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Facultad de Lenguas

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Dirección: Dra. María Marcela González de Gatti

Capitalism, Patriarchy and Women in John Irving's *The Cider House Rules*

Miranda, Daniela de Lourdes
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Introduction

Stories permeate our lives. Stories bring into life multiple readings and a variety of questions related to our own reality. The act of reading a literary work often comes with post-reading questions on the possible thorny issues presented in the work of art. Thus, literary texts have always encouraged readers to question the fictional social constructions, leaving readers pondering new meanings in real social settings. The twentieth century was a time of breakthroughs, discoveries, revolutions and controversies in every field of life – from food production and clothing to gender and political ideologies – which have continued nowadays.

In particular, gender awareness has taken the lead when it comes to new perspectives and outlooks on contentious subjects such as women's working and life-related rights. These last few years have been key to the achievement of women's rights – including more equal salaries, better working conditions for sexual jobs, more abortion policies and a better understanding of the role of women in the family institution, not only in Argentina but also worldwide. The US' steady trail towards equality has been marked by important figures throughout history, who paved the way for women's leading milestones that changed society. In 1963, the Equal Pay Act was passed by Congress in the promise of equitable wages for the same job position regardless of race, religion or gender. In 1965, the US Supreme Court established the right of married couples to use contraception. And in 1973, abortion was made legal in the Supreme Court landmark known as *Roe v. Wade*.

These global concerns have been taken up by a variety of writers and have been translated into a bunch of stories. American-Canadian novelist and short-story writer John Irving examines contemporary topics from diverse perspectives in his works. Some of them include *The World According to Garp* and *The Cider House Rules*, where he delves into family life, prostitution, sexual abuse and abortion. The latter, on which this research is carried out, tells multiple interconnected stories that revolve around the main male characters, Dr Larch and

the orphan Homer Wells, who interact with other male or female characters, evoking diverse subjects of great controversy. These are presented as rooted into people's collective past and everyone's present. The main storyline is brought about by Dr Larch's obstetrician endeavours at St Cloud's orphanage, where women either deliver their babies and leave them for adoption or receive an abortion to end the pregnancy. Dr Larch, in the meantime, tells multiple stories of his past and how he ends up being a doctor there, such as the narrative of Mrs Eames. Dr Larch performs such treatments and then teaches Homer Wells, who has always been an orphan there and has never been fully adopted. The second storyline could be the narrative of Wally Worthington and Candy Kendall, a young couple from Cape Kenneth, who decide to have an abortion. Once they leave the orphanage and take Homer with them, the narrative focuses on another storyline about Melony, another orphan who struggles with Homer breaking her promise and leaving her alone at St Cloud's. At Cape Kenneth, Homer learns about the management of the apple orchard's business and falls in love with Candy. Wally enlists to war and Candy gets pregnant with Homer's son. They both have their baby but lie about his identity by telling everyone that the child is adopted. The final storyline revolves around an apple picker Mr Rose and his daughter Rose Rose. Even though the narratives seem to be written on male characters, the events of the novel are mainly built upon the female characters and their relationship towards themselves and their male counterparts.

This study intends to analyse the construction of the female body and women's oppression in the capitalist and patriarchal society from the gender perspective and socialist feminist criticism. In John Irving's *The Cider House Rules* (1985), there is a dialectical relationship between capitalism or profit-based systems and patriarchal social structures when it comes to the characters' decision of not keeping children – and producing orphans or abortions – and the covert rules about the production of capital and family imposed by the twentieth-century society. The novel portrays the female body and women's issues – motherhood, prostitution

and abortion – as products or results of power-related structures: either through objectification or male dominance over women. These structures finally reveal how agency is a gendered and power-driven practice, governed by male characters who are sanctioned by patriarchal codes.

Theoretical Framework

It is of paramount importance to highlight and clarify some conceptual parameters that will lead this study in analysing the Neo-Victorian novel *The Cider House Rules* by John Irving from the perspective of gender studies and socialist feminism. This section explores what is meant by and expected from the Neo-Victorian, how are the female body, women, agency and power conceptualised in feminist theory, and finally, what does socialist feminism see capitalism and patriarchy.

An Overview of Neo-Victorian Fiction

Published in 1985, John Irving's *The Cider House Rules* is a Neo-Victorian novel set in the 1920s. Thus, it is important to reflect upon its literary genre to approach the novel from its context and the issues it problematizes. The concept of "Neovictorianism" has been thoroughly analysed and still bears some difficulty in its definition. In global terms, it involves a dual entity that comprises two time frames: the past and the present – the nineteenth century, the twentieth and twenty-first century – thus, these frames aim at historical awareness or memory. This genre can be considered to be born in the late 1960s with the publication of Jean Rhys' *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966) and John Fowles' *The French Lieutenant's Woman* (1969).

Marie-Louise Kohlke – founder of the *Neo-Victorian Studies* journal – puts forwards that Neovictorianism is a project with a socio-political outlook of historical awareness, a

contribution to the public and private cultural memory and an interconnection between the past and the present. She expresses that:

As such, the neo-Victorian novel – used in this collection in a generic sense of literature re-imagining and engaging the nineteenth century in global terms, not necessarily confined to only British or Britain’s colonial contexts – may function as a belated abreaction or ‘working-through’ of nineteenth-century traumas, as well as those of our own times, albeit more obliquely. Frequently, neo-Victorian fiction highlights interconnections between acts of aggravated historical violence and their long-term cultural and political aftershocks still resonating well into the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. (Kohlke 3)

As many other contemporary texts, these works articulate the “present” and the “past” by being not only auto-reflexive but also by re-incorporating the past into a contemporary setting. These novels or productions are dedicated to the “afterlife of the nineteenth century in the cultural imaginary” (Kohlke – journal). This form of fiction demonstrates and exposes past inequities that are present all throughout history – independently of the century and the place. This author explains that “By re-imagining and mourning alternative lost pasts that *might have been*, the Neo-Victorian circumvents the potentially debilitating and crushing inevitability of *what was...*” (Kohlke journal). As such, the Neo-Victorian configures itself as a well-suited form to render the past and the present accessible and appealing to the reader’s consciousness and concerns. It further interrogates the motives that subtend some specific issues that lay at the mercy of power stakes and interests behind.

