



Article

Women Who Leave: Uprooting and Return in Galician Literature

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Abstract: The article considers the literary treatment of emigration in Galician fiction, through a review of the most recent work in the field. It looks in particular at the role of women (both authors and characters) and relates approaches here to the changes that have arisen as a result of Galician migratory flows over recent decades. It seeks to show how narrative fiction, a genre highly sensitive to social change, has the capacity to identify phenomena still barely visible in statistical accounts, and to act as a space for the re-signification of new individual and collective identities that are currently emerging within the context of globalization, thus contributing to the opening up of new possibilities relating to the kind of society that we want to become in the future.

Keywords: migration; gender; Galician literature; transnational identities; Galician narrative; female authority



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1. Introduction

The desire to reflect on the nature of migratory movements is itself not unrelated to the significance that these movements have come to assume in our societies. This is particularly salient in the Galician case, in which migration historically played a part in shaping the region's demography, economy, and even its self-perceived identity, as analyzed by historian Ramón Villares (2019). It is estimated that between 1830 and 1930, the Galician migratory fluxes comprised 4% of the total outward European emigration towards countries such as Argentina, Cuba, and Brazil, each of these holding varying weights at different points in history (Villares 2019, p. 171). This means that between 1828 and 1930, over 1.5 million people left Galicia for the great Latin-American capital cities, of which more than a half of a million never returned (Núñez Seixas 2005, p. 6).

Indeed, "though there have been significant numbers of overseas migrants from almost all Spanish regions, Galicia has clearly led the lot through the nineteenth and twentieth centuries" (Núñez Seixas 2019, p. 1). It is not easy to produce exact data regarding the full extent of this phenomenon, but expert estimates agree that "until the late 1950s, most Spanish immigrants to Argentina, Uruguay, and Brazil came from Galicia (between 40% and 50% of all immigrants), while Canary Islanders composed the largest portion of Spanish migrants to Venezuela, closely followed by Galicians and Asturians. These last two groups were the main ones among Spanish migrants to Cuba (together with Canary Islanders), as well as to Puerto Rico and Mexico. If considered as an independent entity, Galicia would be among the European countries characterized by the highest rates of emigration in the period of mass migration (1850–1930)" (Núñez Seixas 2019, p. 1).

If, as Castles and Miller claimed as far back as 1993¹, the second half of the twentieth century was "an age of migration", it is profitable for us to understand the increased prominence that this theme is now assuming in Galician literature, in terms of the extent to which it operates as an ideal space to develop individual and collective experiences, and also as a kind of laboratory where we can evaluate cultural changes and processes of identity construction. In this sense, literary works not only assume a documentary value,

but also, in some way, a prospective one, inspiring us to consider what kind of society we want to become, and how emigration can play its part in the design and construction of our future collective identity. This is especially the case for a society such as Galicia, in which a large part of the population has normalized a dual identity (Galician + Spanish) as a result of various experiences of migration, and may not see the addition of a third identity as problematic; that is, such experiences are having an impact on the old nation-state model that assigns stable and homogeneous models of identity, as discussed by Castles et al. (2014). The development of this conceptual framework, in which literature can play an active part, proves necessary in conferring meaning on the experiences of individuals and groups, even more so in a context of progressive trans-nationalization and globalization in which population flows can change suddenly (for example, following Brexit, or the incipient return to the countryside arising from the COVID-19 pandemic), thus forcing us to reinterpret them.

From a historical perspective, we can accept the hypothesis that the low presence of female characters in Galician fiction on emigration can be explained, above all, statistically; quite simply, the percentage of women who emigrated was traditionally far lower than that of men². However, this low percentage came to increase considerably³, especially, as we will see, with shifts in the orientation of Galician migratory waves towards Europe. This process has led, little by little, to the incorporation of more female voices into narrative approaches to the issue (Vilavedra 2015). This article will endeavor to offer a panoramic view⁴ of the corpus of narrations that in the last few decades have incorporated these voices, as well as how they are employed as operative elements in the resignifications of current migratory processes.

On the other hand, if we expand our focus, we note that the striking lack of female characters in post-war Galician narrative (see Vilavedra 2018) must also be evaluated in light of socio-demographic studies. These confirm the relegation and rendering as socially invisible of women at various times in history, something which is seen very evidently in Spanish migration legislation (see Calvo et al. 2009), which systematically subordinated women to men (clearly a determining factor in the extent to which women took part in various migratory flows). Therefore, both phenomena—the general historical relegation of women, and the issue relating especially to women and migration—must be viewed and interpreted together.

This doubly atypical nature of female figures in Galician fiction on emigration means that when women do begin to appear, they tend to be very unusual, and often somewhat eccentric. In the fiction of Álvaro Cunqueiro, for example, we find curious cases, depicted through his unique take on the subject (as well as on many others). Consider, for example, the female watchmaker in *Os outros feirantes* (The Other Traders) (1979), who emigrates when faced with her family's opposition to a profession traditionally considered masculine at that time. Or, in the same work, Aunt Remedios, who appears as an eccentric figure for several reasons: first, that she, a woman, emigrates to Brazil in the early twentieth century; second, the seemingly positive outcome of her adventure: few emigrants could send back, as she did, “un reló de ouro pra o sobriño máis vello e un fonógrafo”⁵, and even fewer return as the heiress to a countess, and in a seemingly well-off situation. Aunt Remedios, dressed in a pink batiste with black lace, her hair combed into a large bow and accompanied by a little dog called Napoleón, “un lanudo branco, pequeniño, de carta e media de longo, o fuciño azul”⁶, and a little golden bell instead of a glass eye, is more of a fairytale character than a valid character for the documentation of an experience as arduous as emigration. However, the story also has realistic references that anchor it to empirical history: as Cagiao (2019, p. 220) reminds us, “os agasallos de obxectos pouco usuais, mesmo descoñecidos en Galicia ou que, polo menos, eran difíciles de obter”⁷ were common, and also that “a emigración a Brasil foi iniciada por pioneiros das comarcas de Pontevedra e Ourense máis próximas a Portugal, onde xa existía unha tradición arraigada de presenza galega en cidades como Porto e Lisboa”⁸ (Cagiao 2019, p. 224): it is no coincidence that Aunt Remedios was born in Portonovo, as we are told in the story.

