**COLÁISTE MHUIRE GAN SMÁL**

**MARY IMMACULATE COLLEGE**

**Title:** Constitutionally codified, the myth of the maternal in the national imaginary.

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## Abstract:

This thesis will address Article 41.2 of the Constitution to examine how it affected Irish women for the succeeding eighty years. It will draw from De Valera's ideology of nation building in 1937, which situated women in the private realm of the home. It will examine the special position afforded to the Catholic Church that wedded the function of women to a biological one of purity and sacrifice. Analysing a longitudinal selection of short stories from four different authors, their identifiable set of characteristics will convey a complete treatment of a subject. These subjects seek to question the symbolisation of women by an autocracy that enshrined their domestic position constitutionally.

The analyses will employ the lens of literary critic and philosopher Julia Kristeva to appraise the role of motherhood and support a better understanding of their lived experience. Irish women and girls historically carried a disproportionate share of caring responsibilities, that left them discriminated against at home and in the workplace. Her philosophy of abjection responds to the way the selected authors narrated their female marginalisation, objectification and latterly racism, which features in the more contemporary texts. This aligns with her theory that posits females as subjects-in-process who can actively advance their social progress. The final topic concerns the recent Citizen's Assembly on gender equality exampling such progress. Chaired by Dr Catherine Day, the findings concluded the need for a referendum to remove or reword Article 41.2 from the Constitution and replace it with non-gender specific language, that simultaneously includes protection of non-marital families.

## Declaration

I hereby declare that this thesis represents my own work and has not been submitted, in whole or part, by me or another person, for the purpose of obtaining any other qualification. All sources that have been consulted have been identified and acknowledged in the appropriate way.

**Signed:** Lorna Murphy

Date: 01 March 2023

## Dedication

For all the Evelyns and Brendans in my life, but above all this thesis is dedicated to Evelyn Phelan, Mamó, Mum.

## Acknowledgements

I would like to thank most sincerely my supervisor Dr Eóin Flannery for all the support, encouragement and time he has afforded me over the past number of years. Many thanks, also, to all other members of staff at Mary Immaculate College, those I met and those unknown to me, but without whom the process would not be possible.

## Contents

# INTRODUCTION

Acts of remembrance that extend down through generations are dependent on the experiences of those close to us in their recounting of events, because they perform a wider role in our collective memory. In Ireland, there has long been an acknowledgement of literature's importance in the transmission and shaping of communal and cultural memories. This remembering of events through the story format coalesces to outline a sketch that makes up portions of a national identity. Steeped in the pitfalls of broken memories, silences, and mis-remembered episodes, a writer writes in order to narrate the spaces that arise between history, memory and communities renewing themselves continually. In this thesis, I will explore the liminal spaces that emerged following the 1937 Constitutional inclusion of Article 41.2. Under the umbrella heading of 'The Family' it is positioned legislatively as part of Article 41, a heading given to the State's recognition of the family as the natural and primary social unit that reads:

> In particular, the State recognises that by her life within the home, woman gives to the State a support without which the common good cannot be achieved.
>
> (IrishStatuteBook.ie)

Controversial since inception, one group piloting objections were the National University Women Graduates' Association (WGA) who recognised the sacrifice the inclusion of this Article would have on their public life. In fixing their existences within the home, they

considered 'the omission of the principle of equal rights and opportunities enunciated in the Proclamation of 1916' (Luddy, 2005:180) to be sinister and retrogressive. With their newly gained right to vote in 1918, and full adult suffrage in 1922, their involvement in public life was now under threat. For that reason, they requested a meeting with De Valera but when it became apparent that amendments to Article 41.2 would not be forthcoming, they campaigned for a complete rejection of the constitution by the public. As part of this activism, they published their objections in the feminist paper *Prison Bars,* while a different form of objection was led by Hanna Sheehy Skeffington who was agitating the message 'Vote No to the Constitution.' Along with members of the Irish Women Citizens Association, they conducted a postcard campaign mailing this message to the 1937 electorate in their crusade.

This project seeks to explore the prophecy of the WGA campaign and the State's conflicting but interrelated position on the lives of women within the home, as told through the Irish short story. With a vast resource of authors to choose from, the four selected writers offer a representation of the social and political discourse of women in modern Irish society. By charting the treatment of fictional female characters in this fashion, these authors expose and evaluate women's relationships within the home and their problematic identities outside of it. Previously in Irish literature women have been likened to an array of characters, ranging from *An Sean Bhean Bhocht* to *Cathleen Ní Houlihan*, with her walk of a queen. These problematic motifs of colonial representations feminised the country in portrayals that paved the way to bolster a hyper-masculinization in readiness to oppose the invader. Juxtaposing male distinctions was the female personification of Irish virtue,

authenticated through a self-sacrificing Catholic identity. Both familial and gender relationships in Ireland acted as metaphors for political, economic, and religious relationships with a male England. This symbolisation of femininity is a motif addressed by each of the authors, in texts that engage with the lived reality of these vulnerable women and their patriarchal male counterparts. Article 41.2 enshrined this division of gender in law constitutionally, which De Valera submitted to a plebiscite in July of 1937. The selected short stories from 1938 to 2018 that follow, identify areas concerning women and mothers who were confined to the home constitutionally. However, when situations such as widowhood occurred within this confinement, the lack of legislation around succession left these women vulnerable. The unpaid provision of care and labour is another role women played in their support of the "common good" this thesis seeks to address. These un-monetised roles left the women unprotected Constitutionally if their labour or care became redundant. Equally, the symbolic female role ascribed to women affected them publicly and privately, and this is expressed repeatedly in story testimonies that disavow the imagined female purity and subordination vis a vis the Constitution. Thus, this private female sphere within the home, created a symbolic and gendered approach towards the reproduction of children, and gender inequality in the division of wealth and power.

The format of this project will begin by contextualising the era surrounding De Valera's Constitution, to explore the political context that has shaped familial and political histories, setting women apart from men. Succeeding the legislative discussion will be an introduction to Julia Kristeva, the Bulgarian-French philosopher and literary critic. Residing in France, Kristeva uses psychoanalytic discourse in the context of nationalism,

to express her experience as a foreigner on the boundary position in society. She considers her own migration to be an experience that better equips her to deal with the mediation between self and other. Parallels from her analysis resonates with Irish women's marginalisation in relation to power, as strangers on the fringe of public life within their nation. Having laid the framework for the thesis, a textual analysis of their stories reflects the interconnectedness of the constitutional reality of citizens, living within this political and social culture. Contemporary Ireland indicates a new cohort of women who continue to be trapped in confined spaces they consider home, as the country has yet to successfully register their presence as women of colour. Concluding this project will see a reiteration of the thematic angles that included a chronological examination of the Home, Mother and the Nation since the Constitution of 1937. It also calls on the status of the proposed revisiting of Article 41.2, and the performance of gender roles in relation to race. The process of transcending such entrapment for ethnic minorities yearns for a more positive rethinking of belonging and nationhood. Reading the Proclamation of 1916 outside the G.P.O. on Easter Monday, Patrick Pearse had claimed the 'allegiance of every Irishman and Irishwoman' (www.gov.ie) in Ireland's resolve to achieve prosperity and happiness for the whole nation equally. He proclaimed religious and civil liberty, equal rights and equal opportunities to all of the citizens. In this, Pearse guaranteed to bridge the divide between nationalism and feminism, mirroring the female involvement in national and labour movements of the time. The instability of the Civil War however, steered W.T. Cosgrave, and his government towards steadiness and self-governance, but in paving the way towards constancy, an attack on the female access to public power ensued. Legal disciplining manifested an attack on their public life with the Government's proposal to exempt all

women from jury service in The Juries (Amendment) Act of 1924. Violating the Constitutional equality clause, feminist opposition fought for the retention of women on jury lists. Delivering further raids in legal reform was the automatic disqualification from jury service for women in the new Juries Act of 1927, denying women their responsibilities as citizens and marking the beginning of their diminished role in public life. Further limits on their rights came from rising unemployment and the economic recession of the 1920s and 1930s. With the introduction of the marriage bar in the 1930s, the erosion of women's occupational prospects declined further, when married women were prevented from employment with the Civil Service. When extended out further, to private companies, it announced the Irish Free State as one that prioritised men's work and the patriarchal nature of the country:

> Most women gave up their jobs on marriage, either because it was the social norm to do so, or because of the marriage bars in certain jobs, notably teaching and the Civil Service. Only single women were able to stay in employment for most of their adult lives. Many of these were religious, especially in the female professions of teaching and nursing.
>
> (Beale 1986, p.140)

Compounding these confinements came in the form of intense support from the Catholic Church. In a virtually monotheistic population, Irish census figures for 1926 classified 92.6% of citizens as Catholic, therefore, nationalist and religious leaders could steer a 'secular civility [that] became synonymous with Catholic morality' (Inglis 1987, p.165). Endorsement of the Free State by the Church was critical to the stability of the State's survival. In return for this support, a dominant role of influence in social policy was

extended to Catholic bishops, instantly thwarting Patrick Pearse's vision of an imagined inclusive community. When the Catholic Church laid the importance of national morality and purity with women, it shaped the moral landscape of the nation through their vision. This tactical linking of nationalism with Catholicism harmoniously worked to keep women regulated to a heterosexual marriage in the home. Reiterated in the Constitution of 1937 was the illegality of contraception and divorce, 'making the family the cornerstone of Irish society, and outlining a very circumscribed view of women's role in society' (Crowley and Kitchin 2008, p.357). In their paper 'Producing decent girls', Crowley and Kitchin further hypothesise that De Valera pulled the moral conduct of the nation together in spatial practises of the home, hospital, school and church, as sites of governance. Change and opportunities for women in the labour force was slow, and the lack of work led many women to emigrate in search of better pay and working conditions abroad. It was not until the Women's Movement of the early 1970s, that a shift occurred, and the evolution of women workers began following the mobilisation of collective action strategies from groups such as the ICA (Irish Countrywomen's Association) and the IHA (Irish Housewives Association).

As noted earlier, informing my examination of the selected short stories will be the theoretical insights of Julia Kristeva. A key figure of feminist theory, her work tallies with readings on the positioning of Irish women as strangers on the periphery of life within a nation. Of note, is her acknowledgment of the ever-changing nature of subjectivity and, in her capacity as a literary critic, her semiotic principles endorse many aspects of the maternal. Kristeva's consideration of maternity as an essential contribution to civilization

sees her argue that this mastery of procreation is not the only difference separating men from women. She discusses feminist struggles in relation to their importance in both contemporary and future life, and how these surpass the values of women in matrilineal societies. Allowing for this, she extends the point by noting that 'without a relation to a new type of matriarchy emerging, this consideration necessarily entails symbolic and political recognition' (Kristeva and Moi 1986, p.208). In *Powers of Horror* (1982), her essay on abjection, Kristeva explains how this recognition which is found in literature 'represents the ultimate coding of our crises, of our most intimate and most serious apocalypses' (Kristeva 1982, p.208). In literature and the short stories that follow, the abject is unveiled in relation to the maternal function, which far exceeds the private sphere allocated to it in Irish society. Her linguistic criticism, as one who views issues through the dual lens of both the linguist and a French feminist, Kristevan claims are largely concerned with discourses of identity. In particular, Kristeva believes that mothers can account for the dynamic interrelations between the semiotic and the symbolic. Her theory on the semiotic *chora* operates as a principle of identity, a univocal signifier which Michael Payne argues, Kristeva uses with purposeful ambiguity:

> When Kristeva writes about the body, unlike Lacan and Derrida, she gives it a sense of having bone and flesh and hormones. For her the body both is and is not external to language. It would seem to be in the interest of sustaining this ambiguity that she alludes to without actually naming the chorion.
>
> (Payne 1993, p.168)

Kristevan theory considers that women adopt a semiotic approach for objects of exchange in their relationship with the power of language, even though they may not participate in

them directly. Her discussion around misdirected abjection is partially responsible for women's oppression, which is of particular interest in addressing Article 41.2. By centralising the maternal in her work, Kristevan theory underscores the negative effect of positioning women in the home constitutionally. In tandem with the refracted behaviour witnessed in texts concerning women whose power and autonomy were negated, she extends this misdirection of maternity in *Stabat Mater* (1977), as a cult of the Virgin Mother that can no longer explain, interpret, nor give meaning to motherhood. This 'cult' is seen in Western patriarchy as a means to cover up the unsettling aspects of maternity, and the mother-child relationship that has been utilised in Ireland to manipulate and subjugate women to uphold the Catholic values of De Valera's aspirations. This encouragement of reinforced homage and devotion to Mary the mother of God, placed the Virgin on a pedestal. Impossible to emulate, Irish society's certainties did not wish to disturb it. Having endowed the Virgin Mary with allegorical status, just in the same manner that feminised Ireland ossified into "Mother Ireland" the two allegories blurred the boundaries between figural endings and literal beginnings. In this context, Kristeva argues that 'Christianity, with its Virgin birth, both unravels and protects the paternal function' (Kristeva 1987, p.40). Negating matrilineal society with Biblical stories regarding the impregnation of the Virgin by the Word, the Name of the Father, God. This 'Name of the Father' is the guarantor of paternity and inheritance for the requirements of societies based on exchange and control of women and children. The maternal power is controlled and domesticated through the Name of the Father. Kristeva follows, for the most part, the general parameters of Jacques Lacan's model of psychosexual development, but her additions include a more central place for the maternal and the feminine in the subject's

psychosexual development. If the body can be conceptualised as a basic political object of power relations, a theory of mind/body dualism is required. Where Freud used the Oedipus complex as an approach of the ego's identification with others, especially the mother, Lacan's psychoanalysis theorised for the mirror stage. *A Dictionary of Critical Theory* (2018) conveys the infant's developmental stage at this mirror stage, when recognition of separateness from the mother reflects for the first time through the image. Pinpointing this moment, the infant forms an integrated sense of self as a whole and 'introduces the subject into the imaginary order' (Buchanan 2018).

Adjacent to Kristevan theory, the thesis will explore the long-established protectionist policies of the De Valera era that gave way in 1959 following his Presidential election. Membership of the E.U. was a pre-requisite for Ireland's economic growth, which manifested in areas of employment, education and infrastructure. It also paved the way for an equality of gender roles that has infused social and cultural representations. Since the economy of unequal gender relations became a 'master narrative' enshrined in law, Article 41.2 has acted as a catalyst for debate in Irish society. E.U. disapproval pertaining to the Article was, and is, matched by the Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission, who noted 'that this provision perpetuates stereotypical attitudes towards the role of women in Irish society' (IHREC 2018, Gender Stereotyping, para. 6). Reconciling traditional views of the maternal subject with feminist demands for liberation and autonomy is a motif taken up by the authors citied in this project, whose endeavours contributed towards the framework of national change. The original Constitutional wording was rooted in the predominance of heterosexual marriage, a nuclear family and a virtuous motherhood. These supposed qualities attached to motherhood, saw mothers willing to suffer for their

children and sacrifice their individual self-interests for the benefit of the family and wider community. Having evolved since 1937 to a more modern outlook, a re-examination of aged legislation has been necessary for some time to match the gradual reformation of Irish social and cultural mores. Encouraging the Government to address the roles within family and society for women and men, a call for 'a referendum on Article 41.2 of the Constitution of Ireland without delay,' (IHREC 2017, p.54) saw a new experiment in democracy employed, in the model of Citizen's Assembly.

Indication of public opinion on specific topics has been proven in former models of The Citizen's Assembly and is included as part of my dissertation for the debates that arose surrounding Article 41.2. As a relatively new model of democracy for Ireland, The Citizen's Assembly allows citizens to engage in free, respectful and informed discussion and debate on legislative issues. Following a successful assembly on marriage equality, The Citizens' Assembly was an experiment in consensus that went largely unnoticed 'except by cynical journalists who were convinced it was just a fig leaf – a pretence at action' (Heffernan 2020, p.140). The government of 2016, however, looked towards citizen deliberation again to indicate the electoral demand for constitutional change on the issue of abortion. Considered successful on these two occasions, the *Oireachtas* once again used this method in July of 2019 to debate the replacement of Article 41.2 with language representing a more contemporary outlook on gender equality. Chairing the Assembly for this occasion was government-appointed Dr. Catherine Day, and ninety-nine other citizens. Broadly representing a regional spread of the population, each member received briefing papers in advance of their conventions. Expert advisory groups, legal presentations,

medical specialists and ethical seminars spearheaded these gatherings, culminating in a knowledge base around gender equality. In January 2020, the Assembly convened in Dublin Castle to address the 'Family in the Constitution and Law.' Addressing Article 41, this portion of the conference highlighted the protective nature that prioritised a 'Family' within both society and law. Advancing to Article 41.2, the gender specific nature of this article underscored the constitutional position of women in the home that left them unprotected by legal rights in Ireland. By April 2021, the assembly had concluded, and Catherine Day submitted their completed recommendations to the *Oireachtas*. Chief among their recommendations was the removal or replacement of Article 41.2 to language that is not gender specific.

A recent contextual example occurred in the pandemic of COVID-19 which highlighted Ireland's gender inequality and how it impacted women. The COVID-19 pandemic bears out many of the lived experiences recounted in the suite of short fictions analysed below, all of which valorise female sacrifice and duty of care. Reflecting the gendered exposure to COVID-19, CSO figures cited 80% of healthcare workers as female in 2018 (www.CSO.ie). The publication from the Economic & Social Research Institute (ESRI) in July 2019, verified 70% of essential workers were also female (www.ESRI.ie). Intensifying both group's vulnerability was their exposure to the virus in their fields of employment during the state sanctioned lockdown. Another area demonstrating greater vulnerability for women more so than men in society, was the threat of domestic violence and manipulation. Informed consideration from the government recognised the vulnerability of this cohort and they were among the very few, granted permission to leave

their dwelling during curfew. Researching social inclusion and equality, Cullen and Murphy documented their preliminary analysis of COVID-19 for *Gender, Work and Organisation*. They confirmed that as per previous pandemics, the situation led to a 'series of immediate gendered effects and the deepening of longer-term gendered inequalities' (Cullen and Murphy 2020, p.348). Intensification of gender inequality manifested as further isolation and poverty for vulnerable groups of women without representation or service providers. Adding to these disadvantages, Cullen and Murphy list the impact of 'unemployment, risk of exposure to infection and of sexual violence' (Cullen and Murphy 2020, p.348) to the inventory. Key indicators detrimental to their well-being were the omission of women from pandemic income supports and health supports. Conditions like these continue to indicate that Article 41.2 is wholly unsuitable in modern society. Given that the role and responsibility of fathers is notably absent, it is in breach of the State's obligations under Articles 3 and raises further questions as to how care work is recognised.

Considered the most apt form for this thesis, the short story captures the lived experience of those affected by the Constitution. As a genre it perfectly expresses a flash of that precise moment that embodies the restlessness and fragmentation of the instant. Russian, French, and American writers have used this platform to record injustices, offering their readers a mode for voicing social protests through imagery and symbolism. For countries challenged by instability of the national experience, the short story suitably depicts the struggle of the submerged people. The craft involves language that is economic, precise and lends itself well to the illustration of characters who are suffering exploitation. Dating the origin of the genre is difficult, but noteworthy is Frank O'Connor's point of

reference regarding the publication of 'The Overcoat' in 1840. In 'The Overcoat', O'Connor claims Gogol's rhetorical device of the mock-heroic, created a new form 'neither satiric nor heroic, but something in between – something that perhaps finally transcends both' (O'Connor 1965, p.15). His stories frequently refer to the 'Little Man' who is described in all his mediocrity and absurdity, but in the hands of Gogol is transfigured to appear in a different light. The Irish short story, like Gogol's 'Little Man', seeks to complicate any reductive notion that all women's lives are equally considered. This thesis sees women who have contested state-enforced social and legal subordination from their personal experience of migration, divorce, death and widowhood. In each of these nuanced texts a previously held centrality towards Irish male perspectives is eroding to make way for experiences and lives formerly silenced. Weaving together the interconnections between the personal and the political within their texts the four writers that follow, each account for the nation from disparate angles since the Constitution of 1937.

Beginning with Mary Lavin in Chapter One, the format will individually deal with texts by Edna O'Brien, Colm Tóibín and Melatu Okorie on a chapter-by-chapter basis while simultaneously including pieces of legislation or cultural events in their textual analyses. Producing stories of vibrant authenticity on public record, the four authors use autobiographical details to effect change by foregrounding the marginalised lives of women previously erased from the politics of (self-) representation. Mary Lavin, the earliest of the four authors, voices social concern for the everyday struggles witnessed first-hand in her family unit and community. Her compassionate narration of humble characters requires readers to be sensitive and alert, to pick up 'devices of concentration, poetic

association, and above all implication' (Kelly 1980, p.2). This social concern is evidenced in a reading of 'A Patriot's Son' (1956) which was Lavin's only story on nationalism. Unlike her male contemporaries who frequently wrote of rebellions and fighting, it was Lavin's portrayal of the inner play of feelings rather than revolutionary politics that came to the fore. Widowed in 1954, with three young children and a farm to manage, she experienced little empathy or support from the Government. Marginalised and lacking financial aid, her 'support for the common good' (www.gov.ie) did not receive the recognition as constitutionally promised. Acutely conscious of the feminine state, she withholds a feminist attack in her beliefs that we must each live our best life. A textual analysis of her widow stories identifies the need for an act that would reform the law relating to property succession. With her husband deceased, Mary Lavin found herself, in the precarious position of a woman constitutionally idealised in the home, but without any legislative support to ensure she was not obliged by economic necessity to engage in labour.

A brief look at her fictional character Lally, offers some insight into Lavin's style and content. Examining their mother-daughter relationship in an un-named provincial town, Lavin details their estranged relationship following Lally's non-conformance to respectability when she married beneath their class. However, living her truest life, it is spiritual concerns that preoccupy Lally following the death of her middleclass matriarch. Acknowledging Lavin's nuanced title, the reader understands that Lally is disinherited from 'The Will' but proceeds to have expensive religious masses offered for her mother. Lally offers these masses to salve any trouble for the soul of her mother in Purgatory,

constituting part of her beliefs even though she can ill afford them. This style of restraint is first exampled with 'Miss Holland' (1938), a story nuanced with the class inequality experienced by her protagonist, following the death of her father. The central character of this text finds herself with little money and ill equipped for life. Rather than remain in a working-class boarding house she chooses to opt for loneliness borne with dignity. The story of 'Miss Holland' represents Lavin's outsiders and exiles, characters who are not necessarily foreigners, but do not fit Irish societal expectations and conformations. Lavin's feminism, like her stories, communicate the actions of female characters who collude in their own powerlessness. In both 'Asigh' (1972) and 'A Nun's Mother' (1974), (the latter which is not included in this project), the reader experiences two women perpetuating their own complicity, in stories told with compassion and restraint. The protagonists of these texts have repressed their desires and channelled their influence towards the gendered embodiment of the national imaginary instead.