Kate Mitchell – author of *History and Cultural Memory* – argues that these Neo-Victorian fictions offer a “cultural memory” that is intended to be “re-membered, and imaginatively re-created, not revised or understood” (7), suggesting that Neo-Victorian novels do not attempt to understand nostalgically the Victorian past but seek to reconstruct or deconstruct that past

in the text and in the reader's mind. Therefore, the author avails himself of classic narratological characteristics of Victorian novels: layering of plots, conflicting melange of characters and the centrality placed upon orphans as victims of society's evils. Mitchell suggests an approach to the Neo-Victorian as a subgenre of historical fiction and as memory texts constructed upon a critical attitude, product of an act of recollection of bringing back the past. Departing from this view, rather than involving a mere act of recall, these fictions under the Neo-Victorian project offer a "cultural memory" that is re-embodied: re-membered and re-constructed.

By disclosing the past, as Kohlke explains, the text makes nineteenth-century history accessible and "appealing to present-day sensibilities" (Kohlke 11). There is a continuity of power and knowledge practices that are exposed in the Neo-Victorian trend as a result of a close dialogue between the past and the present. This enterprise questions the assumptions of the contemporary present by bringing back into popular consciousness issues that might have been only circumscribed as "Victorian" – whereas such social ills and inequities remain at stake today.

These views help us analyse the novel in terms of re-thinking the contemporary afterlife of the nineteenth-century cultural history and disseminating the implicit ideological constructions that interact with history's public discourses of patriarchy and capitalism.

Gender Studies

In order to approach a thorough analysis of women's issues and patriarchy across the female characters of *The Cider House Rules*, it is vital to address some central notions that belong to the field of gender studies: gender, women's positions, performativity, agency and power. To delve into these, this study will explore the texts of postmodern feminist writers: Judith Butler, Simone de Beauvoir, Luce Irigaray and Michel Foucault.

From the 1960s, second-wave feminism constructed an account of gender affairs throughout various spheres of life from historical, biological, psychological and cultural answers to the position of women in society as “second or lesser sex” (Tolan 320). Furthermore, Fiona Tolan explains that the patriarchal society supports primarily male supremacy by hidden means since “women’s oppression was achieved by a combination of physical violence and cultural pressure” (326). However, before considering the specific factors that condition women’s definition in society, we ought to centre our understanding on the basis of what gender involves and how it interacts with other social spheres.

When asked about the definition of gender, most analysts compare this notion with “sex” as two opposites constructs. US feminist philosopher, Judith Butler in *Gender Trouble*, claims that “gender is culturally constructed: hence, gender is neither the casual result of sex nor as seemingly fixed as sex” (9), thus, the construction of any gender does not derive from pre-existing qualities but rather from ruling systems above. There seem to be certain structures to which requirements the subject of feminism – women – is subjected. These structures configure the axes of relations that constitute the gender identity as inferior which work across power. When defining gender, she claims that it:

... is not always constituted coherently or consistently in different historical contexts, and because gender intersects with racial, class, ethnic, sexual and regional modalities of discursively constructed identities. As a result, it becomes impossible to separate out “gender” from the political and cultural intersections in which it is invariably produced and maintained.

Hence, to approach any gender subject, it must be interpreted across the cultural meanings that the body assumes in the particular context since gender comprises an ongoing discursive practice. As such, the body assumes the construction of “women” or “men” in accordance

with the discursive or cultural means by which the “natural sex” – pre-discursive in nature – is said to be.

Within gender studies, Judith Butler argues that gender should be understood as “performativity”, which means that there are certain practices performed that construct an individual’s gender identity rather than “free-floating attributes” (25). Thus, women appear to be endowed with no agency but for their sexuality. Gender identity becomes intelligible when the agent follows instituted cultural laws that regulate the shape and meaning of the subject. These culturally granted features impose standards of femininity that depend on the “male” binary counterpart – whose freedom and autonomy is freely enjoyed. Therefore, the female bodies are understood as a “passive recipients of an inexorable cultural law.” (Butler -)

From a non-essentialist point of view, gender-studies critics have argued that there is no intrinsic reason why women ought to be put in an inferior position to men, in spite of women being often placed at a disadvantage. According to Simone de Beauvoir in *The Second Sex*, women are always situated in positions of inferiority as a result of being the others to men. Instead of being defined by the category of “sex”, one “becomes” a woman under cultural restraints that are ruled by men. Butler explains de Beauvoir’s thinking saying that “the body is figured as a mere instrument or medium for which a set of cultural meanings are only externally related” (Butler ---). Simone de Beauvoir sets a binary identification of gender where women are the opposite of men and the lack against the masculine identity. Therefore, the female body is “marked” within the phallogentric discourse where the male body remains the “unmarked” entity. De Beauvoir explains that:

In actuality the relation of the two sexes is not quite like that of two electrical poles, for man represents both the positive and the neutral, as is indicated by the common use of *man* to designate human beings in general; whereas woman represents only

the negative, defined by limiting criteria, without reciprocity. (...) One finds the expression of a duality – that of the Self and the Other. (De Beauvoir 15 – 16)

The female body, then, is left in an inferior or dependent position towards the masculine. The male body is under the category of “subject” – essential and absolute – to which the female body is opposed as “object” – inessential and the Other. The One is the one that poses the requirements or conditions under which the Other exists.

These categories seem to reflect why gender is the product of a body and its own materiality – its own performative experiences, in Butler’s terms. In addition, French postmodernist psychoanalyst, Luce Irigaray argued that “the feminine occurs only within models and laws devised by male subjects” (91), which suggests that women both fall into male-created categories and experience themselves fragmentarily. Contrary to De Beauvoir, Irigaray proposes that women are not the other to man because the feminine “resists all adequate definition. Further, she has no “proper” name” (26). Then, women are not considered to be part of the binary structure of gender but rather the one that is not defined without the male counterpart. Then, both categories “male” and “female” are maintained within the parameters set by the masculine subject in which the female body is left out without definition. In either case – from De Beauvoir’s or Irigaray’s points of view – the female body is assigned an inferior or dependent position to the masculine body, precluding women from complete and independent experiences. Female agency, then, is deprived of full recognition by the social subjects and autonomous life in the symbolic and social order.