It was in fact two men, both of whom had lived the migratory experience, who were responsible for half-opening the door on the female world of Galician emigration. This was a silent, suffering world, one that hitherto had seemed to be non-existent, but which can now be confirmed and illustrated through the available data. Thus, in the numerous pages that Xosé Neira Vilas dedicates to Galician emigration, he carefully recounts the female presence as a radical witness of exploitation, loneliness, and alienation. Here are the domestic workers who spend half their lives caring for a family in exchange for meagre financial returns (the case of María in the story “O aforro” (The Savings) in *Historias de emigrantes* (Stories of Emigrants) (1968), those who are victims of sexual exploitation (in “Eu son Carmen (I am Carme), also in *Historias de emigrantes*), or those who are the victims of economic exploitation, even within their own families (such as Dosinda in *Remuíño de sombras* (Swirl of Shadows) (1973)).

Less well-known but no less forceful is the case of Manuel Varela Buxán who, after returning to Galicia in 1950, following several decades of emigration in Buenos Aires, produced a large body of theatrical work in which he codifies emigration and its consequences through a radically negative view of both. Consider, for example, the case of *Triste chegada* (Sad Arrival) (1981), in which we witness the bleak return of a girl who has been forced into emigration as a means of helping her struggling family. Having finally earned the money to pay off the family’s debts through many hardships, she returns to Galicia to find that her father and mother have died during her absence, stripped of her affection and care.

2. America Other Destinations, Other Waves

The change of traditional Latin American migratory destinations (mainly Argentina) would also leave its mark on Galician literature, but the lack of a firm literary tradition in approaching these new scenarios, both historical ones (objectively, we know far less about these experiences) as well as artistic one, translates into a certain tendency towards stereotyping. This is especially notable in the case of Venezuela, as depicted in *Sempre me matan* (They Always Kill Me) (1995) and *O fácil que é matar* (How Easy it is to Kill) (1998), both by Alfredo Conde.

Indeed, in this new migratory context, Venezuela stands out, a country that experienced brief but intense success as the preferred destination for those who wanted to emigrate from Galicia, due to the boom in the country’s exports of raw materials and food during the economic reconstruction of the post-war period and, above all, the development of its oil exploitations (with the resulting economic boom). Cagiao (2019, p. 205) establishes 1948 as the year of the beginning of the ‘open doors’ policy in Venezuela, and the data provided by the Spanish Institute of Emigration (Calvo et al. 2009, pp. 295–96) point to 1954 as the year of the greatest increase in Spanish emigration there (with a jump from 12,306 people in 1953 to 22,033 in 1954). Annual flows remained very high until the early 1960s, when they reduce by half, initiating a dizzying decline to just over a thousand per year by the early 1970s.

In Conde’s novels, women are either high-level prostitutes, wives, or interesting lovers: defined as characters by their physique, sexuality, and ambition. The narrative cycle (both novels are conceived as such) presents a deceptive kind of imaginary because, in an attempt to remove the miseries of emigration from his narratives and to focus instead on its successful aspects, Conde falls into the trap of simplification, clichés, and a ‘pulp’ or melodramatic treatment. The emotions he brings into play are perceived as artificial, achieved through repeated mechanisms that deprive them of true identity, since in their superficiality, they seem interchangeable. The novels thus end up being closer to standard soap opera than to the complexity that the modern novel demands.

A very different case is that of Rosa Aneiros, who manages to avoid this risk of stereotypes by linking the memory of exile to that of emigration. Thus, in *Sol de inverno* (Winter Sun) (2009), she reconstructs a genealogy of singular women who, each in their own way, come to terms with a complex and culturally mixed memory that harks back to the struggles for independence in Cuba, viewed from a hybrid perspective that draws on

the times of the pirate Sir Francis Drake and those of the Balmis Expedition, as well as the aforementioned struggles, these epic counterpoints used in order to avoid succumbing to the paralyzing addiction of exoticism. On other occasions (Vilavedra 2019), I have analyzed the contribution of novels such as *Sol de inverno* in the articulation of a transnational and cosmopolitan memory, a project in which narrators play an important role and which can serve to rescue the so-called ‘literature of historical memory’ from the chronic threat of sclerosis and self-referentiality. A similar path would be explored, a decade later, by María Xosé Porteiro in *Sándalo* (Sandalwood) (2019), a novel in which women are again the main characters in a range of stories that unfold over two centuries, straddling Cuba and Galicia, and in which fiction, documentation, and memory merge indiscernibly.

We should note here what these two narrative projects have in common, both in relation to a literary ambition that lacks neither length nor enunciative complexity, and in the striking mixture of historical documentation, memorialization, and epic scope which allows these authors to focus on female characters who, in some way, resurrect for cultural memory the role of women in the history of the Galician diaspora. As Porteiro says in the epilogue note to *Sándalo*, “esta historia non é fiel á Historia nin deixa de selo, pero transita polo océano, seguindo a corrente do Golfo, para manter vivas as pontes que os nosos devanceiros tenderon”.⁹

That the memory of emigration to Cuba can still bear literary fruit is amply demonstrated by Xavier Paz’s *A Barcelonesa* (The Barcelona House) (2021). The ambiguity of the title (the feminine form *Barcelonesa*) is suggestive of a female role that is enduring and undeniable, and thus which can embrace generational history. The novel recounts a century in the life of a family, beginning with the marriage of a couple from the area of A Mariña, Galicia, who originally meet in Havana and return home successful enough to buy “A Barcelonesa” in their native region. This house, a 14-bedroom mansion, owes its name to the Catalan woman who, in the early twentieth century, made it a thriving home with the most modern facilities of lighting, sanitation, etc. In both the expansion of the couple’s business and that of the family itself, the novel reveals a saga of women who in the very mansion find their point of convergence as pillars of a family memory that is also part of the Galician collective memory.

