necessary to understand the specific politics in 'You' (1993) and 'Mavis Belfrage' (1996).

2 SCOTLAND AND ENGLAND: UNION AND INDEPENDENCE

Scotland has had a complex political status since the Union of the Crowns in 1603 and especially since the Act of Union of 1707, which united the Parliament of England and the Parliament of Scotland in Westminster. From the passing of this Act, Scotland lost its institutional autonomy within the United Kingdom, becoming a 'stateless nation' (McCrone 1992). Yet this did not entail a suppression of its national symbols. On the contrary, against a backdrop of union, Scotland preserved a distinct national identity from Britain, generating a Scottish nationalist movement and a wish for independence from the United Kingdom. Indeed, as Euan Hague remarks:

Nation-states undertake assimilation policies to create a sense of shared history. Assimilation merges citizens together, denying otherness and often discriminating against 'alien' cultures. This situation can again be seen in eighteenth-century Scotland when United Kingdom government legislation aimed to weaken 'backward' traditions such as the clan system, Highland dress and Gaelic language. (...) However, it could be argued that the process of assimilation within the United Kingdom nation-state was never completed as many Scots preserved the belief that they were identifiably and culturally different from other inhabitants of the 'United Kingdom' and particularly 'England'. (1996: 132)

From the 1960s, discontent with the Union in Scotland and the consequent fight towards parliamentary devolution, regarded by some nationalists as a preliminary step paving the way towards independence (Thomson 2007: 1), was conditioned by several factors. The first set of factors is related to political and economic change in the 1960s and 1970s and how it affected the Scots. The credibility and popularity of Home Rule for Scotland grew considerably in the 1960s and continued in the 1970s, when many Scots put the blame for the crisis of the post-1945 welfare state they so wished to maintain on their political ties with the Union (Brown, McCrone, Paterson 1998: 19). The statelessness of Scotland as a nation within the Union, politically wedded to England, made the organic structure of the Union an easy target for political dissatisfaction. On top of that, the disintegration of the British Empire, the de-industrialisation of a mostly industrial economy like the Scottish one and the global crisis of the mid-1970s, accelerated Scotland's disenchantment with the Union policies and their support for the Scottish National Party (Homberg-Schraam 2018: 37). As explained by T.M. Devine: 'a vote for the SNP came to be regarded as an act of protest, a manifestation of a Scottish discontent rather than a commitment to Scottish independence' (2012: 575). The debate on constitutional change prevailed (Devine 2012: 584) and the first referendum on devolution was called in 1979 by the Labour party as a reaction to the significant opposition to the Union manifested by a considerable number of Scots. However, those in favour of devolution were defeated as they did not reach the 40% of the electorate that Labour MP George Cunningham had imposed in his amendment of the original bill (Homberg-Schraam 2018: 38).

After the failed Devolution Referendum of 1979, Margaret Thatcher became Prime Minister causing an even more acute decline in the support for the Union among Scots (Devine 2012: 606). Margaret Thatcher considered that 'Scotland had become a dependency culture that had grown lazy through excessive reliance on handouts from the government' (Elliott 2018: 230). Hence, the strategy of the Conservative party in the 1980s was to reactivate the economy, implementing austere policies based on the dismantling of the welfare state. These policies augmented the sensation that the Scottish vote was underrepresented in Westminster (Homberg-Schraam 2018: IX). In fact, many Scots felt they had been forgotten by the central government and 'Westminster' shifted in meaning, acquiring a pejorative tone and being used as an umbrella term for everything they despised about being governed by the English (Dallyel 2016: 118).

Alasdair Gray is a declared supporter of an independent Scotland. Apart from integrating left-wing political messages which underscore systemic injustices in novels like *Lanark* (1981) and *1982, Janine* (1984), Gray enacted a pro-independence message propounding his particular vision of a new state configuration for Scotland in his pamphlets *Why Scots*

Should Rule Scotland (1992, 1997) and *Independence: An Argument for Home Rule* (2014). In an unpublished interview with Alasdair Gray in February 2019, Gray explained why he supports independence:

AG: When I was younger, in the 1950s and in the 1960s, the idea of Scotland becoming independent of England as a separate part of Britain entertained me. I found it an entertaining idea, not at all convincing, not at all necessary. When Harold Wilson's government was elected, and the Welfare State was expanded it never occurred to us all that what the Welfare State had achieved for Britain was going to be undone by Margaret Thatcher. The worst undoing was, of course, the elimination of the student grants. In the 1980s the student grants were replaced by debt. (...) This of course made me a hell of a lot more radical. Once people became afraid of losing their jobs, they stuck their necks out and criticised the authority...very clever. Myself, Jim Kelman and others were horrified and that's why I started thinking Scotland Independent might become much more Labour, much more truly socialist. It might start recovering some of the Socialist advantages that the British Tory government has abolished (Gray 2019).

