Eavan Boland and the Gendered Discourse of Irish Nationalism(*)

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Abstract

This paper examines the intersection of the discourses of nationalism and gender. The study focuses on the Irish case and examines selected poems by the Irish poet, Eavan Boland, in which she attempts to revisit and subvert the oppressive concepts that shape women's identity in the Irish literary tradition. These concepts are attributed to the representation of the nation as female and the gender injustices inherent in the nationalist ideology. The research discusses the foundational theoretical concepts on nationalism and explores the most eminent critical claims on its gendered nature. The paper further examines the post-independence conditions and the nationalist agenda in Ireland as well as the poetic position of Eavan Boland towards nationalist considerations and her intellectual reflections on Irish literary patriarchy and its conventions of the feminine as related to national ideals.

Keywords

Nationalism- Gender- Irish nationalism- Irish poetry- Irish women poets-Eavan Boland

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الملخص

تناقش هذه الورقة البحثية تداخل خطاب القومية وخطاب الجندر. وتركز الدراسة على أيرلندا كمثال وتتناول بالتحليل مجموعة مختارة من قصائد الشاعرة الأيرلندية إيڤان بولاند، والتى تهدف فيها إلى مراجعة وتقويض المفاهيم القمعية التى تشكل هوية المرأة فى التقليد الأدبى الأيرلندى والتى تعتبر نتاجاً لتجسيد المرأة كرمز للأمة فى الأيديولوجية القومية وكيف أسفر هذا التجسيد عن العديد من الممارسات الظالمة ضد النساء. يتعرض البحث لأهم النظريات المؤسسة لمفهوم القومية بشكل عام ويلقى الضوء على أبرز الآراء النقدية التى تطرقت إلى القومية من منظور جندرى. يناقش البحث أيضاً الأوضاع فى أيرلندا والأجندة القومية فى فترة ما بعد الاستقلال كما يتناول موقف إيڤان بولاند الشعرى تجاه الاعتبارات القومية وخواطرها الفكرية تجاه أبوية الأدب الأيرلندى وأعرافه الذكورية فيما يتعلق بالنساء وتحديداً كما رسخته المثل القومية.

الكلمات الدالة

القومية– الجندر– القومية الأيرلندية– الشعر الأيرلندى – شاعرات أيرلنديات– إيڤان بولاند

Introduction

The present research attempts to examine the intellectual reflections of the Irish woman poet, Eavan Boland, towards a national patriarchal literary tradition which perceives women as emblems of nationhood. Boland's poetic energies have been directed towards constructing an outspoken subversive voice within the Irish literary establishment. Her poetic enterprise is governed by an urge to revise and subvert the subjugating notions of women's roles and identity that are directly related to the gendered discourse of Irish nationalism. Of importance to this study is the perception of nationalism in relation to contemporary formation of gender, thus the approach of this research paper focuses on the ideology of nationalism in the way it sanctions "powerful constructions of gender" and the way it is "implicated in gender power."[1] The paper discusses the post-independence conditions and the

nationalist agenda in Ireland in the way they have been inherently oppressive of women. The purpose is to reveal the difficulty of writing as a woman living within powerful structures of patriarchal dominance and, the effect of that on the poetic voice.

The first section of the paper briefs the most important theoretical concepts on nationalism, in other words, its foundational theories and ideology to draw attention to the way they were dismissive of gender relations and their influence in shaping modern national identities. This is followed by an exploration of the most eminent critical claims on the gendered nature of the nationalist discourse, its ideological construction of gender difference and its detrimental effect on women as expressed in the writings of some feminist thinkers and post colonial critics such as Anne McClintock, Nira Yuval Davis, Deniz Kandiyoti, Tamar Mayer, and Kumari Jayawardena. The focal point of the research is Boland's poetic task and how it offers new perspectives by revisiting and subverting classical and national Irish myths and the traditional construction of Irish womanhood.

Nationalism: Foundational Theories and Ideology

Theories of nationalism have widely ranged and competed in their attempts to critically analyze its complexity. Analysts of nationalism have varied in the way they attempted to trace its origins and the way they attributed its force to specific and diverse factors. While nationalists have tended to place the origins of their nations in the distant past and to associate them with primordial times and ethnic roots, most theorists of nationalism have come to regard nations as "modern phenomena." [2] They generally consider nationalism as a response to the problems that accompanied the transition to modernity, such as the advent of industrialization and capitalism, the power of modern communication systems and technology which spread cultural narratives across vast territories, the weakening faith in religion, cultural threats, western colonial claims to political domination, the desire to preserve ethnic ties and sentiments, etc. This part is intended to represent the most crucial

assumptions of the notable scholars of nationalism such as Hans Kohn, K. Deutsch, Carlton J. H. Hayes, C. Geertz, Anthony Smith, Benedict Anderson, Ernest Gellner, E. J. Hobsbawn, John Plamenatz, and Partha Chatterjee.