On these same lines of rendering the migratory subject epic, we should underline a clear antecedent here, *Cabalo de ouros* (Golden Horse) (2010) by Víctor Freixanes. In this novel the two female protagonists, Rosaura and Amalia, suffer the effects of the economic and political crisis in Venezuela in the 1990s and they recover the memory of those who escaped the brutal repression unleashed at the time of tungsten mining in Galicia after the end of the war of 1936. Ignored both by studies of the literature of historical memory and by those who deal with the subject of migration, *Cabalo de ouros* is a fine example of how the vectors of emigration and memory can converge, and indeed can be radically renewed by such epic drive. On the same lines, we might also reflect on the question of what we mean exactly by Galician emigration; that is, at what point should we establish its starting point? Certainly, Galician emigration is often seen as part of “un éxodo masivo de matriz europea que mobilizou a máis de cincuenta millóns de persoas”¹⁰ (Cagiao 2019, p. 203), which in the case of Galicia dates back to the mid-nineteenth century or, at the earliest, to the eighteenth, with the first Galician migrations to Portugal. However, we might also consider other, previous migratory movements. Once again, literature operates as a mechanism to reveal invisible realities, those which have been buried by canonical history. Such is the case with *A cidade dos Césares* (A City of the Caesars) (1993) by Víctor Freixanes: were the almost four hundred Galician families who set sail from A Coruña between 1776 and 1783 to colonize the unknown lands of Patagonia emigrants? Does the epic distort the condition of being an emigrant? Can it be that the historical conception and social perceptions of migration might not coincide? If so, what role does literature play here?

3. Europe

The case of Galician emigration to Europe in the second half of the twentieth century must be understood in terms of a complex scenario created by the intensification of the international movements of workers and their families after the end of World War II.

Consequently, from reconstruction after the Armistice and the long period of socio-economic development that followed in Central and Western Europe, countries saw a growing demand for workers which was impossible to satisfy with the reduced home populations resulting from the War. Human losses and a reduction in natality during the War played a part and were subsequently compounded by the development of a process of socio-labor mobility, leading to the abandonment of unskilled work due to a lack of demand locally, plus the increasing participation of women in the labor market, with the consequent diversification of the female market (Durán 2007, p. 187).

The picture changed drastically and rapidly at the end of this expansionary cycle, with the sudden rise in oil prices in 1973. This led, on the one hand, to a fall in migratory flows, as we have mentioned, and on the other hand, to return-emigration movements that would come to form an indistinguishable part of the phenomenon of the diaspora itself; in my opinion, these remain under-analyzed¹¹ as to their repercussions in terms of changes brought about in Galicia, not only geographically and economically (with the acceleration of the process of urbanization that they brought about), but also regarding changes in ideologies and customs. In this context, and in the literary approach to it, the phenomenon acquires a remarkable documentary value, and as I have already noted, even a prospective one, alerting us to factors and circumstances that need to be addressed to fully understand the recent history here.

The Galician emigration to other European countries¹² occurred in a short period of time, which many historians place between 1960 and 1973. This fact determined a unique literary approach because, even though this particular migration was seldom the subject of contemporary literary treatment (Vilavedra 2015), the phenomenon is now experiencing a second opportunity to flourish. This is the case because it has become a source of inspiration in literature for the generation of sons and daughters of those who emigrated to Europe at that time, children who in the new millennium are turning again to consider those years that they know well, either because of direct experience (the case of Xesús Fraga in *A-Z*, 2003), or because it was a time common in their family history or local environment (the case of Eva Moreda in *A Veiga é como un tempo distinto* (A Veiga Is Like a Different Time) (2011)). As in any other case of painful experiences (Mudrovic 2005), individuals need time to incorporate them into their own autobiographical narrative and then be able to communicate and share them, to foster the social development of the migratory experience and its integration into collective memory. The literary contributions from this new generation of writers are proving to be especially fruitful for this analysis (still pending) of the changes brought about in Galicia by the return emigration noted above (and which we will discuss further below), in that they foster the social recognition of that particular migratory experience as a fundamental part of Galician community identity.

However, all this changed radically from the 1980s onwards. The entry of Spain into the European Economic Community in 1986 and, above all, the coming into force of the Single European Act in 1993, determined changes in the legal and civil status of the Galician community in Europe, and this forces us to re-evaluate all the variables that had traditionally characterized that emigration. Once again, literature can work to create a framework for memory retrieval that lends it a present sense and reveals a range of possible meanings in which to integrate and interpret current migratory currents as part of future cultural memory. Thus, for example, alternative communities are beginning to emerge in contemporary narrative and hence to increase their social visibility, operating in areas hitherto unseen in Galician literature. Take, for example, *A través do fume* (Behind the Smoke) (2018) by Antonio Piñeiro, a novel in which the author links the migratory experience of the Galician community in Belgium with the childhood of his generation in Franco's Galicia, doing so through the adult voice of the main character, who, shifting

between inner monologue and current consciousness, returns to Galicia with the ashes of her father. Antón Riveiro Coello, in *O paraíso dos inocentes* (The Paradise of the Innocents) (2019), also focuses on the unique European experiences of current Galician youth, in the context of the days before and after the terrorist attack in Zaventem, and against the backdrop of the Syrian war and the movement of the resulting refugees to Europe. In this novel, Riveiro links the condition of the character Tristán Sarou as a Galician with his re-discovery of an Arab identity, one which is not seen as incompatible with his Galician one, which the young man was in the process of developing, although this is cut short by his sudden death in the attack. The de-territorialization of this process of discovering and assuming one's complex roots, as lived in a country not identified a priori with either element (Arab or Galician), leads to a literary approach that focuses on experiencing the identity conflict of the character in an introspective and subjective way, which allows the author to successfully deal with the risk of stereotyping.