This gendering within the national imaginary is evident again in 'The Becker Wives', (1946) 'The Lost Child', (1969) and finally, 'Sarah' (1974). From 'The Becker Wives', Lavin deals with the role assigned to Irish women who were without a profile in political affairs. Endorsing their contribution to the nation was their reproduction of the next generation and in a cautionary note, she describes a bleak outcome on the margins of society for those who deviate from this trajectory. Continuing the reproductive theme are her negotiations of Church teachings on the separation of body and soul in 'The Lost Child', (1969). Through the married characters of Renée and Mike, Lavin questions the gendering of Church teachings. The members of the clergy administering and enforcing

these doctrines are male priests, intervening on issues pertaining to female bodies and pregnancy. When Renée's pregnancy terminates unexpectedly, she questions why an all-male institution does not elicit female contributions for consideration. Three years later 'Asigh' revisits the noted lack of recognition for the female contribution in an agrarian setting. Without a name, this female protagonist participates in the private role of the national imaginary working full time alongside her father on the farm and latterly in her role of care for him. The story concludes at the father's death leaving this unmarried daughter without financial independence, and subject to the mercy of her brother who inherited the holding. Finally, is 'Sarah', the last textual example of Lavin's for this project and selected for the depiction of an independent-spirited woman, thwarted by Church teachings and social oppression. However courageous the protagonist Sarah was, her non-compliance with the national imaginary was fatal. Having fulfilled her reproductive and caring roles, the burden of social conformity could not tolerate any further infractions. Unmarried and pregnant with her fourth child, was a transgression that proved too challenging for this family. Social and religious pressure, led to her eviction from the home and the subsequent death of both mother and child.

Lavin's stories contextually lay the framework for Ireland at this time through the actions of her characters. She represents their strictures and marginalisation, in characters like the aforementioned Miss Holland, who is left adrift when her role as carer to her elderly father reaches a natural conclusion following his death. Having fulfilled her constitutional emplacement within the home, Agnes Holland does not overtly rage against her position, but subtly reveals her coping mechanisms within that limited social order. Lavin's writing

responded to the fates and hardships of her characters living within these constraints in a practical manner, which was similar to her own approach following the death of her first husband. In the subsequent chapter, the texts of O'Brien extend and intensify Lavin's critiques with a more obvious pronouncement from the next generation who begin to voice their opinion regarding the unfairness of their marginalisation.

Chapter Two engages with Edna O'Brien from Tuamgraney Co. Clare. Born a generation after Mary Lavin, in 1930, her writing is chiefly concerned with the suffocating experience of Irish women in the cultural context of the 1960s. O'Brien primarily identified the lack of regard for the emotional and physical vulnerability of women positioned in the home and the constructed nature and interdependence between their sexual and national identities which had previously gone unwritten. The difficulties she identified between the idealised maternal images appropriated within the politics of the nation, left her and her generation of daughters battling with their mothers to avoid a repetition of their fixed censuring. The female lack of subjectivity in her texts, affirms and highlights their marginalised lives under the patriarchal condition of the twining of politics with nationalism. O'Brien-the-author, unlike Lavin, drew copious attention from journalists, censors, and critics, who addressed the promiscuity in her writing and targeted her personality, rather than assess her literary ability. An interview between Julia Carlson and Edna O'Brien documents the striking difference between Lavin and O'Brien. Taken from *Banned in Ireland* (1990) is the suggestion by Carlson that censorship was always more severe in rural Ireland. O'Brien replies, 'Understandably. People know each other's lives. But to write it is taboo' (Carlson 1990, p.73). This writing of people's lives offended

several sections of society who refused to accept these truths, including the Catholic Church and her local community. O'Brien's constant refrain on issues of sexual asymmetry in Ireland, brought attention to the previously ignored social issue. Supporting Edna O'Brien's beliefs on these subjects the community considered taboo, is Gerardine Meaney. Chiefly noted in *Gender, Ireland, and Cultural Change* (2010) are the attitudes centred on a motherhood, which she describes as:

> Overtly idealised and venerated in its social and religious aspects, but also ruthlessly demonised if it occurred outside the legalities and control of Church and State.
>
> (Meaney 2010, p.10)

With O'Brien's early novels banned, this chapter will investigate her insight of the cultural hysteria centred on women's bodies in general, and motherhood in particular. The Constitutional recognition regarding the support that 'woman gives to the State' (IrishStatuteBook.ie) was recognised as a reproductive one, and substantiated in the wording of the subsequent legislative sentence. The slippage of language between 'women' and 'mothers' who would not be obliged to engage in labour outside of the home resolutely locates females to the house to bear children. The absence of 'man' as 'father' within Article 41.2 underscores the Constitutional inequality of reproduction thereby, accelerating hysteria around the female body. O'Brien's literary output suggests that in Ireland, the foregrounding of self-abnegation was the ultimate aspiration, by sacrificial overbearing mothers. Endorsing this point, Anne Fogarty notes that contained in many Irish stories and novels is; 'the desperate struggle of the daughter to avoid the trap of female subjugation and the calamity of duplicating the mother's experience' (Fogarty cited in

D'hoker 2014, p.116). O'Brien is acutely aware of this generational repetition, and implicit in her mother-daughter tales is an eternal cycle that goes from ecstatic symbiosis to inevitable loss, as both parties navigate the complexities of their roles. A self-imposed exile to London allowed O'Brien to recover both her mother and her mother country imaginatively. She had been her mother's protector, which Mrs. Lena O'Brien reciprocated with an abounding fierce maternal love. Therefore, the business of individuation was 'transacted painfully, sometimes bitterly, with resentment and remorse' (Laing et al. 2006, p.187). By using the duality of mothers and daughters, O'Brien aids the exploration of the dichotomy for both generations, as their needs and wants are subject to shifting interpretations. O'Brien's stories explicitly refer to the larger cultural myth in Irish society linking mothers to the Catholic idealisation as self-sacrificing and pure. Emphasising this particular point in *Wild Colonial Girl,* (2006) the authors suggest that O'Brien's characters were;

> Taught by mothers to submit to men and warned by the Church to remain chaste, O'Brien's women soon find themselves rejected by lovers and humiliated by husbands.
>
> (Colletta and O'Connor 2006, pp.8-9)

The inability of the older generation to break the cycle, perpetuated misery and subjugation on their daughters that O'Brien's fictional characters typify in the verbal and physical abuse meted out by the moral surveillance of society. In confronting Ireland's past, tensions arose for certain daughters who battled with their individual consciousness and the difficulties of articulating an understanding of this experience to their mothers. Rebecca Pelan observes how the older generation of mothers 'though attracting our sympathy and pity, rarely attract

our admiration' (Pelan 2006, p.63). This lack of maternal regard is witnessed in the first story 'Cords' (1968), where O'Brien mapped out that early world of her experiences abroad, as told through the visit by a fictional mother to her daughter in London. The daughter's awkward attempt at reconciliation ends in failure when neither party can overcome the cultural hysteria centred on Irish women's bodies, this mother intuitively brought with her on this trip. The generational divide, however, leaves a daughter unable to communicate her cultural disbelief in a society that links mothers to the Catholic idealisation as pure and self-sacrificing. Having migrated from her strictly role-defined existence to England, this daughter has difficulty empathising with another of O'Brien's mothers.

> The Immaculate Conception, which exonerated Mary from any carnal implications, heralded the final achievement of patriarchy and Catholicism, its vehicle in Ireland. In Catholic countries where Church and State remained largely autonomous, Mariolatry remained in the realm of theology.
>
> (Pelan 2006, p.59)

The focus on shame, experienced vicariously by negative societal evaluations, is a motif seen again in the next story 'A Scandalous Woman' (1974). At the centre of this story is Eily, a young naïve girl from a rural community living an agrarian lifestyle far removed from the cultural scene of 60s London. Written with the leavening distance of time and space, O'Brien observes women and their pregnant female bodies continuing to define the boundaries of the Irish nation. Disrupting the social order with a pregnancy conceived outside of marriage, Eily finds herself rejected by her lover and family for not colluding with the nation's romanticised construction of an Irish home. The third text 'A Rose in the

Heart' (1978) is told from a daughter's perspective and recounts the trajectory of a mother and daughter relationship. With overt hints of the autobiographical, this daughter cries for her mother and, the life she endured. Her mother's death also brings an end to their connection and any further chance to make amends. A relationship communicated through the shared creative space of letter writing has ended, and the author-daughter is free to process the woman her mother was, and relinquish the longing for the maternal in favour of a more acceptable love object.

'Sister Imelda', (1982) the fourth of O'Brien's texts included for this project, continues the narrative motif of mother-daughter dyads. Theirs was a relationship both intense and loving, borne from the necessity of abjection and individuation, which served to empower and disempower both parties. Sister Imelda a teaching nun, of the story's title, facilitates the replacement of symbiotic closeness with the maternal figure for a young boarding student, away from home. This relationship theme was originally cited in *The Country Girls* (1960) between Caithleen and her mother. As the first story from the O'Brien trilogy which began her career and her sustained narration of truthful experiences of women's inner lives. The process of separation between mother and daughter in *The Country Girls* advances slowly forward in tandem with Cathleen's maturation, until a surrogate love object replaces the devouring mother. The final selection of O'Brien texts for this thesis is 'My Two Mothers' (2011). Chosen for the conclusive understanding the author has arrived at regarding her mother, and other Irish women of that period. Distance and time provided space for O'Brien to acknowledge the female position, which sees a gentler narration of her mother in memories and imaginings. Framed against the duality of fictional Irish mothers once again, revisited in dream form, both Mother Ireland and the

Virgin Mother embody Mrs Lena O'Brien, whose love and symbiosis she now understands with gratitude. Re-evaluating for the final time, the recurring dream of her mother approaching to cut out her tongue, is the appreciation of how this action kept the daughter mute but safe which enabled their bond to remain intact. The dream remains unfinished, and the author waits for the dream that takes them both beyond the metal razor, to begin their journey all over again, 'to live our lives as they should have been lived, happy, trusting, and free of shame' (O'Brien 2011, p.181).

Chapter Three of the project explores the male encounter of living with the maternal 'common good' in texts from Colm Tóibín. Observing his mother's experience, Tóibín reveals characters with divided selves, characters keeping parts of their mind repressed and compartmentalised. Raging against the marriage bar Mrs Tóibín's role as a published author ended following matrimony. The subsequent death of her husband left her resentful and unequipped for this societal position. Whilst reviewing the characters in Tóibín's collection, journalist Fintan O'Toole writes in *The Irish Times* that 'often what they shut away is the trauma of death' (O'Toole, 2016) and in the aftermath, shadow and dimension remain. When Tóibín discovered Mary Lavin's written accounts of the life of a woman alone, it was then he began to understand 'the business of silence around grief' (Tóibín 2013, p.97). Both authors record the silence that follows death and the difficulty many maternal characters have performing this mode of survival. In his authorial practice, Tóibín uses his personal history as a means to engage with issues on a wider social scale. In contrast to the maternal presence of Lavin and O'Brien, the absence of the mother figure features prominently in several of Tóibín's texts. His reconfiguration of hetero-normative

Irish marriages, affords a different perspective to the cultural erasure of women, marginalised since Irish Independence. Accordingly,

> [m]any of his stories are centred round "anomalous" identities that have been traditionally marginalised, punished or strongly stereotyped in order to promote sympathy with characters that embody what was once considered "improper" or deviant.
>
> (Carregal-Romero 2012, p.9)

Tóibín narrates his own personal freedom as a gay man, in order to break away from the formerly held social constraints of homosexuality. They reflect the erosion of previously held religious and political authorities and are stylised with a silence and complicity he believes makes the previously marginalised, feel comfortable in an all-inclusive Ireland. Similarly, his stories comment on the politics of the Irish State's ideals that are damaging due to their exclusionary practices within the home and at a national level. Widowhood informed much of Lavin's writing, as bodily concerns did O'Brien's, and Tóibín's privileging of the mother-son dyad in this collection, traces the cost of sacrificing real families for idealised representations, with the myth of DeValera's domestic ideal. For all three writers, personal experience was the central creative source for their art, including the space where they lived and worked. Mary Lavin wrote from home on topics of widowhood and small-town merchants, whereas, Edna O'Brien wrote from abroad and published in *The New Yorker* to avoid censorship. Tóibín, however, demonstrates that the modern Irish writer is comfortable writing of mothers and their sons or homosexuality, either in Ireland or abroad. He displays Irish writing that has evolved to be confident and comfortable at home and often sets his texts in Enniscorthy. Considered shadowy, Tóibín's

texts are often ambiguous in order to create a space for individuals not considered part of the collective consensus of conjugal harmony promoted by clergy and politicians alike. Shifting moral and political landscapes demonstrate the disjunction between what was contained in the Constitution and the actual reality for the citizens who made up the nation state. This transformation moved away from the parochialism of Lavin and O'Brien to a metamorphosis that reached even the most remote parts of Ireland. Read together, the stories of *Mothers and Sons* (2006) trace the progress in Ireland's cultural and sexual evolutions and the more central position of femininity within the national maturation. In a style that originated from the prescribed formula of writing copy for newspapers, Tóibín ensured an economic, precise and spare arrangement of sentences that are devoid of moral judgement. His personal testimony occupies a central place that embraces marginalised voices of a country beginning to open itself up and out.

The five stories that follow demonstrate atypical identities previously ostracised in Irish society. Beginning with 'The Use of Reason' the reader can trace Tóibín's theme of shunned citizens, through this un-named mother, who is far removed from the constitutionally enshrined figure in the home. Without a husband, this woman is comfortable drinking alone in the pub, where she remains unbothered by the community who live in fear of her son's violence. Her criminal son has lived an empty existence and has a recurring dream reliving his institutional detentions that began when he was a thirteen-year-old. The feeling of safety is the unshakable emotion borne from these incarcerations, a safety originating in order, rules, and routines that contrasts with the lack of maternal nurturance in the home. Indicative of Tóibín's perspective on female

subjectivity is the manner he reasserts the cultural loss of women marginalised since Irish Independence, in stories laden with autobiographical hints of a loneliness, never far from these sons. Another anomalous maternal identity is the musician Eileen, who redefines the cultural notion of an Irish family in pursuit of a singing career. Deconstructing the previously established boundaries, 'A Song' details a mother who abandoned her marriage and young son Noel to pursue her career in England. Several years later, their paths cross at a music festival in Co. Clare and the shadow and dimension of Tóibín's restrained writing comes to the fore in the actions of Noel and his ability to resist engaging with her. Watching his mother perform, drew the musician in him towards her, but her dissolution of the family and his subsequent metaphysical isolation, guarded his resolve. The balance of the story shifts with Noel's exit from the pub and his avowal to reconcile with his father in Dublin. Thirdly, is the recently widowed Nancy from 'The Name of the Game'. Tóibín characterised this mother as a woman wanting to escape the confines of a small town and provide her children with a broader outlook.

Following the unexpected death of her husband, George, Nancy improved and expanded the business until it was profitable enough to facilitate her move to Dublin. The tension of the text occurs, when Gerard realises the family business is for sale. As the only son, he had assumed that he would inherit this business, as was the customary tradition at the time. Having worked behind a counter since she herself was a young girl, the ambitious Nancy compartmentalised this aspect of her character so thoroughly, even her closest friend and ally was oblivious to her plans. Usurping the constitutionally idealised vision of the maternal in Nancy, Tóibín continues to construct a cultural form previously absent in Irish

fiction, helping to shape and reform a more contemporary Ireland and family cell. Molly, the mother of the fourth story engages in a different type of struggle with her son when it becomes known that he is accused of sexually assaulting boys. 'A Priest in the Family' observes the standpoint this mother takes with her son, Fr. Frank. The significance of this story comes from Tóibín-the-journalist, who was on point to register the opening up and out of religious child abuse cases in Ireland. Recounting the story from the mother's perspective brings a different dimension to the narrative, and Tóibín pronounces Molly to be a woman prepared to face up to the actions of her son while simultaneously navigating the reaction from her community. Even greater than the ordeal of the trial for Frank, is his awareness that his mother Molly will be hearing details of his behaviour during the court case. The last of Tóibín's mother and son relationship stories is set during the wake of an un-named woman and her son Fergus. Seated beside her while examining his interior preoccupation, Fergus recognises that the time afforded to the funeral ritual is shadowy and not belonging to ordinary time. He concedes that he is not only mourning his mother but also his lost self. In order to avoid melancholia, he distances himself by attending a beach rave. Initial explorations of this separation in Kristevan terms, would allow Fergus to finally split his mother and confront his sexual identity as the first step towards his autonomy. The matricide in 'Three Friends', serves as a parallel for both Fergus and Irish society to begin confronting repressed sexuality, or remain without an object identity and a failed set-up of the Other.

The final chapter contains two elements, the first deals with 'The Citizen's Assembly', and the latter with the Nigerian-Irish author Melatu Uche Okorie. The Citizen's

Assembly as noted above, was a new model of democracy by the government of Ireland to probe the national mood on various issues. In July 2019, by Oireachtas resolution a Citizens' Assembly was established to examine gender equality in Ireland by bringing forward proposals to challenge the remaining barriers and social norms that facilitate gender discrimination. Areas to be considered included a reassessment of the value placed on work traditionally held by women in their role as carers both inside and outside of the home. This is relevant to the texts from Okorie for the manner it addresses her place in the home, as an asylum seeker and woman of colour in an Irish context. In her narrative encounters, Okorie exposes Ireland's cultural construction of race, for those vulnerable voices who experience a dissenting resistance. Through the construction of difference that emanates from Irish culture, Okorie's ethnicity continues to mark her self-hood within Ireland's racial epidermal schema. The findings of The Citizens' Assembly on Gender Equality reiterate the significance attached to home and gender in the Constitution of 1937 and the current relevance that legislatively including Article 41.2 has for a newly cosmopolitan Ireland. The textual analysis of Okorie's short stories begins with her experience of "home" in Direct Provision. Among the first documents issued to asylum seekers by the Reception and Integration Agency (R.I.A.) is the 'House Rules' for accommodation centres. These 'House Rules' proclaim that the Direct Provision centre 'is your home while your application for protection is being processed' (www.ria.gov.ie). Home is a fundamental necessity within international human rights and the disavowal of a migrant mother's experience, corresponds to the liminal position of Irish Motherhood within the constitutionally idealised home. As a non-Irish migrant woman and, subsequently, a mother, Okorie's attention lies with the marginalisation she encountered

on arrival in Ireland.

Contained and separated from mainstream society, denied employment, Okorie's skill set as an asylum seeker was redundant for eight years. As a woman of colour, she incorporates personal narratives of the experience, to challenge marginalisation by creating a platform for migrant women to tell their own Irish stories. Providing this platform continues to be necessary according to Ebun Akpoveta (fellow Nigerian-Irish scholar? and founder of African Scholars Association Ireland), who cites Ireland as a country where 'migrant women still have to fight for their problems outside the mainstream of women's issues' (Akpoveta cited in de Salazar 2017, p.60). Okorie's experiences of mobility across international borders, articulate some of the most pressing concerns for women without a home living in Ireland. Shaped through internalised socio-cultural norms, the lives and experiences of these women are a critique of the nation historically effected by the hegemonic project of a capitalist theocratic state. Okorie's stories demonstrate the interconnectedness of the personal and the political that her precarious position highlights, in characters structured by threads of futurity. This construction of futurity is signposted by Claire Bracken who views it as a 'non-determined form of temporality – a time of surprise, change, uncertainty and the unknown' (Bracken 2016, p.2). Okorie is rare in belonging to the canon of Irish short story writers, as an author originally from Nigeria. Her published collection does not risk appropriation of subaltern women's experience by 'speaking for' them, instead she validates them through the critical analysis of her narratives.

Writing within the highly controlled place of Direct Provision, Okorie employs this environment as a subtle language to explore political contexts for her characters. 'This Hostel Life' (2018) focuses on characters attempting to lay claim to a feeling of belonging in centres that encompass the most heterogeneous racial and class spaces in Ireland. The spatial politics expose this home as a site of conflict between management and residents, locals and foreigners, expectation and fulfilment. A conflict authenticated in the actions of Beverlée and her need to grapple for some autonomy in recasting the rules imposed. She creates a makeshift home for herself and her family in taking 'one corner for make small my own kitchen' (Okorie 2018, p.2). Her particular use of maximising the limited space at her disposal, allows her to recreate a more normal sense of home for herself and her family. Writing her second text, Okorie was no longer residing in Direct Provision and the greater freedom afforded from independent living evokes the impact of cultural memory and political trauma that shapes belonging and subjectivity. 'Under the Awning' (2018) is narrated as a story-within-a-story regarding the effects of exile in life writing practice. Naming her character Didi, a young girl from Nigeria, this story informs the reader of her recent reunification with family in Dublin, but a restless motion sees her spatially negotiating her way in search of place and home. She endures casual racism daily which restricts her personal freedom, and the systemic sense of control operating over the female migrant subject, captures a teenager in flux. The use of flashbacks employed by Okorie, illustrates the protagonist's dual consciousness and her attempts at reconfiguration to Irish cultural norms in things from the past that evoke and revoke what she has left behind. The Nigeria of her youth bubbles most prominently in her thoughts and sheltering one day from the 'small rain' (Okorie 2018, p.26) at the opening of her story, brings Didi back to a

memory of estranged familiarity. The unfamiliarity of Irish rain symbolises her insecurity as she grapples to re-imagine her new place in the world. She mediates the puzzling change in tandem with her personal odyssey, through the medium of rain. Back home it signalled the opposite of discomfort, in the familiar environment of Nigeria rain brought fresh corn to the markets and negated the arduous task of going to the well with jelly-cans. Here in Ireland however, the rain signals her discomfort as the reader learns that in order to avoid bringing attention to herself, Didi shelters under an awning in an attempt to copy local custom. While waiting for the rain to stop, none of the other people sheltering engage with her in conversation, thereby, heightening her feelings of isolation and distance from the constitutionally idealised home. Her difference leaves her Othered by the locals rather than being welcomed in to the common good.

Interlacing textual analyses in their short stories are various pieces of legislation or cultural events, which provided a contextual grounding for women's lives in Ireland for the past century. Apparent in the virtual absence of female writers from the original three volumes of *The Field Day Anthology of Irish Writing* (1991) which indicated the position of women's lives, as neglected and stereotyped. As a cohort excluded from national life, Kristeva contends that the artist's task is 'to represent contemporaries' anxieties in a way that may be creative and healing for society' (Kristeva 2002, p.106). Concerned for women's writing and political activism, two further volumes of the anthologies were produced by A. Bourke, S. Kilfeather, M. Luddy, M. Mac Curtain, G. Meaney, M. Ní Dhonnchadha, M. O'Dowd and C. Wills in 2002. The contents of *The Field Day Anthology of Irish Writing: volumes four and five* (2002) include texts that were produced by women

and demonstrateswomen writer's contribution to national life. Kristeva's belief in the redemptive capacity of imaginative writing argues for Okorie's and other marginalised groups inclusion to convey their private world, which has yet to find any literary expression. Okorie presents women's writing and traditions in print that is unconditioned by conservative ways of thinking. In texts without underlying assumptions, she challenges existing canons of Irish writing that will define and redefine Ireland by accommodating the re-evaluation and recovery of women's words, history and race.

