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MOVING BEYOND HEART & HEARTH: FINDING WOMEN IN IRISH LITERATURE

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Although women have reaped the suffering caused by war, they gained none of its glory or remembrance, in much of the recorded history, and in public history. In public consensus, women and war were discordant elements and the arena was viewed as purely masculine. The world of women was restricted between heart and hearth and any extension of this female space had to be socially defined and accepted. This forced absenteeism on women was echoed in literature where women mostly served as stock characters or catalysts to the main male protagonist. The presence of women in the literary heritage of war was governed by extremes: either total denial and shadowing of their roles or shy acceptance and foregrounding. Nevertheless, as war progressed, this situation of marginality changed and women forced their way into the front appearing in a variety of literary images, ranging from imaginative

and mythical to actual and active characters, such as: Mother Ireland, the auxiliary, the victim, the fanatic and terrorist.

C.L. Innes in *Woman and Nation in Irish Literature and Society 1880-1935* argues that only a small proportion of literary studies focus on the struggle of Irish women. "Irish historians and literary scholars have generally given at best a passing mention to those women most actively involved in the political and literary movements, and have found it difficult to include them in their overall narratives of the nation." (Innes: 1993, 2-3) Some critics claim that men have written women and their causes out of the Irish history and women did not put a fight to claim their position (Ward: 1991, 4-7). Their attitude was reconciliatory and their presence developed through the years from symbolic to actual presence. Maud Gonne, the famous Irish feminist and founder of *Inghinidhenah Eireann* (Daughters of Ireland) in 1900 as the female counterpart of the Gaelic League wrote her play "Dawn" in 1904, presenting Irish femaleness in the cloak of motherhood in need of protection. The representation of female receptiveness of male sacrifice is not any different from that of Yeats in *Cathleen ni Houlihan*, in which the bridegroom sacrifices his life for Mother Ireland. "Dawn" is the story of a wife whose husband is killed by the English, and whose son plans to avenge his death. The leave-taking scene emphasizes the sacrifice of Irish men for the

sake of their mothers, the symbolic Mother Ireland. Gonne's feminist stand did not contribute to altering the national representation of women and their roles.

> "Mother, forgive me," he begs.
> let me too die for you…
> I have vengeance to take for all that you suffered."
> (Gonne: 1970, 73-84)

Her play was a joinder to Yeats' play *Cathleen ni Houlihan* (1902) from the female point of view. The play is inspired by a woman icon, co-written by Lady Gregory, with Maud Gonne, the famous female politician, cast as the heroine. The play pictures Ireland as a poor old woman calling on a peasant family preparing for their son's wedding. She complains of her lost fields and killed sons. Her words bewitch the bridegroom into following her and abandoning his bride. As she leaves the house, she is transformed into a beautiful young woman, rejuvenated by the blood of that youth. Although this image of Ireland as a devourer, a 'vampira' thriving on the blood of her sons, is not emotionally and visually appealing, the play had a massive propaganda effect on prospective fighters.

Yet another critical trend argues that Irish women are presented as the core concept of Irishness claiming that Ireland has always been a woman (O'Brien: 1976, 11). Irish women are always present but their presence

oscillated between reality and myth, static and dynamic roles, self immolation and self emulation.

In the native Gaelic Irish tradition, the basic concept of sovereignty is seen to be passed on to an Irish king by a sovereignty goddess. "The documentation suggests that in pre-Christian Ireland, the goddess was conceived…as the centre of an elaborate ritual…surrounding the validation of the king…The ultimate phase in the archaeology of this figure, from the seventeenth century on is the appearance of Ireland allegorized as a woman in literature." (Johnson and Cairns: 1991, 3) In relation to literary inspiration, women serve as muses and Ireland is pictured as a celestial figure in the image of the 'spearbhean' (*spéirbhean*) woman (literary, the skywoman), evoked by poets as a symbol of dispossession and loss (Mills: 1995, 69-88). Moreover, typical de-sexualized femininity and motherhood is made divine and religious in the Irish wars against the British. Ireland is pictured as Motherland, Virgin Mary waiting at the hearth of her home to be freed by her sons from British occupation. '"Shrieking Viragoes" and 'aggressive Amazons' are specifically discouraged, and it is emphasized that Irish women are not required to plunge into the vortex of public life (Ap hywel: 1991, 24-25)." This image of women as 'lacking but special,' is highly criticized by feminists for being a means of further female subjugation.