Certainly, in recent decades, the nature of migration in Galicia has changed substantially¹³. The economic downturn in Galicia, especially after the financial crisis of 2008, slowed the flows of return migration and encouraged the departure¹⁴ of young people with different professional profiles from those of traditional emigration. These new emigrants are very well-educated young men and women. They tended to have higher-level studies, speak foreign languages, and have different goals: they no longer aim to save money to return and open a business and/or buy a house (traditional goals of previous generations), but are simply looking for a decent job anywhere and to earn a living, as far as possible a job related to their original education or training. This change in the profile of Galician emigration is accompanied by an extension of its geographical limits, with the countries considered as a migratory destination now becoming more diverse (Pérez Caramés 2016, p. 57), something that is already having an impact on the incipient literary treatment of the phenomenon, as seen in the novels of A. Piñeiro and A. Riveiro cited above, and above all in the work of María Reimóndez. Several of Reimóndez's novels explore aspects of the new (as well as old) emigration, presenting it as a multifaceted and complex phenomenon, one which resists simple, unilateral assessments and which people can live as something painful and unsettling but also as an opportunity to find themselves or even to reinvent themselves.

In *Dende o conflito* (From the Conflict) (2014), the main character, Saínza Combarro, is a young journalist whose profession forces her to live in different countries without being able to make many plans for the future. Touched by change and loss, and by the suffering that she narrates from a position of anger and helplessness, she is able to recognize that “sen todas as estadías que fixeran do Reino Unido o seu segundo fogar, non podería estar hoxe onde se atopaba”¹⁵ (p. 36). Little by little, after many ups and downs, “a súa vida comeza a trascorrer tamén en Berlín, entre unha viaxe e outra [...] a vida tivera a ben compensala con aquel recuncho de paz inalterable”¹⁶ (p. 212). However, at the same time, when her boss asks her where she wants to receive psychological care, Saínza answers: “En casa [...] en Galicia”¹⁷ (p. 226). A variety of places are thus configured as points of vital anchorage, allowing for the development of complex identities, and for that reason fuller and perhaps more rounded ones. The woman that Saínza Combarro becomes, after many trips around the world and a great deal of suffering, is also the result of the associations created with each of those places and with the network of affections articulated from them. Here, we might also consider the case of Clara, the main character in Reimóndez's *As estacións do lobo* (The Seasons of the Wolf) (2019), who manages, after some very difficult initial years in Munich, not only to find a job and a network of affections with which to feel fulfilled, but also to value the opportunities offered by the host society, such as learning a new language, with which “conquistara unha terra e unha identidade [...] Chegara a esta terra de casualidade, subsidiaria e dependente, e creara nela unha persoa nova”¹⁸ (p. 267), or indeed other positive aspects of everyday life in this new country, such as “poder prescindir do coche”, because “o tren, a bicicleta e camiñar axudan a chegar a todas partes” or “poder levar un can a calquera sitio”¹⁹ (p. 315).

The Case of the United Kingdom

In the case of the United Kingdom, in the early 1960s Galician emigration represented three quarters of the Spanish population settled in that country, a group²⁰ that would experience a dramatic increase until 1971, when the Immigration Act came into force. The fact that Galician emigration to the United Kingdom continues to play a striking role in the current Galician narrative should, as already mentioned, be evaluated in relation to the socio-demographic behavior of new generations of Galicians. Current figures show a phenomenon that has been growing until very recently, only to be slowed down by the complex outcomes of Brexit, its evolution now unpredictable. In any case, the demographic data are reflected in the rise of the topic in literature, and in certain specific aspects of this approach which have been radically renewed in recent years. A case in point is *Os bicos feridos* (The Wounded Kisses) (2018), a novel in which Anna R. Figueirido recounts how social networks transform the communicative dimension of the migratory experience, through the story of a girl who, after graduating in Galicia, finds herself in London as an au pair to a middle-class family.

Another very interesting example here can be seen in the evolution of the writer Xésus Fraga, for whom in *A–Z* (2006) fiction began as a distancing mechanism that allowed him to address a complex and ambiguous memory articulated around a London in which “ben puideron acontecer as historias deste libro. Ou ben imaxinalas”²¹ (p. 16), only in his subsequent *Virtudes (e misterios)* (Virtues (and Mysteries)) (2020) to take a bold leap towards a kind of family memorialization of an autobiographical nature, one with an indisputable female prominence whose documentary value is supported by the inclusion of numerous photos from his own family album. In *Virtues*, emigration appears as a phenomenon of an intrinsic and irresolutely contradictory nature, something that is especially visible in the behavior of networks, which are described here in detail. Networks (neighbors, families, etc.) not only accompany and help to facilitate the migratory experience, but they might also trap and limit emigrants, and may indeed serve to perpetuate the phenomenon of migration itself, insofar as “each act of migration itself creates the social structure needed to sustain it. Every new migrant reduces the costs of subsequent migration for a set of friends and relatives, and some of these people are thereby induced to migrate, which further expands the set of people with ties abroad” (Massey and others 1993, p. 449, quoted in (Brettell 2000, p. 107)). Women are, of course, the center of these networks: the literary approach to these, in line with what Fraga shows us in *Virtues* or Moreda in *A Veiga é como un tempo distinto*, affords them a visibility that is sometimes not achieved in even the closest analyses of economics or class. The phenomenon of networks allows us to understand the migratory experience beyond the individual, in a non-formal framework where social, cultural, and economic variables operate, a particularly solid framework in the Galician case (for obvious reasons derived from the region’s unique demography and territorial organization), one which literature is able to make visible and to explain.