Gray's observations are aligned with the analyses provided by historians like T.M. Devine and Murray Pittock who emphasise the pivotal role of Thatcherism in the radicalisation of the Scottish working classes, the growth of Anti-Unionism and the reconceptualisation of 'English' as synonymous to neoliberal and anti-welfare.

The second set of reasons promoting discontent with the Union in the Scottish 1990s, were related to the controversial position of Scotland in the British Empire since the Act of Union of 1707. As proposed by Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin (2002: 31f), Scotland follows Dorsinville's dominated-dominating colonial model which means Scotland has been both an accomplice of England in the construction of the Empire and a nation culturally and linguistically dominated by England. According to the dominated-dominating model, even if Scotland actively participated in promoting British colonialism, it has been subjugated to an indirect colonial mechanism permitted by the structure of the Union itself: 'not an overtly political strategy of taking over a foreign state but rather a subtle strategy of setting up 'English' as normative so that other regions are marginalised as deviant Others' (Homberg-Schraam 2018: 8). One of the key points put into question when assessing the situation of Scotland as a dominated culture are the main motivations behind the Act of Union of 1707. There are several narratives on the development of the Act of Union, ranging from it being seen as a contract between equals to a feeling that the Scots were blackmailed into accepting the Union (Homberg-Schraam 2018: IX). The 'blackmail' version of the agreement on the Union fits into the vision of Scotland as a British colony and it even reinforces its colonial status as a nation which since 1707 has been systematically inferiorised by an Anglocentric cultural and linguistic hegemony - Britain is popularly associated with England (Stirling 2008: 18). Literary studies which consider the 'Englishing' (Pittock 2001: 10) of Scotland's culture and language could fit Scotland into a postcolonial framework, such as Robert Crawford's *Devolving English Literature* (1992), employing terms such as 'peripheral' or 'minority' to refer to the status of Scots within the Union (Lehner 2011a: 224).

On top of that, some books, like *The Eclipse of Scottish Culture: Inferiorism and the Intellectuals* (1989) by Craig Beveridge and Ronald Turnbull, employing Frantz Fanon's theories of abjection insist on the idea of the 'inferiorisation' of Scottish culture within the

United Kingdom. In addition, the term ‘Caledonian Antisyzygy’ coined by Gregory G. Smith in his book *Scottish Literature: Character and Influence* (1919) identifies a schizophrenic, problematic and consequently mad nature in the Scottish psyche. Both these ideas, underline and foster the conceptualisation of Scottishness as a limiting and almost crippling identity.

The theorisation of Scotland’s ‘inferiorisation’ (Beveridge and Turnbull 1989), together with the welfare and political crisis aggravated in the 1980s, rendered the Scottish 1990s a breeding ground for Scottish nationalism. Besides that, the self-identification of Scottish people and the contemporary cultural construction of Scottishness is determined by its position within the Union and its relationship with England. The peculiarities and inconsistencies of Scotland inherited from this political relationship and its status as “less-than country... not-quite nation” (Robertson 210: 534) may explain the representational limitations of the Scottish nation visually and as a gendered entity.

3 GENDERED SCOTLAND

Gender is one of the cultural constructs intersected in the production and reproduction discourses of the nation. Throughout history, nations have been allegorically represented as female, conforming to the woman-as-nation trope, in paintings or in statues with a nationalist message. The political implications that a symbolic gendering of the nation entails for the people of that nation are analysed by Nira Yuval-Davis in *Gender and Nation* (1997). As she states: ‘In this culturalized discourse, gendered bodies and sexuality play pivotal roles as territories, markers and reproducers of the narratives of nations and other collectivities’ (1997: 39). Women have been traditionally portrayed as both the metaphorical and biological reproducers of the nation and as bearers of its values (Yuval-Davis and Anthias 1989: 7). Interestingly enough, the central role attributed to women in the production and reproduction of the nation does not correspond to their marginal position in the real construction of the nation. Moreover, processes of colonisation have often been narrated with gendered language: the land occupied by the nation and delimited by its borders being referred to as a fertile female land invaded and raped by foreign colonisers.