In his book, *The Idea Of Nationalism: A Study in its Origins and Backgrounds* (1944), Hans Kohn views nationalism as a "state of mind, an act of consciousness."[3] He traces the intellectual origins of nationalism and describes nationalism as an intellectual reaction to the various political, social, and cultural problems that accompanied the eighteenth-century transition to modernity. [4] Kohn refers to the era of the French Revolution which brought about the rise of individualism and the challenge of monarchical authority; consequently, the desacralization of the monarchy threatened to shake the foundations of solidarity in society stimulating a search for "a new order in freedom, based upon the autonomy of the individual", a solution in "the sacred collective personality of the nation." [5] Hence, free individuals sought their right to freedom by pledging allegiance not to kings or social classes, but to the nation; therefore, Kohn's idea of nationalism stemmed from the "Enlightenment's...assertions that the "free individual" forms the fundamental category of politics and society." [6]

In his work, *Nationalism and Social Communication* (1953), Karl W. Deutsch argues that "membership in a people essentially consists in wide complementarity of social communication", thus he attributes the cultural diffusion of nationalism to "the ability to communicate more effectively, and over a wider range of subjects, with members of one large group than with outsiders." [7] For Deutsch, this can be measured by the degree of "social mobilization" which accompanies the transition from traditional societies to industrial societies and which testifies to an integration of dense networks of communication to achieve such mobilization. [8]

As for Carlton J. Hayes, he examines the power of patriotic ideologies and defines nationalism in his post World War I writings as "the

religion of modernity." [9] In his essay: "Nationalism as a Religion", he contends that the rationale of the Enlightenment weakened the faith in Christianity while maintaining the human need to believe in a higher truth or reality, that is why, modern people started to adopt the "nation" as a substitute for religion during and after the era of the French Revolution. [10] It is in this sense, according to Hayes, that modern nations started to possess powers equivalent to those of the medieval Catholic Church since the modern nation-state supplied a "collective faith, a faith in its mission and destiny, a faith in things unseen, a faith that would move mountains. Nationalism is sentimental, emotional, and inspirational." [11] Lloyd Kramer sums up Hayes's view of the "religious sense" of nationalism;

> *Nationalism therefore appropriated religious traditions as they developed their sacred symbols (flags), sacred texts (constitutions, declarations of independence), sacred figures ("founding fathers", virtuous heroes), evil figures (traitors or heretical subversives), sacred places (national monuments, cemeteries), public rituals (national holidays and parades), sense of mission (responsibility to promote national ideals), mobilizing crusades (conflicts with those who oppose the nation's mission) and sense of sacrifice (the nation has been saved by the blood of those who died, so that it might live).* [12]

C. Greetz in his book, *The Interpretation of Culture*, views the nationalist ideology, like any ideology, as a "symbolic strategy." [13] For Greetz, this "strategy" is "a response to strain", "cultural as well as social and psychological strain." [14] In this sense, the construction of a nationalist ideology serves to create a defence against the cultural threats posed by the "dominant other" and also a defence of the "existing culture that needs to be reinvented, precisely to meet this challenge." [15]

Anthony Smith in his analysis of nationalism has insisted on the ethnic origins of nations. In his book, *The Ethnic Origins of Nations* (1986), Smith explains the absence of a break between premodern and modern forms of collective identity. His central claim adopts the idea that

national identities are rooted in "an enduring base of ethnic ties and sentiments" and that "ethnicity forms an element of culture and social structure which persists over time."[16] Thus, modern nations, according to Smith, are "culture-rich communities" that retain "the sentiments, beliefs and myths of ethnic origins and bonds" which contributes to nationalist cultural movements and to aspirations for independent nation states. [17]

Benedict Anderson in his work, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origins and Spread of Nationalism* (1983) gives an account of the cultural origins of nationalism and how ideas about nations circulated in modern societies. According to Anderson, the development of new technologies for distributing information and cultural narratives in the early modern times such as newspapers, books, novels, etc., "created the possibility of a new form of imagined community, which in its basic morphology set the stage for the modern nation." [18] Hence, by reading the narratives of their nations in school books, newspapers, and literature, individuals came to "identify with public communities that were vastly larger than the local worlds in which they lived their daily lives." [19]

Among the prominent theorists who linked nationalism with industrialization and modern economic processes are Ernest Gellner and E. J. Hobsbawn. In his book, *Nations and Nationalism* (1983), Gellner stresses that "The roots of nationalism in the distinctive structural requirements of industrial society are very deep indeed." [20] He explains that for any industrial society to flourish there must be mobile populations, educated work forces and means of communication across long distances between workers and people who must follow the same codes, read the same language, and appropriate the same technologies and it is nationalism that leads to this. [20] Gellner's main theme rests on the assumption that "nationalism provides the integrating structures of language, education, and law that create efficient, modern, industrial economies." [21] Similarly, E. J .Hobsbawn in his work, *Nations and Nationalism since 1780: Programme, Myth, Reality* (1990), emphasizes the material processes and economic utility of nationalism. For Hobsbawn, nationalism played a

major role in the creation of industrial economies and assisted the transition from local to national economies as well as the integration of larger populations and territories into a coherent and unified economic and political establishments. [22]

From a different perspective, John Plamenatz and Partha Chatterjee offer their reflections on nationalism. They suggest that the nationalist ideology especially in the colonial and post colonial contexts has developed in reaction to the dominant Other. Plamentaz spots an ambivalence in the model that is developed by the nationalist ideology to combat its dominator, it involves "rejection of the alien intruder and dominator who is nevertheless to be surpassed by its own standards, and rejection of ancestral ways which are seen as obstacles to progress and yet also cherished as marks of identity." [23] The same model is noted by Partha Chatterjee who examines this dilemma that intellectuals often face; the desire to modernize their nations without following the Western example of modernization. That is why, Chatterjee contends nationalism in this account as a "derivative discourse" which "even as it challenged the colonial claim to political domination, it also accepted the very intellectual premises of 'modernity' on which colonial domination was based." [24]