The short story contains the nation within its form, its silence and structures allowing for an encoded national truth. The nexus of colonialism and gender that denied an essentially feminine race is newly negotiated in narratives prevented from replicating or appropriating itself into a denial of colour or race. Michael Kenneally has noted that irrespective of the narrative mode, contemporary writers engage with social issues 'that are not only reflective of the transformations in Irish society but, to some degree, have been agents of those changes' (Kenneally 2019, p.4). In a country with a past of rigid and gendered nationalism, all four authors have described their desire for a more open polyphonic country. Ireland has witnessed a transformation of women's position in Irish society since state-enforced economic and legal subordination was enshrined in 1937. The surge in short story writing, together with heightened levels of female activism has eroded previously held discourse surrounding the division of the sexes along specific tangents. Irish men are no longer cast in the role of fighters and earners, and their female counterparts no longer occupy the private realm inside the home as passive nurturers of the community. In a rapidly changing and modernising society such as Ireland, drawing down on official

documentation and statistics offers information relating to the agency and role it provides for women. However, it can be argued that analysing such information cannot provide definitive answers, but the centrality of the genre to the Irish literary tradition will 'demonstrate its capacity to engage in a unique fashion with the complexities of modern Ireland' (Kenneally 2019, p.20). The genre's formal properties more than any other form, delivers precise expression that fills in the spaces by affording a considerable role in the consciousness a country acquires of itself and its civilization.

## CHAPTER ONE:

### Mary Lavin – Migrant, Mother, Widow – a trailblazer of Irish life stories.

Mary Lavin is often considered problematic when it comes to positioning her work within the literary Irish canon, and her corpus has failed to receive the complex analytical investigation, which her writing warrants. This could be attributed to her style and story content, which were more organic in their approach than the recognised style used by her contemporaries. For instance, the style of Frank O'Connor's stories forged a bond with readers, by replicating the speaking voice from the oral tradition. In comparison to the style of Frank O'Connor, Mary Lavin's work focused more on allowing the reader to draw their own conclusions by reflecting on their personal environment and circumstances. The following excerpt from *Guests of a Nation* (1931) indicates how O'Connor narrated his text to give the impression it was being retold orally to an audience:

> At dusk the big Englishman, Belcher, would shift his long legs out of the ashes and say, "Well chums, what about it?" and Noble or me would say, "All right chum" (for we had picked up some of their curious expressions), and the little Englishman, Hawkins, would light the lamp and bring out the cards.
>
> (O'Connor 1985, p.172)

Unlike Synge or Yeats, O'Connor's style was considered transitional in comparison to the Literary Revival tradition of folk-tales, but Lavin's style evolved beyond Ireland's post-independence aesthetic. As Elke D'hoker argues, Lavin 'departs from the short story

tradition' by failing to subscribe to 'the cultivation of the romantic outsider and focusing instead on family relations and social responsibilities' (D'hoker 2008, p.415). By concentrating on the inner play of feeling at the expense of politics or nationalism, she voices social concerns including her personal experience of widowhood. Writing from Ireland, her incorporation of everyday struggles was harvested first-hand from family and community, to legitimise her narration of a country struggling with isolation, compounded by war-time neutrality.

The difficulty in situating Lavin within Irish literary history is further complicated by the treatment of gender in her writing. Unlike Edna O'Brien, who attributed the misfortune and repression of women to patriarchal Ireland, Lavin withholds an outright feminist attack in her beliefs that individuals must live their best life, irrespective of their circumstances. Her ability to recount the everyday ordeals, with a balanced view of gender, offers an insight of her remarkable understanding of people. This impartial approach has autobiographical origins in her relationships with her parents. Lavin greatly admired her father, but struggled maintaining a considerate and caring relationship with her mother. Her placement in the Irish canon in more recent years is perhaps becoming less problematic with the advent of female education and a more in-depth understanding of the gender roles in her corpus. Recent publications such as *The Oxford Handbook of Modern Irish Fiction* (2020) includes a chapter by Heather Ingman who considers Mary Lavin to have been a 'trailblazer for Irish women writers' (Ingman 2020, p.265). One aspect of this trailblazing involved her subtle presentation of Irish citizens, whose everyday experience, as narrated by Lavin, was vastly different from the idealised one of her Taoiseach. In 1943, as part of

his annual St. Patrick's Day broadcast, Taoiseach Éamon De Valera told the nation of his vision for 'cosy homesteads' and 'laughter of happy maidens' (De Valera 1943, RTE archives). This was contrasted in Lavin's texts with characters subtly revealing how they coped with the inauspicious coupling of Church and State. Ingman continues to observe Lavin's 'trailblazing', with her introduction of new themes, 'such as conflicted mother-daughter relationships, female sexuality, and widows' (Ingman 2020, p.266). Her preference for short stories with inconclusive endings, allowed readers formulate their own opinion, rather than the prescribed ideology of De Valera.

This chapter will examine Lavin's representation of the home for her women characters, that both reflects and disrupts the Irish constitutional representation of these. This begins in her earliest work, 'Miss Holland', (1938) which details an unmarried character called Agnes in a caring role for her elderly father. The story reflects that by her life within the home, Agnes, gave to the State a support towards the common good. Following the death of her father and the loss of her home, the story arc details the reaction of Agnes as she deals with her new situation and homelessness. In Lavin's later work however, the reader notes an evolving perspective that disrupts the constitutional representation of women as seen in the story 'Sarah' (1974). Sarah, the protagonist of the story title, reflects a woman disrupting this image using her personal autonomy as an unmarried mother to three sons, who engages in labour outside of the home for economic necessity. Living and caring for her unmarried brothers along with her children, when she is pregnant for the fourth time, it is her brother who can no longer sustain the social ideology and has her abjected from the home. As stated in the introduction, critical theory from Julia Kristeva is interwoven throughout the thesis and draws most especially from

her utility of this concept of abjection. In critical theory, abjection, is identified as something that must be cast off and separated from norms and rules especially relating to society and morality. Given the socially confined Irish society of the time, it was women who were frequently abjected for disrupting the social order especially in areas of morality and sexuality as witnessed in 'Sarah'.

Briefly looking at two of Lavin's stories offers insight and context for her style and content, before an in-depth analysis of her contribution to the genre follows. Fresh insights into the mother-daughter relationship that Ingman referred to, can be seen in an example of one provincial town, where the fictional character Lally, is estranged from her mother. First published in 1944, following the death of a middleclass matriarch, the story of 'The Will', examines this estrangement. Disinherited in the will, for marrying a man considered beneath her family's social status, the daughter of this text, however, is preoccupied with spiritual concerns, rather than money or class. The will of Lally comes to the fore, as Lavin playfully directs readerly attention from the story title to a daughter whose main concern is the soul of her mother in the afterlife. Having died without forgiving her daughter, Lally proceeds to have expensive religious masses offered to salve any trouble for the soul her mother in Purgatory. Lally's siblings, meanwhile, continue to reprimand her non-conformance to respectability. Her sister, Kate, pleads with her to discontinue operating a boarding house because it is 'not a very nice thing for us to feel that our sister is a common landlady in the city' (Lavin 1970, p.135). Perpetuating the systemic social hierarchy of shame for the next generation of children, Kate continues berating her sister with the unpleasant situation that arises for her children whose 'cousins are going to free schools in

the city and mixing with the lowest of the low, and running messages for your dirty lodgers' (Lavin 1970, p.135). This boarding house, however, provides Lally with her only source of income. Widowed herself now, the strong will of Lally sees her defiantly return to it. Lally's mother and her sibling Kate (in parenting her own children), perform a sacrificial shaming of daughters that will be strongly evident in Edna O'Brien's stories in the next chapter. The prevailing social conditions of provincialism and an inflexible social hierarchy of codes does not, however, see them break the cycle for the next generation. A charitable tone is continually employed in Lavin's writing, which she utilises as a technical approach to subvert the social mores of the time. This honest capacity of Lavin's is equally applied to develop imaginative responses to being male in 1940's Ireland, further contributing to the difficulty of situating Lavin within the writing scene of the time. These beliefs stem from her strongly held view that people must be individually minded, irrespective of teachings from the organised structures of authority. This honest and balanced description can equally be applied to the way she writes nuns and priests, as ordinary people with hopes and longings similar to lay-people.

The second example examines Ireland's post-Revolutionary generation of short story writers, particularly the trio of Liam O'Flaherty, Frank O'Connor and Seán O'Faoláin who grew up in the atmosphere of idealism and nationalistic fervour. These men wrote of rebellions, fighting, and a spirit of national reawakening. Whereas Mary Lavin's single contribution to this theme was 'A Patriot's Son' (1956) but, this text revealed itself as a universal human-interest story more than one of nationalism. In this text a shopkeeper's son is conflicted by an opportunity for heroics in the battle for 'Mother Ireland' or, his

destiny to remain as a bystander in the nationalistic struggle. His loyalist mother had admonished him previously to do nothing that would seem treasonous to England. An occasion arises, when authorities surround their shop, trapping his nationalist friend Seán, but Matty diverts their attention by donning his coat and attempting to escape. He suffers an injury in the process, his plan is foiled and now Matty must face the double humiliation of a failed attempt at heroics, along with his mother's disdain. The struggle for national independence seen in this example from Lavin, is however, little more than a vehicle for character analysis of a young man. It is a cursory but significant instance, as we shall see in more detail below, of Lavin's fascination with the human mind and her belief that human interest is more a popular genre than historical events.

Fascinated by human interest stories and writing in a traditionally male-dominated world of 1940s writers, Lavin's feminism is nuanced and personal, as witnessed with the inclusion of widowed characters. Amidst the twilight years of Ireland's second wave feminist debate, her imaginings never saw her dreaming of escape, but she harnessed her labour, as a technique of survival. Equally, she expected her characters to manage their own fates and to continue irrespective of hardships or suffer having her irony directed at them. Her theme of death, and the power it holds over the living in their actions and thoughts, is a resounding motif that sees many characters experience death in some form. Drawing from her own understanding of losing a husband, she articulates the reduced social status of widowed protagonists in 'The Cuckoo-Spit', 'Happiness', and 'In a Café'. The constraints of space do not allow for these widow themed stories to be included extensively, but the experience of this societal sub-set is noteworthy for the harsh treatment they

received as a marginalised group. It was not until the Succession Act on widowhood of 1965 that widows were recognised as a deserving group requiring protection and assistance from the state. As Mary Daly outlines:

> Ireland's late age of marriage, especially for men, meant that women were often left widowed with dependent children, and without adequate means of support, though a means-tested widows' pension, introduced in 1935, provided some minimal assistance.
>
> (Daly 2016, p.161)

Taking just two from her many widow stories, highlights Lavin's examination of these women who struggle, pitting their individual will against the collectively enforced social conditioning. In 'The Cuckoo-Spit' the reader is introduced to Vera, middle-aged and widowed, she has an encounter with a younger man named Fergus. Her social status prevents her escaping from the definitive role expected of her, which denies her the opportunity to embrace new and young love. Equally, the story is balanced with a male perspective, when Fergus concludes that he too is a victim of social pressure. He surrenders to their respective positions of respectability and thwarts any advances that might allow their relationship to develop. Elsewhere, 'In a Café', widowed Mary is struggling with memories of her late husband, Richard. Grappling to maintain appearances in her new status, Mary's emotional vulnerability jars with 'society's obtuseness when confronted with a grieving widow' (Ingman 2009, p.205). Escaping her rural setting in trips to Dublin, Mary the young widow finds moments of imagined possibilities. Apart from brief reprieves, both women experience acceptance in this established claustrophobic society to be centred on respectability and security. Outside these parameters, widows were exiled or

isolated without consideration for their individual needs. Lavin had to suppress these individual aspirations as a widowed mother and author herself, and recalls how the demands of life imposed on her:

> a selectivity that I might not otherwise have been strong enough to impose upon my often feverish, over fertile imagination. So, if my life has set limits to my writing, I am glad of it.
>
> (Lavin cited in Kelly 1980, p.12)

The context of constraint that conditions the behaviours of many of her characters are all-pervasive including her widow characters whose position was even more difficult, due to the construction of women constitutionally. The dominant Irish view, considered the family as a moral institution, possessing inalienable and imprescriptible rights, but those who were widowed, were largely defined by their former roles and duties during the enclosure of marriage. As a writer, circumscribed by her widowhood she wrote this undefined role within the limited sociological and emotional mores of the time. Her deliberate restraint included the exclusion of political documentation, so she mirrored life rather than get involved in politics. Another area of this social conditioning, was Ireland's neutrality as World War II raged on. From a country isolated and inward looking, her writing style is muted and constrained to mirror the tempo of political life. Lavin's less overtly polemic tales of the insensitive attitudes towards widows are no less powerful and renew an emphasis on this marginal group. Feminist values are threaded subtly through her works, but keenly held observations of both genders are also included, identifying the constraints both faced in 1940s Ireland. Equally her stories involve male protagonists

wronged or harshly treated by a patriarchal Ireland, but chiefly noted are women who are exiled because of their nonconformity to an Ireland in the throes of idolising Mary, the Virgin Mother of God, in tandem with institutions of authority. Virtually all of her stories are situated in Ireland, rendering characters isolated and unable to seek the usual escape route to England and beyond. Immobile in their struggles, it is from this microcosm that Lavin's work transcends space and time to share lessons and traditions that have been handed down from previous periods.

Likened to Chekov in style for her compassionate narration of humble characters and a keen eye, Lavin spoke not of teachers and serfs, but shopkeepers and middle-class merchants. Like Chekov, her heroes are modest people on society's margins, which Lavin uncovers to reveal a layer below the ordinary surface. Having peeled this outer layer, she presents her findings of these individuals living their truest life. Her outsiders and exiles are not foreigners, but a variety of characters, such as Miss Holland from the ascendency. Ill-equipped for life in a boarding house to which her new circumstances transported her, Miss Holland acknowledges the failures of her class background that jarred with her fellow lodgers. This too is the fate of Flora in 'The Becker Wives', who is afforded a compassionate narration by Lavin in her treatment of a character with mental health issues. 'The Becker Wives' offers an insight into not just Flora's life, but also the extended conservative merchant family into which she married. As the Beckers cope with the demise of her health while conforming to societal expectations, readers are again reminded of Lavin's likeness to Chekhov, in her ability for kindness, achieved through controlled writing. In an Ireland where women had yet to partake in national life, she writes of the

everyday nature of love, she touches upon how sacrifices are won and lost in the heart of families, and that both are equal aspects of the same thing in life. But in the pursuit of love, she expressly writes of her disappointment in people who put money and social preoccupations ahead of their personal relationships. This controlled measure of ignoring or expanding on the areas of tension offers clarity of insight for the reader towards the message contained in the scenario, where ordinary words and small gestures are unassuming.

Writing with strong hints of the autobiographical, her stories concerning the father-daughter dyad are greatly outnumbered by stories regarding the mother-daughter relationship. Lavin constantly presents gender difference in ways that are provoking and thoughtful, by affording voice and space to understand the perspective she encountered with her own mother, and her less favoured parent. Such an abundance of autobiographical accounts considerably widened the portrayals of the female character in Irish literature. Where the male authors O'Connor, Ó'Faoláin and Corkery wrote of individuals at odds with society, Lavin does the same within her own gender. She writes of what is in front of her, Irish women, her mother, the captivity of marriage for people caught in the restrictive social hierarchy of the time. She spotlights women who do not actively rebel or escape from these structures, unlike the men who were better positioned to rebel against the British or escape into their careers. Instead, she wrote as a response to her environment, including her lifelong concern with the practicalities of money, responsibilities and domestic concerns. Following the death of her mother Nora at the age of 88, Lavin brooded on this event and, undoubtedly, borrowed heavily from her guilty experience in considering her

mother to have been a 'silly woman'. The daughter of a prosperous merchant family, Nora, was sent to America to find a husband. Lavin believes that her mother always felt superior to her husband, Tom, and never hesitated to show her discontent for him. The author-daughter however, thought her dad was 'a genius'.

Stories stemming from a class-conscious society of the 1940s, where generational opposition arises from the need to seek change, were hints of the feminist wave to come in the 1960s. In her early days of writing, what Lavin refers to as her 'apprenticeship', mothers are illustrated as captive within marriage and society, much like her own mother. In her later, more mature writing she gives mothers greater diversity and depth. Latterly, her female characters are depicted as modern, educated women, teemed with more daring subjects like Church authority and abortion. Furthering this point, James Heaney believes the mother characters in Lavin's texts are involved in unhappy relationships with their daughters:

> [f]ar from providing a 'zone of resistance' the alienation which these mothers experience in respect of their daughters reveals that the theme of the imaginative individual's sense of dislocations reaches to the heart of the Irish family.
>
> (Heaney 1998, p.302)

This alienation is at the core of the strained relationship between the fictional Mrs. Latimer and her only daughter, Angela, in 'The Nun's Mother', whose decision to become a nun, Mrs. Latimer believes, will see her miss the joy of having a husband. The difficult exchanges between the two women are regretted by the older woman who could not articulate all her daughter would forsake by entering a convent. Her inability to divulge the

pleasure of intimacy she experienced with her own husband, Angela's father, results in both women losing out on an easy relationship between them. When a prowler is sighted in their neighbourhood, it re-enforces Angela's belief that convent life would provide a calm and safe future for her. The hopelessness of the situation is further complicated by Mrs. Latimer herself, a product of false modesty from a stifled boarding school convent education.

The role and presence of the Catholic Church in Ireland bears on Lavin's life and writing, and in an interview with Maurice Harmon she speaks of her parents contrasting philosophical ideals and the society that shaped them. Returning from Massachusetts to Athenry, aged 10 awakened a completely new concept of sins in Lavin. She saw this in her maternal aunts, whom she considered scrupulous in conforming to the rules of local community. The author, however, held firmly to her own belief in the right of private conscience, which she aligned with her father:

> [m]y mother's family did not think for themselves; they accepted everything they were told, and I am sure often misinterpreted it. In America there were transgressions, but no sins and people did not go burrowing into your conscience.
>
> (Interview with Maurice Harmon 1997, p.291)

Lavin states that she found some of the teachings from the doctrine regarding Limbo, the adherence to celibacy and the incontrovertible authority some members of the religious groups adhered to, difficult to accept. Her stance on these issues is available to readers alert to nuance and irony, as she condemns blind acceptance of such teachings. Her interviews reiterate her position on how individuals should be permitted to think for themselves in

areas of sin, vocations or celibacy. She views nuns and priests as the rest of us, and without making any overt reference to this, she sets them plainly before us as ordinary people. With work that encompasses a fifty-year period that saw the literary and intellectual climate in Ireland become more enlightened with the passing of time, as writer and artist, Lavin helped to mould and record that period through her craft. From the five stories selected for this chapter, the first to be examined is 'Miss Holland', followed by 'The Becker Wives', 'The Lost Child', 'Asigh' and finally 'Sarah' from a story of the same title. In chronological order, each text is composed of opposing pairs that represent the contrasts of rural / city divides, the social hierarchy of rich / poor and the difference in the religious clergy / lay people. These assertions can be tested in the following five stories through the lives of inhabitants of small-town farmers and merchants to present the reader with a stark choice between two alternatives. Lavin's use of antithesis serves the purpose of identifying women as individuals with unique circumstances and not the constitutionally idealised homogenous group. Lavin's style for utilising oppositional pairings negates the need for her political documentation and stimulates in the reader, a tension and questioning of the social constraints instead. The slow erosion of Ireland over the thirty-five-year period selected, displays citizens grappling to maintain a stoic respectability in the face of any scandal or trauma breaking the norm, achieved without direct authorial comment, but replaced with Lavin's muted irony.

## ‘Miss Holland’ (1938)

### Being True to Herself.

Published one year after the Irish Constitution, when Lavin is still a young single woman of 26 years, ‘Miss Holland’ divulges Lavin’s recognition of opposing pairs, a motif that was to become a constant theme of her career. The difference between tradition and modernity in Ireland is told through the framework of ‘Miss Holland’. Lavin provides this crucial textual response to the inevitability of adapting to social change. Unlike her predecessors, Lavin’s comment on exile in a nation poised for change, deals with the interior view of the ‘exilic mind’ in her characters. In this way Lavin examines how ‘each character engages the indefinite nature of space that Lavin is truly interested in’ (Shea 2015, p.190). This style of examining space, seldom drew attention to itself and highlighting this point is Lavin’s introduction of the fictional Agnes Holland. Declan Kiberd posits that ‘working more by innuendo than by statement’ (cited in Levenson 1998, p.220) the contrasting social classes are revealed. From the opening lines Agnes is shown deciding on a particular boarding house which is to become her new home, ‘after all the house seemed comfortable, and the landlady looked clean and quite good natured, like a superior type of housekeeper’ (Lavin 1938, p.143). As the story progresses, we learn that ‘her father’s estate was not yet out of probate’ (Lavin 1938, p.143) and, following his death, Agnes finds herself in need of accommodation.

Kiberd’s observation on the presence of innuendo as a stylistic approach in Lavin’s

work, is evident in 'Miss Holland'. This stylistic approach will be analysed again in the discussion of 'The Becker Wives' that follows, in relation to the symbolisation of their household assets and clothing. When Agnes Holland confirms her acceptance of the room, and enquires 'when could she send her luggage?', the landlady Mrs. Lewis promptly replies, 'that she could send her baggage any time she liked' (Lavin 1938, p.146). The slippage between luggage and baggage is the type of controlled writing Lavin uses to symbolise the difference of class without the need to state it explicitly. With the arrival of her luggage these differences are extended when Miss Holland inquires after the cost of the taxi fare. Such is her embarrassment in discussing money and the 'awkward negotiation' of tips that once 'the difficult business was over' we see the taxi man stomping off down the cement path and the trunks left outside. Mrs Lewis could not understand why the taxi man had not brought the luggage to Agnes's room and, equally baffled, is Miss Holland, because 'Mrs. Lewis made it seem as if it were her fault!' (Lavin 1938, p.147). When Miss Holland is more settled and her trunks have been brought to her room, she imagines where she will place her treasures. Included are 'the beautiful Alken prints' and the 'terra cotta vase she and her father had once brought home from Egypt' (Lavin 1938, p.144). Inserting these symbolic pieces is a pairing device which functions to contrast the ugly mantelshelf and lampshade, which Miss Holland intends to cover with 'some piece of silk' (Lavin 1938, p.144).