These fragments of female experiences are controlled by a dominant ideology or the embracing “male” subject himself. Irigaray would understand the feminine as marked by the hegemonic discourse of the masculine that culturally prevents women from assuming their own attributes and being an agent on her own:

The rejection, the exclusion of a female body imaginary certainly puts woman in the position of experiencing herself only fragmentarily, in the little-structured margins of a dominant ideology, as waste, or excess, what is left of a mirror invested by the (masculine) “subject” to reflect himself, to copy himself. Moreover, the role of “femininity” is prescribed by this masculine specula(riza)tion and corresponds scarcely at all to woman’s desire, which may be recovered only in secret, in hiding, with anxiety and guilt. (Irigaray 30)

There are certain valued products set by the phallogentric society that grant not only social power but also signification to the role and definition of the female. Traditionally, women are of use for men – as a commodity – and those that assign their respective value on their lives: fathers, husbands, or employers.

Irigaray poses the view that women might be incapable of their own decisions on the performance of their own sexuality and their bodies. In other words, patriarchal social systems are dependent on the productive work or symbolic value that is assigned to its subjects or objects. This author argues that as commodities, women are “utilitarian objects” and “bearers of value” – the latter is a result of the economy of exchange in the male business. Similar to the linguistic value assigned to the signifier and signified, value – in Irigaray’s terms – can only be bodied when a relationship has been established; as a result, women’s value relies on the expression of the masculine value.

The female body is both appropriated and commodified by men and thus in such social order, women are imposed certain roles: mother, virgin and prostitute. From them, the characteristics of the feminine derive, which are “the valorisation of reproduction and nursing; faithfulness, modesty, ignorance of and even lack of interest in sexual pleasure, a passive acceptance of men’s “activity”; seductiveness, in order to arouse the consumers’ desire while offering herself as its material support...” (Irigaray 186) As mother, women are restricted to

their reproductive functions and cannot transcend or break those barriers. The economic and symbolic value is based on the responsibility of bearing children. The virgin is purely exchange value since the virginal woman only functions to establish a relation among men. And finally, the prostitute is restricted to the social order because her value is subordinated to the usage or exchange among men.

The female body, as a result, is treated in accordance to the expectations, investment and care of men. In other words, because the category of “femininity” or “female performance” is a cultural construct, “patriarchal oppression consists of imposing certain social standards of femininity on all biological women, in order precisely to make us believe that the chosen standards for “femininity” are natural” (Toi 108). Female agency, then, is gender-constructed and power-related when it comes to the ways power is exerted.

To get an insight on the notion of power and its intrinsic relationship with sex, our research takes French philosopher Michel Foucault’s proposal in *The History of Sexuality*, where he points out that:

Sex – that agency which appears to dominate us and that secret which seems to underlie all that we are, that point which enthralls us through the power it manifests and the meaning it conceals, and which we ask to reveal what we are and to free us from what defines us – is doubtless but an ideal point made necessary by the deployment of sexuality and its operation. (Foucault 155)

Through discourse and narratives, power circulates within the social order constructed – mostly patriarchal -, systematically functioning to articulate a desirable goal. Joseph Bristow, in *Sexuality*, summarises Foucault’s ideas saying that his concept of power is both relational and thus polyvalent. In other words, “the manifold relationships of force that take shape and come into play in the machinery of production, in families, limited groups and institutions, are

the basis for wide-ranging effects of cleavage that run through the social body as a whole” (Foucault 94).

Relations of power reside within the body and its experiences in the specific context. Such relations are set upon negative parameters, such as rejection, exclusion, blockage, concealment or secrecy. What Foucault stresses is that power dictates the rules of sex, whether or not through a licit or illicit binary system. Furthermore, “power acts by laying down the rule: power’s hold on sex is maintained through language, or rather through the act of discourse that creates, from the very fact that is articulated a rule of law” (Foucault 83), subsequently exerting diverse mechanisms of power. These mechanisms are part of a logical sequence of such law and involve power practices that are sustained by two indispensable bodies – one superior and one inferior – from which the maintenance of ownership is ensured in the instruments of the social order. Among all the mechanisms that have been inherited from the West, objectification and domination from a superior being towards an inferior body are the most common among societies.

More specifically, from objectification to ownership, the female body has always been subjugated to male oppression and power. Foucault posits domination as a strategy used to reinforce a particular optimised order by the governed or those in superior positions.

Socialist Feminism

Because the “feminine” is a social construct – “patterns of sexuality and behaviour imposed by cultural and social norms” (Moi 108) -, this construction is clearly contaminated by patriarchal power-driven ideologies. In a chapter dedicated to “Women on the Market”, Luce Irigaray’s premise is that any society or culture is based upon the “exchange of women” (--). The female body marks social interactions through its usage, consumption and exchange

which reasserts the value of the female body and its potential benefit to men. This study will analyse the dynamics between patriarchy and capitalism in light of socialist feminism.

This denigration and usage of women operates within social systems, more specifically, the system of patriarchy and the socio-economic system of capitalism. When defining “patriarchy”, Juliet Mitchell in *Woman’s Estate*, established that it is a universal mode of power relations and domination that are passed off as natural or common. She wrote that:

patriarchy is the sexual politics whereby men establish their power and maintain control. All societies and all social groups within these are sexist in the fundamental sense that their entire organisation, at every level, is predicated on the domination of one sex by the other. (Mitchell 65)

In other words, a man takes a position based on domination or superiority over and against women merely because of his status as a man. Man asserts himself as subject by expressing certain power over other considered inferior. Patriarchy is a system that “penetrates class divisions, different societies, historical epochs” (Mitchell 65). Women are dependent on the dynamics between production and consumption of their own bodies and the roles assigned to them, in spite of their socio-economic class.

Patriarchal structures in society, in turn, might derive from other pervasive and accepted norms, such as capitalist thinking. Juliet Mitchell argues that patriarchy entails a form of production, an essential feature of capitalism. Patriarchal societies’ nuclear form includes the development the submission of women on the part of men according to their “use value” and “exchange value” (Irigaray ---) – which are components of the capitalist regime. As explained by Ruth Connell, in “Socialist Feminist Theory: An Appraisal”, the profit-based division of labour and social classes establishes a hierarchical division between masculine and feminine roles in society, as it is a mechanism of control. According to the author, “it designates the fact that roles, purposes, activity, one’s labor are determined sexually” (Connell 12).