In the nineteenth and early twentieth century, Irish women have mainly been domesticated and confined to performing household chores and family nurturing. At this stage, the image of the mother is coupled with religious sacredness. The veneration of mothers and motherhood and the notion of the sanctity of women come as a social reflection of the religious esteem devoted to the Virgin Mary in Ireland. Mothers are expected to follow in her footsteps sacrificing their sons to redeem Ireland from occupation. The Virgin Mary is seen as yielding, gentle, receptive, tolerant, and the symbol of celibate devotion. This modesty and piety are expected of women only within their societies, but in relation to war, they are expected to be dogmatic, prejudiced and raise their children to be so. The concept of the 'Marian-type' and image of the Virgin Mary has been adapted into a closely related image of Virgin Ireland linked to Mother Ireland. The connection is the subject matter of numerous epics showing that "while Virgin Ireland gets raped and pitied, Mother Ireland translates pity into a call to arms and vengeance…Traditionally, it is her sons whom Mother Ireland recruits and whose manhood she tests (Cahalan: 1999, 180)." On an official level, there also developed a national preoccupation with the maternal, culminating in the female recognition in the 1937 Irish constitution that a woman's natural and proper place is in the home as a full time wife and mother.

This tendency of personifying Ireland as a woman enlarges to accommodate a number of vulnerable female figures, maidens as well as mothers. The most renowned and publicly adored are *Cathleen ni Houlihan, Dark Rosaleen*, and *Shan Van Vocht (*Johnson and Cairns: 1991, 4). The choice of the female sex as emblem of the national Irish struggle has been intentional to incite the typical male instinct of the protector.

This technique of viewing women as special and mythical is judged by feminists as crippling to the status of women, an appropriation of femininity to enlarge on masculinity, a strengthening of the patriarchal stranglehold, and a sign of their invisibility, since it renders them unsuitable to claim power or perform roles other than those permitted to them. As Johnson and Cairns note, "the notion that myths are timeless does not relieve the anxiety caused by such mythical female figures to feminists who wish to claim the right to shape, reshape society, and put an end to repetitive variations that are reductive to women (Cahalan: 1999, 162)." Nonetheless, women's emancipation is delayed and retarded because "not all Irish women resisted these patriarchies. And for some, mainly from the North, *Cathleen* flourished abundantly (Innes: 1993, 9)."

Women did not join the operational scene as fighters in the early stages of the Irish revolution, primarily be-

cause of the nature of the Irish war. Battles took place not in a defined open war zone; it was mostly based on guerrilla fighting. Men had to travel to remote places to carry out attacks or meet the enemy on their grounds. Victorian mannerism and religious morality also discouraged women from attaining physical bodily strength that would make them look or act as men. The image of the 'warring' woman was specifically discouraged by society in favour of another image, which is the Girl at the Gaol Gate . The sole war effort required of women is to care for, honour and obey their men folk and produce more male warriors. Irish men made sure that women would be kept at bay away from the war field. They were subconsciously responding to allegations of being a feminine and childlike race, thus suitable for control by the masculine Englishmen. The Irish hostility to the foe helped develop the resistance to militarized femininity (Innes: 1993, 9).

With the escalation and militarization of war, and the appearance of military organizations in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, nationalism and war support became *asensuscommunis*. Women started their revolutionary involvement on a community service basis. That women were committed to the revolution was popularly non-negotiable. Lady Morgan testifies to this state by stressing that "politics can never be a woman's science, but patriotism must naturally be a woman's sentiment (Sydney: 1960, x)." The

absence of men from the household has been exploited as a pretext women use to get involved in the political struggle. Monica McWilliam uses the term “accidental activism” to describe the relation of Irish women to war. This activism "is born of immediate experience of social injustice, rather than a consequence of pre-existing ideological belief” (McWilliam: 1995, 13-15). Women's participation is seen as a sign of loyalty to their men, not valued for its own worth, but as a compensation for the genuine roles of men.

Even under Sinn Fein and *CummannamBan*, the female branch of the IRA, women remained the underdogs assigned minor jobs including being scouts, dispatch riders, intelligence workers and nursing aides. Letters to Nora published by Sinn Fein, as a part of its literature directed to Irish women, chose what it thought to be an objective frame in the form of female exchange of experience and defined women’s patriotism in relation to domesticity. An elder lady addressing Nora, a representative of the younger generation, says that “no Irish woman can afford to claim a part in the public duties of patriotism until she has fully satisfied the claims her home makes on her (Banerjee: 2012, 47-48)”. Another letter describes Irish women as no more than “fit helpmates” (Ibid) to strong willed Irish men.

The address by Agnes O'Farrelly, a founding member of the organization, states that "each rifle we (women) put in their hands (men) will represent to us a bolt fastened behind the door of some Irish home to keep out the hostile stranger. Each cartridge will be a watchdog to fight the sanctity of the hearth" (Ward: 1980, 101).

