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The struggle for land in *Famine* and *Crooked Plow*: Oppression and resistance in (post)colonial contexts

A luta pela terra em Famine *e* Torto arado*: opressão e resistência em contextos (pós)coloniais*

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ABSTRACT

This article examines how land functions as both a site of oppression and resistance in British-ruled Ireland and postcolonial Brazil. Through a comparative analysis of *Famine* (1937) by Liam O'Flaherty and *Crooked Plow* (2019, translated 2023) by Itamar Vieira Júnior, this study explores how land dispossession, labor exploitation, and environmental and humanitarian crises shape colonial and postcolonial experiences. While acknowledging the historical and racial differences between these contexts, the article highlights shared mechanisms of control over land and labor that perpetuate systemic inequalities. By engaging with postcolonial and decolonial thought, the analysis reveals how literature represents land as both a space of suffering and a site of resistance, memory, and identity. The article concludes that resistance in both novels is multilayered, emerging through acts of defiance, cultural struggle, and reimagined relationships with the land.

KEYWORDS: land; coloniality of power; postcolonialism; Brazil; Ireland.

RESUMO

Este artigo examina como a terra funciona simultaneamente como um espaço de opressão e resistência na Irlanda sob domínio britânico e no Brasil pós-colonial. A partir de uma

análise comparativa de *Famine* (1937), de Liam O'Flaherty, e *Torto arado* (2019, traduzido para o inglês em 2023), de Itamar Vieira Júnior, este estudo investiga como a expropriação da terra, a exploração do trabalho e as crises ambientais e humanitárias moldam experiências coloniais e pós-coloniais. Embora reconheça as diferenças históricas e raciais entre esses contextos, o artigo destaca mecanismos comuns de controle da terra e do trabalho que perpetuam desigualdades sistêmicas. Dialogando com teorias pós-coloniais e decoloniais, a análise revela como a literatura representa a terra tanto como um espaço de sofrimento quanto como um lugar de resistência, memória e identidade. O artigo conclui que a resistência em ambos os romances é multifacetada, manifestando-se por meio de atos de desafio, embate cultural e novas formas de relação com a terra.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: terra; colonialidade do poder; pós-colonialismo; Brasil; Irlanda.

Introduction

The struggle for land occupies a central position in both colonial and postcolonial contexts, functioning as a vital resource for survival and as a locus of conflict. Beyond its physical dimensions, land—along with its transformation—serves as a medium through which cultural practices and values are expressed (Montaño 26). In *Famine* (1937), by Irish author Liam O'Flaherty and *Crooked Plow* (2019, translated 2023) by Brazilian writer Itamar Vieira Júnior, land transcends its materiality to embody cultural memory, identity, and resistance against systemic oppression. Despite their distinct historical and cultural settings, these novels share a thematic focus on how land mediates the relationship between marginalized communities and their lived realities under (post)colonial domination. Through their depictions of dispossession, cultural endurance, and collective struggle, *Famine* and *Crooked Plow* underscore the centrality of land not only in shaping identity but also in resisting structures of power.

In *Famine*, set during the Great Irish Famine (1845-1852) and under British colonial rule, land becomes a site of suffering and dispossession. O'Flaherty portrays the alienation of Irish peasants from their land, exacerbated by colonial expropriation

policies, as a profound source of vulnerability. This disconnection transforms land from a source of sustenance into a site of despair, reflecting the broader destruction wrought by colonial domination. The novel illustrates the disempowerment of a community stripped of its connection to the land and tradition, revealing the destructive consequences of such alienation.

In contrast, *Crooked Plow* presents land as central to the collective identity and resistance of Black plantation workers in Brazilian backlands. Vieira Júnior's narrative highlights the spiritual and cultural bonds these communities maintain with their land, framing their struggle for land ownership as an act of resistance. This struggle resonates with Frantz Fanon's anticolonial theory, which underscores land reclamation as a cornerstone of liberation. For the characters in *Crooked Plow*, land is more than an economic resource; it is a vessel of cultural memory, spiritual sustenance, and a promise for future generations.