This paper follows the ideas proposed by socialist feminist since they are committed to understanding capitalism as a system of power linked to patriarchy. Socialist feminism rethinks the traditional Marxist reading of economic relations and class antagonism to propose a dialectical connexion between economic demands and women's oppression in general. Zillah Eisenstein proposes the concept of "capitalist patriarchy" to highlight the close tie between "capitalist class structure and hierarchical sexual structuring" (5). Unlike Marxist feminism, influenced mainly by the conceptual terrain of Marx and Engels, who prioritise economic systems over gender issues, these new theorists see socialism and feminism as intertwined.

Rosemary Putman Tong explains in her book *Feminist Thought: A More Comprehensive Introduction* that from the socialist feminist point of view, "women form a conception of themselves they would not have if their roles in the family and the workplace did not keep them socially and economically subordinate to men" (98). This means that from this view, every human – or male and female – relation is "fundamentally exploitative" (Tong 98) as the relationship between employer and employee in any capitalist-based system.

From the feminist socialist perspective, we could analyse the three categories proposed by Luce Irigaray, mentioned above, which are mother, virgin and prostitute by giving special attention to the social and economic structures that produce these positions. Juliet Mitchell gives these factors different names: production, the reproduction of children, sexuality and socialization of children. All these play essential roles in the different variations of women's condition. When it comes to production, men's superiority has assigned women domestic labour as their field of production, "based on biological capacity" (Mitchell 103). Natural weakness is transferred to social weakness. The reproduction of children derives from women's natural vocation of motherhood as part of their social exploitation to give life. Practices against maternity threaten the production of children – the biological product – and

the ultimate definition of woman: her capacity of maternity. Another factor is sexuality since “throughout history women have been appropriated as sexual objects, as much as progenitors or producers” (Mitchell 110). Women’s sexual freedom is condemned to masculine domination over “love” and “marriage”. The final process is the socialization of women which is intertwined with the biological and cultural role of women as mother.

Under these categories, this study will explore the novel’s female characters and story to deconstruct the notions of patriarchy and capitalism as well as women’s oppression and agency, by articulating the notions proposed by socialist feminism and the ones introduced by gender and power studies.

Female Body and Women’s Issues in *The Cider House Rules*

In light of the concepts viewed above, this study on *The Cider House Rules* firstly explores the female body and women’s issues across certain female characters in the narrative. In *The Second Sex*, Simone de Beauvoir argues that the experiences of the female body are “Othered” because instead of having a free relation to one’s own body and performing accordingly, women are identified as other to men. This means that women’s bodily practices are constructed strictly in terms of the woman-man relationship.

From the practices depicted in the story, which construct women’s identities, certain roles are imposed on them while the female body is appropriated and commodified by men. We will delve into Candy Kendall’s, Melony’s, Rose Rose’s and Mrs Eames’ stories and their relationship with their male counterparts to see in-depth which women’s issues are at stake, following Luce Irigaray’s notions of female roles proposed in *The Sex Which Is Not One* in the patriarchal social order: mother, virgin and prostitute. Each of these roles posits women as a “use-value for man, an exchange value among men; in other words, a commodity” (Irigaray

31) Identifying how the female body is commodified by men and the women's issues represented in each of these female characters finally deconstructs the social phallogocentric discourses that govern the feminine in the narrative.

All these roles have an impact and derive from social and economic systems that are combined in the context of the novel. In the chapter titled "Women on the Market", Luce Irigaray claims that "when women are exchanged, woman's body must be treated as an *abstraction*" (175), meaning that women are reduced to a common feature which is the lesser value in the economic and social transactions. John Irving's female characters are not participants of this system but mere receivers, where the reproductive use value – in the mother role –, the sexual consumptive value – in the prostitute role – and the marital exchange value – in the virginal role – are the "material support" (Irigaray 175) of the systems that rule above.

Candy Kendall

Candy Kendall's storyline shows multiple roles that place economic and symbolic value to her body. Candy's life could be divided into two stages: Candy as virgin and Candy as mother. As for the first stage, Candy Kendall is a lobster man's daughter and has received a fine education at a private boarding school. She is described as follows:

You had only to know her to know that she was not a Candy; she was lovely, but never falsely sweet; she was a great and natural beauty, but no crowd-pleaser. She had daily reliability written all over her, she was at once friendly and practical – she was courteous, energetic, and substantial in an argument without ever being shrill. (...) She appeared to combine her father's enraptured embrace of the work ethic with the

education and the refinements he had allowed her – she took to both labor and sophistication with ease. (Irving 183)

From the assumption that wealthy people marry wealthy people, she is expected to marry Wally Worthington. When she gets pregnant, the young couple decides to get an abortion at St. Cloud's since "they were simply stunned at the prospect of having to derail their perfect plans – of *having* to get married ahead of schedule." (Irving 191). As such, Candy's life is previously organised and follows certain rules set by her family and social expectations she has to live up to. They are too young to have children and they need more time to finish their studies so that Wally could go to war. Luce Irigaray observes that the virgin role is purely exchange value when it comes to her relationship among men. Thus, Candy's performance and body are marked by the impositions of the masculine, who, at this stage, involve her relationship with Wally Worthington. This book's chapter focuses on her getting an abortion at the orphanage. The issue of abortion is directly connected with the rules of production and family since the decision of keeping children seems to be a matter of how it could impact on the family economy and their socially imposed plans, even when it comes to wealthy families like the Kendalls and Worthingtons. Candy's decision of terminating the pregnancy positions her as "the Other" or the object instead of "the Self" or the subject because she ultimately follows the ephemeral cultural laws that derive from masculine discourse and productivity. In other words, the issue of abortion is not portrayed as a matter of right or wrong in moral terms, but as a gendered practice to maintain the social order of the female body as virgin and highly valuable body to men as such.