It is noted that theories of nationalism connected to societies which were subjected to domination arise not from socio-economic and political crises, but from the mechanics which deploy cultural symbols and beliefs by the intellectual elites to re-establish continuity with their authentic culture, given that their greatest challenge would be to adapt tradition to the spirit of the time and use it as a true model for the national destiny of their countries.[25] In this context, "nationalism is precisely invented, as an ideology−and then as a political movement− by an intelligentsia suffering from the West's socio-cultural domination, to enable its members to find in reinterpreted tradition the Western standards, or equivalents to them."[26] This concept of nationalism actually reveals the "Janus-faced" quality of nationalism; progressive and atavistic, "a modern project that melts and transforms traditional attachments in favour of new identities" and "a

reaffirmation of authentic cultural values culled from the depths of a presumed communal past." [27]

Despite the diversity of the accounts of nationalism which focus on intellectual responses to modernity, modernizing economic processes, the power of modern social communications, substituting the faith in transcendental realities, reactions to colonial oppression and domination, ethnic sentiments, or a harking back to a glorious primordial state, it is observed that theories of nationalism are mainly divided into two broad categories: those which consider nations and nationalism as "constructions" or "by-products of the modernization processes" and those which consider them as "givens"; a "continuation of pre-existing ethnic characteristics." [28] Nevertheless, it is noteworthy how the major theories of nations and nationalism tend to ignore including women and gender relations in their analytical discourses as marginal or irrelevant. As Anne McClintock contends; "if the invented nature of nationalism has found wide theoretical currency, explorations of the gendering of the national imaginary have been conspicuously paltry."[29] There are additional insights gained as a result of utilizing gender in the analysis of nationalism. By examining how gender relations are constructed within nationalist discourses and affect the various nationalist projects, theories about gender have urged cultural critics to reexamine the influence of nationalism in constructing "specific notions of both 'manhood' and 'womanhood'." [30] The next section presents the critical reflections of some feminist thinkers and post colonial critics on the ideological construction of gender difference in the nationalist discourse.

Nationalism and Gender

Anne McClintock accentuates in the opening line of her article; "Family Feuds: Gender, Nationalism and the Family" the invented and gendered nature of nationalism; "all nationalisms are gendered, all are invented, and all are dangerous." [31]For her, nations are "historical and institutional practices through which social difference is invented and performed", thus nations depend on "powerful constructions of gender"

and consequently deny women "the same access to the rights and resources of the nation-state" which are given to men. [32] McClintock contends that since nationalism is from the onset constituted as "a gendered discourse", it is hard to understand it without "a theory of gender power."[33] Her major claim in this article is the frequent representation of nations through "the iconography of familial and domestic space" as "motherlands", "fatherlands", and "homelands" in which a symbolic depiction of nations as "domestic genealogies" takes place.[34] The family offers a natural trope for "sanctioning social hierarchy" where "the subordination of woman to man, and child to adult, was deemed a natural fact." [35] It was this mechanism of drawing upon familial terms to depict the different forms of social hierarchy in order to stress social difference as natural and to further legitimize "exclusion and hierarchy within non-familial social formations such as nationalism." [36] The metaphoric depiction of national narratives in familial and domestic terms depended on "the prior naturalizing of the social subordination of women and children within the domestic sphere." [37]Nira Yuval Davis explains how the figure of a woman in that sense became "national embodiment" symbolizing "collective territory" whether "Mother Russia", "Mother Ireland", "Mother India", or in peasant societies; the fertile "Mother Earth", the close association between womanhood, fertility, land, "collective identity", and "future destiny" contributed to constructing women as "the symbolic bearers of the collectivity's identity and honour, both personally and collectively." [38] Deniz Kandiyoti similarly argues that the language of nationalism and its "vocabulary of kinship" "single women out as the symbolic repository of group identity" equating "nationness" with gender, hence merging the "nation/community" with the "selfless mother/devout wife" which triggers an automatic reaction of "coming to her defence and even dying for her." [39]It is not strange then that a common theme in the literature concerning nations is the "feminization of the motherland" and the call for the "nation's sons"; the "heroes", to defend their nation and it is through the imagery of "men" that the nation is represented. [40]

Another fusion of nationalist ideology and gender difference occurs when examining the previously discussed contradictory tendency of nationalism; to go back to an ancestral communal past and to look forward to seek national progress and modernization. According to McClintock, this contradiction is resolved by figuring it as a "natural division of gender" where women are represented as the natural, "atavistic and authentic" part of the national tradition while men, by contrast, represent the "progressive agent of national modernity (forward-thrusting, potent and historic)." [41] As a result, the interplay of nationalist projects and gender relations reveals itself in the dichotomy of the private and public spheres of civil society where women occupy the private sphere which relates primarily to the family and the domestic while men occupy the public sphere which relates to "the political, social, professional, economic, intellectual arenas." [42] The construction of the boundary between the public and the private domains is "a political act in itself" and since nationalism and nations are issues usually discussed as part of the public political sphere, the exclusion of women from the domain has entailed their exclusion from the discourse of nationalism as well. [43]