This article examines how *Famine* and *Crooked Plow* depict land as both a site of oppression—through forced displacement, economic exploitation, and environmental degradation—and as a space of resistance, where cultural survival, labor, and community solidarity challenge colonial and postcolonial power structures. As David Lloyd (2003, p. 47) notes, comparative studies on colonialism not only reveal recurring patterns of domination but also illuminate their distinct cultural manifestations. By analyzing these novels, this study critiques colonial and postcolonial structures while affirming the agency of marginalized communities in shaping resistance.

The Plantation System: Land, Labor, and Subjugation

The biopolitical control of land and labor in *Famine* and *Crooked Plow* reflects broader structures of coloniality, where power operates through the regulation of bodies and the dispossession of marginalized communities. While *Famine* predates contemporary theories of biopolitics and the coloniality of power, applying these frameworks helps illuminate the novel's depiction of British rule in Ireland. The colonial administration's control over food supplies, forced displacement, and strategic neglect of peasantry exemplify biopolitical mechanisms that determine who lives and who dies. In *Crooked Plow*, the lingering structures of colonial domination in Brazil manifest through

the continued exploitation of Afro-descendant agricultural workers. By integrating textual analysis with these theoretical perspectives, this section highlights how both novels portray land as a site where power is exerted but also contested - whether through acts of survival, resistance, or the reassertion of communal and spiritual ties to place.

Liam O'Flaherty's *Famine* is a historical novel that explores the Great Irish Famine through the experiences of the Kilmartin family, peasants residing in the fictional village of Black Valley in western Ireland. Dependent on potato crops grown on land owned by an absentee landlord, Irish peasants face starvation, disease, and death when blight devastates their fields. O'Flaherty vividly depicts how the colonial plantation system in Ireland led to the expropriation of land and the systemic subjugation of Irish peasants, who were subjected to a semifeudal grazing system where they rented land from Anglo-Irish landlords.

The plantation system, established in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, involved the large-scale seizure of land owned by Irish Catholics, which was subsequently redistributed to English, Welsh, and Scottish Protestants. Approximately 11 million acres of land were seized by the English crown during this period (Nally, 2011, p. 30). This created a hierarchical system in which Catholic farmers were relegated to renting small plots of land. As Samuel Clark (1979) explains, this system fostered a patron-client relationship: wealthier landlords provided land and protection in exchange for rent and services. Landlords frequently leased their states for extended periods, whereas tenants often sublet smaller portions of land in a system known as "middlemanning."

In *Famine*, the possession of land symbolizes not only survival but also dignity. Brian Kilmartin, the family patriarch, emphasizes the cultural and personal significance of holding a plot of land, distinguishing his family from that of his daughter-in-law, Mary, who lacks land. Despite their precarious position as tenants, Kilmartin expresses a profound attachment to the land:

> "What's that?" said the old man, terrified by the suggestion of leaving the land. "You're sick, woman, and cowardly with your troubles. In your right mind, you wouldn't say such things. Leave the land, is it, at the first sign of trouble? Where else would you get land, or the riches that come out of it? It's foolishness and a temptation of the devil to dream of leaving it. Taking the good times with the bad,

> there's no more peaceful life on this earth. It's the life that God ordained, tilling the earth with the sweat of the brow. To be master of your own plot of ground and of your own hearth. And making things grow, like a miracle, out of the cold earth. Tyrants come and go, but the landsman goes on forever, reaping and sowing, for all the generations of time, like the coming and going of the year, from father to son" (O'Flaherty, 2002, p. 249).

Brian Kilmartin embodies what Sheeran (1976) terms "O'Flaherty's peasant farmer *par excellence*" (218). Deeply loyal to tradition, Kilmartin regards his connection to the land as sacred. He repeatedly emphasizes that "a custom is a custom" and exhorts Mary to "stand by the land". His daily life is structured around rituals: working the land each morning, reciting the rosary each evening, and adhering strictly to traditional agricultural practices, such as planting only potatoes and oats. For Kilmartin, deviating from these customs would signify a betrayal of tradition. Even in the face of profound loss, such as the death of his son Michael from what appears to be tuberculosis, Kilmartin insists on spending their meagre savings on a traditional Irish wake, affirming that "there's no going against the custom" (O'Flaherty, 2002, p. 194). As Sheeran (1976, p. 221) notes, these rituals play a vital role in sustaining the cohesion and identity of the peasant community, even amidst tragedy.