The second role assigned to Candy is that of mother. Candy is concerned with Homer Wells as a parentless child when he decides to leave St. Clouds and live with them in Ocean View: "Candy sat up in the front seat and looked at him, her genuine concern quite apparent despite the wild tangle her hair was in." (Irving 322). She informally adopts Homer in her life

– a grown-up orphan that is discovering the world outside the orphanage. Only when Wally leaves for flight school, do Homer and Candy fall in love with each other while helping at Cape Kenneth hospital. Furthermore, after three months of their love affair, they find out that Candy was pregnant. At first, she wants to work hard in the apple orchard to have a miscarriage but Homer tells her he wanted the baby. They travel to St. Cloud's and, while Homer plants apple trees in the orphanage's yard, Candy prepares to have the baby. Candy and Homer's son, Angel Wells, then, becomes an adopted orphan in spite of being raised by his biological parents – who do not want to tell the truth but still keep the baby. Candy is a character that was always confused about her love for Wally and Homer and continued her life as if nothing happened, for instance, “We kind of adopted him together,” she would explain. She said it so often that Olive said Candy was as much of a mother to that child as Homer was...” (Irving 546). Homer and Candy agree on certain rules, which stipulate their living together as a family despite Candy marrying Wally. At this stage, Candy's value is based upon her responsibility towards her son and Homer, the father. Motherhood makes her put her family first and the body is treated in accordance with the care of men. Then, her positionality and performance are left to a dependent state towards the male subject.

Melony

Melony is an orphan at St. Cloud's. Melony's sexual experience starts from a young age with Homer Wells to whom she makes a pact that he would never leave the orphanage without her. Because she is an orphan, she seems desperate for attention, and she uses her body to achieve that goal, leaving her in a never-ending search for a proper family of that she is deprived since childhood. However often is she described as a bully towards other kids and Homer, her personality seems to change after the promise, since:

Melony didn't even run away anymore. It appeared to Dr Larch that some wordless, joyless pact bound Homer and Melony together. Their sullenness toward each other reminded Dr Larch of Mrs Eames' daughter, who would spend eternity with a pony's penis in her mouth. (Irving 153)

Melony's dependence on her male counterpart gives her the role of prostitute, which is social in nature and strictly subordinated to the usage among men. At the orphanage, Melony is useless, in comparison to Homer who could be "of use", because "Larch fretted that Melony, who was almost twenty, was now unemployable and unadoptable; she had grown dependent on her proximity to Homer Wells." (Irving 154). Her female performance is left aside of her own agency to follow Homer, in spite of him leaving her at St. Cloud's orphanage and Homer following his dreams without her. Even though she goes across Maine in search of the apple orchard where Homer is, for fifteen years, she meets Lorna, gets various jobs, and consequently, forgets about Homer. It is then that for fifteen years she frees herself from the prostitute role and slightly accepts being her own subject of her life, not a mere "other" to Homer Wells. After her encounter with Homer, she claims "I guess what's the matter with Homer is that he's a man," Melony observed. 'I only ever met one who didn't let his dong run his life' – she meant Dr Larch – 'and he was an ether addict.'" (Irving 640) The female body becomes "a mirror of its value" (Irigaray 179) and it is allowed to change accordingly; in particular, throughout the years, Melony is described as "thick" and her lungs were "a set of engines". Her feminine role moves in a different direction from the prostitute role as such but it continues to be conceived of in terms of use value and exchange. The narrator explains that "Melony was handy. (...) Lorna became more domestic" (Irving 552). Instead of conditioning herself to the patriarchal relationship with Homer, Melony's body transforms itself in agreement with the economic, profit-based system that ruled the country – capitalism. Finally, Melony experiences herself not fragmentarily but completely because her definition as a

woman is not maintained within the parameters set by the men in her life but for her own definition.

Rose Rose

Rose Rose is Mr Rose's daughter, an apple picker at Ocean View. Her female roles are mother and prostitute, which are complementary in her life. When she arrives at the orchard, she is already the mother of a baby and soon she becomes pregnant again. Not only is she a mother, but also she is her father's mistress since her son and the unborn child are products of rape. Her femininity is defined by motherhood, as stated in the narrative: "When she was with her baby, her gestures and her expressions were womanly, and she had a full, womanly figure." (Irving 646). Amid this, Mr Rose does not allow her to have an abortion, reinforcing that her body is his property as well as the child's. Endowed with no agency, Rose Rose's body is at the mercy of the superior being who locates her in an inferior position but for her sexuality as mother and sexual object. When she gets pregnant again, she tries to lose the baby by hurting herself on the bicycle, since she may want to avoid being tied to her father again. As prostitute, Rose Rose's value has been appropriated by her father because she is sexually commodified by him; furthermore, as a mother, her sexuality and social existence are tied to "the work of nature" (Irigaray 185).

Mrs Eames

Mrs Eames is a prostitute that works in Portland where she is paid to pleasure Wilbur Larch. After their encounter, Larch meets her again on a train to Boston and he discovers that she has a daughter and a different life in Boston, because:

she was a widow who lived a proper life in Boston, but that in order to afford such a life she found it necessary to sell herself in some out-of-the-way town. She begged Wilbur to allow her to keep her appearances and her reputation intact – in Boston.

(Irving 59)

In the patriarchal context of the narrative, Mrs Eames' body and performativity are defined by her role as prostitute, since her value derives from economic usage and men's subordination.

Irigaray puts forward that:

Commodities, women, are a mirror of value of and for man. In order to serve as such, they give up their bodies to men as the supporting material of specularization, of speculation. They yield to him their natural and social value as a locus of imprints, marks and mirage of his activity. (177)

Therefore, Mrs Eames' body supports necessarily male sexual practices, while relegating her social relations and character to the exchange value set by men. The properties of her body are "subordinated to the exigencies of its transformation into an object of circulation among men" (Irigaray 187). There appears to be a passive acceptance of men's superiority to support Mrs Eames' life and her daughter's. The issue of prostitution – in this case – is visible and permanent since her standards of femininity allow her to be economically independent, despite rendering her body to male usage and exchange.

Taking these women's lives into account, the narrative enforces the patriarchal structures of subordination over women in the presentation of women's "otherness". Beauvoir explains that:

When man makes of a woman the *Other*, he may, then expect her to manifest deep-seated tendencies towards complicity. Thus, woman may fail to lay claim to the status of subject because she lacks definite resources, because she feels the necessary bond

that ties her to man regardless of reciprocity, and because she is often very well pleased with her role as the *Other*. (20)

These women's stories and roles analysed exhibit the cultural position of women as "other" to men when it comes to their continuing dependence on the male subject: Ray Kendall, Wally Worthington, Homer Wells, Dr Larch, Mr Rose and Angel Wells.