What happens in nationalist aspirations and priorities is a tactical plan to mobilize women when they are needed in the labour force or "even at the front", then to return them either to domesticity or to subordinate roles in the public sphere when the national emergency ends.[44] In national liberation movements, the need for women's full participation was actually acknowledged and granted, "but women's emancipation was still figured as the hand maiden of the national revolution."[45] To articulate feminist interests at a critical time of the nation's history is to provoke the accusations by local patriarchal groups of treason and association with western imperialism and western feminists. [46] Kumari Jayawardena shows that the concept of feminism especially in Third World countries often evokes "hostile reactions" by traditionalists and political conservatives who regard feminism as "a product of 'decadent' Western capitalism"; that it is of no relevance to women who are not rooted in Western society and that it "alienates women from their culture, religion

and family responsibilities on the one hand, and from the revolutionary struggles for national liberation and socialism on the other." [47] McClintock lucidly expresses how male nationalists problematize the relation between feminism and national struggles and revolutions in post-colonial societies;

> *All too frequently, male nationalists have condemned feminism as divisive, bidding women hold their tongues until after the revolution. Yet feminism is a political response to gender conflict, not its cause. To insist on silence about gender conflict when it already exists, is to cover over, and thereby ratify, women's disempowerment. To ask women to wait until the revolution, serves merely as a strategic tactic to defer women's demands. Not only does it conceal the fact that nationalisms are from the outset constituted in gender power, but, as the lessons of international history portend, women who are not empowered to organize during the struggle will not be empowered to organize after the struggle. If nationalism is not transformed by an analysis of gender power, the nation-state will remain a repository of male hopes, male aspirations and male privilege.* [48]

In the aftermath of nationalist struggles and once independence was achieved, "male politicians", who willingly and consciously mobilized women in the struggle, strived to push them back into their "accustomed place." [49] Tensions then would persist between women's insistence and calls for greater autonomy, especially in the political field, and men's anxieties about losing control. [50]

What usually follows after anti-colonial and nationalist struggles and during the process of integrating women into the modern nation state, is the emergence of forms of control over women. In most cases, the conditions of women have not improved, and in some cases, they have even regressed. Given the centrality of "the myth of "common origin"" in the construction of most ethnic and national collectivities, the best way to

join a collectivity is "by being born into it"; hence came the political implications of the ways women are constructed as "biological reproducers of the nation." [51] Women are sometimes pressured to bear children when the future of the nation is seen to depend on the need for more people, "often primarily for men", as workers and soldiers for the various nationalist, civil and military purposes. [52] Women's reproductive rights were not seen in individualistic terms, but in the light of their membership in the state, which led to "the treatment of women as state property." [53] It is not only their biological roles as reproducers of the nations which made women captives of ethnic and national processes, but mainly their cultural-national roles. According to Yuval-Davis, culture is a rich resource which is always utilized "selectively" in various "ethnic, cultural and religious projects within specific power relations and political discourse." [54] It is precisely at the heart of the cultural constructions of social and national identities that gender relations are articulated. [55] Women are constructed in the role of the "carriers of tradition", the symbolic "border guards" of identity and active "transmitters" of the "national cultural essence."[56] Women serve as "boundary markers" between different ethnic, religious and national groups; they are "the custodians of cultural particularisms" because they assimilate less, both culturally and linguistically, into the wider society.[57] Such roles forced the development of specific codes that define and govern the conduct of a "proper woman"; the symbol of the nation's identity and honour. In this national context, the body becomes an important marker for the nation leading to the control of women's bodies and sexuality which represent the "purity" of the nation that should be guarded and defended since any attack on these bodies becomes "an attack on the nation's men." [58] In fact, the demands of the "nation", as Kandiyoti stresses, is "as constraining as the tyranny of more primordial loyalties to lineage, tribe or Kin", the only difference is that they are "enforced by the state and its legal administrative apparatus" and not by individual patriarchs. [59]

It is surprising how the image and the condition of women were exploited first by western colonizers, then by male nationalists to shape

and control the behaviour of women. Male nationalists accepted and encouraged the participation of women in nationalist movements; however, they set their boundaries of culturally acceptable feminine behaviour and "exert(ed) pressure on women to articulate their gender interests within the terms of reference set by nationalist discourse. Feminism is not autonomous, but bound to the signifying network of the national context which produces it." [60]

The gendered discourse of nationalism which constructs women as responsible for the nation's identity; its boundary markers, reproducers, cultural guardians and transmitters, representatives of the nation's honour and paradoxically, its advancement and its authentic tradition, this national image; undoubtedly, oppresses women and puts them at the mercy and service of a political discourse invented by men and for men. Even the citizenship of women is usually "of a dual nature: on the one hand they are included in the general body of citizens; on the other hand there are always rules, regulations and policies which are specific to them." [61] The next section briefs aspects of nationalism in Ireland and which had a detrimental effect on Irish women together with the intellectual response of Eavan Boland to this nationalist ideology as depicted in her poetry and the thoughts she shares in her prose writings.