The subtle nuance of old money and status versus the functional nature of items in this home for lodgers, is a glimpse of the social disparity Miss Holland will have to accept or cover over. This doubles for the changing nature of her old grandiose home environment

and the working-class Irish society she finds herself in during 1938 and the Second World War. Deductions can be drawn that Miss Holland is disrupted from her sense of security following the death of her father and is in a downward spiral of social mobility as a daughter who did not marry and is without any understanding of money and the public's relationship with it. She is left without a home or the social stability of marriage, narrated here by Lavin to connote an exile on the fringes, now tasked with understanding practical concerns. Autobiographical echoes are found in Lavin's own mother Nora here. As the daughter of a prosperous merchant herself, she was well brought up, but with an education for nothing beyond marriage. Here we see Lavin working on two levels again, the obvious exterior plot in parallel with an implied interior nod towards the materialistic values of an Ireland that is saying goodbye to the 'Big House' tradition. Neither class is examining manners, but the insensitivity to each other, and a lack of understanding towards the interior world of the other. As Elizabeth Bowen reflected: '[t]he rules are Victorian, mean and all-pervasive. There is no mercy for those who violate them, attempt to evade them, or have pretensions above their station (Bowen 1976, p.23 cited in Kelly 1980, p.27).

Miss Holland, a spinster character, is introduced by Lavin to examine the treatment of females, often duty-bound and without legislative protection, who themselves were cast out from home following the death of parents or the introduction of a new wife by a male sibling. After years of duty and devotion to her father, this double standard in society left Miss Holland rejected by wider society as another variation of Irish female sacrifice:

> She would tell them all these little things and they would see that she was not stupid and dried-up, and they would see that she was worth getting to know and that her

company was worth cultivating.

(Lavin 1996, p.153)

The malediction here points to class inequality coupled with non-conformance to both national and religious ethos for women. The fear of the threat Agnes presents has to do with 'imposture' of the Other and is even more insidious when layered with being 'dried-up'. Agnes Holland recognised that her position as a woman neither working nor parenting was not an ideal situation. Charitable like Chekov, Lavin notes the dichotomy between tradition and modernity in the resilience of Agnes to deal with the fate she was given. As D'hoker highlights, Lavin's 'unwillingness to portray women as victims' (D'hoker 2008, p. 415) sees Agnes make attempts to blend in with her fellow lodgers. She recognises that 'a lot of money had been wasted on her education and that she was totally uninformed on all major issues' (Lavin 1938, p.154). The blight of her wealthy background adds a dimension of class inequality to the collective group of lodgers, seated around the dining table at mealtimes. This has to do with the abjection of a threat presented by the other, which Agnes imbues through her former association with wealth. Her contamination was what Kristeva argues must be cast off, because Agnes is disrupting the social order of this community of lodgers.

She cannot penetrate their world and, in an attempt, to partake in the current conversation regarding a politician, she vows to take a daily newspaper to 'keep herself abreast of the times' (Lavin 1938, p.155). Studying the newspaper for the extensive coverage given to this politician accused of embezzling party funds, Miss Holland is now 'armed with a few telling comments gleaned from the editorial' (Lavin 1938, p.156).

However, at dinner that evening the conversation has switched to a new topic involving an incident from the workplace of lodgers, Cissie and Marge. This pattern continues daily until Agnes is totally discouraged and stopped in her practice of taking the newspaper. The remainder of the story centres on observations Miss Holland makes from her window, of a ginger cat in the garden. Being out all day at work, she is unsure if the other lodgers have seen it and prepares and rehearses an anecdote about this cat, with great care. Feeling like 'an actress on a first night' (Lavin 1938, p.161) she waits for an appropriate moment in the conversation to deliver her speech. Unfortunately, Moriarty speaks at the exact same time and Miss Holland 'sank back, and fell silent' (Lavin 1938, p.162). The Moriarty character does make a gesture for her to proceed, but in her generosity, she signals for him to go ahead. He tells all assembled in the dining room that on the previous night he shot the 'damn tom-cat, that dirty orange creature' (Lavin 1938, p.162). It transpires the cat was irritating Moriarty due to his 'caterwauling on the tiles just when one is about to go to sleep' (Lavin 1938, p.162). Miss Holland thought she was going to faint, stood up and left the room, resolving to find new accommodation with people more of her own kind. Agnes recognises that in Kristevan terms she is considered an outsider and in order to avoid marginalisation and exclusion she will have to reformulate her future living arrangements.

In *Strangers to Ourselves* traditional theories of foreignness are revised by Kristeva, who posits that 'nowhere is one more a foreigner than in France' (Kristeva 1991, p.38). When a foreigner tries to penetrate that French homogeneous group, their eating and dressing habits are in breach of what French people consider to be good taste.

Their awkward use of the French language discredits them utterly – consciously or

> not – in the eyes of the natives, who identify more than in other countries with their beloved, polished speech.
>
> (Kristeva 1991, p.39)

On a reduced scale and within the Irish context of this boarding house, the problem set by Agnes is due to her class and the prevailing social constructs. She is overlooked and excluded by the cohort of working-class lodgers dominating the space. Her identity furthers the critical stance the majority are attempting to establish, and she is the foreigner in contrast to the group. Kristeva continues to note that there are 'two opposite attitudes on the part of the foreigner' (Kristeva 1991, 39) either to merge with the masses or withdraw altogether. At forty-five years of age Miss Holland wants to insure herself against the notion of wandering around without the moral certainties to direct her. In Lavin's personal fascination with the notion of our social conditioning, Agnes represents an individual whose values were those of her community. The former lifestyle her social position provided sees Agnes left helplessly dependent as a female who cannot grow accustomed to this new wider social framework. The will to live true to oneself sees Miss Holland think about alternative accommodation, and these themes of powerlessness, social opinion and paralysis, resonate with motifs previously seen in 'The Boarding House' (1914) by James Joyce. The backdrop to Joyce's text is centred around his character Bob Doran, a lodger in a Dublin boarding house with issues of class consciousness, religious and social conditioning comparable to those of Agnes Holland. For Bob however, the story differs once the consequences of his affair with Polly Mooney, the landlady's daughter become known. Bob is revealed to be considering his future married to her and contemplates 'all his long years of service gone for nothing! All his industry and diligence thrown away!'

(Joyce 2014, p.9). Bob Doran now finds himself trapped by a social conditioning and is crippled by his inability to decide, but unlike Agnes Holland who gave years of service to her father, her dignity is Chekhovian and Miss Holland remains free in her imagination and will towards possibility. Ireland on the cusp of change at this dining table, is focalised through the eyes of Agnes to keep Lavin's narration impartial. In both her generic selection and patterning of Agnes's character, and personal backstory, Lavin's narrative effectively narrates the emotional isolation of submerged people like Miss Holland as they encounter emerging social attitudes and conditions in Ireland.

## 'The Becker Wives' (1946)

### Social convention in the marriage of Flora and Theobald.

One of her longer and better-known stories, 'The Becker Wives' (1946) reports on one of the more prosperous communities in Lavin's stories. The microcosm of the Becker family functions as indirect commentary on the structure of class within Irish society. This is epitomised in this extended family of relatives, who are an affluent group of merchants living amid a predominantly farming community. Nonetheless, the family are equally as trapped and isolated as the people around them. As Zack Bowen observed in his study of Lavin, the Beckers reaffirmed 'the theme of the inescapability of one's fundamental life style' (Bowen 1975, p.34). They are introduced with their omnipresent Victorian values to offer an insight into how the middle-classes try to negotiate the tensions between tradition and modernity. The story pivots on the engagement of Theobald Becker to an artist named

Flora. Lavin delicately prises open a conversation on social mobility again, but on this occasion, she incorporates mental health and childlessness. Just as Irish women are often portrayed as helplessly dependent, the Becker men are also shown to be confined in a dull environment, seeking an outlet for their dreams of escape. Suggested through the arrival of Flora, is the social fragmentation of mid-twentieth-century Ireland. Bright and light, her dissimilarities of appearance and mind-set are a catalyst for commentary on the restrictive codes and practices of social stratification. With her exceptional personality Flora provides a useful point of comparison with those of the Beckers and is firmly located as an example of a person 'othered'. First developed by Kristeva in *Stabat Mater,* (1974) the term 'othering' came from the context of her own maternity. Observing that following the delivery of the baby, it 'extracts woman out of her oneness and gives her the possibility of reaching out to the other, the ethical' (Kristeva 1974, p.382). This can be extended to the Christian notion of *agape* (love and charity) to embrace the Other in society and is informed by the Judeo-Christian tradition. Kristeva herself, abandoned her formal beliefs to privilege psychoanalytic discourse over the less rigid authority of institutional religion that she believes, closes down discussion. Concerned with the particularities of individuals, Kristeva's use of Othering in a fictional analysis of characters like Flora, ensues a suitable lens to view the therapeutic value of literature in tandem with the human condition.

The story commences with an examination of the comforts gained through their father's business acumen. These comforts were sustained prudently by the Becker children and furthered, by carefully considered marriages that the constitution of 1937 advocated for throughout the cautious climate of Ireland's modernisation. Under the conservative

regime of Éamon De Valera, the younger members of the family, however, are more vocal than their older siblings in their social awareness of what middle-class functions entail. Theobald, the second youngest son had nurtured what Lavin describes as:

> Strange notions of pride and ambition, and when to these had been added intellectual snobbery and professional stuffiness, it became a positive ordeal for him to have to endure the Becker parties.
>
> (Lavin 1974, p.304-5)

He unashamedly strives to break out from the rules and sanctions of his family and their position within this county town. Theobald's intimations of liberation are done within a context that is replete with material possessions and assets that visibly prove the family's social standing. Living in the comfortable surroundings that exhibit both wealth and stability, their possession of pieces of antique furniture was a recent experience, 'in fact, the Beckers had to rely on Mr. Keyes, an antique dealer, for recommendations' (Lavin 1946, p.302). With their relatively recent lineage, the Beckers were newly acquiring an appreciation of established symbols of solidarity and class, while Flora purchased 'the antiques of tomorrow' (Lavin 1946, p.339). In their search to gift Flora these future antiques, the Becker family made valiant efforts to track down artisans they had not heard of, in streets they never knew existed.

Such socially defined roles see both Flora and Theobald trapped in their birth right, and this is part of Lavin's continued commentary on conventional class enclosure, previously noted in 'Miss Holland'. Appraising the Becker's many experiences at a restaurant, Lavin uses an omniscient narrator to detail how the family were 'the only people

in the whole restaurant who were totally inconspicuous' (Lavin 1946, p.306). Placed at isolated tables by waiters who seat them at the rear of the restaurant, the Becker family are further ignored by staff even though they tip generously and consume the most expensive food and wine. Since they only socialise within the family and have not extended these strong ties outwardly, the arrival of Flora throws all this into disarray. Lavin's delivery comes from a progression of cumulative incidents, beginning with how carefully Theobald had chosen Flora until it is they, the Beckers, who become the publicly observed. These differences manifest physically when Lavin presents Flora as slender, attractive and captivating, against the solidity of the Becker women.

> Flora was not in their midst more than a few minutes before they had all succumbed to her charm. As Ernest expressed it afterwards when he and Julia were going home, there was only one thing that bothered him and that was to think that such a fascinating person should be tying herself up to a bore like Theobald.
>
> (Lavin 1946, p.333)

Theobald intends using the institution of marriage to propel him out of his solid mundane existence, but for all his notions of particularity he adheres unquestioningly to the constitutional emphasis on family as a moral institution. For all her modernity, disbelief in 'long engagements' (Lavin 1946, p.335) and refusal of an engagement ring, Flora swiftly entered the union. In acquiring the social respectability that comes from this constitutionally safeguarded position a warning is sounded by Lavin. In fulfilling the role of wives and mothers, the female Beckers partake and re-iterate the 1937 constitutional emphasis on the family as a moral institution.

Portraying the social and ideological imperatives imposed on the Becker women, Charlotte and Julia, the sisters-in-law demonstrate a substantially different level of emotional and social investment in the conceptual nature of their jewellery. By wearing wedding rings, they are viewed to have become what Ferdinand de Saussure deemed *signified*, regarding their allegiance to husband and Church. Theobald, who is ill at ease in his social cluster and surrounding material possessions, comes to symbolise all that he will reject when he accepts Flora as his wife, and they choose to live in a rented apartment unburdened by weighty wedding gifts. 'Presents were a silent symbol of their family solidarity' (Lavin 1946, p.337) and the usual array of gifted wedding silver and delph used at family get-togethers re-enforces these bonds. In not conforming to these unwritten rules of gift giving, the rented apartment remains sparse, cueing the vacuum that will be left in Theobald's life by the end of the story. At Flora's suggestion, antiques and de-cluttering of expensive possessions felt liberating for the other Becker women that created space and light in their wake. Representations of the past lay in these antiques scattered around their homes, defining their relationship to the family's history and their active participation in the 1937 constitutional emphasis on the moral institution it was. The future was imagined in modernist canvases, but much later, when the ultimately barren and schizophrenic Flora had exited their lives, they realised that they did not understand nor have connection to these modern hangings. Foreboding hints such as these, come in bird similes that Lavin uses to describe the free spirit, small appetite and flightiness of Flora, whom she describes as 'a little creature, volatile as a lark, a summer warbler, a creature so light and airy that it hardly rested on the ground at all' (Lavin 1946, p.323). In contrast, Theobald observes the

herd-like existence of his family and notes how the womenfolk are 'fat, heavy, and furred' (Lavin 1946, p.304). Frustrated by his sibling's choice in spouses, which only added to the ever-widening circle of mediocrity, he is petulant at the restaurant and continues thinking of their bovine likenesses:

> [S]tolid and silent, their mouths moving as they chewed their food, but their eyes immobile as they stared at someone or other who had caught their fancy at another table.
>
> (Lavin 1946, p.306)

In one out of Mary Lavin's two novel's, *The House in Clewe Street* (1945), wider questions and issues about Irish society after independence are raised. Writing 'Masculinities, the failed Bildungsroman, and the nation in Mary Lavin's *The House in Clewe Street*' Loic Wright noted Lavin's complication of the *Bildungsroman* form. Wright drew parallels between the failed attempts of maturation for the novel's character Gabriel Galloway, and the maturing Irish Free State:

> Indicative of Ireland's shift from the rhetoric of freedom and independence during the early twentieth century, to the conservative, rigid social structures that followed during much of the twentieth century.
>
> (Wright 2023, p.188)

Similar to 'The Becker Family,' are the failed attempts of Theobald and Flora in defining their new identity post-independence, their consistent attempts at class freedom from oppression and restrictions are disrupted by Flora's demise. Abjected, she is marginalised as a warning to Irish women transgressing social, constitutional and cultural boundaries of

the idealised home and their role in it, as women and wives. Flora's arrival in the Becker family is set against the linear male narrative of reproduction and the perpetuation of the family business. Flora's representation was a haze of dreams, which the Beckers could not penetrate, and her world of imagination was managed through poetry as a coping method for her dream world. Her refusal to be labelled or bound by possessions identifies a gap in Flora's understanding of her own self. Her demise is inevitable in the static, political society that treats the folly of unconventional people and practices with harsh outcomes 'this inescapability makes all of the characters internal exiles' (Arndt 2002, p. 120). Her non-conformity descends into madness as the only alternative way to end a story or, from a feminist reading, a warning of abjection to others akin to Flora.

Lavin details social hierarchies vicariously through the Becker men, as they offer vignettes illustrating their materialistic values. Stemming from a legacy in Irish agrarian society, landownership for a vulnerable population in post-Famine society was constitutionally idealised through the institution of marriage in 1937. The gendering of the homeplace remained the prevailing structure and ideology of the nation and in the case of the male Beckers, who traded as merchants rather than farmers, their consideration of material possessions and physical comforts symbolised this belief. Theobald is a principal example of an individual striving to live his best life and now must embrace the fate given that sees him become an internal exile. With Flora's descent into madness, they each end up emotionally exiled from one another as a reflection of life's disorder even within the staid stability of their family unit. The social pretensions of the Beckers, that Lavin finds ridiculous sees their foibles greatly exaggerated outwardly in their materialism and

inwardly in their thoughts. To this end, Lavin uses Flora and Theobald as another opposing pair to observe how we handle our fate. Flora functions similarly to Kristeva's notion of the abject, as that which must be expelled for a stable identity to be maintained, not a quality in itself, the abject is undecidable and does not respect borders. Kelly Oliver describes the abject as 'a relationship to a boundary' (Oliver 1993, p.56) and Flora functions as 'what has been jettisoned out of that boundary, its other side, a margin' (Kristeva 1980a, p.69). Exiled through matrimony, Theobald is a man destined to be single and fatherless, for battling against an inflexible social order. Analysing social conformity and hinting at the convention of captivity within marriages, Lavin exposes the helplessness of dependent females for status and 'respectability'. Equally, men are reliant on their spouses for reproduction and a continuation of the lineage. With no positive sense of herself nor her place in the role of Irish middle class life, Flora was a marginal figure struggling on the fringe of a society straddling the borders of class.

For being at odds with her social milieu, Flora becomes one of the submerged population groups Frank O'Connor talks about in 'The Lonely Voice' (1965). Surveying the characteristics of the short story, O'Connor identified the lack of a hero as an outstanding feature that differentiates the genre from the novel, and in the absence of heroes, all that remains is a population dreaming of escape. During Honoria Becker's pregnancy, Flora adopts the mannerism of dress and movement to mimic her: 'She intrudes upon Honoria's valid role as a wife and mother-in-waiting in an absurd way, considering the light nature of her own physique' (Wray 2013, p.96).

The hostility of non-conformance to the constitutional ideology of family to

personalities such as Flora is mirrored by the family unit, in the form of Henrietta and Charlotte, who now demonise the barren Flora in their outrage for her 'making a mockery of motherhood' (Lavin 1946, p.353). This outrage serves to reinforce the suspicious image of a neurotic, non-mother perceived to envy 'normal' women and their completeness. The social coercion exhibited by the reproducing Becker women is handled with deep sympathy by Lavin, when the madness in Flora is unearthed, what is found is not rejected but presented with dignity and understanding.

> It was all over; the fun and the gaiety. Their brief journey into another world had been rudely cut short. They had merely glimpsed from afar a strange and exciting vista, but they had established no foothold in that far place. And the bright enchanting creature that had opened that vista to them had been but a flitting spirit never meant to mix with the likes of them.
>
> (Lavin 1946, p.363)

In 'The Becker Wives', we see Lavin writing sympathetically of each gender, which serves to highlight the captivity felt by both women and men in Irish society. This captivity and its attendant social conventions made participation all the more difficult for individualistic and free-spirited people, like Flora. Social exclusion was frequently the only outlook for any form of resistance to the constitutional emplacement of women, their segregation included class, mental health, and marital status and, interrogated in Chapter Four will be their ethnicity.

## ‘The Lost Child’ (1969)

### A patriarchy in Limbo.

‘The Lost Child’ is an outspoken story that tackles the topic of gender roles in the shadow of the teachings of the Catholic Church. The opening lines from ‘The Lost Child’ set up the theme of the afterlife and the Limbo of infants that resounds with Lavin’s mantra of living our best life with a private conscience. This story offers a range of challenges, beginning when the Protestant Renée converted to Catholicism when pregnant with her third child. Mike, her Catholic husband ruminates on this, remembering how, Iris, his sister-in law had been sceptical from the start, believing that Mike;

> most probably thought it a pity she hadn’t taken the step years ago and saved everyone a lot of misery. Well, it was her soul, not theirs.
>
> (Lavin 1969, p.101)

Mike had hoped Renée would take this ‘step’ prior to the wedding ceremony to avoid the ‘hullaballoo’ (Lavin 1969, p.104) his mother made in tensions between ceremonial observances and adapting to change. Irish weddings usually form an integral part of the Irish social scene, but the couple had to overcome societal expectations and an inflexible social order from Mike’s family, especially his Catholic mother. This matriarch provides the social commentary, with her concerns for ‘a hole and corner business’ (Lavin 1969, p.104). Their exchange of wedding vows in the sacristy, and not in the main body of the Church, she believes was an ‘insult to your parents and your friends as well as to yourself” (Lavin 1969, p.104). Convention commands that only Catholic couples can wed in the main

body of the church and, as this is an interfaith marriage, Lavin gives Mike's mother harsh and ironic treatment for her worries over social norms. Contrariwise lavishing positive attention on Renée's Protestant mother, Lavin describes her as a woman impressively 'briefed-up on procedure, not only genuflecting but making the sign of the cross as well' (Lavin 1969, p.105). As another opposing pair, Lavin narrates Renée's mother to be less downtrodden than Mikes, an ordinary Protestant matriarch who responds positively to her new environment. She is set plainly before us and adapts to the situation of this mixed marriage using her private conscience, unlike Mike's Catholic mother, who remains tied to the static religious and social role imposed on her by society and Church. The mother/son relationship threaded through the thesis, is seen in Mike's mother and her complete suffusing of the maternal role in culture, social and religious life. She is embedded in the State ideology that was framed by heteronormative marriages, widely assumed to consist of two Catholics, which Lavin has signified by inserting the 'hullaballoo' (Lavin 1969, p.104) of resistance.

At one point in the narrative, the now married couple, in the company of Renée's sister, Iris, are on a trip to Achill. They come upon a pattern of rocks at Dugort Strand called *Cillin na Leanbh,* or, the cemetery of the children. These rocks function as headstones in Lavin's meticulous approach to setting up the plot development for Renee's third pregnancy and subsequent miscarriage. The sisters ask Mike why some children are buried outside the cemetery boundaries and not with their family members inside.

'Is it because they were illegitimate?' Iris asked then, 'Certainly not,' he replied. 'The Church does not discriminate in such cases as long as a child is baptised. His

> voice was vibrant with self-righteousness.
>
> (Lavin 1969, p.109)

Renée considers this behaviour 'inhuman' and questions how 'must the poor mother have felt,' to which Iris cried 'How would *anyone* feel – any *proper* person?' (Lavin 1969, p.109) In this respect, Iris is much more logical than her sister Renée who;

> cannot swallow some of the Catholic customs such as that which forbids the burying of unbaptised babies in consecrated ground.
>
> (Kelly 1980, p.1006)

The questioning minds of those from outside the Irish Catholic faith allows Lavin to record her opinion on this area of concern. Narratively nuanced in the sisters Renée and Iris, who draw together unconsciously on the practical application of this issue, unlike Mike. His acceptance of religious education and conditioning sets the framework for Lavin to voice her feelings towards a harmful and prejudicial interpretation of the Christian message.