The preference for narrative formulas linked to direct witness or testament, either openly with memorial or confessional modalities, or through various enunciative procedures that give voice to the ‘I’, can be explained by the perception of fiction as a transgressive genre, which knows no bounds and radically subverts the conventional notions of truth and reality. Consciously or unconsciously, those who have been closely acquainted with the migratory experience and its consequences seek the evocative power of witness formulas and the legitimacy with which these are invested when addressing certain issues. “A medio camino entre historia (o historiografía) y literatura, entre memoria y arte”²² (Baer 2006, p. 109), these formulas are ideal for recovering the “rastros, restos y resistencias”²³ of those phenomena that, due to their size or uniqueness, pose a challenge when dealing with their representation. In the case of Galician narrative, the starting point for this practice has already been pointed out in the foundational work *Adiós María* (1971) by Xohana Torres²⁴ and seems to be linked, as indeed happens in this novel, to the representation of the female migratory experience, the memory of that which is invisible and which in recent times had begun to strain and push for visibility, perhaps because of the gradual levelling up

of the numbers of women and men in the Galician emigrant community. It is in this new demographic scenario that the need arises to construct in literature a female genealogy, one in which that specific experience can be integrated, and which can achieve a meaning that transcends mere statistical relevance. Perhaps this background allows a better comprehension of *A Veiga é como un tempo distinto* (2011) by Eva Moreda, a novel that brings together thematic elements related to the female migratory experience in the United Kingdom for which, certainly, the author found inspiration in her own place of origin (the parish of A Veiga in Lugo, Galicia). However, Moreda deliberately uses mechanisms to break the mimetic illusion, such as creating a male narrative voice (thus avoiding the risk of the voice being identified directly with the author) that addresses the character of Elisa throughout the story, and the fact that the narrator is himself a character, an enunciative structure in which we cannot fail to appreciate remarkable similarities with that of *Adiós María*.

4. The Return: Towards a Change of Model

The bibliography on the question of return emigration underlines the difficulties of its approach in fiction, both in terms of its resistance to fitting into the main theoretical paradigms as well as the difficulty of explaining it according to ideas related to migratory movements in general. When asked who the returnees are, [Álvarez \(2008, p. 144\)](#) suggests that we might begin by applying the criterion established by the Galician Institute of Statistics, which in its records includes as returnees those people who arrive from abroad to resettle in their native municipality. From this definition, the interpretation of the statistical data offered by Álvarez aims to show that the return in this sense would show a tendency towards disappearance from the late twentieth century, to be replaced by transgenerational change featuring the offspring of emigrants (second or third generation), now already adults. On the other hand, the conceptual limitation of the term ‘return’ (and its derivatives) serves to clarify other, underlying realities that are becoming increasingly important, such as holiday returns, the so-called ‘retorno de cerebros’ (‘brain return’), or the massive return produced by the Law 52/2007 known as the “Law of Historical Memory”, which gave rise to the processing of more than half a million applications for Spanish nationality submitted by the descendants (second and third generation) of exiles and emigrants who sought to settle in the land of origin of their parents or grandparents. In making these realities visible, literature can play a useful role, even before such phenomena are compiled and collected statistically, and something similar happens with internal emigration, as we shall see.

[Pérez Caramés \(2016, p. 59\)](#) also analyzes the importance of return (both internal and external) and notes that when migratory dynamics in general increase, this stimulates not only outgoing movements but also return and re-emigration. Everything points to the fact that societies historically accustomed to emigration such as Galicia are more prone to this, and Pérez Caramés’ analysis allows us to contextualize recent literary attention to the issue of return in the context of the prominence that migratory movements in general—whatever their direction—currently enjoy in the public sphere of contemporary Galician society.

Often, the possibility of return was the engine that fueled the sacrifices of people who emigrated, who accepted a life of deprivation in exchange for the promise of a return that could be periodic and repeated (holidays) or permanent (after retirement). In those cases of the mythification of return, its literary treatment takes place within the framework of a very negative vision of the migratory experience itself, as happens in *O atentado* (The Attack) (1999) by Xosé Fernández Ferreiro. In this novel, the protagonist, “un labrego das terras de Lemos”²⁵ (as he defines himself almost at the end of his life, despite decades of working as a traffic warden in Madrid), lives in permanent bitterness, frustrated by the decision to settle in a city that he perceives as alienating and which the novel presents as an epitome of the harshness of urban life, compared to a rural landscape evoked as the idyllic lost paradise. The historical background of *O atentado* is the harsh Spanish post-war period and the evolution of Franco’s society until the beginnings of economic development and the first terrorist attacks. It does not seem coincidental that the author himself belongs to a generation that lived through this historical experience in the first person, and which

he describes so negatively. In this sense, it is also no surprise that his terrible impression of urban life so closely mirrors that of his contemporary, the aforementioned Neira Vilas (Fernández Ferreiro was born in 1931, Xosé Neira Vilas in 1928), and that both continue and extend the literary trend of articulating a negative assessment of the migratory experience. As if in compensation, the women in *O atentado* (Carme, the main character's wife and Luisa, their daughter) are portrayed as fully integrated into the life of the capital, determined to take advantage of everything the city has to offer (from a paid job to the leisure options) and are not caught up in paralyzing longing that affects Cándido, the main character.

Certainly, emigration can give sustenance to a longing gaze, one which finds in literature a mechanism of symbolic return, sometimes used to compensate for the spatial distance that separates the writer from the evoked place, and others—as in *Alma de barro* (Soul of Mud) (2021) by Moncha Prieto—to resolve the uncomfortable disconnect between memory and the reality found upon return. In general, the longer the period of time before the definitive return, the more prone are narratives to adopt an idealized perspective of the place of origin. In the case of the stories in *Alma de barro*, this sits alongside a somewhat reluctant desire to be faithful to events as recounted, although these are revealed within a framework that is proposed as ontologically fictional, perhaps as an unconscious mechanism of caution in the face of the possibility of not being strictly faithful to such facts, which might have faded or become distorted by the passage of time.