In her monograph *Bella Caledonia: Woman, Nation, Text* (2008), Kirsten Stirling examines the relation between nation and gender in the field of Scottish literature, particularly analysing the woman-as-nation trope as it appeared in 20th century Scottish literature. As Stirling notes in her book, it is crucial to highlight that the Scottish nation has very few representations through pictorial arts; instead, most instances where the figure of Scotia or Caledonia appear can be found in literature. Due to its stateless status since the Act of Union of 1707 and its consequent lack of an institutional autonomous relevance, the gendering of the Scottish nation as a static figure is problematised. In fact, ‘many of the literary incarnations of Scotland-as-woman, however, would be more properly called symbols than allegories since, particularly in the novels, they are psychologically realistic characters with secondary symbolic functions’ (Stirling 2008: 12). The secondary symbolic functions of the Scotland-as-woman trope Stirling identifies are provoked by Scotland’s political inconsistency as ‘a country that is not fully a country, a nation that does not quite believe itself to be a nation’ (Robertson 2010: 534) and its lack of an institutionalised official history. According to Cairns Craig: ‘History in Scotland, Ireland and Wales remains

a series of accidents, a series of incidents held together by no fundamental necessity ... England has a history; Ireland [and Scotland] will only acquire a history once [they come] into the orderly and progressive world that is imposed on [them] by England' (1996: 101). The ambiguity inherent to Scotland invalidates it to function as a static and concrete allegory. Rather, its many internal fragmentations and contradictions, both as dominated and dominating, both as Scottish and British, make the Scotland-as-woman figure 'necessarily multi-faceted' (Stirling 2008: 12). In fact, examples of multi-faceted, fantastic and monstrous incarnations of Scotland appear in Alasdair Gray's novels *1982 Janine* (1984) and *Poor Things* (1992).

Gray himself has provided material to better understand his conceptualisation of Scotland-as-woman. In *Why Scots Should Rule Scotland*, published in 1992, Gray reflects on the fragmented state of the Scottish woman-as nation underlining the reasons of a lack of institutional roles of the Scottish nation and its mainly literary function:

Since the 18th century sculptors and political cartoonists have often represented nations as a single people, usually robust and beautiful women with names like La France, Italia, Germania. If Scotland were so depicted the head would have to shown attached to the body by a longer neck than the poor lady's height; moreover, the head would also be attached by a neck of normal length to a different and much stronger body. No wonder many Scottish limbs and organs are underfed, numb and disconnected from each other. Too many of them cannot act without orders from a remote head which is distinctly absentminded toward them because it must first direct a far more urgent set of limbs and organs. (1992: 58-59)

This 'remote head' Gray refers to would be Westminster, functioning as the brain of Scotland. Moreover, the Scottish 'set of limbs and organs' of this 'remote head' are 'underfed, numb and disconnected from each other'. In this vein, Gray depicts a marginalised Scotland whose own political disempowerment has led to alienation. Hence, Gray constructs a criticism against Westminster for ignoring the political necessities of an increasingly irrelevant Scotland. In addition, in *Why Scots Should Rule Scotland* (1992) Alasdair Gray openly declares his support for the SNP as leaders of the Devolutionary and Independence movements: 'Since I argue that Scotland should have a strong government elected by its people this pamphlet is propaganda for the Scottish National Party, or for candidates of other parties who have declared for such a government without swithering from side to side on the matter' (1992: 9) . In this excerpt, Alasdair Gray proclaims his support for a government independent from Westminster, emphasising Scotland's lack of autonomy and the necessity to achieve it by voting the SNP. It is interesting to pinpoint that in this quote Gray is linking literary and real politics, personal and collective politics in petitioning for a vote for the SNP from within an essay. In this pamphlet the figure of the writer becomes the figure of an opinion maker, an intellectual endorsing the fight of a specific political party and consequently taking sides in the dependence/independence predicament, tilting towards the latter.

The gendering of Scotland and the peculiarities identified in it will serve as a framework to examine the representation of Anglo-Scottish relations in Alasdair Gray's 'You' (1993) and 'Mavis Belfrage' (1996).