Such non-conformity adds to the problematic nature of Lavin's place in the Irish literary canon, given her thought-provoking notions of self-reliance and individual moral judgements in matters of spirituality. Vignettes in the story illustrate the religious values of these families, with the conventions of class and creed given full consideration by an author acutely aware of the social framework in which these characters move. Such occasions are witnessed again when the reader sees the family outside the church after Renée's conversion to Catholicism. By way of celebration, Mike, Iris and the children take a trip to the zoo, but a tired Renée, goes home alone by taxi. The taxi is unable to navigate the drive up to the house because the route is unsurfaced and 'nothing would satisfy Mike

but tarmacadam' (Lavin 1969, p.121). Therefore, Renée hops over the fence and approaches the house through a small beech wood showing evidence of the impending spring and 'everywhere, simply everywhere she looked, there were things to be done' (Lavin 1969, p.125). Her neighbours had kindly delivered a pile of manure while she was at church, but it lay smothering her flowerbed, so Renée takes a garden fork to clear the manure from her peonies. In a nod towards Lavin's lived reality centred on the practicalities of always having jobs around the house that need doing, she includes these details as both form and content. Moving manure, she impales a worm on her garden fork and, although disgusted, she cannot deny it the right to life, disgusting as it is, and 'above all one in her condition'. Having freed the worm, 'the mangled creature fell apart, dropping on to the ground in two parts' (Lavin 1969, pp.129-30). The inauspicious incident with the worm imports symbolism related to the separation of body and soul for this couple of mixed marriage, while simultaneously creating a story arc. The body and soul imagery, first noted at the children's cemetery during the Achill trip, arises in discussions with Fr. Hugh a few days later.

Drawing attention to the Irish subservience of clergy, Lavin further emphasises female subservience, with insightful frustration of the prejudices generated by organised religion in the characters of Renée and Iris. Voicing their opinion on Catholic conservatism allows Lavin to narrate one of her strongest stands on the subject of private conscience for moral issues. Following hours of gardening, Mike and the family return and are alarmed to discover that Renée had tackled such a heavy job. Collapsing in the kitchen, Iris and Mike help Renée up to bed, but during the night she experiences placental abruption. Following

a house call from the local doctor, the pregnancy terminates the following day, the baby is lost and in dealing with the aftermath, the couple discuss the events surrounding the loss of their child. Both are distressed and discuss the wisdom of the local doctor who undertook an internal examination. Mike recalls a discussion between medical students from his own student days, who were analysing best practice to establish pregnancy 'in a case like yours' (Lavin 1969, p.139). He explains to Renée how an internal examination could result in a haemorrhage and this information offers his wife a strange relief. The lost child would not be 'her fault but the fault of the doctor' (Lavin 1969, p.140). This is the manner the couple use to communicate and make sense of what happened, repeated again when they question each other about 'what went through your mind?' (Lavin 1969, p.140). Mike replies that his first thoughts were for the farm, which was in his wife's name. Foremost in his thoughts is the land she inherited and the title deed in her name. This subverts the traditionally dependent female role of the agrarian community, but Mike omits mentioning his unease regarding the lack of a surfaced driveway that hindered the ambulance's navigation. Renée in turn tells him that she had 'forgotten the children' (Lavin 1969, p.140) and she too neglects to mention the guilt she is experiencing for vigorously gardening, which may have resulted in a 'lost child'. Lavin offers the reader an insight of Renée and Mike's thoughts but spares the fictional couple these insights. This allows them a common ethos of stoic respectability to jointly conclude that such are the practicalities of their married life together, and as a couple, they carry on through the ups and downs of shared living. Repeatedly, Lavin's stories reveal that love is not tidy and she provides this text as an example of how to deal calmly and kindly with the fate handed to each of us in marriages that either diminish or bring out the best in people.

With the passing days in hospital, the recuperating Renée was troubled with dreams of going towards the unknown and grew depressed thinking of their baby. When Mike came to visit, she asked him:

> 'Where is it now? Or had it not begun to live:
>
> What do you think, Mike?'
>
> Mike had lost his bearings, though. He looked to the nurse for help. She came over.

(Lavin 1969, p.148)

As a Catholic, Mike is unable to draw from his religious doctrine to answer her questions regarding the spirituality of the baby, so Iris suggests that Fr. Hugh pay a visit. During his visit, Fr. Hugh suggests that the Vatican was reconsidering their theories regarding Limbo as the eternal solution for the death of unbaptised children. Fr. Hugh's enquiry into which doctor attended to Renée is an insinuation immediately understood by Iris. She is so outraged that certain doctors would baptise haemorrhaging children, she raises her voice to an astonished Fr. Hugh.

> 'I thought you brought me here because…'
>
> 'Well, you thought wrong', she said.
>
> 'What more does the Church know than any of us in this matter – or in fact' – but beyond this she didn't go, her face cold and proud.

(Lavin 1969, p.150)

A speechless Renée holds her sister fiercely and says, 'if it's anyone's guess why shouldn't it be mine - or at least a woman's?' (Lavin 1969, p.150). This courageous line of

questioning from the sisters on Church teachings plays out in Mike's astonishment. Regarded as a man of authority, Fr. Hugh was generally unquestioned by subservient parishioners who suffered the social conditioning of the State with their silence.

In a replay of an earlier scene, the two sisters join forces again, and Mike's face has gone dark with annoyance. His social conformity and unease become apparent when he asks Renée, if she now is thinking of giving up the religion she only recently embraced, 'What will people say? What will I tell the children?' (Lavin 1969, p.151) When the conversation has settled down, Iris posits:

> 'anyway, it's not her faith in God that is in question, is it?' and she turns to Renée to remind her why she didn't want her to rush into a religion that makes everything so hard – 'so *impossibly* hard.' She looked back at Fr. Hugh, 'God couldn't want that, could He?'
>
> (Lavin 1969, p.151)

Fr. Hugh takes all this in his stride and replies that Iris is a man after his own heart. The story concludes with a proposal for them all to gather when Renée is home and stronger, to debate the issue more extensively in a calm and truthful manner, without false loyalties. The narrative strongly purports this to be a modern story depicting a transitional society which Kristevan theory recognises as an ever-changing subjectivity, never permanent, but the only authentic way to live. The sisters provide useful indices in their portrayal as modern, educated and progressive women, in juxtaposition with Mike, who is still constrained by the pressure of maintaining appearances within a morally and socially restricted society. Renée, with her university education is confident to question and

challenge Mike and Fr. Hugh, unlike many Irish women who had yet to partake of secondary school learning. Society's' transitional nature as referenced by Kristeva, was slow paced in Ireland and it was not until state funded education was introduced to Ireland in 1967, that most women began attending secondary schools. Renée is questioning an identity imposed on society by puritanical Catholic teaching, which leaves her at odds with her nation. Mike too, begins to realise that he will no longer fit into the stereotypical role of husband, but must move from acceptance to find what is foreign inside himself. Mike's emotional awakening is uncertain as he mediates between the two religions, and he becomes a Kristevan 'subject-in-process'. He 'gives us a vision of the human venture as a venture of innovation, of reaction, of opening, of renewal' (Kristeva Interviews 1974, p.26). Lavin, always acutely aware of the social framework within which her characters operate, closes the story out with a comment from Fr. Hugh on how Iris, with her independent thinking and grasp of spiritual concepts, 'is a man after his own heart' (Lavin 1969, p.152). In a country where female characters struggled to establish a voice for themselves within the life of the Irish nation, Lavin suggests that women are spiritual beings and faced with moral dilemmas they must and can face individually, without adherence to male command. Expanding on bodily issues the imbrication of which Edna O'Brien of the next chapter includes in her texts, culminated in the repeal of the Eight Amendment of the Constitution. As this collection of authors and their texts identify, the patriarchal Church and State authorities fashioned corporeal regulations for female subjects and omitted them from the consultation process.

In *The Four Seasons of Mary Lavin* (1998), Leah Levenson considers the question

of Limbo to be Lavin's most passionate stand on the subject of dogma. Levenson acknowledges that the artist's work encompassed a fifty-year period, which considerably helped to mould a more enlightened outlook for the country. Having migrated from Massachusetts, the eye of the outsider was awakened and Lavin states that the 'religious thing bowled me over. Catholicism was different from what I had known.' (Levenson 1998, p.291) Lavin echoes these sentiments during an interview with Maurice Harmon, offering an insight into the origins of her idea for 'The Lost Child', an idea that had been in Lavin's mind since she was a young woman:

> When I was a young woman, I was obsessed with the idea of Limbo, which seemed repellent. I realised later that my instinctive rejection of that idea was part of other things that I could not accept in the doctrine of my church, while feeling at the same time that I had every right to consider myself a member of that church. Then I was ready to write the story.
>
> (Harmon 1997, p.290)

Thinking back to her younger self, she remembers the child she was, who could not judge her own actions by private conscience and left the more mature author writing her religious preoccupation. With this in mind, Lavin provides sensitive narration to the manner in which people find it almost impossible to know right from wrong. Drawing from Zack Bowen again for this issue.

> Unlike James Joyce, Lavin does not normally portray religion or the Catholic Church per se as a trap. Rather it is the practical application of the religious institutions in the everyday domestic and social life of the characters that brings

> pain.
>
> (Bowen 1975, p.30)

Renée, but more especially her sister Iris, are examples of modern woman's developing sense of their own identity. Educated, they can question, provoke, and debate religious and moral issues for themselves and comfortably with Fr. Hugh. Lavin feels the interpretation of the Christian message is prejudiced and she explores this theme further in the story 'Sarah', to follow. A Church ruling by command rather than compassion sees her religious characters written as victims of cruel autocracy, some, however, are humble and compassionate. It is the Christian message and the patriarchal slant applied to that message, which most exercises Lavin. The old spirituality was vital in sustaining communities in the face of oppression but she foregrounds the dominance of the Catholic Church as an institution of religion in her exploration of spirituality. In other narratives such as, 'A Wet Day', 'A Pure Accident' and 'The Shrine', she depicts priest characters with an over-whelming sense of self-importance. Lavin casts priest characters as authoritative, domineering, and assured of their own superiorities and their obsessions with church building programmes. Highlighting this balance was one of the features that marked Lavin among one of the great Irish short story writers of her time. In fact,

> Mary Lavin would seem to suggest that the Catholic Church now desperately needs priests of Father Hugh's type. He can look a young woman in the eyes without embarrassment and is willing to doubt and question.
>
> (Kelly 1980, p.1006)

Entrusted with pastoral care, parish priests helped construct the moulding of the constitutionally enshrined maternal role in Irish homes. From their assured positions,

priests impressed the role of each gender on the faithful, through the religious teachings of the Catholic Church and their personal actions. In 'The Lost Child', Father Hugh is portrayed as a priest that is happy to engage in a discussion of Limbo with Renée and Iris. In the final story of the chapter, Lavin's pregnant character Sarah is not afforded this opportunity, but is fatally abjected from the home by her brother Pat. The parish priest had previously counselled Pat, that Sarah's unsettling presence as an unmarried mother was not the constructed maternal image of the Church, and he communicated that she be cast off to a 'Home'.

## 'Asigh' (1972)

### Un-named and un-paid, the invisible role.

Taken from the collection *A Memory and Other Stories* (1972), this account of domestic violence in the home and the deliberate omission in naming the protagonist speaks volumes for the powerlessness experienced by people in her position. Relevant to the text is the Succession Act of 1965 affirming the rights of widows, daughters or sisters who contributed an active role in the farm business but remained without statutory entitlement once the male owner died. This example is another marginalised female cohort Lavin incorporates in her texts. Writing from two levels of significance, the first is exterior and obvious, providing a background of a farming family. The second which is hidden and implied, examines the social conditioning of all the characters of this community. The father is a widower, with two almost-grown children, a son Tom, and an un-named

daughter. The role of the daughter in this story highlights Ireland's sacrificial women, often imprisoned in the home providing free physical labour and care to siblings and parents. The submissiveness of this character is in complete contrast to the character of Sarah, in the subsequent story. Written only two years later in 1974, 'Sarah' details a single mother of the same name whose contrasting experiences express Lavin's awareness that both feminism and autonomy varies on an individual basis. She explains to Robert Ostermann, that her characters exist before the story.

> 'Some place, some time, I observe something – an idea, someone's concern, a situation – and for some reason it stays alive in me'.
>
> (Ostermann 2004, p.410)

Lavin always maintained that she mirrors the life she sees in front of her and the story develops after she muses on how the characters in her mind, would behave. The lack of name for the female protagonist in this story suggests that Lavin wanted to explore the prevalent gendered expectations of rural agrarian communities in that period.

Lavin acknowledges that entwined in our everyday living is our past, the memory of which begins in the opening line and the protagonist is recalling a conversation she had with her father: 'Only once did he say anything about it, and that was a few days before he died. 'Does it trouble you much?' he asked. That was all' (Lavin 1972, p.66). Subsuming the muted human tensions through this unnamed daughter, who has many similarities to Lally from 'The Will'. Religiously and socially conditioned, both women forgive their respective parent their wrongdoings, so they can live untroubled in the afterlife. Knowing that sleep would close in upon him soon,

> [h]e couldn't last much longer. It would be all over then, the long imprisonment of her life with him. But she took no pleasure in the thought.
>
> (Lavin 1972, p.67)

Set on their farm through an omniscient narrator and relayed in flashback, the events of the story begin at the closing stages of her father's life. The girl put her hand to her leg that was throbbing with such pain 'so bad it might have been the moment it happened' (Lavin 1972, p.67). It began a week before her seventeenth birthday, when Tod Mallon, the new neighbour, rode into the yard. Having recently bought the farm next to them, he enquires about the sale of hay and possibly the meadow itself. Negotiations between the men get underway, when the un-named girl walks into the yard. Introduced to Tod from this moment on the pairing begins and all conversation involves a double layer of innuendo interweaving the value of the land with that of this daughter:

> I can afford to ask a nice price,' he said. 'I never put anything, on the market that I'm ashamed to stand behind!'
>
> (Lavin 1972 p.71)

The second layer of significance and nuance is not lost on the girl who realises that 'her father and Mallon were making a match for her all the same. There and then. And she wanted it that way!' (Lavin 1972, p.70) Mallon echoes the sentiment by replying; 'I'm a man that's willing to pay a good price for a thing if it's true to its worth,' he said" (Lavin 1972, p.70). Rather than speaking plainly or compassionately, the men refer to the young girl on a parallel with the land. She becomes the *signified* with the use of the word *thing*

illustrating how the farming community normalised discourse concerning women's bodies that were comparable with livestock or land. This daughter was sacrificial to one of the most authoritarian fathers in the Lavin canon. She displayed the achievement of moral purity and behavioural conformity by authoritarian patriarchy at the expense of female agency. This becomes evident in the father's fury-filled reaction when he sees her talking to Jake their labourer. The event took place in front of the congregation outside the Church after mass one Sunday. The father assumed she was chatting to Tod Mallon, but when he realised it was in fact, Jake their labourer, he hit her so forcefully with a head-collar that she fell.

> 'Get up!' he'd said to her. 'Get up!' And as if she was a beast that had fallen, he struck her again to rise her. Not that he was a man who ever ill-treated a beast'.
>
> (Lavin 1972, p.68)

Lavin's association with animals made again at this juncture suggests comparisons between women and livestock. With control of land and purity of women prioritised, it was for his disappointment in both of these that she suffered, 'Father, father! Do you want to make a show of me before everyone?' (Lavin 1972, p. 77) she cried. She had verbalised his thoughts, Mallon's delay in concluding both sale and wedding was humiliating him. 'It was the second blow that did the harm. It fell on her leg and tore open the skin' (Lavin 1972, p.78) with permanent devastating consequences.

Silence and shame preceded the disability but right now, she did not realise how long she would have to endure:

> The terrible silence that came down with respect to her infirmity. Not only her father's silence, but Tom's. Not only the silence of those in the house with her, but of the whole parish. No one ever spoke directly of it to her. Except Tod. He always asked about it, right from the start.
>
> (Lavin 1972, p.79)

In his vanity and ambition, the father does not seek medical treatment to avoid public acknowledgement of his affliction. Without medical treatment, the infected wound leaves the girl permanently crippled and the marriage never materialising. Tod had no desire to marry the girl who would now be 'no use for the heavier jobs of farmer's wife, calf-rearing or pig-feeding or the like' (Lavin 1972, p.82). She is now destined to remain single, circumscribed by her life experience in a restricted conservative regime of influences over which she had no control. As Bowen remarks, 'freedom, or the lack of it, then, is the all-pervasive theme of Lavin's work as her characters attempt to cope with their captivity' (Bowen 1975, p.23). This girl is another of Lavin's characters who must continue now to live with her fate. Venturing outside the home 'after a few weeks tied to the house' (Lavin 1972, p.78) her father in the yard declares 'a person would think you'd want to hide your shame, instead of going out to show it off!' (Lavin 1972, p.79). The father actively projects his 'shame' on to his daughter, as a practice embedded in the Irish psyche and the female position that remained unchanged in remote areas far longer than in urban communities. The 'Chains or Change' manifesto published the previous year by the Irish Women's Liberation Movement in 1971 saw the renewed call for reform in many areas of female concerns. These included, equal pay, an end to the marriage bar, justice

for widows, and contraception amongst others. Igniting this next wave of feminism in Ireland, Mary Lavin never considered herself a feminist but drew attention to these issues as an artist. Coming from her own concerns and responsibilities as a widow, Irish constraints and conventions contributed to Lavin's own lifelong concern with practicalities. 'Her vision of reality is harsh and closely circumscribed by an acute awareness of social class and society's sanctions' (Bowen 1975, p.23).

Viewing 'Asigh' through a Kristevan lens provides some insight for this un-named protagonist and her struggle to establish a voice for herself within the life of the Irish nation. The exclusions on which Irish nationalism was constructed included widows, people from the travelling community, foreigners and the un-wed. From her position on the fringe, the unnamed character of 'Asigh' is without a role defined by marriage or childbearing and she seems unable or unwilling to disrupt the homogeneity. The combination of Catholic doctrine and Ireland's gendered nationalism rendered this character passive and invisible in negotiating the boundary position. She bears out Kristeva's analysis in *Stabat Mater* regarding the cult of the Virgin Mary, an idealization that silenced and controlled women with 'that ideal totality that no individual woman could possibly embody' (Kristeva 1997, p.317). This rural farm girl cannot dissolve the rigid boundaries ascribed to her. Not considered within the text, is the cultural option of migration to England or America, therefore, the central character does not become a subject-in-process. Viewing Kristeva's spiritual theme through the relationship between the symbolic and the semiotic, affirms the position of this female character in relation to

institutional religion. Kristeva herself 'privileges psychoanalytic over religious discourse since she believes the former allows for a more provisional and flexible sense of identity' (Ingman 2007, p.122). From her essay *Women's Time,* Kristeva argues the double bind for women:

> If women refuse this role as the unconscious 'truth' of patriarchy, they are forced instead to identify with the father, thus turning themselves into supporters of the very same patriarchal order. Kristeva argues for a refusal of this dilemma: women must neither refuse to insert themselves into the symbolic order, nor embrace the masculine model for femininity (the 'homologous' woman) which is offered her there.
>
> (Kristeva and Moi 1986, p.139)

Without any direct relation with the law of the community and its political and religious unity, the unnamed girl remained oppressed in her identification with nationalism. An unmarried woman, unwaged, she provided labour and healthcare to her ageing father but without claim to an inheritance and fostered by the Madonna ideal of martyr, she has sacrificed herself for him. Within this patriarchal agrarian community her non-compliance to the maternal role, leads to a misplaced abjection for women's oppression and degradation to function. Her stasis does not confront the brave new world of the seventies, but sees her remain isolated on the farm, conforming to a personal self-sacrifice that benefited societal codes.

Lavin's broad attentiveness and sensitivity to gender becomes evident in the father's death, indicating that unhappiness is not the preserve for one gender above another within the conventional social enclosure of Ireland. Tom, who has played a secondary role in the story up until this point, now comes in to focus when he explains, the lack of expediency in bringing his partner Flossie home. He informs his sister that many years ago, on the pretext of a trip to the market he secretly married Flossie. There was no rush, however, in moving her in to the family home because they had not conceived any children. When his sister questions this, he tells her 'How do I know? How does any man know?' (Lavin 1972, p.93) His maleness identifies a minor opportunity for freedom that society can never permit his sister, he had been afraid of his father, 'to face up to him openly – but that didn't say I let him own me body and soul' (Lavin 1972, p.93). Connectivity of body and soul, referenced in 'The Lost Child' is repeated by Lavin, but managed differently by Tom. Displaying his individuality, Tom adheres to his own moral judgement and not one prescribed by his father. Tom's remarks display a rebelliousness in him that is absent in his sibling, disclosing much in respect of the politics of gender roles in the Irish family. Disappointed that as a married couple they have not be able to conceive children, he is more in tune with nature and explains that Flossie would be lonely in the large house, so he was considering a smaller 'cosy' home for her instead. The story ends with the un-named protagonist looking out at the stars and realising she would have no-one to share this sight with:

> Why did she have this terrible need? We try to make nature a part of our life, she thought, and what are we but a part of it? But now there would be no one with whom to share it, ever.

(Lavin 1972, p.95)

Tom appears to have submitted to and understood nature more than any of the other characters, which Lavin anchored by giving him the same name as her father. Comfortable in his environment, the fictional Tom has the land in prime condition under his lifetime of management, as originally indicated by Mallon's interest in it. The last picture is of Tom and his complete subservience to nature, which sees him blend in like a tree, submit to the flow of life and not fight for his identity. Lavin closes out the story with this memory of her father in the actions of the character.

> Swinging the scythe expertly from side to side, slicing through the reeds and the wild grasses, with a gesture so true and natural it might have been a branch swaying in the wind.

(Lavin 1972, p.96)

## 'Sarah' (1974)

### A social fatality of insubordination.

In a country that considered social stability to be the cornerstone of life, this story is set on the cusp of modernisation one year into Ireland's membership of what was then the European Economic Community in 1974. Embracing change did not occur homogenously and assorted groups were hesitant to reject tradition and Church

teachings. In themes of gender, this era marked the second wave of feminism, with focused campaigns by activists for social change. One of these changes was the social welfare act of 1973 which introduced an allowance be paid to single mothers, for the first time. As the nation began to emerge from economic stagnation and social transformation, for women the greater access to the labour market was a transformation. The abolition of the marriage bar began the process of gender mainstreaming and 1973 was notable too for the removal of the 'special relationship' with the Catholic Church. Constitutionally removed and replacing the previously enshrined Catholic principles, Article 44 (2.2) now legislated that the State was no longer the guardian of the Faith. For Sarah, the protagonist of this story, neither the removal of Church maintenance on Catholic values nor EU access to labour markets, influenced her fate. This is another of Lavin's texts that identifies an individual and moral being, caught in the differing pace of gender development between the sexes. Faced with social condemnation, she is a woman asserting ownership of her motherhood and her body in a household holding steadfast to beliefs surrounding the role of women in domesticity and motherhood. Human dignity for women is to the fore from Lavin, at a time in Irish literature when female bodily concerns and contraception were not frequently cited.