Nationalism in Ireland and the Poetic Position of Eavan Boland

Ireland suffered a period of 800 years of British colonial and imperialist intervention that was marked by countless wars, rebellions, uprisings, religious strife, and armed protests for national liberation. The Irish Free State was formed in 1922 after the British government and the leaders of IRA (Irish Republican Army) signed a treaty in 1921 that gave partial independence to 26 counties of Ireland, which came to be known as the Free State of Ireland, and at the same time, retained under British authority and protestant dominance the six counties from the northeast which came to be known as Northern Ireland.[62] The partition was inevitable since it was the condition set by the British government to agree on the formation of an Irish state. [63] The following decades were marked

by political violence, riots and civil war which defined both "the nationalist historical narrative of the Free state" and "the birth of Northern Ireland." [64] The partition divided Ireland into two zones: the North and the Republic, Protestant and Catholic, colonial and post-colonial. [65] For citizens of the North, the Irish republic is a permanent danger to their existence as Protestants and as "Unionists" with the United Kingdom; whereas, for citizens of the Irish Republic (nationalists), the North is "a reminder of the incompleteness of the Irish nation and the unfinished business of colonization." [66] The discourse of Irish nationalism is deeply influenced by the experience of colonialism and the eventual partition since nationalists still feel that the Irish nation is under the British control. Hence, feelings of loss and dispossession still reside within the nation. Irishness is thus constituted as a "split identity" in which Northern Ireland represents "the negation of the Irish nation, and paradoxically its very condition of possibility." [67] The process of Ireland's coming into being as a nation rested on the forsaking of one of its parts. In Ireland, the gendered aspect of nationalism is strongly linked to British colonialism and its lingering effects long before the partition. Colonialism is seen as the symbolic "emasculation" of manhood of a nation or a collectivity; hence, in the "processes of resistance and liberation" an assertion of an "aggressive masculine identity" takes place against the interests of women. [68] Indeed, Irish people in the colonial discourses have been associated with "femininity"; they were deemed politically incapable, emotionally unstable, lacking capacity of government, just like women, thus, British political dominance was justified and legitimized. [69] Nationalists then focused their efforts to restore manhood to the Irish by creating and summoning a Gaelic tradition of knights and warriors to rescue Ireland.

From the earliest known Irish mythologies, the image of "Nation as Woman", as a goddess figure who is "an embodiment of Ireland itself", a symbol of "sovereignty and motherland" has been deeply embedded in the Irish national, cultural, and literary imagination.[70] The mythic representation of Ireland as an old goddess whose sexual union with the right king will restore her youth, radiance, and fertility became central in

Irish culture. [71] It was specifically during the 19th century, when Irish writers strived to establish in their writings a sense of national identity through a revival of Celtic mythic nationalist sentiments, that the Mother Ireland figure served a very precise and definite purpose; "a completely abstract ideal" about "the feminine" and about "nationhood."[72] The most popular modern personification of Ireland in its struggle for independence became present in a poetic form called the "aisling" where the mythical female figure transformed into the concept of Ireland as a "maiden in distress" waiting to be rescued by Irish men.[73] This maiden or "dream woman" became a source of inspiration for Gaelic poets, a "symbol of dispossession and loss" and a "call-to-arms for patriots." [74] The iconic "male glorification of Ireland" as "the mother, the virgin and the female muse" in popular contemporary Irish poetry incited Irish women during the 1980s and 1990s to start "re-creating and re-inscribing a literary place where the repressed female ... might speak."[75] The gendered representation of the nation was heavily established in the Irish literary tradition. Eavan Boland overtly denounces in her prose writings the fusion of the national with the feminine in Ireland;

> *The majority of Irish male poets depended on women as motifs in their poetry... The women in their poems were often passive, decorative, raised to emblematic status. This was especially true where the woman and the idea of the nation were mixed; where the nation became a woman and the woman took on a national posture.* [76]

Boland maintains that many things are lost when women are simply reduced to emblems of nationhood; among them are "human truths of survival and humiliation" as well as "the suggestion of any complicated human suffering." [77] The idea of reclaiming a lost heritage or a glorious past has often resulted in a "silencing (of) the realities of history" in favour of a "romantic mythologizing of the past."[78] The iconic representation of the Irish woman was further controlled by the prominent and highly influential role of the Catholic church in the nationalist cause against

England. [79]

      Given its long history of colonization, religion in the Irish context was interconnected with nationalism and was considered in large measure a form of resistance to British imperialism. [80] As a declaration of the separation from Protestant Britain, the new Irish Southern state, whose population is mainly Catholic, constructed a "Catholic social order" that would effectively eliminate centuries of British Protestant domination. [81] In seeking to secure Catholic moral codes and the welfare of the Irish State, Irish women were legally limited to the domestic sphere. The Constitution of 1973, the Republic's first Constitution, in accordance with Catholic teachings, banned divorce, established the family as the basic unit of society and delineated women's social position within the home. [82] The text of the Constitution "posited an equivalence between 'woman', 'the home' and motherhood" and legally limited the access of married women to work outside of the home; thus explicitly and directly linking the "cooperation of Irish women as mothers and hearth-keepers" to the successful attempts of Irish male nationalists at building the nation "in the public spheres of politics, economy and war."[83] This position of Irish women was explicitly expressed by Article 41 of the 1937 Constitution:

> *2.1 In particular the State recognizes that by her life within the home, woman gives to the State a support without which the common good cannot be achieved.*

> *2.2 The State shall, therefore, endeavour to ensure that mothers shall not be obliged by economic necessity to engage in labour to the neglect of their duties in the home.* [84]

This article is an important manifestation that reveals how in the post-colonial context and during the modern nation-state formation, an assertion of a nationalist rigid masculine identity took place to counter the British colonizer stereotyping of the Irish as feminine, this assertion is to a great extent achieved by the state control of women and the imposition of "a very definite feminine identity" that is restricted to the domestic domain. [85]