The practices and female positions studied across the characters of the novel reflect the relationship between patriarchal social structures and capitalist economic structures because they reveal the expected economic or social value of women in society. It is of utmost importance to articulate these characters' experiences and practices with the discourses that exist underneath and are devised by male subjects.

Relationship between Capitalism and Patriarchy in the Neo-Victorian novel: *The Cider House Rules*

The Neo-Victorian, as proposed by Marie-Louise Kohlke, constructs itself as cultural memory and a revival of historical conscience, which – in this case – brings into the narrative diverse issues. By contributing to this, the Neo-Victorian trend creates a continuous dialogue between past and present inequities. In this section, the study will focus on the illustration of capitalism and patriarchy in the construction of the Neo-Victorian narrative, following the key characteristics of socialist feminism and Neovictorianism. In order to do this, it is important to bring into analysis the social context depicted in the novel, which coexists with the Neo-Victorian project. Finally, these characteristics narrated in *The Cider House Rules* might reveal a clear dialectic relationship between these two systems that are presented in the Victorian past and the Modern present. As Juliet Mitchell points out, "comparable conditions for women and comparable discriminations" (40) might be visible in all levels in

industrialised countries where “the inferiorization of women is essential to its functioning.” (Mitchell 40).

Social context of the Neo-Victorian Novel

Dual in nature, the Neo-Victorian novel sets a link between the past and the present by reincorporating 19th-century issues into a contemporary setting, in this case, the 20th century. *The Cider House Rules* is a literary work set in the 1930s and 1940s in the United States in the context of World War II that presents typical acts and practices of the Victorian past, such as the centrality upon orphans, the practice of abortions, the production of capital in industries, and the presence of black people in the plantations.

In John Irving’s novel, orphanhood plays an important role in the characters’ development and choices. Each orphan is an outsider of society that has no agency of her or his own but to follow the social rules already governing the individual. In other words:

having so few options is what makes an orphan so desperate to encounter society – any society, the more complex with intrigue, the more gossip-ridden, the better. Given the chance, an orphan throws himself into society – the way an otter takes to the water. (Irving 150)

Unwanted children, whether they become orphans or unborn children, are a recurrent feature of the society depicted in the novel, since they are a liability to the forms of productions and the busy dynamics of the time. As well as in Victorian times, orphans are considered a kind of “workforce” to the capitalist society; for example, “For Homer Wells, this was easy. *Of use*, he felt, was all that an orphan was born to be.” (Irving 55) Furthermore, abortive practices avoid taking the onerous responsibility of parenthood and the economic maintenance of the children which are opposite to the consumerist values of the society

depicted, whether the parents are wealthy or poor. Therefore, the production of orphans or the act of abortion are presented as easy ways to get rid of social responsibilities which prevent people from fully achieving a personal well status and reputation. For instance, Candy and Wally decide to get an abortion because the possibility of having a child could eventually preclude them from accomplishing the standards of their social status – mainly that one of the male counterparts. Wally asked a colleague on this matter, saying “if you got a girl pregnant, what would you do about it. Knowing your view, (...) about keeping yourself free.” (Irving 195). Hence, the potential benefit of a woman in society – usage, consumption and exchange – becomes a men’s problem when that benefit comes in the way of thriving in the capitalist world. A child comprises a two-fold entity: it is an unexpected product and a product of the inferior individual in the system – women. In the capitalist, patriarchal society, “bearing children, bringing them up, and maintaining the home – these form the core of woman’s natural vocation” (Mitchell 106). Instead of being a result of men’s production, the responsibility is left on women who have to make the difficult choices over their bodies when it comes to keeping the child or not.

As for the industrial production and the presence of *negroes* in the plantations, these are dominant characteristics of the Victorian era and the capitalist society constructed. The existence of exploitative companies such as the Ramses Paper Company, the apple orchard in Ocean View and the Kendalls’ lobster production company in the novel presents a clear context where the dynamics of society are dependent on the systems of production and consumption. All these are presented in the narrative as common and natural practices; for example, Homer and Candy are responsible for collecting the cheapest workforce for the harvest each year, mainly composed of black people. A pregnant woman and a mother are seen as an obstacle to the ideal consumerist system, leaving women socially and economically subordinate to men’s decisions. All the social interactions of usage, consumption and

exchange – also present in inferior social classes – assign dependently a value to the female body.

As written in the book, “History”, wrote Dr Larch, ‘is composed of the smallest, often undetected mistakes.’ (Irving 164), suggesting that certain unethical, corrupt practices continue across the ages and still have an impact on people’s lives. Capitalist thinking in the novel is underneath every social matter, where the use or exchange value is what drives an individual’s decision-making.

The context of the novel comprises critical issues that are the products not only of capitalist systems but of patriarchal structures that reinforce the social and economic subordination of women to men. In *Women’s Estate*, Juliet Mitchell thoroughly explains that the differentiation of male and female are “throughout history, an interlocked necessity” (101) of the phallogentric society to support the market. Not only does women’s nature compose the private property of men but also their children – the product of her sexuality become an aspect of the productive system or labour. Women’s and children’s social and economic subordination follows inevitably the rules of reproduction and production of capital – a proper workforce.

Capitalism and Patriarchy in *The Cider House Rules*

All these characteristics of this particular Neo-Victorian novel finally reveal that there is an intrinsic relationship between capitalism and patriarchy in the novel, constructed in the decision of not keeping children and producing orphans or abortions. All across the novel, there are several instances of choices made in relation to the so-called “products of conception” (Irving 113) who are left at the margins of society due to the unwritten rules of

the production of capital and family. According to Dr Larch's account of events in his writing:

Here in St. Cloud's', he wrote, 'guess who is the enemy of the Maine forests, the villainous father of the unwanted babies, the reason the river is choked with deadwood and the valley land stripped, unplanted, eroded by the river floods – guess *who* is the insatiable destroyer (first of a logger with his hands pitchy and his fingers mashed, then of a lumberman, a saw-mill slave whose hands are dry and cracked, with some fingers only a memory), and guess *why* this glutton is not satisfied with logs or wit lumber... guess *who*.' To Dr. Larch, the enemy was paper – specifically, the Ramses Paper Company. (Irving 17)