> Sarah had a bit of a bad name. That was the worst her neighbours would say of her, although there was a certain fortuity about her choice of fathers for the three strapping sons she'd borne – all three, outside wedlock.
>
> (Lavin 1974, p.15)

Sarah, a single woman, resists efforts to define her situation and lives happily in a house with her two bachelor brothers and her three children of uncertain parentage. Set in a

rural location, the greatest concern of the neighbours lay with the fact that 'she never missed Mass' and 'observed abstinence on all days, abstinence was required' (Lavin 1974, p.15). This was more of a priority to the kindly neighbours than sins of the flesh. Sarah's fastidiousness to Church commandments above sins of the flesh underscores the national anxiety approach to women's bodies. In Sarah's community 'charity was tempered with prudence' (Lavin 1974, p.15) and the women were cautious in hiring Sarah for cleaning and labour duties around their menfolk. The conflict underlying the story transpires in the actions of her brother trying to maintain national ideals, shattered by Sarah. Most notable is the continued subservience of people to the Church, atypically framed by Lavin in the characters of Sarah and Mrs Kathleen Kedrigan. Both women are pregnant, and Lavin indicates that Sarah is destined for motherhood because on this, the fourth occasion she can still work as hard as usual, unlike Mrs Kedrigan who was expecting 'her long-delayed child' but was frightened and peevish (Lavin 1974, p.19). While Sarah faced the congregation on Sundays without any embarrassment walking down the centre aisle and taking her usual place under the fourth station of the cross, Mrs. Kedrigan was frequently bed-ridden and unable to attend church so 'the priest came to her' (Lavin 1974, p.19). Sarah's pregnancy first came to her brother's attention one evening when she is serving dinner. The elder brother Pat poked his younger brother Joseph and remarked on her condition. Except for a toss of the head, Sarah ignored them but when she left the room, they continued discussing what would 'have to be done about her this time' (Lavin 1974, p.18). Without parents, the elder brother Pat assumes authority and airs his concerns regarding the parish priest:

I thought the talking-to she got from the priest the last time would knock sense into

> her. The priest said a Home was the only place for the like of her. I told him we'd have no part in putting her away – God almighty what would we do without her? There must be a woman in the house! – but we can't stand for much more of this.
>
> (Lavin 1974, p.18)

Sarah is what in Kristevan terms could be considered as an unsettling presence in her nation's life, but Lavin's role 'is precisely to complicate the notion of belonging: one has to belong and not belong' (Kristeva and O'Keefe 2002, p.131). This fictional story can unveil the abject of this family, because of the position literature holds as a privileged signifier. In *Powers of Horror* (1991) Kristeva posits for a more liberal use of first person and personal experience to illustrate points where previously semiotics and psychoanalysis used works of art in order to explain concepts such as abjection. In this theoretical context, Sarah uses her personal experience of pregnancy to illustrate the role her brothers and religious compliance played in their attempts to sublimate the abject. Equally, Elizabeth Grosz, in her account of women's "volatile" bodies, calls attention to the continued shaming of women in our culture.

> Can it be that in the West, in our time, the female body has been constructed not only as a lack or absence but with more complexity, as a leaking, uncontrollable, seeping liquid; as formless flow; as viscosity, entrapping, secreting … a formlessness that engulfs all form, a disorder that threatens all order?
>
> (Grosz cited in Bouson 2010, p.203)

As signposted previously, within Irish nationalism women had remained in a subordinate role excluded from the narrative of Irish history and State formation. Sarah and her family

in this text are not in favour of revolutions, they are arguing instead for social reform to avoid chaos. Like Kristeva, beginning on the level of the individual and their relation to others, Irish women like Sarah, can express their specific needs without causing chaos or shame to the whole nation. Sarah was placed in the boundary location which could have been turned in to an advantage if her voice was allowed subvert entrenched morality for a more fluid identity to create a polyphonic state. Bringing the situation to a head, Sarah sent an anonymous letter to Kathleen Kedrigan, naming her husband Oliver, as the father of her child. Threatened by the other, his wife Kathleen conforms to the societal ideology of family and gives this letter back to Sarah's brother Pat Murray. In the framework of the 'Madonna myth,' this action distinguishes her as another helplessly dependent female character. Marina Warner has written about the myth and cult of the Virgin Mary in *Alone of all her Sex* (1983) and consideration is given to the lack 'in the conceptual architecture of Christian society for a single woman who is neither a virgin nor a whore' (Warner 1983, p.235). The naming of Oliver as the father of this unborn child means Sarah's brothers Pat and Joseph can no longer pretend there was a 'Virgin' conception. This exemplifies the masculinist fear of women 'as representing the chaos and darkness of the Kristevan wilderness outside the parameter of society' (Ingman 2005, p.344).

Although Sarah was already raising three sons, this is the first occasion she named the paternity of the child. Sarah is no longer willing to claim sole responsibility for the conception of her children, and her brothers can no longer hide behind their previous myth, that the men who slept with Sarah were 'blackguards' who took advantage of her (Lavin 1974, p.61). 'Her "fall" thus becomes a public shame that her brothers must acknowledge'

(Shumaker 1995, p.192), and Pat grills her on the fatherhood of this unborn child.

> 'Answer me. Is it true what it says in this letter?'
>
> 'How do I know what it says! And what if it is true? It's no business of your'.
>
> 'I'll show you whose business it is!'
>
> (Lavin 1974, p.21)

As a married man, a forced union with Oliver Kedrigan is not possible and while the brothers were considering their options, they never considered or acknowledged any rights Sarah may have as an individual. This echoes the motif seen previously in 'Miss Holland', 'Asigh' and 'The Lost Child'. All moral issues were decided without consultation of her private conscience, 'for although Sarah is pious, she will not accept the repentant Magdalen role' (Shumaker 1995, p.194). Chastity not charity issued from Pat, who rules by command not kindness especially when Sarah will not be submissive to his authority. As Chang notes:

> The status quo of gender politics is secured once women are forced into marriage and family, and therefore have to obey. If women fall, for whatever reason, outside this domain, they risk either being demonised or expelled as social outcasts so as to intimidate younger women into not following a similar path.
>
> (Wan-lih Chang 2015, p.47)

Sarah's insubordination towards her brother was fatal, but primarily concerned for his reputation regarding their family honour, the contradiction was lost on Pat. Sarah's spirituality and adherence to religious convention was an acceptable pattern of thought

within the community, who considered her a devout Church going woman fulfilling the role of care for her children and bachelor brothers. She was what Chang theorised, ultimately demonised and expelled, without any sanctuary or protection from the State and, as we have seen in all of the above examples, there is a complete absence of author comment. As a fallen woman, Sarah is isolated without any control over her own actuality and Pat threw her out of the house. Insensitive to her needs and without dignity, he too was defined by the role society had allocated for him and was unable to overcome expectation and use his individual conscience. The result of his actions, saw both Sarah and her child perish, highlighting how national anxiety continued to play out on her female body. While the men are discussing their needs and Sarah's fate without her input, Lavin, ever sensitive to people's tendencies to betray themselves in careless speech and action, presents men who balance internal and external chaos with a measure of peace to themselves. Expressing this, Pat declares that no one was 'going to say I put up with that kind of thing' (Lavin 1974, p.51). When the two brothers are no longer able to harmonise their mental disputes with Church doctrine, Sarah is abjected from the home. Pat had internalised societal shame along with a blow to his own pride, so he cast Sarah off 'where she and her likes belong; into a ditch on the side of the road!' (Lavin 1974, p.23). Society's varying degree of maternal understanding is actioned on this occasion by Pat, and from an already marginalised position within her Constitutionally idealised home, he instigates an even more extreme abjection.

'Sarah' is one of Lavin's most hard-hitting pieces of social criticism. Lavin is a veteran of female experience who talked about the trials and discoveries of being a

widow. Like the character Sarah, Lavin incorporated the status of a single mother with three children and no husband to navigate the tension between imaginative individual and social pressures. From her exiled position, Sarah is battling to impose her individual will against the enforced collective consensus of patriarchal society and Church. Sarah is an internal exile deliberately ostracised from her home without her children in 1970's Ireland. The reaction of her brother Pat demonstrates his lack of capacity for developing an imaginative response to this pregnancy. Narrating the dichotomy between the outward and inward realities of the brothers, displays a tension to resolve the narrow emptiness of their lives. Separating mental detachment and emotional detachment in the brothers, Lavin likens them to previous characters in 'The Lost Child' with symbolism for the separation of body and soul. Again, in 'The Will' this estrangement examined by Lavin in Lally who is preoccupied with the spiritual concerns of her mother, who died without forgiving her daughter. Sarah, the outsider of this story who chose to break with the social and religious conventions, differed from other sacrificial female characters. She differed from those imprisoned in the home to provide free caring and physical labour, in Lavin's depictions of Sarah as a woman both wilful and fulfilled. Constrained by a social ideology that pitted her against the bitter Mrs. Kedrigan, Sarah remained true to herself. The narrative created a space for commentary from Lavin to draw attention to the artifice of the virginal ideology against the enjoyment women gain in sexual relationships.

## Conclusion

Exiled as strangers from the political life of their nation, Lavin describes women as

unsettling the fixed certainties of their society and there are no happy resolutions for them. The female characters noted in this chapter gave 'too much adherence to proscribed patterns of thought' (Kelly 1980, p.171) and were tightly confined by society. The fate of those attempting to escape the oppressions that beset them, left the escape of Flora from 'The Becker Wives', extend into madness and in the text of 'Sarah', the protagonist's defiance ended in her death. Similar to Lavin's own mother, provinciality engulfed the lives of her characters and overcoming rigorous conditioning was difficult. It will take the writing of Edna O'Brien to succeed in producing narratives from the 1960s onwards that oscillate between these public and private worlds.

Lavin does however, successfully complicate the notion of belonging and quoting from *Revolt, She Said* (1998) after the riots in Paris of 1968, Kristeva noted 'one has to belong and not belong' (Kristeva 1998, p.131) which is the role of a writer. Whilst Lavin's writing does not include revolutionary politics that readers often expect in texts following political upheaval, her exposure of contradictory ways of being male, set her apart from her contemporaries. Extended in her frank and clear approach to clerical sentiments, Lavin complicated her placement initially within the Irish tradition. Female writers were receiving scant recognition in Ireland when Mary Lavin was writing. However, with the advantage of time and a greater awareness of Irish female writing, Lavin has come to the fore in recognition of narrating humble people that were living a life, true to themselves within their confines of social conditioning. In stories that were without plot but more focused to mimic or mirror people's lives, her ability to narrate gender fluidness was significant and differed from her male contemporaries, who were more concerned with

revolution and nationalism. In doing so, Lavin drew her outsiders from the 'ordinary mothers and daughters of Ireland' (Heaney 1998, p.302). Her characters were frequently written as people trying to make ends meet and this is what struck a chord with readers, who themselves were familiar with difficult circumstances. With autobiographical hints from her widowed life, Lavin was chiefly concerned with practicalities and responsibilities that gave her writing an authenticity that resonated with her audience and transcended national boundaries.

This chapter focused on the manner of representation for single women in the stories of 'Miss Holland', 'Asigh' and 'Sarah'. This trio formed a distinctive social group, who did not contribute to the notion of constitutional marriage. Lavin's commentary on the practical application of this religious and social ideology is what brings pain to the characters. The dominance from these twin institutions did not bode well for these women characters in a society constantly trying to exert social control over them. The period of Lavin's writing career saw Ireland undergo considerable social change, and as a writer she was poised to narrate events from the female perspective with the eye of an outsider and a clarity in her essence. This allowed her to negotiate the everydayness of events and her themes of gender development marked the efforts of feminist campaigns, as social improvements for women occurred. In Kristevan terms, the building of nationalism incurs exclusions and the texts of 'Miss Holland', 'Asigh' and 'Sarah' concur with symbolising the underside of this ideology that society wishes to suppress. These female characters did not fit into the image of a glorious new nation, but narrated by Lavin they accepted their fate against the backdrop of a conformist society in a small-town habitat. Unlike O'Connor,

O'Faoláin and Corkery, Mary Lavin's characters have equally constrictive lives, but their dissatisfaction did not lead to rebellious behaviour. Where O'Connor and O'Faoláin had references to the national struggle, Lavin favoured an emphasis on marginalised groups, domestic life, unmarried women and widows in a male-dominated environment.

Over a fifty-year period of writing, each of her stories is circumscribed by her own situational context and her belief that 'life itself has very little plot' (Shea 2015, p.184) and each of her works aims at a particle of truth, placing that particle under a microscope to magnify life. I would link Lavin's interpretation of difference and diversity in all her characters with Kristeva's notion of inclusion as the only way forward for both genders. Few, if any of Lavin's characters fit a stereotype in Irish literature. Born in America, the change of continents awakened in Lavin a way of seeing women as not victims or sacrificial, but as a rich array of females moving forward, doing their best, just like men. She created a wonderful sense of compassion for readers with certain principles that remained with her all through her life. There is an affirmation of life in her stories, culminating in a fierce conviction through small gestures and ordinary words to live your best life. This influence does not come from a theory or philosophy but by a life lived.

# CHAPTER TWO

## Edna O'Brien - From Symbiosis to Suffocation

Ireland's political revolution and Civil War marked a break with the past, and the principle of social integration to serve the needs of nationalism began. Mobilising social change in alignment with a sense of belonging embodied a cohesive project of social transformation. The cohesion and stability provided by the State developed into an oppression borne by the citizens, which Mary Lavin illustrated in texts of ordinary characters in everyday life. Edna O'Brien was born a generation later in 1930 and her first publication was set in a more upbeat 1960, when readers were introduced to the infamous fictional duo of Caithleen and Baba. Unlike Lavin, her texts of female evaluation came from an autobiographical framework to explore how loves and losses were sharply defined in the constitution, as the experience of women. O'Brien threaded the difficulties associated with the burden of female subjectivity in a constant and repeated refrain, illustrated with symbolism and imagery to denote the suffocation and loss felt by women at this period of history in Ireland. In doing so, she offended several sections of society who refused to accept these truths, including the Catholic Church and her own community. Casting her as a 'scribbler of vapid romance,' the novelist John Broderick dubbed her a 'bargain basement Molly Bloom' (Dan O'Brien, *Irish Times*, 2019).

Lamented by critics for this reworked expression of female sexual desire and romance, O'Brien underwent a new critical perspective by Eve Stoddard. Discussing nations and gender, Stoddard shifts the author's dissections of sexual relationships by evaluating a comparison of postcolonial novels between O'Brien and Jamaica Kincaid.

Writing of women in newly independent states, Kincaid argues that the unity implied by nationalism, 'tends to supress internal dissent' (Stoddard 2006, p.107) resulting in women being held up to traditional roles of wives and mothers. This long-established facticity is a difficult obstacle O'Brien had to disable to reform Ireland's conventions of conflating sexuality, land and national identity. Affirming this knowability, O'Brien, as a subject-in-process used the element of revolt in her craft to constantly question the sense of belonging for Irish women. If language as Kristeva posits, is inseparable from the beings that use it, O'Brien's texts probed an inner uncertainty of feminine related issues that Article 41.2 had silenced. One method to overcome this complication was her utilisation of dream sequences and letter writing as literary devices. This chapter notes a number of daughter characters O'Brien narrated that were affected by dream hallucinations involving their mothers. In these dreams, the mother was armed with a razor as she approached her daughter to cut her tongue. The act of tongue cutting, symbolised the silence of Ireland's daughters from speaking on topics considered contrary to the idealised notion of home and mothers. This nightmarish image was later offset by letter writing between the two generations of women as the only means viable to them to maintain their communication and relationship.

From Tuamgraney in Co. Clare, Edna O'Brien had her first publication over sixty years ago in a career that went on to include more than 19 novels, a memoir, poetry, children's books, plays, screenplays and of chief concern to this thesis, is her abundance of short stories. A brief reference to the *Country Girls* trilogy of (1960-1964) is inserted

for the pivotal role it played in launching O'Brien's writing career. Continually referenced by critics and readers alike, the autobiographical nature of the trilogy, the themes and the experiences of the two female protagonists are often subject to reproach. Critics reprimanded the recycling of this duo and writing for the *New York Times*, Julia O'Faolain refers to their different guises as 'narrow and obsessional'.

> Hers is the archetypal Romantic attitude: a yearning to cage the minute, arrest time at the childhood phase or the moment of sexual ecstasy or, all else failing, to recapture it through art. Her talents are for sensuous evocation, shimmering surface seduction. She can make us share her dreams, taste those cakes, feel, see and touch as she has done. What she does not seem to be able to do is to get experience into perspective.
>
> (O'Faolain 1974, p.357)

O'Faolain concludes that 'the story is forever the same', but I would argue that this very sameness, was fundamental in emphasising the Irish female position and the slow pace to effect change. The first of her three novels *The Country Girls,* (1960) followed by *The Lonely Girl* in 1962, left the trilogy completed when *Girl with the Green Eyes* (also known as *Girls in Their Married Bliss*) was published in 1964. The trajectory of these three novels is toward increasing exile, loneliness and loss, measured consistently with female concerns in the original characters of Cathleen and Baba.

In interview with Seán O'Hagan of *The Guardian,* following the publication of *Country Girl, A Memoir* (2012) O'Brien expands on a certain kind of fluidity between the

author and the texts that she employed. This variability between the author and the narrator can be traced right from the opening line of her canon when the reader is first alerted to the character who, 'wakened quickly and sat up in bed abruptly. Then I remembered. The old reason' (O'Brien 1960, p.01). The reader later understands that her alcoholic father had obviously not returned, and the young child comprehended his absence as an indication of another drinking session. This man's behaviour is what fashioned her childhood to be 'fearful and transportive' (O'Hagan 2019). O'Brien grew up in fear of his rages and retreated 'to the surrounding fields to daydream and to write imaginary stories' (O'Hagan 2019). As the author matured, so too did the encounters of her female protagonists who learned to negotiate the social order of their surroundings in a bid towards a more successful subjectivity. In themes that were less introverted, she began to write with a more outward looking perspective to include a shift that was more political and cultural in Ireland. She latterly extended her focus of feminine issues beyond the personal, to a more global concern for the fate of women at the hands of a Serbian war criminal, and a Nigerian guerrilla group respectively. *The Little Red Chairs* (2015) gives an account of recent European history from the Serbian war, and *Girl* from 2019 brought attention to the kidnapping of almost 300 schoolgirls, by Boko Haram.

O'Brien, however, would like consideration of her place in the literary canon to be an artist of truths and she explained the importance of this to the same interviewer, Seán O'Hagan again, following the publication of *Girl* in 2019. 'I want to go out as someone who kept to the truth' (O'Hagan 2019). Her truth telling on the lack of female subjectivity

that began with an Irish perspective extends currently to a more global approach as far as Nigeria. Both countries highlight women's lack of subjectivity, which results in females caught in an eternal cycle of mother and daughter relationships, ranging from ecstatic symbiosis to inevitable suffocation and loss. The difficulty in placing O'Brien among the tradition of short story writers in Ireland differs from Mary Lavin. Where Lavin's self-deprecation exacerbated her critical neglect, O'Brien drew copious attention from journalists, censors and critics. All of whom addressed the promiscuity in her writing and targeted her personality, rather than assess her literary ability. A striking difference to Mary Lavin is seen in Julia Carlson's book *Banned in Ireland* (1990) when the interviewer suggests that censorship was always more severe in rural Ireland, to which O'Brien replies, 'Understandably. People know each other's lives. But to write it is taboo' (Carlson 1990, p.73).

O'Brien: Then if you write in a kind of personal tone, as I do, they assume without any shadow of doubt that everything in it happened to you.

Carlson: Why do you think you spark off such resentment?

O'Brien: Oh, appearing to be attractive and giving the notion of maybe having a wonder life. I wish I had! Grudge prevails all over the world; it isn't just in Ireland.

(Carlson 1990, p.73)

The personal tone and characteristic lyricism of her prose is what differentiates their writing styles, as O'Brien mapped out that early world of the Irishwoman's experiences in rites-of-passage and the prevailing mores of the time. During an interview with Philip Roth,

O'Brien speaks of loving her mother overmuch and of the continuing battle with her father until he died. This reversal from Lavin's parental relationship saw O'Brien break away from her country and parents in her need to write from afar. A self-imposed exile to London allowed O'Brien recover both her mother and her mother country imaginatively, she had been her mother's protector and repaying this loyalty came with a fierce maternal love. Her mother's love had a suffocating possessiveness to it and the business of individuation was 'transacted painfully, sometimes bitterly, with resentment and remorse' (Coughlan 2006, p.187). With her early novels banned the publication of O'Brien's short stories in magazines and anthologies in America and England, bypassed Irish censorship and saw this challenge to oppression brought to a wider audience abroad.

This chapter will examine O'Brien's illumination of the cultural hysteria centred on women's bodies and motherhood. In doing so, it documents Irish women's experiences in stories that were connected to create and shape one particular version of a collective history. By using the duality of mothers and daughters, O'Brien aids the exploration of the dichotomy between the generational needs and wants of Irish women that are subject to shifting interpretations. In a much more obvious and feminist style than that of Lavin before her, the original trilogy told of women aiming for self-actualization in order to comment on their suppressed absence from the body politic. With her investigations into motherhood, its complexity, and its dependence on social forces to open up the conversation, O'Brien has helped the next generation of women understand and learn from it. O'Brien's stories explicitly refer to the larger cultural myth in Irish society that links

mothers to the Catholic idealisation as self-sacrificing and pure.

> Taught by mothers to submit to men and warned by the Church to remain chaste, O'Brien's women soon find themselves rejected by lovers and humiliated by husbands.
>
> (Colletta and O'Connor 2006, pp.8-9)

O'Brien constitutes articulating postcolonial problems of female subjects in rural and urban communities, in casts of characters that do not sit easily within the broader accepted notions of Irish nationhood.