In fact, the fusion of nationalism and religion in Ireland has sternly burdened the Irish woman. The connection between Mother Ireland and Virgin Mary was inevitable in which "the central female figure of Catholicism becomes combined with the foremost symbol of nation" stressing the religious as well as the political importance of Mother Ireland in the Irish "collective imagination." [86] The image of Virgin Mary was promulgated as "Queen of Ireland", thus fusing national and religious iconography. [87] As a result, links between Virgin Mary and the women of Ireland were established in which women were encouraged to manifest and represent the ideal of Mary in their lived lives; therefore, issues including female sexuality, female behaviour, ideal motherhood and female body boundaries are "intensely disciplined" to fit "Mary's symbolic content." [88] Virgin Mary has been posited as a symbol of the Irish nation's moral purity, hence it is not surprising that the national politics in Ireland has been largely preoccupied since the mid 1980s with "highly gendered and sexualized political issues such as contraception, abortion and divorce" which are viewed as a direct threat to the moral order of the Irish nation. [89]

It was also natural that Irish literary conventions and the body of canonical Irish literary texts that were produced over the centuries and under the influence of such nationalist and religious imperatives, especially in the modern era, would sanction the reflection of the aforementioned ideals of the feminine in relation to Ireland. The mythic representation and iconic male glorification of Ireland as a mother goddess, a pure virgin and an inspiring female muse had complicated the lives of both ordinary women and women poets in Ireland. Eavan Boland has extensively and elaborately manifested— in her prose writings as well as in her poetry— the constraining burdens of the Irish poetic inheritance which is powerfully influenced by the nationalist projections of the idea of a nation on the women of Ireland.

For Boland the worst impact of the nationalist discourse in Ireland had been the exclusion of women from Irish history and literary canon.

Her central point of focus has been in "bringing living women to occupy the space formerly occupied by mythic figures" and emphasizing the dilemma of women poets within the patriarchal literary establishment in Ireland. [90] She directly addresses the national muse or Mother Ireland who is the cause of the plight of real flesh and blood women:

> *Make your face naked,*
>
> *Strip your mind naked,*
>
> *Drench your skin in a woman's tears.*
>
> *I will wake you from your sluttish sleep.*
>
> *I will show you true reflections, terrors.*
>
> *You are the muse of all our mirrors.*
>
> *Look in them and weep.* [91]

Boland's central aim is to subvert this male tradition, male mythology, and male muse and to draw attention to the inherent injustice they have caused. Boland's poetry strives to find new ways of expressing old mythologies that can liberate women from their former definition as silent muses. In Ireland, female identity has been presented through "tropes of the passive, virginal, if not desexualized, woman provided by nationalist politics and the Catholic religion, an entire canon of Mother Ireland and Mother Mary musings." [92] Evans argues that a woman's poet project is not limited to "resistance and revision" but is also concerned with "revival" and hence, a total rejection of nationality and tradition is both "impossible and undesirable."[93] She suggests poetry beckons towards history "whilst also working towards a new future" in an attempt to reach through history and tradition to an "other space, a going beyond the tradition whilst in dialogue with it in an attempt to create and partake of a new one." [94]

This is more or less the poetic vocation Boland aims at, she does not wish to separate herself from her country's national and literary tradition or abandon her heritage. She refutes the passive, stereotypical, and imaginary images of women in Irish poetry, and decides to draw instead a truthful portrayal of ordinary women" who have first-hand

knowledge of pain and loss." [95] Her aim is to resist women's "former reductive inscription" within Irish poetry and revise "their position with relation to the national tradition." [96] She clearly states her artistic mission in relation to her national consciousness:

> *If there really was an emblematic relation between the defeats of womanhood and the suffering of a nation, I need only prove the first in order to reveal the second. If so, then Irishness and womanhood, those tormenting fragments of my youth, could at last stand for each other.* [97]

The most puzzling concept for Boland resides in the word "nation", the "pageantry and tension behind the idea of a nation." [89] The melody of patriotism, the songs of protest and remembrance, the ballads, and the speeches which were active principles inviting admiration, were all male. They were actions that belonged to men, dreamed by men, and carried out by men. Boland wonders at the displeasing limits of the Irish idea of a nation:

> *If I wanted to feel the power of a nation as well as its defeat, then I would take on the properties of the hero. I would raid a barracks for arms or write a note the night before my execution under the bluish sputter of a gas flame. I would crack my head against a pavement north of the Liffey as I fell, wounded to death by British bullets. And as soon as my head−a male thick-necked head− touched the stone, I would dissolve into refrains and stanzas. I would pass from hero to apotheosis.* [99]

This glorifying and romanticised image of the male persona was not simply limited to the right of action, but of poetic expression as well. There were scarcely any women present in the cause of Ireland, any women in the back streets, and any women to sing or die for Ireland. There were only passive heroines, queens, virgins, and mothers who were "invoked, addressed, remembered, loved, regretted", and "died for." [100] Boland's active intention to pursue her passion and become a poet collides with her feminine identity as represented by the lore of the idea of a nation:

I was ready to weep or sing or recite the in cause of Ireland. To do any of that, however,... I would have to give up the body and spirit of a woman. If I chose to keep them, then my tears would dry out, my mouth would close, my words would disappear. I was restive and disappointed at the choices offered to me. [101]

Boland wonders at the absence of this confusion for the male poet who can easily obtain recognition, artistic determination, and most importantly, a place in Irish poetry. On Yeats' poetry Eavan writes:

Before he even lifted his pen, his life awaited him in poetry. He was Irish. A man. A nationalist. A disappointed lover...The values were set. I was to learn how hard it would be to set different values [102]

There was indeed a growing sense of oppression which went side by side her admiration of the power of the exhilarating imagery and language of such poets of her national literature; "the accepted masters of the tradition" who handled the feminine image as the silent, static, and passive parts of their poems. [103]

Boland does not let her disappointment hold her pen, blur her sense of direction and purpose, or shut her from attempts at belonging to her country's powerful narrative, in "Anna Liffey" she says:

Make of a nation what you will
Make of the past
What you can-

There is now
A woman in a doorway.