Therefore, men – in accordance with profit-based institutions – establish their power over the feminine across pervasive and accepted norms, such as the rules of prostitution and motherhood. In the narrative, Dr Larch made repetitive references to the workers of these companies who attended “whore hotels” (Irving 117) near St. Cloud's orphanage and left aside all women's rights. As for the orphans, they were perceived as cheap labour work – similar to the black community –, since they represented a group without any participation in society but for their “use”. This social hierarchy and the economic importance of the capitalist regime depicted in the novel is also translated in the treatment towards women who are also crucial components of the system – which reasserts their use value. The same way gender seems to condition one's labour and production, the hierarchical division of society reinforces the division between males and females, because the “value of any commodity is determined by the amount of labor, or actual expenditure of human energy and intelligence, necessary to produce it.” (Putnam Tong 98) The first time Wally Worthington went to St. Cloud's he saw a good place to produce cider:

Then she saw Wally; he was walking toward the Cadillac, in the direction of the hospital entrance, but he kept turning around to look at the hill. In his mind, he saw the orchard at harvest time – the long ladders were in the trees, the pickers were the orphans themselves. The bushel crates were stacked in the rows between the trees; in one row a tractor towed a flatbed trailer already heavy with apples. It looked like a good crop. (Irving 256)

These left “products of conception” were the perfect scenery for massive production. Later on in the storyline, Homer went to the orphanage and started planting apple trees there due to the possibility of earning good money.

In addition, the close relationship between patriarchy and capitalism entails that there are accepted norms among men and different forms of production that result in a fundamentally exploitative relationship between man and woman. This latter relationship is based upon the natural weakness of the female body and the strength of men’s production. The examples of Candy Kendall’s and Melony’s performativity and roles reveal the Marxist connection between economic demand and women’s oppression in social terms. On the one hand, Candy Kendall’s wealth and high social class set the parameters of her practices, which mainly revolve around working and being a good daughter. Her role as virgin and mother were juxtaposed since her feminine value depended on her character as the future wife of Wally and proper mother of both Homer and Angel. On the other hand, Melony was never conceived as an individual capable of participating in the workforce since she was a woman and an orphan – except for exchanging and selling her own body. Dr Larch did not let her help at the hospital with the pregnant women, but Homer Wells – who had the same characteristics but was a man – could perform perfectly and be rewarded for it. Only male orphans were born to be “of use”. Instead of becoming an essential role in the family enterprise, Melony “found a job in the shipyards and began her winter employment on an assembly line, working with

other women...” (Irving 431) Therefore, the physical difference between man and woman in production is threatened under “capitalist relations of production” (Mitchell 144) that reduce woman’s role in the market to the wife-mother role in the family. If a woman does not comply with those parameters of capital, the potential of being an outsider of society increases and reinforces the inferiority of women.

The forms of capitalist production and class hierarchy analysed – plantations and orphans – model the female roles assigned by the dominant male subject. Hence, women’s oppression transcends social classes and racial distinctions, since there are multiple roles imposed on women due to economic and consumerist structures in the capitalist society depicted in the narrative. The examples proposed suggest that “general denigration of women is an inevitable consequence of the socio-economic system of capitalism in which it operates.” (Mitchell 40) In the 19th century as well as the 20th century, there are specific issues or “mistakes” – as Dr Larch put forward – that are reproduced at all levels, especially gender hierarchies and oppression. Women like Candy, Melony, Rose Rose and Mrs Eames are clear examples of male power, which restricts women’s freedom of choice over their bodies and social lives.

Power and Agency

The narratives of the women analysed and the constructions of capitalism and patriarchy finally transgress the symbolic order and prescribe different feminine positions. The female body’s roles and women’s issues studied – motherhood, abortion and prostitution – are ultimately presented as products of underlying capitalist and patriarchal power structures: through objectification and male dominance over women. These transfers of power “have exerted considerable influence on the regulation of the social order” (Bristow 169) The female body, then, could be controlled by these methods of control of the social body, which are

articulated legitimately or illegitimately within a culture – through phallogentric and capitalist discourse.

The first mechanism of power is objectification which is explained by Foucault in *The History of Sexuality* as sustained by two linked bodies – one superior and one inferior. The female body is constructed as the inferior entity, which is – in some cases – objectified by the superior entity – men. In *The Cider House Rules*, as seen previously, Mrs Eames is reduced to her sexuality and her female role as prostitute. So much so that she created another identity outside Portland to have a safe life in Boston with her daughter and she resorted to abortions to keep on business. Following the notions of socialist feminism, this mechanism of power is driven by the usage, consumption and exchange of women, assigning a permanent value to the female body. Even though Dr Larch knew the story of Mrs Eames as a mother, when he met her again some years after, he focused on the attributes of her role as prostitute. The narrator puts forward: “Although she had lost a lot of weight and all of her youthfulness since Larch had last seen her, he had no trouble recognizing Mrs. Eames.” (66) In addition, Rose Rose is objectified by her own father – Mr Rose –, reasserting her role as prostitute, whose body is not her own but property of another. Rose Rose tells Angel that “You shouldn’t have no business with me. I ain’t really available.” (Irving 665) She is a mother and a victim of rape, whose positionality is characterised by the use and consumption of her body. In other words, these two characters’ roles as prostitutes – derived from the patriarchal power – define their identity completely.

Foucault, furthermore, posits domination as a strategy used to reinforce a particular order by those in superior positions – in this case, men. This concealed mechanism permeates all social structures affecting the female body. In John Irving’s novel, *Candy Kendall* experiences male supremacy in her role within the family – as a virgin and as a mother –, since her roles and actions are entrenched by the male characters. Firstly, she is expected to be

a virgin girl who would marry the wealthy Wally Worthington and continue the family business. And secondly, she performs the role of mother in relation to Homer Wells and Angel. These three male characters maintain their dominance over Candy's performativity by reducing her economic and social value to the household and the family. Moreover, male dominance is set over the character of Melony because however strong and intelligent she was, the male counterpart – Homer and Dr Larch – were superior. Through the impossibility for a woman to perform certain jobs at the orphanage and the hospital, Melony is not able to embrace subjectivity and leave behind her role as prostitute – until she frees herself of the ideal set upon Homer Wells' relationship.