The noticeable development in women's roles came during the Troubles. Men were killed, arrested, and interred for years which forced women to the fore of the resistance. "The visible face of republicanism, at that time, was often female" (Ryan: 2004, 46). Females and femininity became an asset rather than a liability to the revolution. '[F]emaleness' was made use of by the male leadership as a decoy, a camouflage for men's operations, a seductress and a caterer. Some revolutionary roles are simply an outgrowth to domestic roles. E. MacDonald in *Shoot the Women* First gives an account of the success of the "female-equals-innocent" (MacDonald: 1991, 21) strategy, when women in the nineteen seventies smuggled bombs into a fortified Belfast city centre by placing them underneath babies' prams. Women also provided "much of the material support necessary to any guerrilla army … women and children often accompanied male rebels to insurgent camps … While encamped, women cooked for the rebels and sewed their uniforms and ammunition pouches" (Cannavan: 2004, 33). However, this rise in responsibility occurred with the permission of the war

patriarchy. Other suffrage projects concerning women's equality were accused by nationalists as unpatriotic, while Ireland was still under British rule. Women were quieted and the suffrage was postponed until liberation, so that an Irish male parliament would grant Irish women their rights.

This not a favourable attitude towards the militarization and politicization of women created Irish and British stereotypes of women. Patrick Magee surveys over one hundred novels in his book *Gangsters or Guerrillas?* proving that the bulk of the Irish literary output promotes, conforms, and is informed by a view of the leading political discourse, in this case, the male leadership of the Irish war (2002). The image of Irish womanhood was doubly victimized, when the British also churned out clichéd figures "to portray Northern Ireland women as passive victims of paramilitary mobsters or bomb throwing viragoes and godmothers of hate" (Steel: 2004. 55) However, the reported and recorded accounts of women's roles during the Irish war, from the late nineteenth century to the late twentieth century, do not do justice to their actual performance. Louise Ryan and Margaret Ward explain that due to the inconsistent nature of guerrilla fighting and the constant raids on houses of activists, war supporters and civilians, many valuable documents were destroyed sometimes by women themselves to avoid incrimination and persecution. There was a persistent awareness

of patriarchal conspiracy and of men's reluctance to emphasize women's experience out of fear that women would not be content to act as mothers and wives after the war.

WOMEN OF THE TROUBLES: FROM HEROIC TO PATHETIC

The literature of the Troubles is rooted in social realism unlike the revivalist literature of the Easter Rising and Anglo-Irish War. While the latter reverts backward to Irish history and mythology to establish the unique Irish character and country, the former adopts a writing technique of communicability and identification by relating real life incidents, familiar to the intended audience nationally and the informed audience internationally, such as the Falls Road Curfew, the Derry human rights marches, the Belfast bombings, the Bogside Battle, the Shankill Butchers etc. By highlighting such incidents, the literature of the Troubles seeks to enliven the memory of the audience regarding their bloodiness and anarchism to guide the readership to further rejection and opposition to their possible regeneration in the future. The characters of the literature of the Troubles are not the epic heroes and heroines of the revival with supreme power, intellect and determination. They are mostly working class citizens trying to battle with everyday life, and come to terms with their own personal war tragedy. In the literature

of the Troubles, republican and warring women are sometimes depicted with ridicule and belittlement and accused of terrorism and fanaticism. The literature of this period tries to promote the model of Irish women free from the shackles of the nationalist ideology and imagery, which are pictured to have contributed to their victimization and delay of emancipation.

In *Give Them Stones* by Mary Beckett, the authoress changes the pathetic female situation into a heroic one where women claim agency as initiators of action rather than recipients. The novelist calls for empowerment and emancipation. Martha, the heroine of Beckett's novel, whose early life lacks political interest, changes to become a member of an unorganized resistance by house wives in her area. A member of the working class, she grows to witness a case of gender role reversal right in her own home, where her mother is the bread winner of the family, while her father takes care of the children before being interred in prison, prior to his death. Early in her childhood, she notices how the Catholics suffer from social and economic discrimination. At school, being a Catholic, she finds difficulty gaining a scholarship. She has grown to feel that "Catholics were only fit for back streets and bog lands...I didn't think we were inferior except in wealth and opportunity" (Beckett: 1987, 46).

Martha's character defies definition or branding. She is a character in the making, developing until the last page of the novel. She, like many women, suffers from an identity crisis unable at first to associate herself with any of the social or political trends. Through her, Beckett argues that women can be nationalists and true to their country and people, but their nationalism should be founded on respect for women's roles and characters, through which women can maintain their views and independence. Martha dreams of a united Ireland and changing the living conditions of Catholics, but she detests violence and bloodshed. She refuses the dictation of any party and the image of heroism, and insists on being identified as a female worker, with an independent entity (Sullivan: 2000, 227-49). Responding to the British soldiers on her republican loyalties, she says: "I shrugged. I was going to be a heroine but instead I said, 'I am a home baker" (Beckett: 1987, 144).