It has taken me
All my strength to do this.

Becoming a figure in a poem.
Usurping a name and a theme. [104]

Indeed it has taken her all her strength to write, to choose a theme, to usurp a name in a male-dominated craft and to reconcile and integrate her womanhood, her body, her life, and her daily experiences into the story of her nation.

Boland greatly believes that Irish poetry for an aesthetic purpose traded in worn out emblems that fused womanhood and nationhood in an inevitable way:

> *It was difficult to deny that something was gained by poems which used the imagery and emblem of the national muse. Something was gained, certainly, but only at an aesthetic level. While what was lost occurred at the deepest, most ethical level, and what was lost was what I valued...−human truths of survival and humiliation−...Gone was the suggestion of any complicated human suffering. Instead you had the hollow victories, the passive images, the rhyming queens.* [105]

What was lost on the ethical level cannot be redeemed, it simplified women, denied them complexity of feelings and aspirations, distorted their reality and their terrible survival and masked their true suffering. It was all done for an aesthetic gain. This gain deformed the ethical relation between image and imagination where the image is supposed to be a truth and not just an ornament or an ideal. In "Triade for the Mimic Muse", Boland directly addresses the national muse in an angry tone:

> *I know you for the ruthless bitch you are:*
> *Our criminal, our tricoteuse, our Muse−*
> *Our Muse of Mimic Art.*
> *...*
> *You try to lamp the sockets of your loss:*
> *The lives that famished for your look of love.*
> *Your time is up. There's not a stroke, a flick*
> *Can make your crime cosmetic.*
> *...*
> *How you fled*

The kitchen screw and the rack of labour,
The wash thumbed and the dish cracked,
The scream of beaten women,
The crime of babies battered,
The hubbub and the shriek of daily grief
That seeks asylum behind suburb walls−
A world you could have sheltered in your skirts−
And well I know and how I see it now,
The way you latched your belt and itched your hem
And shook it off like dirt. [106]

Boland's anger and indignation are exhibited in the diction and the tone she uses to address Mother Ireland or the national muse; "You slut. You fat trout" and "ruthless bitch". Boland no longer accepts the standards that are set by the muse, the imaginary ideal that ignored or "fled" the specific details of women's lives. She rebukes the muse and confronts her with her "crime", her failure and betrayal of reality that cannot be concealed or made "cosmetic". The way the muse's false representation misses true experiences of "beaten women" and "babies battered", of "the scream" and "the shriek of daily grief", the muse missed a whole other world than that of the warriors and mythical queens and "shook it off like dirt" in favour of an idealized image. Boland maintains that the image of women was violated, instead of being witnesses of suffering, ugly realities and truth, they were reduced to ornamental figures:

There is a recurring temptation for any nation, and for any writer who operates within its field of force, to make an ornament of the past, to turn the losses to victories and to restate humiliations as triumphs. In every age language holds narcosis and amnesia for this purpose. But such triumphs in the end are...corrupt. If a poet does not tell the truth about time, his or her work will not survive it. [107]

Boland contends that it should have been the poets' imperative to break the silence of those women in their poetry. A great injustice that was done to

Irish women has been in the poets' frequent using and reusing of them as icons or figments in poetry for the sake of "a temporary aesthetic manoeuvre." [108]

In her poem "Mise Eire", the title literally means " I am Ireland" in Gaelic, but when read aloud it echoes "Misery", "the sound of pain."[109] The poem could be a response to Patrick Pearse's poem "I am Ireland" which utilized the figure of Mother Ireland to reveal feelings of shame at "bearing 'children that sold their mother'." [110] Patrick Pearse was a nationalist rebel leader who was executed in 1916 by the British authorities, his feminized representation of Ireland is rejected by Boland in her poem. [111] Boland begins her poem by saying "I won't go back to it−/ my nation displaced/ into old dactyls", by rejecting the "old dactyls" that romanticise history as well as rejecting "the songs/ that bandage up the history,/ the words/ that make a rhythm of the crime" and consequently, beautify ugliness. She will not approach her poetry that way, she will not pursue the male muse. Boland then offers realistic versions of flesh and blood Irish women:

> *No I won't go back.*
> *My roots are brutal:*
>
> *I am the woman−*
> *a sloven's mix*
> *of silk at the wrists,*
> *a sort of dove-strut*
> *in the precincts of the garrison−*
>
> *who practises*
> *the quick frictions,*
> *the rictus of delight*
> *and gets cambric for it*
> *rice-coloured silks*
>
> *I am the woman*

in the gansy-coat
on board the "Mary Belle"
in the huddling cold,
holding her half-dead baby to her
as the wind shifts East
and North over the dirty
water of the wharf

mingling the immigrant
guttural with the vowels
of homesickness. [112]