A comparable attachment to the land is depicted in *Crooked Plow*. Set in the backlands of Bahia, Brazil, during an unspecified historical period, the novel explores the struggles surrounding land ownership in a postcolonial context. The protagonists, the sisters Bibiana and Belonísia, who live in the fictional Água Negra plantation, are part of a community that has worked the land for generations. Their father, Zeca Chapéu Grande, though illiterate, is respected for his agricultural expertise and spiritual leadership, particularly through his participation in *jarê* rituals and his connection with the spirits of the *encantados*. Zeca embodies a mystical relationship with the land that transcends its material value: "his ear [was] attuned to what was deep in the earth. ... like a doctor listening to a heartbeat" (Vieira Júnior, 2023, p. 99).

This connection reflects a syncretic blend of indigenous and African spiritual traditions, which view land not as mere property but as a living entity imbued with sacred significance. Zeca's reverence for the earth aligns with the cosmologies of Afro-Brazilian

religions, where *orixás* (deities), such as Oxóssi, are closely tied to the forest and agriculture. Similarly, indigenous cosmologies in Brazil conceptualize the land as an ancestral presence, a caretaker of the community's spiritual and material well-being. This perspective is also shared by Belonisia, who perceives the land as a spiritual entity: "She'd listen for the most intimate sounds coming from the most secretive places inside the earth; this would help her free the crops of pests, find solutions to all kinds of problems, and boost the harvest" (Vieira Júnior, 2023, p. 267).

Despite their deep spiritual connection, the workers at Água Negra, like the Kilmartins in *Famine*, do not own the land they cultivate. As descendants of freed enslaved peoples, they labor on a sugar and rice plantation in exchange for shelter and the right to cultivate small vegetable plots for their own sustenance. They receive no wages and are prohibited from constructing brick houses. This exploitative system, which persisted even after the abolition of slavery in Brazil in 1988, was designed to suppress both the body and spirit. Many descendants from enslaved peoples remained tied to plantations due to economic necessity and a lack of alternatives. As José Marcelo Marques Ferreira Filho (2022) explains, while plantation workers were not physically forced to stay, their dependence on the plantation for survival effectively bound them to these structures.

Zeca himself articulates the futility of formal land ownership, asserting, "a deed to the land isn't going to give you more corn, more beans. That's not what puts food on our table" (Vieira Júnior, 2023, p. 191). However, his profound connection to the land does not free him from oppression. When drought strikes the plantation, workers' struggles intensify. Even Zeca's efforts to purchase food are thwarted, as supplies are confiscated by the farm manager Sutério. Like other workers at Água Negra, Zeca neither owns his labor nor his body. His complicity in perpetuating this system is noted by his daughter Belonísia, who reflects: "you could say my father was in fact complicit in his own exploitation: as the spiritual leader of the community, it was he who made sure the work continued without disruption, keeping peace among the tenant farmers" (Vieira Júnior, 2023, p. 84).

The dynamics in *Famine* and *Crooked Plow* exemplify what Peruvian philosopher Aníbal Quijano (2005) describes as the coloniality of power—enduring structures of power, knowledge, and social organization rooted in colonialism. Although formal

colonial rule has ended, coloniality perpetuates the exploitation of marginalized people and the imposition of Eurocentric epistemologies. This phenomenon also sustains economic and social hierarchies privileging the descendants of colonizers. Quijano identifies a "racial division of labor," wherein Europeans were deemed deserving of wages, while enslaved Africans, the indigenous population and their descendants were confined to unpaid labor. This racialized labor system, which Quijano terms the "coloniality of labor control," reflects the enduring capitalist and racial logic of colonialism (Quijano 120). María Lugones (2020) expands on this, arguing that coloniality reshaped identities—such as "European," "Indian," or "African"—in ways that permeate all facets of social life. In an earlier text, Lugones (2010) describes that the coloniality of power colonizes memory, subjectivity, and relationships, imposing a "civilizing transformation" that sought to erase ecological, communal, spiritual, and agricultural practices. Coloniality not only exploited the physical labor of the oppressed but also reconfigured their relationship with the land, undermining traditional knowledge systems and severing spiritual connections (Lugones, 2010, p. 745).