The importance of Beckett's novel is that it essentially describes Irish women as peace loving home makers, and justifies their involvement in violence as retaliation for prior violence and injustice. Beckett uses real life situations such as the Falls Road Curfew in 1970 Belfast, when houses were searched and destroyed, with men killed and arrested to explain to the audience the resistance actions that may seem to them as unfounded violence, to explain that Irish women had the right to believe and behave the way they do. Martha

describes how she could not believe that Protestants could burn Catholics out of their homes: "I tried not to believe it. I said it was a carried story…Then we saw the fighting in Derry and had to believe it…I saw all those houses going up in blazes and children crying and women screaming…I was in a rage…I was crying, first with vexation and then with pride when a whole army of women with bread and milk came marching down from other streets …pushed the soldiers away, shouting at them to go home to England and learn manners. They handed the food into the besieged houses" (Beckett: 1987, 118-21). Still, she turns her back on the IRA, and refuses to pay protection money in protest at some bloody actions, after which her home and bakery are burned by IRA members. At the end, the heroine asserts her heroism verbally by saying: "When they ask for bread, don't give them crackers as does the church, and don't like the state, tell them to eat cake, explain that man cannot live by bread alone and give them stones" (Beckett: 1987, 148).

Martha tries to achieve economic independence from her family and husband by opening her own home bakery to cater for the needs of her family without asking her idle husband for a penny. She is a diligent worker; aware of money value and despite her need, she chooses to give her neighbours free bread. Her national solidarity gets mixed up with her financial project. She boycotts British soldiers, refusing to sell them

bread, and refusing accusations of affiliation with the IRA. This lack of a clear-cut ending on the part of the authors, these mercurial characters, and justification of the challenges facing them are a call on readers to be non-judgmental and non-critical about women in war and at war.

In this novel, there appears to be a systematic representation of the Troubles as a ruthless and unjustified carnage, victimizing both men and women. The repressive nature of war and its social reverberations are seen to have spared no one. It shaped the modern Irish character with the contradictory effect of emancipating and frustrating the efforts of Irish women and men towards recognizing selfhood outside the boundaries of nationhood. Women were doubly victimized by men and male orchestrated wars and their literary representations.

CONCLUSION

Albert Camus in the title of a collection of essays on revolution divides the roles of humans in such times either into victims or executioners (Camus: 2008). While much of the identity and characterization of women identify with the first, they rarely act in the capacity of the latter.

In Irish literature, men writing the war story present women in religious, mythical and sacrificial nature, the

symbol for which men fight. The female image written by men is that of the saint or the Satan praised endlessly for acting as mothers, wives and war supporters, or condemned limitlessly if they breach the social norms. The picture is less detectable in the female story. Some Irish female writers do not defend the position of their female ancestors, but turn their back on all the heritage of war history and concentrate on writing the women's plight as war goes on.

Irish literature promoted a familial and maternal ideal of Irish women. The position of Irish women in war and literature is contested between emphasizing women's agency in war and stressing their marginality. The recording of Irish war literature has remained as patriarchal as war itself. Men articulate women's war experience and participation as befitting to the maintenance of the social order of men leading the war arena and women as followers. In the later stages of Irish revisionism, the roles and images of women are even harder to investigate. Irish women writers renounced nationalism and its package of 'ready to comply' women characters. They developed a sense of irony towards the cult of the hero and heroine. Mythical icons as *Cathleen ni Houlihan, Shan Van Vocht, Dark Rosaleen*, and the early feminists like Maud Gonne and Constance Markievicz were either ignored, criticized or replaced by the image of the ordinary Irish women, suffering from social injustice inflicted upon them by the patriarchy and the bloody inheritance of war.

NOTES

1. *Dark Rosaleen* (Roisin Dubh, Black Rose) symbol of the beautiful Irish Maiden, an Irish poem translated by James Clarence Mangen in 1902, in which Ireland is addressed in the feminine. The poem is an allegory in which Red Hugh O'Donnell calls on the Pope in Rome and King Philip of Spain to come to his aid. The feminization of Ireland was meant to divert attention from the call to arms which was punishable by death.

2. *Shan Van Vocht* (old Irish woman) an anonymous poem traced back to 1798, envisioning an old Irish women, symbol of Ireland, waiting by the sea for the French army to free her.

3. Girl at the Gaol Gate, a mythical persona of a maiden serving the men actively engaged in fighting, waiting at the gate of prison for their release.

4. Irish writer and poetess, Sydeny Lady Morgan (nee Owenson), was born in Dublin in 1780, and was the daughter of the actor Robert Owenson. *St. Clair* and *O'Donnell* are two of her famous novels. She died in 1859.

5. The Irish Troubles of 1968-1997 were sectarian violence between Catholic Republicans demanding total separation and independence from Britain for the es-

tablishment of a united Ireland and Protestant Loyalists in Northern Ireland holding on to unity and loyalty with Britain and the British crown.

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