4 'NEVER SAY SO': A VISION OF COLONISED SCOTLAND IN 'YOU' (1993)

'You' was first published in the journal *Casablanca* in 1993 and it is included in the short story collection *Ten Tales Tall & True*, also published in 1993. The main characters in this story are an unnamed Scottish working-class woman and an unnamed upper-middle class English man. The characters first meet as guests at a wedding where the bride is Scottish and the groom is English. Their differences, not only in nationality, but also in class and status - the groom's family tries not to 'show they are richer, feel superior to the bride's people, the Scots, the natives' (Gray 1993: 60) - generate an atmosphere of tension which also divides the main characters.

Alasdair Gray chooses Glasgow as the main scenario to narrate the inequalities and frictions which arise in the relationship between Scotswoman and the Englishman. Most of the areas where the Scotswoman and the Englishman meet are fancy hotels only the man in the relationship can afford, not taking into account the woman's status nor her desires as well as negating her agency. In fact, the woman admits to being lured into the relationship by the Englishman's money: 'Of course his money smooths things' (Gray 1993: 65), which was helpful to hide her lack of economic affluence. In this sense, the significance of money as a facilitator of their relationship indicates the class difference between the Scotswoman and the Englishman.

It was believed that Scotland was a more socialist (Brown, McCrone and Paterson 1998: 17) and working-class nation (Homberg-Schraam 2018: XII). Therefore, if we were to consider the Scotswoman and the Englishman as secondary symbols of the nation (Stirling 2008: 7), the representation of money in 'You' coincides with the idea that Scotland is a poorer nation than England. Indeed, in *Why Scots Should Rule Scotland* (1992), Alasdair Gray seconds this economic inequality as a social reality by describing that in the nineteenth century 'the housing and work conditions for the lowly paid were far worse than for the equivalent social group in England' (49). The unnamed Scotswoman in 'You' is visibly working-class, she 'lives in a bedsit' (Gray 1993: 63) and when talking about her job she is asked by the Englishman: 'Can you live on a wage as low as that?' (1993: 64). On the other hand, the man is described to be 'the posh English sort' (Gray 1993: 61). He likes to show off by mastering his knowledge of Scottish whisky - 'one of the best things your country makes' (Gray 1993: 62) - and his contacts in London: 'If you decide to come to London contact me first' (1993: 64). Consequently, England's and Scotland's relationship of inequality, especially accentuated in the 1980s between English Conservatives who favoured 'monetary control, privatization, the liberation of free markets...' (Devine 2012: 591) and the Scottish working classes, dependent on the crumbling welfare state, is integrated into this analogy.

Moreover, 'You' is scattered with words referring to a colonial setting such as 'natives' (Gray 1993: 60), 'chiefs of my lot' (1993: 62) to refer to friends or 'Sassenach' (1993: 62) which prompts a postcolonial reading of the story. The sexual encounters between the Scotswoman and the Englishman, mediated by money, invitations to the fancy Central Hotel (Gray 1993: 65) and seduction can be paralleled to colonial encounters where the economically superior figure attracts and 'buys' the natives' interest through material

possessions. According to Len Platt, in 'You' (1993) 'landlordism is brought up to date in the figure of the outsiderly Englishman — an ethnic stereotype, like other representations of English identities in Gray's fiction, of brutality, materialism and self-obsession that slips into race discourse too easily' (2015: 178). Apart from being in control of the money flowing in his affair with the Scotswoman, the Englishman is shown to be in control of the media - 'he talked about people whose faces are seen, names and voices are heard on the news' (Gray 1993: 65) - and the labour market - he 'shifts the bums to where they don't block things' (1993: 66). This epitomises the superiority that England, as the business and culture centre of the United Kingdom holds in comparison to an inferior Scotland, embodied by the female protagonist. In the symbolic secondary functions which can be attributed to the characters, the Scotland-as-woman of 'You' (1993) embodies the Scotland of 'suppressed voices' (Jones 2012: 4), a working-class visibly poor woman hardly-ever portrayed in pre-devolutionary Scottish literature.