In both *Famine* and *Crooked Plow*, the plantation system emerges as a locus for exploring the persistence of the coloniality of power in (post)colonial societies.[1] Quijano's concept is particularly resonant in O'Flaherty's depiction of Irish peasants' subjugation under British colonial rule. The plantation system described in *Famine*, with its absentee landlords and exploitative rent system, exemplifies how the British colonial authorities utilized landownership to assert control and perpetuate structural inequality. The systemic alienation of Irish peasants from their land reinforced racial and economic hierarchies, with Anglo-Irish Protestant occupying the apex and Irish Catholic relegated to the base. By foregrounding the dispossession and suffering of the Kilmartins, the novel underscores how these colonial structures transformed land into an instrument of domination, stripping the Irish of agency over their lives and labor.

[1] I am not suggesting that the experiences of the descendants of enslaved peoples in Brazil can be directly compared to those of Irish peasants in racial terms. While scholars such as Ignatiev (1995) and Nally (2011) argue that British colonial policies in Ireland were rooted in the perception of the Irish as an "inferior race," the Irish were not subjected to enslavement based on their skin color. In contrast, Portuguese colonial policies in Brazil were deeply entwined with racism and slavery. As Darcy Ribeiro (2006) explains, Brazilian racism is not solely tied to racial origin but is instead shaped by skin color. Nevertheless, parallels can be drawn between the underlying ideologies that sustained both colonial projects.

Similarly, in *Crooked Plow,* Quijano's notion of coloniality of power is reflected in the enduring labor systems that bind Afro-Brazilian communities to exploitative arrangements even after the abolition of slavery. The community at Água Negra remains ensnared in a socioeconomic framework rooted in colonial hierarchies, where intersecting racial and cultural identities perpetuate marginalization. Achille Mbembe's observation that colonization constitutes "a matter of seizing, delimiting, and asserting control over a physical geographical area – of writing on the ground a new set of social and spatial relations" (Mbembe, 2003, p. 25-26) aptly describes this process. Such territorialization established rigid hierarchies that classified individuals into masters and slaves, patrons and unpaid workers, embedding these divisions within the physical and social fabric of colonial spaces.

In Brazilian plantations, colonial authorities constructed an architecture of domination that simultaneously isolated and enclosed laborers, rendering it difficult for them to leave and limiting access to public services. According to Ferreira Filho (2022), the spatial and symbolic architecture of sugar plantations physically and mentally isolated the workforce, consolidating their subjugation. This system represented both the material agent and the "architected stage" of oppression, confining individuals physically and mentally (Ferreira Filho, 2022, p. 22). In contrast to Belonísia's characterization of her father's actions as "complicity" in his own oppression, his continued presence on the plantation can be understood as a consequence of this architectural violence. As Ferreira Filho observes, "violence and, above all, fear could mold the mental cartography of individuals as much as the terrain, the hydrography, and the climate molded the physical space" (2022, p. 216). This dual violence of physical isolation and psychological entrapment forms the basis of plantation labor dynamics in *Crooked Plow*.

In *Famine*, the semifeudal landholding system of nineteenth-century Ireland exemplifies coloniality of power by perpetuating hierarchical structures that privileged the Anglo-Irish landowning elite at the expense of tenant farmers. The plantation economy, with its focus on monocultures and resource extraction, prioritized exports over local sustenance, compounding the devastation wrought by potato blight. British government policies of "nonintervention," predicated on laissez-faire economic principles, exacerbated the crisis by refusing to halt food exports or provide adequate relief. While subsequent measures, such as the establishment of workhouses under the

Irish Poor Law, public work schemes, and short-lived soup kitchens[2], offered limited aid, they were conditioned on stringent eligibility criteria. As Nally (2011) argues, these measures were designed not only to provide relief but also to discipline the Irish poor and impose reform on Irish economic and agrarian practices. Such interventions illustrate how colonial governance intertwined humanitarian aid with mechanisms of control, deepening the dispossession of the Irish peasantry.