Either through objectification or dominance, these female characters lack full agency because they are deprived of recognition of their own autonomy and are controlled by the dominant ideologies – patriarchy and capitalism. The unwritten rules of these two systems prevent women from assuming their own identity and acting freely – resorting to certain practices that may be undesired, such as motherhood, abortion and prostitution. Thus, to have agency is to be given the status of an individual endowed with reason, rights and responsibilities. Whereas the male characters afford certain responsibilities and roles in the capitalist system, women require the acceptance of men to carry out their practices. As explained by Foucault, “all the modes of domination, submission and subjugation are ultimately reduced to an effect of obedience.” (85) Since the female characters' bodies analysed are appropriated in the social and economic order, the roles imposed on them – mother, virgin and prostitute – prevent them from achieving full agency but for their relationship to men. Only when they accept their individuality as a woman in this context, will power be a means to achieving freedom and pure agency of their performativity, even under the influence of unperceived discursive power.

Conclusion

The plurality of stories brought into life in the literary work studied allowed us to take a deep look into the contemporary topics presented – in particular, how the female body is constructed and how certain underlying ideologies and systems have an impact on women's issues. In other words, this paper intended to deconstruct John Irving's *The Cider House Rules* women's issues presented to understand them in terms of social, gender and productive practices that are part of the complex social context of the Neo-Victorian novel. The complexity of the layered stories in the text contains not only multiple explicit viewpoints – patriarchal and capitalist – but also covert rules of production and usage that have an impact on the individual's agency.

Firstly, in *The Cider House Rules*, women's bodies are given an inferior position in the social and economic order when it comes to their relationship to the male characters. The female body, then, is assigned multiple roles – mother, virgin and prostitute –, “representing the father's monopoly of power” (Irigaray 189). Through the construction of the female body only within these parameters, the social and economic value imposed on women is that of use, consumption and exchange – whereas men are endowed with a “transcendental value” (Irigaray 188). The female characters of John Irving's novel are always positioned in relation to a male counterpart who rules their practices and acts. Candy Kendall is relegated to the role of virginal woman who “is a simple envelope veiling what is really at stake in social exchange” (Irigaray 186), the role in maintaining a relationship between the wealthy family of the Kendalls and the Worthingtons. Her second role is that of mother since she is tied to the use value of her being an instrument and domestic individual marked by the presence of the father – Homer Wells – and the child – Angel Wells. Similarly, due to her dependence to Homer, Melony is condemned to the role of the prostitute woman who serves as the key to the relations among men. She is not seen as a woman capable of performing the same jobs a man

can. Rose Rose's body, furthermore, is equivalent of a commodity in the role of mother and prostitute, since her relationship to man – her father – “can never fully transcend his relations to the “natural” (Irigaray 185). The character of Rose Rose is defined by the characteristics imposed on her as a consequence of constant rape and domination. Mrs Eames, on the other hand, assumes the role of prostitute, whose body is given usage, consumption and exchange value only in the social order.

Consequently, all these four women are imposed certain social and economic roles that show contemporary women's issues. Abortion, motherhood and prostitution are finally the practices that reinforce these women's roles because they derive from the compulsory relationship established towards men. Their relationships with men restrict their own female performativity – in Judith Butler's terms – as their gender identity is constructed on those parameters of usage, consumption and exchange. The coercive domains of the man-woman relationships set in the narrative inscribe multiple meanings where “the body is figured as a mere *instrument* or *medium* for which a set of cultural meanings are only externally related.” (Butler 12). These meanings are constrained by the multiple discourses in which the individuals function, sustaining diverse forms of power.

The Neo-Victorian novel, as studied above, discloses the construction of the past by raising questions of both the present and the past in the piece of art. Under the Neo-Victorian project, John Irving's novel constructs a context and stories where certain characteristics of the Victorian past are translated into their contemporary background: orphanhood, abortion, negroes and industries. These themes are the results of discourses that permeate the characters' stories: capitalism and patriarchy. These two systems are interlocked in the necessity for production and profit, constructing a complex reality determined by the economic factor, in which women are positioned in an inferior place. The “products of conception” – children – and women are the leftovers of the society that support male

dominance, based on the rules set by the capitalist system. A woman would not produce the same profit as a man and thus, are qualified only for domestic labour or prostitution. The female body is, then, conquered by the system itself. Patriarchy – and consequently, capitalism – “endures a power system because it is so well entrenched it hardly needs to be visible, invoking the “natural” it claims to be irrevocable” (Mitchell 65).

The hierarchical gender differences between men and women and the capitalist class structure mutually reinforce each other in a dialectical relationship where women have inferior roles of usage, exchange and consumption. Therefore, “women’s status and function are multiply determined by their role in not only production but also reproduction, the socialization of children and sexuality.” (Putnam Tong 112). Both patriarchal and capitalist ideologies finally view “women as lovers, wives and mothers rather than workers” (Putnam Tong 112) because the context and relationships established along a woman’s life are automatically dependent on men’s conceptions and subjectivity. Socialist feminism further upholds that these systems are intrinsically power dynamics because they exert ultimate power over the “other”.

Being fervently supported by these two systems, the gendered and capitalist practices narrated in the novel trigger power mechanisms of objectification and dominance over women. Mrs Eames’ body is objectified by the laws of nature and sexual oppression set by the phallogocentric society – which restricts women’s performativity and assigns an object status available for men’s usage, consumption and exchange. As for dominance, the characters of Candy Kendall, Rose Rose and Melony show how the female body is dominated by men when it comes to performing well at family and work levels. These characters’ feminine positions are ultimately entrenched by the representation of power that remains within the capitalist and patriarchal systems. Power reinforces the superiority of men over women in the

symbolic roles of virgin, mother and prostitute – constituting valuable and necessary gears of the ruling systems.

In conclusion, in *The Cider House Rules*, the dialectical relationship between capitalism and patriarchal social structures paves the way for certain female roles and gendered practices to reinforce women's inferiority and oppression in the 20th century. The portrayal of the female body and women's issues – such as motherhood, prostitution and abortion – under these systems' parameters of superior entities and inferior ones finally reproduce power-related structures of objectification and dominance. Resorting to these issues in a Neo-Victorian manner, the narrative reveals how agency is gendered and power-driven, governed by the patriarchal and capitalist structures that sanction stringent rules over women's performativity. The overall expression of women's individuality and inferiority can be visible in the words of the author:

Homer Wells could see that several of the women had their faces in their hands, or sat as stonily as the other kind of mourner at a funeral – the one who must assume an attitude of total disinterest or else risk total loss of control.” (Irving 32).

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