"I won't go back to it" is an announced break with the "brutal" trends of nationalist poetry that provided dishonest depictions of Irish women and feasted on worn out feminine icons. Boland's poem "de-romanticize(s)" Pearse's creation of a feminine figure and his "conventional heroic view of Mother Ireland." [113] Instead, she offers an alternative truthful depiction of a prostitute "who practices the quick frictions" with soldiers in exchange for cambric and silk and the "immigrant"; the impoverished mother on board ship with "her half-dead baby" cradled in her arms as she leaves Ireland. The two women in the poem stand for "the marginalized, silenced women of myth and art." [114] Eavan Boland indeed foregrounds not just the misrepresentation, but the absence of women from Irish history: "It's our alibi/ for all time/ that as far as history goes/ we were never/ on the scene of crime." [115] Women's lives are unrecorded and particularly the female experiences within the ordinary and the domestic domain, they remained untrodden areas since they were deemed inconvenient for grand poetry.

To be recognized and accepted as a poet and to have a voice in Irish literature, Boland finds herself facing a poetic ordeal. She is at crossroads; either to write her life mythically into the Irish poem in the way dictated by tradition or to disrupt the values encoded in the relationship between subject and object in the Irish poem. One of those values is the authority of the poet, an authority that she thinks she can only grasp by adherence to

her identity as a woman:

> *Given the force of the national tradition and the claim it had made on Irish literature, the political poem stood in urgent need of a subversive private experience to lend it true perspective and authority. An authority which, in my view, could be guaranteed only by an identity−and this included a sexual identity−which the poetic tradition, and the structure of the Irish poem, had almost stifled.* [116]

However, it was not that easy given that the Irish poetic tradition was male and bardic in formation. It is true that it gave women poets in Ireland a powerful inherited history and language construct, but it operated as "a powerful colonizer" marking out "value systems"; "it politicized certain realities and devalued others." [117] One of the devalued realities was the proposition that the life of a woman as a theme was not fit for the purpose and importance of the political poem. That was something Boland had taken as her poetic task; a momentous disruptive transit in the appropriation of theme and of authority of the Irish poem. In "Envoi", Boland centers the main theme of the poem on her relationship with her muse:

> *My muse must be better than those of men*
> *Who made theirs in the image of their myth.*
> *The work is half-finished and I have nothing*
> *but the crudest measures to complete it with.*
>
> *Under the street-lamps the dustbins brighten.*
> *The winter flowering jasmine casts a shadow*
> *outside my window in my neighbor's garden.*
> *These are the things that my muse must know.*
>
> *She must come to me. Let her come*
> *to be among the donnée, the given.*
> *I need her to remain with me until*
> *the day is over and the song is proven.*

...

What I have done I have done alone
What I have seen is unverified.
I have the truth and I need the faith.
It is time I put my hand in her side

If she will not bless the ordinary,
if she will not sanctify the common,
then here I am and here I stay and then am I
the most miserable of women. [(118)]

Boland's muse "must be better than those of men". Boland seems to be encouraging herself to have faith in her muse and overcome the doubts concerning her muse's power. Her work is "half finished" and her poetic tools are of "the crudest measures". Her muse "must know" the most ordinary things surrounding women's everyday existence: "street lamps", "dustbins", "jasmine" and all the things that were traditionally dismissed as "women's themes." [(119)]"She must come to (her)" because the muse is "given", it is a gift and not something to be taken or earned, the muse must come to help Boland realize and make vivid what she and other women experienced until "the song is proven". Boland makes clear the absence of a precedent or a revealed example that would guide her in her task; "what I have done I have done alone" but "it is time" Boland would call upon her muse to help her "bless the ordinary" and "sanctify the common" or else she would be "the most miserable of women". Boland's muse must "bless" and "sanctify" her poetic variations on traditional themes or else Boland will remain trapped by the male tradition of that muse and hence will remain a "miserable" woman poet. Boland seeks a poetry that would lend a new vision to the dailiness and ordinariness of women's lives. She wants to recover those lives that have been previously marginalized from Ireland's historical narratives.

Conclusion

Nationalism is a force capable of shaping, defining and directing people, political action and cultural identities. Its power is equivalent to

that of religion and is directly related to the aspirations of nations for independence and progress. However, most theories of nationalism were dismissive of the way it constructs gender difference and determines gender relations and roles. In the Irish context, the discourse of nationalism is vehemently influenced by British colonialism where attempts to reclaim a glorious lost heritage and to revive Celtic nationalist sentiments led to a gendered representation of the nation that became heavily established in the Irish literary tradition. Boland takes to task the iconic glorification of Ireland in Irish literature as female; a goddess, a mother, a virgin and a female muse. Such representation disregards the truths of suffering and survival and complicated the lives of Irish women excluding them from Irish history and literary canon. Her poetic task has been directed towards emphasizing the dilemma of Irish women poets who strive to find their place within the patriarchal literary establishment in Ireland. Her aim is to revisit, revise and resist the position of women as depicted in the national tradition by integrating a truthful portrayal of ordinary women and the realistic version of their daily experiences into the story of her nation. Her choice of theme, her authority as a poet claiming the subject position and not the traditional object one and her adherence to her identity as a woman allow her to disrupt the silent, stereotypical, passive and mythical images of women in Irish poetry and to subvert the purpose and the importance of the nationalist poem.

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