Drawing on Michel Foucault's concept of biopolitics, Nally (2008) contends that colonial relief measures constituted a form of biopolitical control, transforming Ireland into a "laboratory" for British policies later implemented in other colonies. These measures, such as the Irish Poor Law, prioritized the "better ordering" of Irish social life over addressing the structural roots of poverty and dispossession (Nally, 2008, p. 724). Rather than guaranteeing "a right to a life free of crippling poverty," these policies reinforced systems of control, tethering tenant farmers to a precarious existence through the oppressive tenantry system (Nally 2008). This aligns with Aníbal Quijano's argument that coloniality perpetuates inequality and dependency, embedding hierarchical power structures into the fabric of social and economic life.

In *Famine*, the coloniality of power is encapsulated within a system of land tenure that systematically alienates the Irish peasantry while funneling wealth to imperial elites. This economic and social framework is epitomized by the remarks of the manager Chadwick, who asserts, "Ireland is essentially a grazing country. […] Instead of growing corn, they grow potatoes. […] Priests encourage [the peasants] to get married and breed, so they can get more money out of them. Doesn't concern me, as long as they pay their rent" (O'Flaherty, 2003, p. 75). These statements reflect the dehumanizing logic of colonial governance, which reduced Irish tenants to exploitable laborers, devoid of agency, while positioning land as a resource to be extracted for imperial gain. The system's biopolitical dimension lies in its capacity to manage and discipline populations, rendering Irish lives subordinate to the demands of the empire.

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[2] During the Famine, the British government implemented several relief measures, including constructing additional workhouses across the country, establishing "public works," and later, setting up soup kitchens. Relief efforts largely revolved around workhouses, institutions responsible for admitting Irish paupers and providing food and shelter in exchange for labor, such as stone-breaking, threshing corn, digging ditches, washing, and sewing. The "public works" initiative represented the second phase of relief policies, managed by local committees and landlords who paid wages to able-bodied men for tasks like building railways, opening roads, and breaking stones. Last, soup kitchens were introduced as a temporary measure in 1847 to reduce reliance on government aid. However, they operated for only a few months (Nally, 2011).

In parallel, *Crooked Plow* highlights the persistence of colonial structures within a nominally postcolonial setting. The semislavery conditions endured by Afro-Brazilian workers on plantations such as Água Negra reveal how colonial hierarchies persist, maintaining the coloniality of labor control (Quijano, 2005). Despite the formal abolition of slavery, Brazilian landowners, beneficiaries of colonial legacies, continue to wield economic and social control, exploiting the descendants of enslaved people. Belonísia vividly captures this enduring oppression, describing life on the plantation as requiring extraordinary resilience: "[it was a] hostile land of perennial sun and occasional rain, that abusive land where people were dying constantly, denied all succor, where we lived like cattle, working and getting nothing in return, not even rest […]" (Vieira Júnior, 2002, p. 130).

As Ferreira Filho (2022) observes, plantations were not inherently unequal spaces; rather, they were deliberately constructed as territories of domination and control. These "exercises of territoriality (of one class over the other) [...] transformed the monoculture estates into sites where domination, sovereignty, and control were exercised" (Ferreira Filho, 2022, p. 27, my translation). This resonates with Quijano's identification of the racial division of labor as a central mechanism of the colonial matrix of power. By institutionalizing racial and economic hierarchies, colonial systems ensured the continued exploitation of Black and indigenous workers under the guise of economic necessity.

Both novels underscore how coloniality operates not only through direct violence but also through the biopolitical regulation of labor, land, and life. In *Famine*, biopolitical control manifests in the systemic dispossession and precarious subsistence of Irish tenant farmers, whereas in *Crooked Plow*, it persists in the plantation system's reproduction of racialized exploitation, underscoring the enduring legacy of colonial power.

Resistance and Struggle

Despite Belonísia's assertion that her father, Zeca, was complicit in his own exploitation, his relationship with the land could be reinterpreted as a form of resistance. His respect for the land challenges the colonial-capitalist logic that reduces it to a commodity for exploitation. His practices of cultivating the land and participating in religious rituals rooted in African and indigenous traditions serve as acts of cultural defiance against the erasure of these identities under coloniality. In addition to other forms

of resistance, such as Severo's political activism, *Crooked Plow* portrays a community striving not only for land ownership but also for liberation from domination.