Marriage guaranteed the stability and continuity of communities and O'Brien's narrations persistently depict women who were not passive embodiments of purity that society prescribed for them. By her life within the home, Irish women remained in the private sphere of domesticity and O'Brien represents this in a framework of family values that are patriarchal and gendered. Her texts reveal a nuclear family frequently disrupted by male violence, including the abuse of women by brutal fathers and uncontrolled husbands. 'A Rose in the Heart' (1978) displays a current of violence that culminates in the child's father shooting at his wife Delia, but thankfully, unlike William Tell 'he was not a good aim' (O'Brien 1978, p.40). For women who chose a life not situated within a nuclear family, women who failed to marry and bear children, they allegedly disrupt the social order. Unable to renew their community through marriage and motherhood, this female cohort unsettle the hallowed role of the Irish family. Villar-Argáiz postulates that O'Brien:

> Also disrupts the sanctified role of the family in Irish society by portraying mothers

> as non-idealised figures, challenging the stereotypical view of maternity sponsored by Irish nationalism and the Church.
>
> (Villar-Argáiz 2013, p.180)

With overt hints of autobiographical experiences, O'Brien narrates the disillusionment felt by Irish women confined to the home as part of a national allegory. This confinement to the home, left women unable to partake in public life. This resulted in their relationships with other women including their daughters becoming intense, watchful and undiluted by social distractions usually experienced in the workplace and wider environment. Returning to Kristeva's stated view of women and their boundary position in public discourse, O'Brien took responsibility of this position through her craft. She disrupted the uniformity of an imagined homogeneous nation, in stories that elicit an awareness of this relationship to a boundary position. Described by Kelly Oliver as an unravelling of the double bind. 'The abject is not a 'quality in itself'. Rather, it is a relationship to a boundary and represents what has been jettisoned out of that boundary, its other side, a margin' (Oliver 1993, p.56). In her first compilation of short stories *The Love Object and Other Stories* (1968), O'Brien introduces readers to the mother-daughter relationship and the process of abjection for self-identity formation. From this collection is 'Cords' (1968) and the mother-daughter motif that is underscored and repeated for over forty years up to the publication of 'My Two Mothers' in 2011, highlighting the ramifications and complexities experienced by both parties. Nuanced are the difficulties Irish women encountered in coming to terms with their place in a country under the hegemony of male dominance in tensions that arise from these inter-generational conflicts. O'Brien's texts describe younger women battling

to assert their autonomous female selfhood from both their mothers and the Motherland. When read together the selected stories, contradictions, similarities and tensions offer a wide sense that this relationship has perturbed and resounded with O'Brien over the course of her adult life. It also brings to bear the fact, that the older women rarely evoke sympathy from the reader even though they too, have suffered at the hands of gendered nationalism. Detailing the reality of this gendered nationalism is Caitríona Clear's, *Women of the House: Women's Household work in Ireland 1922-1961*. In this study Clear details, the hard, physical labour of the homemaker, who was without running water and electricity among one of many contributing elements to the flow of female emigration out of the country. For rural women, however, the tasks of feeding livestock and milking cows were added to their list of duties which is highlighted by Heather Ingman in her findings of 'nation and gender' for *Twentieth-Century Fiction by Irish Women* (2007):

> Clear makes the point that middle-class feminists of this period were mostly out of touch with the realities of working-class women's lives and failed to help improve the lives of women bearing and rearing large numbers of children in poverty.
>
> (Ingman 2007, p.15)

The inability of the older generation of women to break the cycle caused the misery and subjugation to perpetuate, while their daughters had continually to battle against it and their mothers. In confronting Ireland's past, tensions arose as these girls had difficulty articulating an understanding of this experience to their mothers, but a trajectory of viewing the mother from a position of object to subject is clear, and a need for reconciliation is recognised:

> Collectively women have had significant achievements over the last twenty years. However, class and gender forces ensure that general freedoms for women only very slowly affect life in poor communities.
>
> (Daly 1989, p.100, cited in Connolly 2003, p.200)

It was only in the 1980s that the State took on some of the core beliefs of groups like Irish Women United. Prior to this, groups such as the Irish Women's Liberation Movement had a flurry of activity, but it was hard to get any group to share the same views servicing the needs of the collective. 'By the 1990s however, individual women concentrated their feminist commitments in new areas and institutions' (Connolly 2003, p.191). With the benefit of a formal structure, these groups were able to sustain themselves more than the previous informal ones, which enabled them lobby elite sources for funding through the 1980s.

Memory is a haunting presence of O'Brien's feminist fiction, including the memory of her parents and their married relationship. My research has not revealed many references to her siblings, but interviews and nuanced narratives, appear to indicate one brother and two sisters who were older and away at boarding school during her formative years. With memory, comes her radical deconstructions of femininity, Irishness and sexual ideologies as O'Brien provided a counter-narrative to the nationalist construct of the family-centred, rural nation. Her imbrication of femininity, nationalism and motherhood replicated in stories provide a significant intervention in social commentary. The rupture to family life revealed by O'Brien indicates a nation at odds with itself and the difficult terms negotiating

female identity in Ireland. Gerardine Meaney considers all nationalisms to be gendered, and concludes that: 'the Mother Ireland trope merely indicates the operation of a fundamental structuring principle recognisable in both official and insurgent nationalism' (Meaney 2010, p.4). The literary repetition that equates motherland and maternal body as irretrievably lost was a response to the ingrained marginalised female voice. However, the land that Mother Ireland historically fought for, no longer applies and rather than turn her protagonists into card-carrying feminists, O'Brien opts for a greater understanding. She explores the full human range of people's lives to probe uncomfortable questions regarding the motivation behind politics, land, sex and ultimately motherhood. From an historical perspective, idealised images of the mother strongly shaped Irish culture in relation to nationalism and Catholicism. As D'hoker explains about Marianne Hirsch:

> In her classic study, *The Mother-Daughter Plot. Narrative, Psychoanalysis, Feminism* (1988), Marianne Hirsch has analysed the fraught relations between mothers and daughters as represented in novels by women writers. Common elements in the texts she analyses are the daughter's ambivalent feeling of fear and anger: 'fears of maternal power and […] anger at maternal powerlessness" (167), inspired by the paradoxical combination of the myth of the omnipotent, devouring mother and the reality of the mother's submissiveness in a patriarchal society.
>
> (cited in D'hoker 2014, p.2)

In the cultural context of Edna O'Brien's stories, aggravating these difficulties are the idealised images of the mother in the discussions surrounding nationalism and Catholicism. By her constitutionally located life in the home, the reality of the maternal powerlessness

was clearly evident for their daughters to witness. Twinned with their submissive biddings towards the national common good, these sacrificial overbearing mothers are exactly what the daughters are struggling not to replicate. As Fogarty points out, many Irish stories and novels: 'depict the desperate struggle of the daughter to avoid the trap of female subjugation and the calamity of duplicating the mother's experience'(Fogarty cited in D'hoker 2014, p.116). Mothers and daughters, who failed to disentangle themselves from religious and cultural pressures of conformity, added a layer of difficulty to their relationship. The role of Catholicism in Irish society is ever present in O'Brien's stories and is featured again in 'A Scandalous Woman' (1974) which concludes that; 'Ireland is a land of strange, sacrificial women' (O'Brien 1974, p.52). Jeanette Shumaker scrutinises the impact of sacrifice with the Madonna myth on western European women and the variety of forms it takes. This ranges from nuns, to wives, to mothers and fallen women, but whichever role chosen, the application of the 'Madonna myth' is appropriate. A conflicted ideology, held up as an impossible ideal, it was continually reproduced and passed down to generations of Irish daughters. The female body was of central concern to the church and nation-state and citing Marina Warner, Shumaker states that it is 'the very conditions which make the Virgin sublime are beyond the powers of women to fulfil unless they deny their sex' (Shumaker 1995, p.186). Lena O'Brien, the author's mother, died in the Spring of 1977 and the publication of 'A Rose in the Heart' came a year later. This story resonates strongly with notions of self-sacrificing femininity and autobiographical hints of past misunderstandings, between an unnamed daughter and her fictional mother, Delia. The critic Lynette Carpenter concurs that O'Brien writes 'the same story over and over again'

(Carpenter 1986, p.263, cited in Mooney 2008, p.433). Carpenter's opinion on these repetitions, appropriately emphasizes O'Brien's attempts to process memories of early maternal symbiosis, which later became suffocating. Reformulating this theme over is a reworked process by O'Brien to gain an understanding of suffering from the Irish female condition and her own fears in replicating this behaviour with lovers and children.

In addressing the misunderstandings of motherhood, this chapter will interweave and expand on the previously mentioned motifs of tongue cutting, and letter writing. The theme O'Brien exercises features a mother, who appears in the dream sequence armed with a razor to violate the daughter's organ of speech. Using this analogy, O'Brien references the voiceless position of most women throughout her short story collection. The first example from the selected texts begins with 'A Scandalous Woman' in 1974, where a character called Eily is discovered to have had relations with a young man called Jack, outside of marriage. Until a hasty wedding is prepared, her parents confine Eily in the family home under lock and key. This constitutionally recognised space now doubles as a prison for the unmarried Eily and using silence as her method of protest, she will not speak to anyone. 'Even to her mother she refused to speak' (O'Brien 1974, p.39). A second example bookends 'My Two Mothers,' (2011) when the author dreams of her mother, coming with a razor in hand to cut out her tongue. This inability of speech represents oppression and silence, but a rebalancing occurs in the copious letters that reassert some degree of voice and control. The use of letters by O'Brien as a narratological device indicates a method to project voice for older generations through the character of her

mother's unspoken thoughts. Through the act of reading by the recipient, the daughter is better equipped to dissect and understand her parents. Penned by silent and passive mother characters, truths were unveiled in letter writing, but the manner of acceptance by the receiver, depends on fate.

As will be seen later in a closer reading of 'My Two Mothers', O'Brien the author and protagonist, has boxed and compartmentalised her mother's correspondence for twenty years. She revisits them with a greater maturity from her position as an established author with empathy, and in a bid towards reconciliation, she acknowledges that it was from her mother that she got both her writing ability and tenacity. Examples of letter writing in the stories chosen for this chapter exist in 'Cords', 'A Scandalous Woman', 'A Rose in the Heart' and 'My Two Mothers'. The gendered labour noted earlier, along with the economic and cultural stagnation of the 1940s and 1950s, accounted for large-scale female migration from Ireland. Therefore, many relatives, friends and neighbours were subject to the migrant experience at any given time and their recorded testimonies are highlighted in O'Brien's use of letters in this chapter. Writing about diaspora space, Tony Murray notes that O'Brien's letter writing between mother and daughter plays a significant role in the narrative of the Irish migrant experience from the mother(land). O'Brien employs these written correspondences as a framework to map the position of her daughter characters, in relation to their mothers left behind in the home. In letters, revelations of the private reflections of home and family for those who stayed behind can offer a means of reconciliation between generations, now that distance lies between both parties. Tony

Murray notes that the process of fleeing to London involved opposite imperatives for the writer and the letter recipient in the migrating characters of O'Brien's fiction.

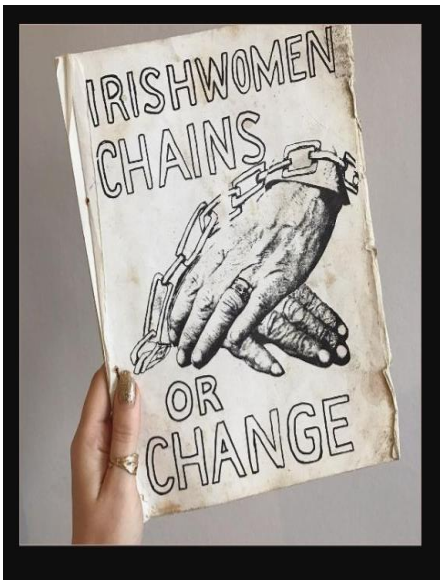
> By revisiting the primal scenes of rupture (physical, emotional, literary) caused by migration, she has been able to deconstruct and re-evaluate the diasporic condition through different forms of narrative.
>
> (Murray 2013, p.91)

From London, O'Brien was temporarily able to renounce her mother and discover her own self without detaching completely. In reading her mother's communications, O'Brien had the physical space to refigure her maternal experience and reconnect with a greater understanding. Equally, Mrs Lena O'Brien was able to articulate her emotional needs to her daughter through the content of letters penned, and viewed from this lens, intergenerational entanglements towards a reconciliation between the women was facilitated.

The Civil Rights Act of 1965 bolstered a second wave of feminism in America and resulted in the prohibition of employment discrimination based on sex, race, religion or national origin. American social unrest channelled the development of other women's groups including Ireland, which saw the founding of the Irish Women's Liberation Movement (I.W.L.M.) in 1970. The image below is from their pamphlet of 1971 highlighting the continued injustices against women in Ireland up to the previous year. In summary, the contents display women's inequality in law, education, work and marriage and this manifesto lists most of the discriminations against women at the time. As noted in

*Feminism Backwards* (2020) author and I.W.L.M. member Rosita Sweetman:

> Our little ship was so tiny and so fragile, and the patriarchy out there so entrenched and so vicious, that equal rights, equal education, decent housing, contraception; bringing out or even discussing issues such as incest or abortion was considered too incendiary. If we went too far too fast, we might alienate more women (and men) than we convinced and be closed down before we got going.'
>
> (Sweetman 2020, p.122)




The 'Contraceptive Train' was a successful direct-action protest held on May 22, 1971, to coincide with 'World Media Day'. Captured on film, the train arrived in Dublin's Connolly Station, from Belfast. The forty-seven women disembarked displaying contraceptives they had purchased in Northern Ireland, symbolic of the waning but continued role of Catholicism in society. At this point in Irish life, O'Brien the author was married, divorced and living in London with her two children, having written her *'Country Girl'* trilogy, *August is a Wicked Month* (1965), *Casualties of Peace* (1966) and *A Pagan Place* (1970).

With foreignness central to Kristeva's intellectual identity, and drawing from her migrant experience as a Bulgarian living in France, she identifies with the marginalised position of Irish women. Kristeva argues that nations are formed on an identity of exclusion, but the redemptive capacities of writing facilitates a space for marginalised women to pursue their individuality within the demands of the culture. This will be exampled again in the fourth chapter in relation to Melatu Okorie but more immediately for Kristeva and her text *New Maladies of the Soul* (1995). In this, she favours the use of psychoanalysis alongside the role of writing, 'to demystify the ideal that the community of language is a universal, all-inclusive, and equalizing tool' (Kristeva 1995, p.223). In exposing the uncanny of entrenched Irish nationalism in her short stories, Edna O'Brien provided a space to express her secret desires as a representative voice for Irish women confined within the rigidity of the symbolic. Two predominant themes informing theory for Kristeva are regarding the notion of abjection and, secondly, her belief that individuals are not static, but continue to be subjects-in–process. This chapter will investigate five short stories drawing on these motifs, which O'Brien outlines as general struggles of Irish women trying to merge their gender with their nation.

## 'Cords' (1968)

### Talking through letters for O'Brien's mothers

Taken from *The Love Object* anthology of 1968, 'Cords', is an ambiguous title that could reference the many struggles of this mother-daughter duo. These range from umbilical

cords, vocal cords or a daughter, Claire, who needs to cut free from the familial bonds for once and for all, while her mother hangs on to their relationship by threads. Bringing this mother-daughter dyad to the reader's attention comes from a personal odyssey that O'Brien has linked with an ordinary experience. The text begins with a mother preparing to fly to London to visit her daughter Claire, and when they meet, their terse dialogue underscores their shared and separate difficulties. Both women have difficulties articulating their old experiences and achieving an understanding of each other's current position. In this latter case, the early symbiotic mother-daughter bonds witness a new obstacle of hostility before a reconciliation can occur. The story begins with the musings of the un-named mother preparing for the trip:

> Just like any mother, except that her daughter was different: she'd lost her faith, and she mixed with queer people and wrote poems. If it was stories, one could detect the sin in them, but these poems made no sense at all and therefore seemed more wicked.
>
> (O'Brien 1968, p.115)

This framework marks the differences between the women, as Claire seeks a new identity in London and the mother finds her daughter's non-conformity to Irish ideals incomprehensible. Far removed from the Irish ideal of women as bearers of children and upholders of Catholic values, the mother struggles to understand Claire's loss of religious beliefs and the unusual people she mixes with. Most unfathomable of all is the medium of poetry Claire has chosen as her art form, the mother finds her poetry incomprehensible and, therefore, views it with suspicion.

Framing these generational differences by the dialogic nature of their conversations emphasises the vast lifestyle differences and beliefs of the women, which grew separate with time and space:

> 'All Irish planes are blessed, they never crash,' she said, believing totally in the God that created her, sent her this venial husband, a large farmhouse, hens, hardship, and one daughter who's changed, become moody, and grown away from them completely.

(O'Brien 1968, p.116)

The rhythm of their greetings is spoken in a staccato style, indicating their nervousness around each other initially as they each proceed to profess their way of being. Old difficulties and anxieties of their relationship soon reappear, and the simple act of collecting her mother from the airport in a taxi was met with protests that; 'she could have navigated' (O'Brien 1968, p.116). This was curtly countered as 'Nonsense' and trying to amend for this bluntness, Claire gently enquires about her mother's journey:

> Oh, I must tell you, there was this very peculiar woman and she was screaming. Claire listened and stiffened, remembering her mother's voice that became low and dramatic in a crisis, the same voice that said, 'Sweet Lord your father will kill us,' or, 'What's to become of us, the bailiff is here', or, 'Look, look, the chimney is on fire.

(O'Brien 1968, p.117)

Claire stiffens at the tonal qualities that instantly return her to the home and the life that occurred there. Even though the trip was well intentioned and both women are initially pleased to meet, very quickly old tensions and a lack of mutual understandings, has them both edgy and tense. Even the mother's gifts are a source of unease to Claire, who imagined her mother, hunching over her work to stitch the ugly tapestry on winter nights, using only the dim light from a smoking Aladdin lamp. Completed without a thimble to ease the needle through:

> because she believed in sacrifice and her father turning to say, 'could I borrow your glasses, Mam, I want to have a look at the paper?' he was too lazy to have his own eyes tested.
>
> (O'Brien 1968, p.118)

From experience, Claire is frustrated that her mother cannot take complete pleasure in her hobby, just as she could not relish the luxury of a taxi ride from the airport. Frustrated by the extent to which her mother, unlike her father, is self-denying and sacrificial even in the small incidences of life. The two women are not completely at odds with each other and successfully manage moments of affection early in the visit, when standing 'with tears in their eyes, savouring those seconds of tenderness, knowing that it would be short-lived' (O'Brien 1968, p.118). Knowing this tenderness is short lived and avoiding any disclosures that might spoil the mood, Claire busies herself with a kettle in the scullery. No longer able to avoid the greatest source of tension, the mother is vexed because Claire did not enquire after the father:

> 'Your father sent you his love',

> ‘How is he?’
>
> ‘He’s great now, never touches a drop.
>
> Claire knew that if he had, he would have descended on her, the way he used to descend on her as a child when she was in the convent.

(O’Brien 1968, p.118)

Claire remembers how wounded she had been by an alcoholic father and the inadequacies of her mother who failed to protect her from his drinking deliriums. Recognising how perverse it was not to let her mother partake in an emotional reconciliation regarding the father, Claire recognised that it would gain nothing either. Having fled to London, Claire did not get to live nor share a home with her sober father, and unlike her mother who appears to have resolved her relationship with her husband, she only remembers ‘the thin, frustrated man who was emaciated, crazed, and bankrupted by drink’ (O’Brien 1968, p.119).

These opposing sides of a remembered family life continue throughout the mother’s stay and continue as a source of tension between them, until a climax is reached during a dinner party Claire has organised. Hoping to introduce her mother to her friends was however, complicated by the fact that the guests invited were a trio: ‘One man and two women; his wife and his mistress. At that point in their lives the wife was noticeably pregnant’ (O’Brien 1968, p.119). With fixed constructs of gender central to Irish nationalism, this trio do not adhere to the social framework the mother is familiar or comfortable with. In choosing them as friends, the daughter is not reinforcing the image of

female purity, which distresses her mother and is a further source of conflict between them. She enquires from Claire privately as to 'which of those two ladies is he married to?' (O'Brien 1968, p.120) When the terse reply informs her, that it is not of her concern, and berated for being narrow-minded and cruel, the mother retires to bed. The guests question the mother's absence, but unable to communicate her migrant and generational experience to them, Claire cannot explain the difficulties she is negotiating with her mother. From a rural Irish Catholic background living in London during the swinging sixties, Claire cannot articulate to her friends, her need to sever the ties of this authoritarian upbringing or to get as far away as possible from her former monotonous, way of life. The mother too remains constrained by her husband, country and State, so she cannot accept freely or take on board immediately her daughter's way of living. In Claire's search to find her place, she too, would like to have a partner she could relate to, because she also is lonely and isolated. However, 'there was no one she trusted' and equally, she is searching for a partner 'she could produce for her mother and feel happy about it' (O'Brien 1968, p.127).

Patricia Coughlan proposes that the discussion of abjection in O'Brien's work is a fertile medium to understand the author's vision. She suggests that a complete relinquishing of the mother's body is never fully realised by the child and will surface again in adulthood, 'since pre-Oedipal experience is always unconsciously present to the subject' (Coughlan 2006, p.178). Not confined to the maternal, abjection can be expanded out to groups in societies, nations and boundaries. The method of reconciling her gender with her nation adapted by O'Brien here, would in Kristevan terms, be considered an appropriate

structure for a writer. *In New Maladies of the Soul* (1995), she argues that affirmation for women through literature provides a format to voice conflict with social norms:

> Why the emphasis on literature? Is it because when literature is in conflict with social norms, it diffuses knowledge and occasionally the truth about a repressed, secret, and unconscious universe? Is it because literature intensifies the social contract by exposing the uncanny nature of that which remains unsaid?
>
> (Kristeva 1995, p.220)

The holiday continues with both women guarded and edgy, intensified by the mother's statement that Claire 'was twenty-eight. Soon she would be thirty. Withering' (O'Brien 1968, p.120). In verbalising her daughter's waning biological reproductive capacity, her mother exposed what is considered in Freudian terms, to be uncanny. The *unheimlich* of her mother's repressed impulses have been projected on to Claire, whose motherless status she unconsciously viewed as threatening. For the mother of this text, her unsaid belief regarding marriage and childbearing, reaffirm her own stifled, calamitous position within Ireland's masculinist nationalism. The mother desperately seeks the approval and understanding of Claire and states in frustration and with strong conviction - 'I was a good mother, I did everything I could, and this is all the thanks I get' (O'Brien 1968, p.126). Claire, however, violated all the rules of decency and kindness when she turned and laughed, hysterically. Dogged by minute details of her childhood since her mother's arrival, from how 'she used to love to slip into the chapel, alone' (O'Brien 1968, p.127) and pray that she would die before her mother, to avoid being the scapegoat of her father. This fear of her father actualised itself in a beauty treatment twenty years later when Claire was

zipped into a plastic tent of a steam bath. She panicked and cried out,

> convinced that her sweat became drops of blood. She put her hands through the flaps and begged the masseur to protect her, the way she had begged her mother, long ago.
>
> (O'Brien 1968, p.126-7)

This spa treatment brings her vulnerability to the fore and is indicative of wounded women as a portrait of the nation who needed protection. In Kristevan theory regarding childbirth and bodily fluids, parallels could be drawn between the cocooning nature of the spa-tent and the mother's womb. In typical discourse, for successful selfhood to be attained it is the father who breaches the dyad between infant and mother to represent the symbolic order of the society. Characters such as Claire reveal in their actions what society does not want to see, namely the darker side of Irish family life. Portrayed as 'abject' by O'Brien, it stimulates fascination and horror in the reader. If the symbolic in this instance was an Irish Catholic family with the near silencing of mothers, then the abject is the underside that examined areas of verbal abuse, violence and alcoholism. Claire continually seeks a more successful maternal abjection and continues her cycle as a subject in process in London. Her experience of a blurred boundary from her father's unclear lines of demarcation poses a problem for her search to secure a strong female self. The mother's visit to London remains a source of anxiety and disempowerment for her daughter and not the source of strength and strong identity she required. O'Brien has always maintained she was 'much wounded' in her childhood. Whilst never expanding on what this 'wounding' involved, the

fearful descriptions of her father descending on her, has resulted in very few male characters being narrated as kind or gentle. With the Irish family unit inviolate, abuse was contained within homes and witnessing the powerlessness of her mother, fostered a desire in O'Brien to escape. Exile provided both the author and Claire with the space to examine the actions of her mother, their rural setting and her own position as an adult striving for autonomy.