The truth is that several of the studies consulted here highlight the variety to be found in the phenomenon of Galician migratory in general and return in particular. This, in addition to the canonical model to which it applies (see the definition proposed by Álvarez above), is typically developed within a broad casuistry that can serve to complicate the phenomenon and its study. It extends to dependent relatives who also return (spouses, sons, and daughters), as well as to those descendants who make the decision autonomously, after the passing of their parents, or having stayed in the host country to which these parents had emigrated and from which the younger generations now return, with or without Spanish nationality, and whether or not they had been born in Galicia. All this determines that “si medimos la inmigración a través del stock de extranjeros resultante, su peso en Galicia es considerablemente bajo. En cambio, si medimos la inmigración teniendo en cuenta el lugar de nacimiento de la población residente, Galicia es una de las comunidades autónomas de mayor inmigración”²⁶ (Lamela et al. 2005, p. 90). Indeed, other studies (Rodríguez et al. 2008) affirm that Galicia is the leading community in this sense, with the highest proportion of returned emigrants with respect to its population, and “a terceira comunidade autónoma (despois de Madrid e Cataluña) que recibe máis españois procedentes do estranxeiro”²⁷ (Rodríguez et al. 2008, p. 32). To all this, we must add the fact that, in the case of Galicia, those who return from other autonomous communities easily double the number of those coming from abroad (Rodríguez et al. 2008, pp. 72–73).

These high return statistics should come as no surprise because the truth is that, as Álvarez (2005, p. 106) points out, Galicia receives a quarter of the returnees who come to Spain, this due to the mere fact that “fue la comunidad que más población expulsó hasta hace unos lustros”²⁸. As already mentioned, to this contingent of returnees, stricto sensu it would be necessary to add the return of the second generation (spouses, children, grandchildren) who, according to López de Lera (2005, p. 30), are the ones that are sustaining the increasing trend of the series²⁹. The mix of both flows (returned first and second generation), and the age differences between them, also serve to diversify (and complicate) the literary approach to a phenomenon that affects more youth than a priori might seem to be the case, as forcefully shown in novels such as *A forma de Célebes* (The landform of Celebes Island) (2021) by Iago Méndez, or those already mentioned (and also recently published) such as *Virtudes (e misterios)* by Fraga and *Para toda a vida* by Moreda. Let us now see exactly how change is happening within the return experience, as recounted in recent Galician literature.

Internal Emigration: The Case of Barcelona

To assess the uniqueness of the return in the case of Galicia, two issues must be borne in mind: the female role, and the significant volume of migratory flows between Galicia and the rest of the Spanish state, which show a gradual growth throughout the 1990s (López de Lera 2005, p. 26) as a result of the return, after retirement, of those people who in the 1960s had emigrated at the age of 25–30.

Regarding the former issue, Hernández Borge claims that in the second half of the twentieth century, “la mujer gallega estaba plenamente integrada en las migraciones realizadas dentro de España”³⁰ (2015, p. 237), with a rising (although irregular) trend since 1961. This itself would bring about a notable situation, since within these flows of internal migration the distribution by sex was close to 50%, “soliendo ser más numerosas ligeramente las mujeres desde los años noventa del siglo XX” (ibid.)³¹. It seems that, for Galicia, this internal emigration replaced the European flows, which had begun a steep decline in the early 1970s³².

Thus, in coherence with the above, and from the perspective of literary approaches, the phenomenon of return has two very unique characteristics: first, the fact that female voices emerge to narrate it, and that these voices focus on their own living of the migratory experience; second, the intergenerational dimension of return and its potential as a cohesive factor within the attraction that it holds for the community of writers, in that the subject arouses the interest of authors over the age of sixty (the case of Pura Salceda) and also those who are still in their forties (the case of Eva Moreda).

As for the dynamism that migratory flows within Spain have acquired in recent times, this is consistent with data such as those provided by Rodríguez et al. (2008, p. 53), showing how Barcelona was, unequivocally, the preferred destination of Galician emigration in Spain between 1962 and 1975: the Catalan city absorbed 45% (34,145 people) of that contingent, while 39% went to the Basque Country and 16% to Madrid. Therefore, it is not surprising that in the literary approach to internal emigration, Barcelona has acquired a notable role. The city appears as a space of possibilities that turn the migratory experience into an opportunity for personal development. On these lines, a unique case is that of Silverio Cerradelo who, drawing on his own (personal and family) migratory experience, opens up the focus of the literary treatment of the subject in *Os paxaros tamén migran ao sur* (Birds Also Migrate South) (2007) by presenting the relationship between a Catalan boy and a German girl who opts for an unconventional life in Barcelona. The relationship between the two is the starting point for a broader reflection on feelings and love bonds, and on the power of that which is different to lead us to evolve and discover new dimensions of reality. In the novel, this is represented by the character of Eva who, with her simple existence and despite her tragic end, calls into question certain prejudices and makes visible other ways of understanding life.

These new literary approaches to the migratory experience point to a conceptual shift that reveals how human beings can perform better when they have the opportunity to interact in more open and less prejudicial societies, ones with porous cultural boundaries and generally those that are more willing to accept that which is different. As I have already pointed out, several authors play a very interesting role in this re-conceptualization of the migratory experience. Such is the case with *O paxaro de nácara* (The Mother-of-Pearl Bird) (2019) by Pura Salceda, very representative of the literary contribution of a generation of women³³ who take on ambitious narrative projects at a time of maturity in their own lives, possibly because they have more time, with their professional and family spheres already well-established.