Similarly, in *Famine*, land is the lifeblood of Irish tenant farmers, embodying their connection to tradition, community, and survival. This dual significance of land, both material and symbolic, resonates in both *Famine* and *Crooked Plow*, although through different historical and cultural contexts. Frantz Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth* identifies land as a critical site of colonial conflict, framing it as both a source of sustenance and a symbol of dignity and autonomy: "for a colonized people, the most essential value, because it is the most meaningful, is first and foremost the land: the land, which must provide bread, and naturally, dignity" (Fanon, 2004, p. 9). For Fanon, resistance often emerges from the alienation of colonized people from their land, which he argues leads to the inevitability of violence in the process of decolonization.

In both novels, the plantation system, rooted in the extraction of wealth, defines the relationship between workers and the land as one of dispossession and subjugation. The totalizing control of the plantation owners extends even to the confiscation of goods purchased or produced by the workers themselves, symbolizing the oppressors' absolute dominance. In *Famine*, after successive crop failures, Kilmartins' inability to pay rent results in Chadwick, the farm manager, confiscating their animals (O'Flaherty, 2003, p. 258). This echoes the confiscation of sweet potatoes and *dendê* oil during a drought in *Crooked Plow* (Vieira Júnior, 2023, p. 83). These acts of seizure are not only economic but also deeply symbolic, underscoring the complete domination of the marginalized by those in power.

Resistance in colonial contexts, as Edward Said (2011) and Fanon emphasize, often begins with the reclamation of land. For Said, resistance is not only a physical confrontation but also a cultural struggle for recognition in the territory once it is ruled by colonizers (Said, 2011, p. 85). Fanon goes further, asserting that the structures of colonial domination, established and maintained by violence, inevitably provoke violent resistance: "Colonialism is not a machine capable of thinking, a body endowed with reason. It is violence in its natural state, and it will only yield when confronted with greater violence" (Fanon, 2004, p. 23).

In both novels, the plantation system serves as a microcosm of colonial domination, where dispossession and oppression are met with acts of resistance and a greater struggle

for autonomy. The connection to the land becomes both a site of subjugation and a catalyst for resistance, illustrating the enduring relevance of Fanon's and Said's insights into the dynamics of colonial power and anticolonial struggle.

In *Famine*, resistance arises not only from a desire to reclaim landownership but also from a need to preserve a way of life tied to the land. The emergence of banditry in Black Valley, described as "spontaneous movement on the part of the people; one of those silent and sudden movements of rebellion that spring from the earth itself" (O'Flaherty, 2003, p. 229*)*, resonates with Eric Hobsbawm's concept of social banditry. Here, acts of resistance, though criminalized, reflect peasants' attachment to the land as their only means of sustenance (Hobsbawm, 2012). This defiance is embodied in figures such as Martin Kilmartin and Barney Gleeson, whose actions, from rebellion to assassination plans, depict resistance as an inevitable response to colonial oppression and systemic annihilation, as the narrator notes: "in spite of the government terrorism, or because of it, the spirit of rebellion increased among the peasants instead of diminishing" (O'Flaherty, 2003, p. 247).

In contrast, *Crooked Plow* portrays resistance as a multilayered process, blending cultural resistance, spiritual defiance, and, eventually, organized rebellion. Severo's assassination catalyzes a deeper collective resolve, as Bibiana asserts: "the seed that Severo planted will not die. [...] There are many more of us on this plantation. They plucked one fruit from the branch, but the tree remains. With roots too deep to be wrenched from the soil" (Vieira Júnior, 2023, p. 231). This metaphor of endurance and solidarity underscores the persistence of collective resistance. Fanon's insights find resonance here, particularly his assertion that reclaiming land often necessitates acts of violence as the colonized reassert their right to the land. However, *Crooked Plow* also highlights a form of resistance that is not solely dependent on physical confrontation but is equally rooted in spiritual resilience and cultural endurance.

The narrators of both novels also highlight resistance through pointed commentary and active engagement with their respective sociopolitical contexts. In *Famine*, the narrator frequently abandons the detachment of a third-person objective perspective to openly criticize the key agents of the Great Hunger: Protestant landlords, Catholic gombeen men (local usurers), and the government. This critique is encapsulated in statements such as "under a tyranny, the only active forces of government are those of

coercion" (O'Flaherty, 2002, 311), which underscores the oppressive mechanisms sustaining the plantation system. The narrative further highlights the brutal actions of the government in protecting landowners' interests, even at the expense of "plundering the poor people's property" (O'Flaherty, 2002, p. 311). This interventionist stance aligns the narrator with the oppressed, the role of a "*compagnon de route*" (Duarte 2018; Batista, 2024) in denouncing the atrocities of the Great Hunger.