All the interactions between the Scotswoman and the Englishman are narrated in the second person by the unnamed Scotswoman, employing the 'You' of the title as the main subject. Through the second person narrator 'You', it is suggested that the woman has no agency to express herself loudly. When initiating a sexual encounter, the Scotswoman finds herself unable to express her lack of consent as she finds 'no words to say no' (Gray 1993: 67). Moreover, when having a discordant opinion: 'The main course is always too fancy, too sautéed, too spiced' (Gray 1993: 65) she obliges herself to 'never say so' (1993: 65) and remain silent. In contrast, the Englishman judges the Scotswoman because of this, defining her as: 'A woman of few words' (Gray 1993: 61). However, it is partly due to the Englishman's aggressive, authoritarian and judgmental behaviour: 'he can get anyone, anything he wants' (Gray 1993: 72), that the Scotswoman keeps silent. The Englishman is constantly taking the floor without asking for it: 'Both are quiet because he is quiet, for it is always he who directs the talk or deals it out' (Gray 1993: 69), and whenever the woman shows interest in knowing about him, he complains and says he does not want to talk, completely contradicting his own actions: 'If asked about himself he gives a crisp reply in words... ' (Gray 1993: 65).

It can be interpreted that the abusive and toxic masculinity exerted by the Englishman in his manipulation of the Scotswoman's use of speech in their dialogue is paralleled to English hegemony in opposition to Scotland's 'othering'. As Bill Ashcroft suggests: 'Women in many societies have been relegated to the position of 'other', marginalised and, in a metaphorical sense, 'colonised' ([1989] 2002: 174-75). In the case of the Scotswoman, 'You' (1993) pays attention to what Joy Hendry referred to as 'the double knot in the peeny', talking about Scottish women writers:

Writing is a claim to power. Scottish women are one further remove from the seats of power by being first female and secondly Scottish. You can't deal with one without the other. Scottish culture as a whole is a neglected area, lacking in status and prestige. A Scottish woman writer shares this neglect with her male colleagues, as well as being overlooked and underestimated because she is a woman (1987: 38).

However, in using a working-class silenced Scottish female to fulfil secondary symbolic functions as the Scottish nation, Alasdair Gray takes matters further and suggests a threefold marginalisation based on gender, class and nationality. Therefore, the gendering of the Scottish female character as an inferior Scotland to a male, superior and hegemonic England responds not only to gender relations within patriarchy but also balances Dorsinville's dominated-dominating model for Scotland towards the dominated position. For the unnamed Scotswoman who narrates the story of 'You' in the second person, it is impossible to 'forget he is posh English, knows more about everything, is keeping a lot back so must think himself superior' (Gray 1993: 68). When not 'loving' (Gray 1993: 68) or being seduced by him: 'And all the time he is kind, polite, funny' (1993: 65), her inferiority and his superiority are a palpable reality to both of them. Consequently, without money, sex, or seduction mechanisms which disguise their insurmountable gender, class and nationality asymmetries, the Scotswoman and the Englishman struggle with the uneasiness that these tensions provoke.

The Englishman makes reference to these tensions as 'aggro going on under our jolly surfaces' (Gray 1993: 61) in an ironic way, trying to overlook their differences: 'I don't think the tension is as Scottish-English as it looks. It's just bloody British. Whenever two British families come together one lot feel up, the other lot under. Guilt and resentment ensue and much silly jockeying. Even the Royals do it. I find these tensions boring. Do you?' (Gray 1993: 61). Nonetheless, the soothing effect of money and sex as artificial gender, nationality and class levellers are shown to be limited and at the end of the short story, the Englishman's previously 'gentle, considerate, amusing' (Gray 1993: 67) behaviour disappears. Contrary to what the Englishman's passive message about Anglo-Scottish tensions suggested at the start of his affair with the Scotswoman, dismissing them as something typically British, the Englishman seems to care deeply about these tensions. Behind his 'jolly surface' (Gray 1993: 61), the Englishman shows himself to be a sexist, disrespectful and tyrannical creature: 'I am sick of your unending probing into my personal affairs. If you have not already noticed I dislike that trait in women you are not just stupid, you are a cretin. A cretin may be god for three nights fucking in a filthy hole like Glasgow but three nights is the limit. Remember that' (Gray 1993: 73).

Leaving the short story on this final note, Gray polishes up the construction of a controlling and narcissistic Englishman whose dominating role is determining in the silencing of the Scotswoman as well as in the control of the system. The Englishman's power unveils and affirms the difference between him and the rest of the people who, like the unnamed Scotswoman, work and live in the margins.

5 'ASSERTIVE WOMEN': A VISION OF SELF-COLONISED SCOTLAND IN 'MAVIS BELFRAGE' (1996)

Interestingly, 'Mavis Belfrage' (1996), narrates the romantic relationship of a Scottish and an English character in the opposite fashion, that is, the Scottish character is a man and the English character a woman. This short novel tells the story of a lukewarm Scottish University Professor, Colin Kerr, who suddenly falls in love with his English student, the quirky Mavis Belfrage. Apart from being a story against education coming from the Union,

using Cambridge as an example of an institution that educates their pupils to be ‘opinionless lecturers’ (Gray, 1996: 13), ‘Mavis Belfrage’ (1996) is a story about an unequal romantic relationship.