The vision that authors such as Salceda and Moreda construct of the migratory experience, sifted and conditioned by the experience of return, is more complex and polyhedral and less Manichean than we can find in writers of previous generations, such as Neira Vilas and Fernández Ferreiro. Certainly, for the characters in *O paxaro de nácara*, natural-born Galicians whose lives evolve in Barcelona, the balance of the decision to emigrate is negative: “A culpa tena este puto país que nos obriga a marchar das nosas casas para buscar a

vida por eses mundos adiante. A maldita diáspora que nos espaxe disolvéndonos. A que vai aniquilando a nosa lingua, a que nos asimila pouco a pouco ás novas culturas e aos seus costumes, ata que xa non somos nada, apenas un recordo tatuado nun apelido”³⁴ (p. 400).

However, the result of that distance is no longer the uncritical idealization of the homeland, but rather an ambiguous feeling, generated by the indestructible link with “Un lugar que cremos aínda noso pero que xa non nos reconece, que nos converte noutros porque en realidade somos só unha pantasma entre dous mundos, e xa non pertencemos a ningún deles”³⁵ (p. 400). These new customs to which the character of Nélida refers, and which are almost imperceptibly assimilated in the host societies, also have their positive aspect, even if the emigrants themselves, having grown into them and effectively naturalized them, might not be overtly aware of the fact.

The most striking example of this process is Nélida, the main character in *O paxaro de nácara*, and her cousin Sabela. The passing of the matriarch brings the whole family together in a village in Ourense, which for Nélida is “un lugar mítico, case irreal, que coñecía só a medias; ás veces a través dos relatos dos outros, en recordos que se incorporaban á súa memoria coma se fosen vividos por ela nalgún momento [...] unha terra que sentía como propia, como a súa auténtica casa, a pesar de habitala só fugazmente na súa infancia”³⁶ (p. 8). Nélida’s stay is extended, and this allows her to contrast her own customs (leisure, domestic, gastronomic, etc.), acquired in a dynamic and cosmopolitan city such as Barcelona, with those of a village still anchored in a concern for appearances and the fear of other people’s opinions and judgments. Especially striking is the freedom with which both cousins experience sexuality, despite doing so with the discretion they feel is imposed on them by the context and circumstances.

This possibility of constructing hybrid identities, even in cases where the characters are not aware of it or where this possibility is theorized by narrative voices, seems to be one of the most radical innovations brought about by the treatment of the subject in the 21st century: writers who choose migration as a literary theme seem to renounce the old masculine and mournful paradigm, their approach instead being crossed with other vectors of identity construction, such as generational, gender, or professional ones. Another very significant case here is *Diario dun enterro* (The Diary of a Burial) (2019) by Gonzalo Herme, in which it is also the passing³⁷ of a relative (in this case, the grandfather) which triggers the return to Galicia of a young writer living in Barcelona who has various emotional and identity dilemmas to be resolved: the least conflictive being his fully assumed and normalized homosexuality (normalized, that is, in the environment of a large city), which seems to have something to do with his integration into Barcelona life.

5. Conclusions: How Do We Face the 21st Century?

The already classic concept of ‘imagined community’, first proposed by Benedict Anderson, and which has been of such use in the social sciences and humanities over the last four decades, acquires fresh meaning if we consider it from the perspective of new multidimensional and transnational migration. In this scenario, identities are negotiated at the same time as they are involved in the construction of various national paradigms, not always territorialized, or territorialized in a heterodox way. In the development of these new identities, there comes together not only the memories of both communities—migrant and recipient—but the respective images that each group has historically developed about themselves and about the other: It is at this crossroads, at this axial point of the rhizome, where literature appears to draw together and tie the loose ends of who we are and what we want to become, and where many of the more recent novels help us to identify new migratory patterns (even though many of these are still in their infancy). It is a task that political and state institutions have not proven to be particularly agile in undertaking, and indeed sometimes undermine the effectiveness of their own intervention strategies here, which can appear to lag behind the reality of the facts.

A new paradigm is emerging, in which the issue of emigration hybridizes with many others, so that it seems difficult to establish hierarchical or taxonomic priorities

between them, this leading to multi-perspectivist approaches. We no longer speak so straightforwardly of novels ‘about’ emigration; rather, this theme appears in the context of other subjects or is crossed by other vectors (race, class, gender, age, etc.). Thus, literature presents us with the problem of the aging of migrant communities in our societies (see the case of *O atentado*), or with the living of the migratory experience in childhood which seems invisible to the adult world, this approached with sensitivity but without concessions in *A música dos seres vivos* (The Music of Living Beings) (2015) by María Reimóndez, or with the progressive dismantling of traditional support networks, which historically provided so much help to emigrants and which are now being replaced by digital networks (on this issue, see Castles 2000), as in *Os bicos feridos*. Of course, literature, as it has always done throughout history, presents us with evidence of new ways of understanding old concepts such as ‘home’, ‘saudade’ (melancholic longing), and ‘family’, and the ways in which new professions operate, forcing young people to move, to a point that obliges us to re-signify the term ‘migrant’.

For if it is true that throughout history migratory movements have overturned the myth of compact societies, so too is it true that the new generations are making credible, de facto, the theoretical myth of the post-national world. As Castles says, “there is no way back to the relatively autonomous and homogeneous national societies of the past” (2000, p. 206), and this dynamic shows no signs of stopping. As literature has taught us, the modes of migration are diversifying, progressing towards more multicultural and transnational societies, a process which seems irresistible and unstoppable. Indeed, at the beginning of this century, Castles predicted a scenario of more and more flexible migratory movements, but also acknowledged that it was possible that a period of “dramatic economic, environmental, or political changes” was approaching that would disprove any of his optimistic predictions: “It seems highly probable that the world in thirty years’ time will be even more mobile and cosmopolitan than today, but just as contradictory and conflictual” (2000, p. 207).

Both predictions are in fact coming true. However, in any case, the challenge lies in how to manage all these changes within a framework of respect for the rights of minorities and for progress towards a better quality of life for each and every community involved in these new population movements. In this, as in so many other things, literature can inspire us, accompany us, and offer us a clearer picture of the individual and collective challenges that lay ahead.