In contrast, *Crooked Plow* employs three narrators to explore resistance from diverse perspectives: Bibiana ("Edge of the Blade"), Belonísia ("Crooked Plow"), and the *encantada* Santa Rita the Fisherwoman ("River of Blood"). The *encantada*, in particular, adopts an overtly political stance, linking the historical diaspora of African peoples to the present struggles of the oppressed in the plantations. She observes, "I've traversed centuries. […] The battles were always unjust. I've watched these people endure the annihilation of their dreams" (Vieira Júnior, 2023, p. 221). Santa Rita's role is further amplified in her narration of Bibiana's and Belonísia's climactic act of vengeance against the new landowner Salomão. She claims that "we spent so many nights digging out the earth, making the pit. […] Then, late one ordinary night, I crossed the yard and approached Belonísia. […] I became one with her flash […]" (Vieira Júnior, 2023, p. 274--75). This stance positions her as a participant, embodying their defiance and lending spiritual support to their cause. Unlike the narrator of *Famine*, who critiques oppression from a distance, Santa Rita directly joins the struggle, becoming both a participant and a source of spiritual fortitude for the people of Água Negra.

Gendered resistance forms a central theme in both *Famine* and *Crooked Plow*, highlighting how women face exploitation not only as members of oppressed communities but also in ways distinct from their male counterparts. These narratives explore the intersection of colonial, economic, and patriarchal oppression, which not only deepens women's subjugation but also shapes their unique modes of resistance. Lugones (2010, p. 745) explains that resistant subjectivity often finds expression "infra-politically" because authority and voice are denied to it. In response, this inward resistance challenges the meanings imposed by coloniality, becoming an integral aspect of the identities and lived experiences of the colonized. It is "an active subjectivity."

In *Famine*, Mary exemplifies how the coloniality of power intensifies gendered exploitation. As Lugones (2020) observes, colonial systems created a gendered structure

of oppression that dehumanized women, treating them as expendable and forcing them into conditions of relentless labor. For Lugones, this intersection of labor, gender, and the coloniality of power is inextricable (2020, p. 79). Margaret Kelleher (1997) further notes that women, especially mothers, dominate Irish "famine literature" as figures embodying the horrors of hunger, a narrative approach that she terms the "feminization of famine."

As hunger worsens, women become especially vulnerable to violence. Mary's sister, Ellie, is abused by the farm manager Chadwick and forced to flee the village. The disintegration of familial structures and societal expectations that burden women with the responsibility to sustain households compound this vulnerability. When Martin flees after killing Chadwick and the potato crops fail, the Kilmartins lose all means of survival, leaving Mary and other women in the community to navigate desperation.

Kitty Hernon and Sally O'Hanlon exemplify the harrowing measures women endure. After Kitty's husband, Pat, succumbs to madness and is institutionalized, she struggles to care for their seven children during a time of scarcity. Her attempts to give up her children for adoption are futile, and she is unable to save them all. Similarly, Sally, faced with the unbearable prospect of her children starving, she takes the desperate step of ending their lives to spare them further suffering.

Mary, once celebrated as the most beautiful girl in Black Valley, undergoes a stark transformation that underscores the dehumanizing effects of famine. The narrator describes her altered appearance in striking detail:

> […] The imminence of famine had wrought a marked change in her countenance. ... There was no similarity of features and her beauty was still as radiant as ever. But there was a similarity in the expression of the mouth and of the eyes. Her mouth had gathered together, somehow, like the first movement of the mouth of a person going to whistle. Her eyes seemed to be searching for something. They were never still. They were fierce, on the alert, suspicious. Her hands, too, were shifty, and it was pitiful the way she now grabbed at her food, tore it greedily with her teeth and looked around in an uncouth fashion while she ate. ... Indeed, all five of them ate as if this were their last meal and as if some enemy were coming, hotfoot. to pluck the food from their lips (O'Flaherty, 2002, p. 324).