From the beginning of their relationship, Colin and Mavis cohabit in Colin’s apartment with Gordon, Colin’s father and Bill, Mavis’ son. It is Colin who initiates the relationship, telling Mavis he needs her (Gray 1996: 21) while it seems she is only with him for ‘practical reasons’ (1996: 25) as she needs a place to live. Consequently, their relationship becomes co-dependent. Colin falls madly in love with Mavis because she ‘seemed the sort of woman he had met at Cambridge’ (Gray 1996: 18) and Colin is completely fascinated by Cambridge: ‘He talked about Cambridge because he thought his life there more interesting than anything before or after’ (1996: 18). In return, Mavis undervalues Colin’s romantic wishes and hospitality. While she refuses to be fully dependent on him and to engage in a monogamous relationship, Colin struggles to accept her registering as his lodger. In Colin’s words: ‘But you *will* be cohabitating...with me. And I’ll give you an allowance’ (Gray 1996: 33). To what Mavis responds: ‘In return for what? For housework? I don’t want to encroach on your dad’s territory. For fucking with you and you alone? That would be as bad as marrying again’ (Gray 1996: 33). Mavis completely rejects the monogamy Colin demands but selfishly stays in the home he provides. Even if Mavis takes financial advantage of Colin, she manifests her dominance refusing to take orders from Colin: ‘If I bossed her she would leave me’ (Gray 1996: 40) and cheating on him with Colin’s Welsh pupil Clive Evans. Mavis not only deliberately cheats on Colin but she also expects him to endure and understand the situation and to ‘make (her) believe it’s all right’ (Gray 1996: 46) to cheat on him. Therefore, Mavis exerts control over Colin and mostly succeeds in subjugating him when his need of her – ‘I need you’ (Gray 1996: 44) – persists once she starts cheating on him.

The gendered components attached to Mavis’ and Colin’s exertion of power and their nationality are, in this short novel, associated with the postcolonial reading of Scotland as dominated. Mavis’s Englishness and her authoritarian and active position in her relationship with Colin leads to the interpretation that she embodies a politically superior, central and dominant England. On the contrary, Colin Kerr represents what has been coined as the ‘Scottish Cringe’, manifesting a ‘cultural inferiority and a certain abdication of responsibility that leads to an acceptance of the inevitability of Scotland’s political situation’ (Stirling 2008: 13), as shown in Colin’s passivity. As Gillian Carter said:

If we equate the colonization of Scotland with the feminization of Scotland, that is, with the use of gender stereotypes portraying England as dominant and aggressive and Scotland as passive, then we can see how ‘the colonized are... constrained to assert a dignified self-identity in opposition to a discourse which defines them as, variously, barbarian, pagan, ape, female; but always subordinate and inferior’ (1995: 69).

Colin’s inferiority and need for Mavis’ domination categorises him as a feminised subordinate of Mavis. This feminisation could be explained in relation to the heavily gendered term used by Tom Nairn to refer to the Act of Union of 1707 as Scotland’s ‘political castration’ (1981: 155), in which the agreement of the Union became a source of

political disempowerment associated with emasculation (Lehner 2011b: 33). The shade of dominated-dominating parameters which operate in Colin and Mavis' romantic relationship, following Dorsinville's model (Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin 2002: 31f) are condensed in the use of the word 'assertive'. This term describing the characters' preference as regards romantic power dynamics is juxtaposed in the narrative constituting a dichotomy opposing Colin who was 'only comfortable with assertive women' (Gray 1996: 17) and Mavis who dislikes 'assertive men' (Gray 1996: 18). Mavis' preference for unconfident men indicates she is in a position of comfort when being dominating, matching some of the features attached to the hegemonic English nation in the Scottish postcolonial vision. Besides, Colin's behaviour as a Scottish male who does not feel at ease when defending a strong opinion is shown in his 'fair-mindedness typical of Cambridge at its best' (Gray 1996: 14) as well as in his lack of self-confidence.