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Notes

¹ Year of the 1st edition of this influential work, which we will quote here from the updated 5th edition, from 2014.

² Some of the data to be used here, from specialised sources, are very revealing: in the 1870s, some 15% of emigrants were women; by 1916, this would be 19% (Lama and Vilavedra 2001, p. 291).

³ Hernández Borge (2015, p. 233) notes the increased participation of women in trans-oceanic flows of Galician emigration from the 1960s, due to the influence of a series of legal provisions (derived from the agreement signed by Spain with the Intergovernmental Committee for European Migration, which itself found form in the Family Reunification Plan), so that between 1963 and 1967, women migrants became more numerous than men.

⁴ This panoramic is not comprehensive but should be taken as representative, based on the level of visibility the works that are discussed have achieved within the Galician literary system.

⁵ A gold watch for her eldest nephew and a phonograph (all translations are my own).

⁶ A small, woolly, white pooch, a foot and a half long, with a blue muzzle.

Gifts of unusual objects, even ones unknown in Galicia or at least difficult to obtain.

Emigration to Brazil was initiated by pioneers from the areas of Pontevedra and Ourense closest to Portugal, where there was already an ingrained tradition of Galician presence in cities such as Porto and Lisbon.

This story is not faithful to History and does not cease to be as such, but rather travels across the ocean, following the Gulf Stream, to keep alive the bridges that our ancestors built.

A massive exodus of European origin that has mobilised more than fifty million people.

One of those who best know the history of Galician emigration, Pilar Cagiao, acknowledges that the new mobilities of the current century are “still to be analysed” (2019, p. 204).

The importance of the Galician case can be seen in data provided by the Spanish Institute of Emigration (Calvo et al. 2009, p. 306): of assisted Spanish emigration to Europe between 1964 and 1985, 28.39% came from Galicia, a figure exceeded only marginally by that from Andalusia, at 29.37%.

See Pérez Caramés (2016) for this process, in which he refers to the extensive specialised bibliography.

According to Pérez Caramés (2016, p. 59), in 2008 some 27,000 people left Galicia, which in 2013 had grown to 30,000, when a migratory cycle would close and another would open, defined by Pérez Caramés as “unha nova fase de emigración sostida” (a new phase of sustained emigration), in which the outgoing movements once again feature in Galician population flows.

Without all the stays that had made the UK her second home, she could not be where she was today.

Her life also began to develop in Berlin, between one trip and another [...] life compensated her well with that unalterable corner of peace.

At home [...] in Galicia.

She had conquered a land and an identity... She had come to this land by chance, subsidiary and dependent, and had created in it a new person.

Being able to do without the car ... [because] ... the train, the bicycle and walking help to get everywhere ... [or] ... being able to take a dog anywhere.

In 1951, there were 4159 Spaniards registered in the United Kingdom, in 1971 there were 38,100. In 2020, the General Secretariat for Emigration of the Xunta de Galicia set the number of Galicians in the United Kingdom at 15,324; however, these data provided by the “Register of Spaniards Residing Abroad” of the National Statistics Institute only affect people voluntarily registered in that register, so the figure may be higher.

The stories of this book may well have happened. Or (you can just) imagine them.

Halfway between history (or historiography) and literature, between memory and art.

Traces, remains, and resistance.

A pioneer in the literary approach of Galician emigration to Europe, she is already considered a classic author. For a comprehensive discussion of her work, see the monograph by Ana Garrido González (2014) *Xohana Torres: da viúva de vivo á muller navegante*. Santiago de Compostela: Concello de Santiago and Universidade de Santiago de Compostela.

A farmer from the lands of Lemos.

If we measure immigration through the resulting stock of foreigners, its weight in Galicia is considerably low. On the other hand, if we measure immigration taking into account the place of birth of the resident population, Galicia is one of the autonomous communities with the highest levels of immigration. In this case, the data assess the return strictly to the town where someone was born.

The third autonomous community (after Madrid and Catalonia) that receives the most Spaniards from abroad.

It was the community that sent the greatest emigrant population until very recently.

The data provided by Rodríguez et al. (2008, p. 86) point in the same direction, in that at that time only 24% of returning emigrants were over 65 years old.

Galician women were fully integrated into migrations within Spain.

Women usually being slightly more numerous since the 1990s.

Especially striking is the fall of 1975, the year in which 8001 people left Galicia for Europe, compared to 18,575 the previous year, a year in which the number had already fallen by almost 10,000 people compared to 1973 (Calvo et al. 2009, p. 302).

It is not appropriate for me to expand on this issue here, but I think it is a phenomenon worthy of analysis: we might note cases such as those of María Rei Vilas, Celia Díaz, Pura Salceda herself, or the return to the novel of M^a Xosé Porteiro.

The fault lies with this bloody country that forces us to leave our homes to seek life in those worlds ahead. The damn diaspora that scatters us, dissolving us. The one that is annihilating our language, the one that assimilates us little by little to the new cultures and their customs, until we are no longer anything, just a memory tattooed on a surname.

A place that we still believe to be ours but that no longer recognizes us, that makes us others because in reality we are just a ghost between two worlds, and we no longer belong to either of them.

- ³⁶ A mythical place, almost unreal, that she only half knew; sometimes through the stories of others, in memories that were incorporated into her memory as if they had been lived by her at some point [...] a land she felt to be her own, like her real home, despite living only fleetingly there in her childhood.
- ³⁷ There are numerous cases in which the passing of a close relative operates as a trigger for a return, one that develops into an existential turning point. So much so, that it would be necessary to analyse the extent to which this element is a mere narrative resource for the construction of history or, in Galician literature, whether it assumes anthropological dimensions that could be studied from the perspective of our unique association with death. To name just a few of the examples discussed in these pages, see *O paxaro de nácara*, *Diario dun enterro*, and *Para toda a vida*.

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