Female resistance in O'Flaherty's novel does not manifest as overtly political acts, such as armed rebellion. Instead, it lies in women's struggle to survive and protect their children, even when faced with impossible choices. For Mary, the only viable alternative is to emigrate, leaving behind the land that can no longer sustain them. Through Mary's departure, O'Flaherty underscores the failure of colonial systems to support women's survival and the necessity of seeking life beyond the confines of home.

In *Crooked Plow*, Bibiana and Belonísia endure multifaceted exploitation as both laborers and activists, highlighting the intersection of economic, social, and gendered oppression. Bibiana's resistance takes the form of outspoken defiance, organizing her community to challenge the landowners' authority. In contrast, Belonísia, silenced by a childhood accident involving a knife, channels her resistance through a profound spiritual connection to the land and her role as a custodian of cultural memory and tradition. Her hands embody her power to resist and nurture the collective struggle. As Santa Rita the Fisherwoman observes, "those same hands that cultivate the land from which life itself is harvested, those hands could boost, or fail, the struggle of an entire people" (Vieira Júnior, 2023, p. 261).

The contrast between the two novels emerges in their depiction of resistance and its relationship to land. In both *Famine* and *Crooked Plow*, oppression drives rebellion, with the land serving as a site of both conflict and resistance. However, while *Crooked Plow* portrays a collective struggle infused with political resistance and spiritual endurance, Famine presents a bleaker narrative. In O'Flaherty's work, starvation and disease devastate the Irish peasants, turning the land into a barren graveyard devoid of hope for sustained resistance. The narrator captures this desolation:

> This used to be a meeting-place of animals [...]. All life had fled. What awful silence! Even the river, shallow with the summer drought, was silence. All life had ceased. And with the fall of night, a dark shroud passed down from the heights into the valley's bed, as if returning this passing habitation of man to the womb of eternal death (O'Flaherty, 2002, p. 329).

The collapse of community structures in *Famine* parallels the erosion of cultural traditions that once sustained Irish peasants. Brian Kilmartin, a steadfast observer of

rituals such as Irish wakes and traditional planting cycles, succumbs to despair, relinquishing his leadership role to his son Martin and permitting Mary to emigrate with her child. Patrick F. Sheeran (1976) aptly notes that the breakdown of these rituals, "more than the simple fact of starvation," precipitates the community's disintegration (Sheeran, 1976, p. 222).

Both novels underscore the colonial control of land as central to the subjugation of oppressed communities. Ferreira Filho (2022) highlights how plantation structures were designed to instill fear and enforce coercion, shaping not only the physical environment but also the mental framework of the oppressed. This aligns with Frantz Fanon's depiction of the colonial world as inherently divided, demarcating the roles of colonizer and colonized through spatial and social hierarchies. Viewed through this lens, *Crooked Plow* and *Famine* reveal the intrinsic connection between land control, autonomy, and identity. While *Famine* depicts a land drained of life, *Crooked Plow* asserts the enduring power of communal and spiritual practices to reclaim agency. Together, these narratives underscore that the struggle for land ownership is not merely material but deeply entwined with cultural survival and self-determination.

Conclusion

This analysis of *Famine* and *Crooked Plow* demonstrates how land functions as both an instrument of oppression and a site of resistance. By examining the dispossession of Irish peasants under British colonial rule and the ongoing subjugation of Afro-descendant agricultural workers in Brazil, these novels reveal the enduring entanglements between land, power, and identity. Both texts illustrate how colonial and postcolonial structures seek to control not only the material landscape but also the bodies, labor, and cultural survival of marginalized communities. However, they also depict acts of resistance—whether through communal solidarity, spiritual reclamation, or alternative relationships with land—that challenge the logic of domination.

Situating these narratives within the broader field of postcolonial studies highlights how land is never a neutral backdrop but rather a contested terrain where histories of violence, displacement, and resistance unfold. This discussion contributes to ongoing scholarly conversations about the coloniality of power, biopolitical control, and the

intersections of race, labor, and territory. It also underscores the contemporary relevance of these struggles, as land dispossession, environmental degradation, and the displacement of indigenous and marginalized peoples continue to shape global politics. By reading *Famine* and *Crooked Plow* alongside present-day land struggles, we recognize literature's capacity to illuminate enduring struggles and forms of resistance.

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