Colin's lack of self-confidence and need for Mavis can be also linked to his education in Cambridge. Colin's English education at Cambridge University has left him unable to have an opinion, turning him into a man without a personality. 'Mavis Belfrage' (1996) shows how the influence of English educational methodologies renders Colin into a state in which he is easily subdued. He could be described as a Scot transformed by English education so that he is more pliant. While 'he used to have opinions' (Gray 1996: 37), Colin's father blames Cambridge as the source of Colin's passivity as a man who 'won't voice an opinion' (Gray 1996: 37) and 'refuses to vote' (1996: 37). In comparison to his father, Gordon, who represents a working-class, caring, active Scotland, underpinning Scotland's mythical egalitarian society (McCrone 1992: 88), Colin embodies a passive and easily manipulated Scotland.

Hence, Colin fits into Tom Nairn's definition of Scotland as a self-colonised nation. According to Tom Nairn: 'Scotland is not a colonised cultured, but a self-colonised one' (1991: 6). This suggests that Scots were participants in their own submission to a superior national power and are responsible for their dual political predicament: dependent on the United Kingdom but toying with the idea of being independent. Nairn continues unravelling this idea in the following way:

This is easier to endure, but far, far harder to shake off. An internalised submission has turned people (Scots) into their own jailers who have locked up their own will-power, their capacity for collective purpose and action. This blockage is the real knot, the central nexus-of Scottish identity. And the last two decades have demonstrated just how hard it is to untie. Another of the rules is the internalisation of duality. All dependency of one people on another creates a duality, obviously. The subordinate or marginalised community has both to try to remain itself on the one hand, and to live with the dominant state on the other. In that sense, identity dilemmas being pulled two ways at once – are a commonplace feature of dependency (1991: 6).

Colin's duality, moving in a 'liminal space of colonial encounter' (Lehner 2011a: 223) in between integration and independence (Hague 1996: 126), is originated by the blockage of 'internalised submission' theorised by Tom Nairn. In his 'inferiorisation' of Scotland: 'Colin did not believe Scotland was as good a place as anywhere else' (Gray 1996: 19) and his love for Cambridge as a metonym for England, Colin is portrayed as a Scot self-constructed as inferior to a hegemonic, normative and central England. This construction

of a literary character like Colin is in line with Jessica Homberg-Schraam's remark on the postcolonial themes of Scottish writers: 'Scottish writers not only describe the dominating influence that England exercises over the Scottish nation but also engage critically with Scotland's own construction as England's Other' (2018: 9).

However, the ending of 'Mavis Belfrage' shifts Colin's subordination. When Mavis continues to cheat on Colin, Colin is unable to tolerate the situation anymore and seeks revenge, hurting Mavis as she hurt him. Their situation of co-dependence becomes unbearable for Colin, as 'he could not sleep without her and could not join her in bed without loathing himself' (Gray 1996: 62). Therefore, Colin violently slaps Mavis in order to be 'even' (Gray 1996: 63). Colin's ability to humiliate and hurt Mavis back using violence taps into Colin's masculinity. Although self-colonised in his expression of nationality and internally dominated by a normative England he has assumed as his own, as a man Colin can exert an agency to dominate others while being dominated. After being smacked on her cheek Mavis tells Colin he 'must think himself a real he-man' (Gray 1996: 32). According to Gillian Carter:

The consequence of this (Scotland's feminization), then, is to combat the feminization of Scotland by re-defining it in terms of virility and masculinity. The reaction to the subordinate feminine status is seen most clearly and most often in the figure and work of Hugh MacDiarmid. His assertion of an intensely male identity led to him being seen as the icon of the working-class man where Scotland's true identity lay. In affirming a sense of national selfhood in answer to this discourse, the nation is redefined in terms of autonomy, unity and strength (1995: 69).

Colin's autonomy and strength, recovered after he violently confronts Mavis and breaks-up with her, is associated with his recovery of masculinity and to Hugh MacDiarmid's 'assertion of an intensely male identity' (Carter 1995: 69) leading towards the re-empowering of the Scottish nation. Colin's unity is reached in the final part of the short novel, entitled, in a most likely deliberate way, 'Independence Declared' (Gray 1996: 73). Colin's personality after breaking up with Mavis has completely changed:

I'm independent. I can be alone without going melancholy-mad. What others think no longer worries me much. I don't need you, Mavis, but I want you because you're bonny and reckless and clever and now I can love you like a man. It wasn't a man who loved you three months ago. It was...' (he thought a little then smiled with amusement and distaste) '... a dog shaped like a man (Gray 1996: 73).

In this quote it can be implied that independence, autonomy and an equal and balanced relationship between Mavis and Colin and symbolically, between England and Scotland, is associated with a subversion of Colin's previous feminisation as subordinate and his assertion as a superior and assertive man. Interestingly, this shift in Colin's personality is rejected by Mavis, who preferred a weaker Colin, who did not behave like the men Mavis detests the most 'all glib and grinning and damnably, damnably sure of themselves' (Gray 1996: 73). Her dislike for the reworking in the couple's power dynamics shows her preference for a dominant, controlling and 'assertive' position. What remains unaddressed in both Gray's stories is the location of Scottish women in the Scottish canon. As Kirsten Stirling explains in her monograph: 'countries like Scotland and Ireland, struggling against exclusion from and marginalisation within the Anglo-American canon,

notably exclude women from their own canons' (2008: 80). Indeed, women's marginalisation is shown in 'You' in reference to England, as centre of the United Kingdom. Moreover, 'Mavis Belfrage' does not represent a Scottish female in the position of the woman-as-nation trope, but a feminised Scottish male dominated by a masculinised English female. Hence, neither of these two short texts depict the gender and political power dynamics internal to Scotland, so the status and identity of Scottish women is not examined in relation to Scottish men.

6 CONCLUSIONS

Due to the analogies present between Alasdair Gray's description of the symbolic representation of the Scottish nation in *Why Scots Should Rule Scotland* (1992) and the passive and alienated position of the Scotswoman in 'You' and Colin Kerr in 'Mavis Belfrage', it can be concluded that the characters of these two literary works can be interpreted as symbolic conceptualisations of Scottishness and Englishness.

In both 'Mavis Belfrage' and 'You', Gray reinforces the dominated position of Scotland, constructing a narrative which emphasises Scotland's 'inferiorisation' and asserts its domination by England, personified as selfish, superior and manipulative in both short stories. As a result, it can be inferred that Alasdair Gray's colonial and asymmetric conception of Anglo-Scottish power dynamics could be an additional element to his pamphleteering and campaigning in favour of Scottish Independence. This archetypal vision in which the English characters are superior – Mavis even declines the possibility of being an equal partner to an independent Colin – together with Scotland's subjugation and disempowerment being conditioned by the Union, is helpful for Gray to better emphasise the need for independence as a way out of oppression.

In 'You' the threefold marginalisation of the unnamed Scotswoman is replicated in her relationship with the unnamed Englishman and presented as a condition of ethnic, class and sexual exploitation. The Englishman's passive-aggressive behaviour combining seduction and manipulation creates an analogy between sexist seduction strategies and interactions of a colonial nature. The progressive exposure of the Englishman as a selfish and materialistic person who degrades the Scotswoman and everything about Scotland which is not commercialised, contributes to his portrayal as a detestable character. Furthermore, placing the Scotswoman, although silenced, as the narrator, allows the reader to empathise with her subjugation. She herself tells us she is silenced, so even if her inferiority in relation with the Englishman blocks her agency, the narrative develops a sense of intimacy with the Scotswoman. Thanks to this position, she effectively communicates the uneasiness and anxieties derived from her oppression to the reader, individualising a case of national and gender domination to reflect upon.

In 'Mavis Belfrage', the inferior and debilitated status of the Scottish nation within the Union, which is the cornerstone of Alasdair Gray's support for independence, is again highlighted. However, whereas 'You' may be considered a glimpse into a story of Anglo-Scottish abuse and oppression, in 'Mavis Belfrage' the oppression ends when Colin achieves independence at the end of the short novel. Colin, shown as an emasculated man at the beginning of the short novel, recovers his agency to be violent and thus his masculinity. The fact that his first sign of agency is his use of violence against Mavis, suggests traditionally

feminine attributes like sensitivity or vulnerability are discarded in Gray's portrayal of an autonomous Scottish character-nation.

Finally, the depiction of the English character-nations in 'You' and 'Mavis Belfrage' as selfish, narcissistic and dominant denotes an archetypal and anti-English vision of Anglo-Scottish relationships. Although tremendously effective in supporting the pro-independence message of Alasdair Gray's pamphlets, these prejudiced generalisations, which ignore internal divisions and diversity within Scotland and England, show certain traces of ethnic nationalism. These traces of ethnic nationalism could indicate that Gray's nationalism in the 1990s was not completely civic but some ethnic foundations linked to his conceptualisation of Englishness versus Scottishness remained.

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