The mother cuts the trip short and saying goodbye at the airport two days later, she comments that she especially enjoyed the short boat trip they had taken up the Thames to Westminster. Flagging the shortness signals the longer planned trip, but Claire had been miserly with her time and had pretended to work. By refusing to confront the 'abject' a basic aspect of their relationship is diminished. Embedded in this early example of O'Brien's short story, are the struggles common to Irish women as they tried to negotiate their selfhood while simultaneously trying to detach from their parents. At the airport barrier, where they parted, kissed and registered the other's sorrow, the mother acknowledges all that is unsaid and misunderstood, so promises to write:

> 'I'll write to you, I'll write oftener, Claire said, and for a few minutes she stood there waving, weeping, not aware that the visit was over and that she could go back to her own life now, such as it was.
>
> (O'Brien 1968, p.131)

The holiday and the story end at this point with both of them weeping but unable to overcome their differences. Claire realises that her heart is in shreds (cords), as is her

mothers and she has yet to completely abject from the desired object, that is her mother. The different forms of alienation represented by being opposite to her mother, leaves Clare needing further time to elapse, for necessary boundary space to become defined before she can disavow the maternal other for a greater achievement of understanding. The tension detailed in the mother-daughter dyad of 'Cords' is written in a variety of female characters and different guises by O'Brien who collapses the author's real relationship experiences into this fictional duo. O'Brien the author, continues using this framing device to help her understand and contextualise her own connection to her mother, and only after the death of Mrs Lena O'Brien in 1977, is it concluded in 'My Two Mothers' (2011).

## **'A Scandalous Woman'** (1974)

### Isolated lives in the characters of O'Brien's females.

The second O'Brien story investigated for this chapter, deals with the notion of shame and sacrifice. Central to 'A Scandalous Woman' is the gendered humiliation experienced by Irish women, constituting a specific historical moment of significance. Narrated in an unplanned pregnancy of the character Eily, O'Brien underscores the feminised shame attached to women through the sexualisation of their bodies. Kaye Mitchell defines this as an experience that returns us to our bodies, internalised by individual characters together with the monitoring and policing of the community:

> Shame is internal, individual, personal to each of us, while also being a feature of

> the (external) "social relations" that connect us to others and take us outside, beyond our solipsistic worldview toward some encounter with the other.
>
> (cited in Magennis 2021, p.141)

Before enquiring further into this text, the insertion of an outline of shame and 'affect' theory provides a greater understanding of the nuance O'Brien was extending in this text. Shame can emphasise both positive or negatives uses for individual families and cultures because it functions as a form of respect for privacy. Carla Fischer has identified that shame and guilt differ as follows.

> Shame attaches to who we are as persons, whereas guilt attaches to our actions. Guilt thus allows for reparations as one can make amends for doing something wrong, but since shame entails the assumption of a deep-seated blemish on one's character, rather than a regretful act, it merely offers covering as a means of dealing with the blemish in question.
>
> (Fischer 2017, p.754)

This 'deep-seated blemish' of character was rooted in struggles of colonialism and continued to lay with Eily's female body, because she shamefully reproduced outside the borders of moral considerations. The actual physicality of the female body, links women to be more shame-prone than men. If female sexuality figures as the site of shaming in Ireland, the experience of shame was widespread due to the ideology of purity promoted. Irish women bearing the 'imagined' appearance in the socio-cultural context of purity, experienced negativity for any transgressions. Helen Block Lewis identified that shame evokes a "doubleness of experience" due to the relationship between the self and the other:

> Because the self is the focus of awareness in shame, "identity" imagery is usually evoked. At the same time that this identity imagery is registering as one's own experiences, there is also vivid imagery of the self in the other's eyes. This creates a "doubleness of experience," which is characteristic of shame. Shame is the vicarious experience of the other's negative evaluation. In order for shame to occur, there must be a relationship between the self and the other in which the self-cares about the other's evaluation.
>
> (Block Lewis 2013, cited in Johnson and Moran 2013, pp.107-8)

O'Brien had been residing in London for over a decade before the publication of 'A Scandalous Woman'. Widely referred to as the 'swinging sixties,' this period bore little resemblance to the lifestyle of Eily the protagonist, in rural Ireland. A 'dress dance in aid of the new mosaic altar' (O'Brien 1972, p.12) will be Eily's first social occasion and written with the leavening distance of space, O'Brien's observations continue to inform the reader of the pace of rural agrarian life. In a locality where events or anything new elicited notice, Eily marked her debut. The girl 'who helped on the farm and used not to be let out much', (O'Brien 1972, p.11) is permitted a reprieve from home to attend the religious fund-raising event. 'The locals were mesmerised. She was not off the floor once, and the more she danced the more fetching she became' (O'Brien 1972, p.13). When the young friends convene in the supper room, Eily confided to me that something out of this world had taken place and almost immediately, her sister Nuala brought her home. From the opening lines, the scene establishes the naïve young girl at her first local dance. Swiftly taking advantage of her innocence and youth is O'Brien's character, Jack and the fall-out that ensues rests

predominantly with the women of the community. Eily's pre-marital pregnancy renders visible the reality surrounding reproduction and sexuality among citizens. While reprimanding both parties, it is the female of the duo whose sacrifice exists as an exemplary lesson within the community of familial shame. Her status functioned as a tool of communal life, enforcing boundaries of acceptance, imposed by her female embodiment.

In researching the gendered nature of shame, Clara Fischer highlights the gendered nature of the mobilisation of shame and writes that 'feminists have theorised shame as an emotion woman are particularly prone to' (Fisher 2017, p.752). Kristeva argues that in cultures with rigid gender distinctions that subordinate women to men, women will seem irrational, uncontrollable and in need of restraint and confinement; and '[m]oral infractions can be abject, a threatening otherness that Christianity calls 'sin' (cited in Oliver 1993, p.56). Unprepared and ill equipped for life outside the confines of home, the silence and weight of historical and religious beliefs created this sacrificial victim. Jack and Eily continue to court after the dance, but this abruptly terminates when Eily's father, Mr Hogan, 'found his daughter in the lime kiln, with the bank clerk, in the most satanic position, with her belly showing' (O'Brien 1972, p.31). The reference to 'Satan' denotes his belief regarding women as purveyors of Irish purity. In a society that saw breaches of moral teachings dealt with punitively, Jack incurred a beating and Eily in the supposedly hallowed safety of the home was 'under lock and key' (O'Brien 1972, p.33) in the family oat room. The scandal that ensues will see another daughter become estranged and unreconciled with her mother, because societal shame ruptured social bonds. She had

'joined that small sodality of scandalous women who had conceived children without securing fathers' (O'Brien 1972, p.33).

> In its unhealthy guise, shame impedes individual growth and mature relationships, preventing openness, honesty, and creativity; and fostering blame, aggression and secrecy, as well as shady social practices like discrimination and abuse.
>
> (Nussbaum 2004, cited in Clough 2014, p. 7)

Since placement of the regulation of Ireland's moral health was with the women, any transgression on the framework of purity resulted in shame and concealment.

Church, State and family units utilised shame for social control 'via the containment of the feminine' (Clough 2014, p.7). Clough supports her argument with figures from the McAleese Report of February 2013, which identified the confinement of 11,000 females in Ireland's Magdalen laundries between 1922 and 1996. For Eily, the effects and significance of her transgression plays out differently for each member of her community. With the female body and the Irish nation conflated, the pregnancy became everybody's business, from the men who provide the thrashing, to the farmer grazing cattle on their land. Their idea of masculinity is to punish the boy as the only means known to them, inculcated since they were boys themselves. Whereas 'Eily was silence itself' (O'Brien 1972, p.39) and with this silence, O'Brien can underscore the futility of the female voice in shaping her own destiny. 'She didn't even smile at me when I brought the basket of groceries that her mother had sent me to fetch' (O'Brien 1972, p.39). This silence echoes

with the motif and dream sequence O'Brien uses throughout her canon as a medium to communicate female oppression. 'Even to her mother she refused to speak, and when asked a question she bared her teeth like one of the dogs' (O'Brien 1972, p.39). For Eily who had 'worked like a horse', O'Brien now equates her social standing with the position of the dog. Eily's mother, upset at this turn of events referred to the plans and hopes she had for her daughter to live close to her. 'For years she and her husband had been skimping and saving, intending to build a house, two fields nearer the road' (O'Brien 1972, p.38). Saddened by the imagined isolated future that is in store for the girl, and addressing her loss with annoyance more than embarrassment, 'she seemed vexed more than ashamed, as if it was inconvenience rather than disgrace that had hit her' (O'Brien 1972, p.39). Perhaps Mrs Hogan appreciates the nature of sexuality in her offspring and the repeated lack of autonomy trouble her more than the inconvenience of this pregnancy.

The mother will be further marginalised herself with the absence of labour provided by her workhorse daughter. Alleviating their previous companionship in casting her off from local society, henceforth their friendship will continue through letter writing 'every second week'. Likening Eily's rapid transition from adolescence to motherhood with 'the modern Magdalen', sacrificial women like Eily, 'sacrifices herself for her parents' reputation, as well (Shumaker 1995, p.188). Cast off, she began to grow odd and talk to herself:

> I would hear her mother tell my mother these things. The news came in snatches, first from a family who had gone up there to rent grazing, and then from a private nurse

> who had to give Eily pills and potions. Eily's own letters were disconnected and she asked about dead people or people she'd hardly known. Her mother meant to go by bus one day and stay overnight, but she postponed it until her arthritis got too bad and she was not able to go out at all.
>
> (O'Brien 1972, p. 47).

Her madness denotes the frequently used path of exile for women who broke with the status quo. Previously seen in Mary Lavin's character, Flora, from *The Becker Wives,* Eily's madness provides an expression for her pain and rage towards a family that rejected her rather than protect her. In fact, 'possibly a lobotomy, a numbed sanity that represents oblivion' (Shumaker 1995, p.187) is a supposed cure for her rejection and rage. Years later the author seeks out her childhood friend and finds her to be a 'complete mistress of her surroundings' (O'Brien 1972, p.51) in her shop serving customers, but unwilling to engage in conversation about the old days. Eily's life inside of marriage, however, equally requires humiliating renunciations for her children and her unsympathetic husband, 'both sides of the Madonna ideal – Virgin and mother – are identically submissive' (Shumaker 1995, p.187). The burden of iconicity sees the narrator friend, leaving to consider that 'that ours indeed was a land of shame, a land of murder and a land of strange sacrificial women' (O'Brien 1972, p.52). The burden of shame and sacrifice identified will continue throughout O'Brien's writing and on into Colm Tóibín's too, for those who trespassed against the social and cultural norms of the time.

## 'A Rose in the Heart' (1978)

## Death of an intimate relationship and the unknowable portions that remain.

With the woman's body central to the story, 'A Rose in the Heart' opens in another rural Irish setting depicting the harsh living conditions for a woman named Delia. In labour for the fourth time, descriptions of female bodily fluids are central to the story and lend themselves to the concept of what is 'unclean' in Kristeva's abjection theory. The story begins by informing the reader that two of Delia's children have not survived and her third child is with a neighbour for the duration of the labour. As the midwife hurries up the driveway she mentally notes the condition of the decaying house. This decay indicates a family breaking down, the exploitation of Delia and her reproductive body and, the recollection of an infanticide she attended up the mountain previously. Her arrival on that occasion had been too late for a woman who transgressed the Catholic doctrine on issues of procreation and Irish nationalism entwined with Mariolatry. Modelled on the Blessed Virgin, procreation in Ireland did not encompass a fatherless child, and as a result, that baby was smothered and 'stuffed in a drawer' (O'Brien 1978, p.109). Decisively inserted by O'Brien, the midwife's reflections contextualise the period in Irish history to re-iterate the consequences of transgressing the social-cultural codes of conduct. In the throes of labour, the religious symbolism of martyrdom punctuates the story as Delia 'roared again and said this indeed was her vinegar and gall. She bit into the crucifix and dented it further' (O'Brien 1972, p.112). Connoting the crucifixion of Jesus, O'Brien sets up the framework that likens Irish mothers to the ideal of martyrdom and self-sacrificing types in both their maternal role and their embodiment of Mother Ireland.

In this story, after the safe delivery of an infant girl the midwife realises that the mother, had 'no choice of a name' (O'Brien 1978, p.112). This lack of preselected baby names is representative of the mother's own disappointment with life. This disappointment presents itself in Delia's resentment of the child's very conception and the manner in which 'she had been prised apart, again and again, with not a word to her' (O'Brien 1978, p.109). Administrating the aftercare, the midwife stitched the 'line of torn flesh that was gaping and coated with blood,' (O'Brien 1978, p.110) Delia felt as if her mouth and eyelids were being stitched too. The silence and blindness reverberate with the lack of concerns given to their reproductive bodies, which continued to receive these crude administrations. This powerlessness is symbolised by the use of the third person narrative, which further distances itself from the un-named daughter and extends the negative female experience for the child. Integral to the corporal functionality of pregnancy and childbirth for Kristeva is 'maternal passion,' which differs from the 'maternal function' of Freud and Lacan's concern. This passion, however, must still be abjected, in order to construct an identity, but identity formation is difficult for the girl character who almost fused with the mother during her formative years. With the difficult labour over, the exhausted mother describes her new-born child as a 'mewling piece of screwed-up, inert, dark, purple misery' (O'Brien 1972, p.111) of whom the mother was not proud, but with the passing of time this sentiment radically changed: 'The mother came to idolize the child, because it was so quiet, never bawling, never asking for anything, just covert, in its pram, the dog watching over it' (O'Brien 1972, p.113). As time went on their bond developed and a strong intimacy was borne. Mother and child were as one together and O'Brien reflects their symbiosis in long

passages to underline this sentiment:

> If its mother went to the post office the child stood in the middle of the drive praying until its mother returned safely. Her mother's knuckles were her knuckles, her mother's veins were her veins, her mother's lap was a second heaven, her mother's forehead a copybook on to which she traced A B C D, her mother's body was a recess that she would wander inside for ever and ever, a sepulchre growing deeper and deeper.
>
> (O'Brien 1972, p.113-4)

The attachment between the two women is so tightly woven they have almost merged into one, echoing a theme that originated in *The Country Girls* (1960). Retold in three further stories of this chapter, 'Cords', 'Sister Imelda' and 'My Two Mothers', their intimacy replicates O'Brien's own life in texts crossing boundaries between author and character. Offering readers an insight to the intimacy of their relationship drew mixed reviews from critics and the Irish public alike. Writing on the risks of intimate writing, Jennifer Cooke draws from the texts of the French literary critic and writer Hélène Cixous. In her examination of *The Book of Promethea* (1983), Cooke identified that Cixous's draws on the raw material of the work to communicate an intimacy that is palpable and runs the risk of either offending some readers, while inspiring others:

> Never am I you. That is what is astonishing. That is what is reassuring … I lick your soul right down to the bone, I know the taste of every inch of your nerves, but you I do not know you I do not know.

(Cixous cited in Cooke 2011, p.5)

'A Rose in the Heart' indicates a child so enthralled with her mother she believes 'only death could part them' (O'Brien 1978, p.122). Such is the extent of their union that the daughter lacks childhood friends because the mother wholly achieved this function. The young child/narrator is so absorbed with this union, she likens it with 'a habitation in which she longed to sink and disappear for ever and ever. Yet she was afraid to sink' (O'Brien 1978, p.123). The fear of drowning in her mother will result in her floundering in bad relationships through her adult life but for the moment, this insatiable appetite for the maternal, saw her waking every morning in search of her. Gathering her clothes, she would seek her mother out, dress in front of her and 'feast on the sight of her' (O'Brien 1978, p.115). The feasting metaphor is repeated and extended in anecdotes of their relationship based on food and shared food related experiences. 'The girl and her mother took walks on Sundays' (O'Brien 1978, p.112) to pick blackberries and make preserves. Sharing the ritual of harvesting and consuming is another intimacy to reflect the psychological and emotional hunger of both parties, with needs that are sated or denied: 'The food was what united them, eating off the same plate using the same spoon, watching one another's chews, feeling the food as it went down the other's neck' (O'Brien 1978, p.113). Through food, they can express love in the division and delights of sharing it but when they separate, the daughter develops a food loathing. Male characters are secondary in this text and following the incidence of domestic violence involving gunfire aimed at the mother, the daughter stays with the neighbours, while the mother was recuperating with her own family.

During this time, 'she declined the milk they gave her' (O'Brien 1978, p.118) 'She refused food. She pined' (O'Brien, 1978 p.118). Severing abruptly the shared intimacy of their mother-daughter dyad is a traumatic experience for the young girl and she becomes the Other, which Kristeva maintains is essential for abjection. The reader witnesses this in the actions of the child who will not eat during her stay with these surrogate parents, as Kristeva suggests:

> Food loathing is perhaps the most elementary and most archaic form of abjection. By spitting out food proffered by my parents, I take the first step in becoming an Other and abjecting myself from my parents at the expense of my own death.
>
> (Kristeva 1982, p.2)

When it is time for the daughter to attend boarding school for her secondary education, she was initially unsettled until she found solace in a nun. 'Her new idol. A nun with a dreadfully pale face, and a Master's Degree in Science' (O'Brien 1978, p.124-5). This pale faced nun serves to signal the beginning of the route from the family to exile, which Kristeva stresses will always remain incomplete. Home for the holidays the daughter began rejecting the food that had once been their shared connection. 'All the little treats and the carrageen soufflé that her mother had prepared were not gloated over' (O'Brien 1978, p.124). What previously had been their luxurious experience in an otherwise monotonous existence parallels a rejection of the mother. Unlike the joyful reunion and shared baking celebration following the shooting incidence, her love and adoration for the nun, replaces her love for her mother. Affronted, the mother states that 'these things are not to be sniffed

at' (O'Brien 1978, p.124) but the obsession with Sr. Imelda dominated the child's thoughts to the extent that she 'could taste it' (O'Brien 1978, p.123).

Once her education was complete and her schooling finished, she student removed herself 'from the spell of nuns and gods' (O'Brien 1978, p.125). She met a bakery man, a courtship began and the dating turned into a 'hunger' she could not appease because of the staggering memories of her mother, intruding her thoughts. 'Then there was no one' (O'Brien 1978, p.125). The daughter finds herself alone and working in a library away from home, her loneliness alleviated with the arrival of written communications and food-parcels from her mother, 'always a cake, a pound of butter, and a chicken' (O'Brien 1978, p.126). She marries in haste, a man her mother considers as odd 'as two left shoes' (126), and being at odds with him, mother and daughter meet up in hotel lounges rather than daughter's house.

> 'You didn't get any new style,' the mother said, restating her particular dislike for a tweed coat.
>
> 'I don't want it,' the girl said tersely.
>
> 'You were always a softie,' the mother said, and inherent in this was disapproval for a man who allowed his wife to be dowdy. Perhaps she thought that her daughter's marriage might have amended for her own.
>
> (O'Brien 1978, p.127).

The process of detaching from the mother before any reconciliation can take place begins when the daughter divorces her husband and flees to England. In crossing boundaries and

nations in what Kristeva maintains is necessary to negotiate her cultural identity, she is also trying to negotiate her selfhood, as Other from her mother. Fleeing is only the beginning of the new identity process, as Kristeva says in *Strangers to Ourselves*:

> The foreigner has fled from that origin – family, blood, soil – and, even though it keeps pestering, enriching, hindering, exciting him, or giving him pain, and often all of it a once, the foreigner is this courageous and melancholy betrayer.
>
> (Kristeva 1991, p.29)

However, the identity is porous, boundaries are blurred, and the un-named daughter cannot reach selfhood until she rejects 'unclean' aspects of the maternal body. As with the other selected O'Brien stories, 'A Rose in the Heart' is about being female in Ireland, and the behaviours that weigh heavily on pregnancy, birthing and mothering as objects that created us and provided vital ties with the infant. Equally, are the interconnected traditions to the nationalist ideal and an identification between the maternal and the land of Ireland that both require abjection.

> This process, of course, can never be accomplished once and for all, but continues into adult life, as categories of waste, disgust, and pollution establish, and thereafter sustain, the boundaries of the self against non-self.
>
> (Mooney 2008, p.436, cited in Malcolm and Malcolm)

Preserving relations with home and motherland is a melancholic experience for the girl, long after her departure from Ireland. Through the steady supply of written communication, she is continually flooded with memories from home and the mother figure responsible for

each of these facets. Trying to start afresh, but possessed by these thoughts staggering her memory is the 'bowl with her mother's menstrual cloth soaking in it' (O'Brien 1978, p.128). Categories of waste continue to flood her mind including her mother's sputum until one day she finds herself in the library where she worked:

> Filing and cataloguing and handing over books. They were more than thoughts, they were the presence of this woman whom she resolved to kill. Yes, she would have to kill. She would have to take up arms and commit a murder. She thought of choking or drowning. Certainly, the method had to do with suffocation, and she foresaw herself holding big suffocating pillows or a bolster, in the secrecy of the Blue Room where it had all begun.
>
> (O'Brien 1978, pp.128-9)

Having fled to England, she cannot flee her thoughts, which go full circle from the beginnings in the 'Blue Room', all the way to matricide. If 'matricide is our vital necessity' (Kristeva 1987, p.27) as Kristeva supposes, then the child must go beyond abjecting the maternal body, before she can recover her in language. 'She decided on a celebration. She owed it to her mother' (O'Brien 1978, p.130). Again, as seen in 'Cords', the celebration would not be arranged in the home, because the 'skeletons and its old cunning tug at the heart strings' (O'Brien 1978, p.130). They would meet somewhere else, for a hotel break as a form of appeasement and a treat in recognition of a mother's life of toil and sacrifice. It is not long before old grudges surface and 'something snapped inside of the girl' (O'Brien 1978, p.131).

Unlike 'Cords', written a full decade earlier, the author now writes this daughter with a greater perception and recognises an oppressed woman with real needs and not merely an idol figure of unending love from her childhood. O'Brien, through the words of her narrator brought a greater maturity as a writer and artist to the reflective prose around this relationship. Social changes and the death of the author's mother a year before publication of this text, made room for a less proscribed virtuous depiction of the relationship between Irish mothers and daughters. She enquired into her mother's youth and dances and courtships and over the course of the trip, felt that 'something momentous was about to get uttered' (O'Brien 1978, p.134), but the mother baulked and refused to reveal any stories. Returning to Jennifer Cooke's recognition that even with intimacy, their remains portions of mystery:

> Of how fundamentally unattainable it is to completely "know" another person, however close we are to them […] instead, there is an acknowledgement of how knowing someone constitutes a continual process, one full of surprises and mysteries, one that is never complete.
>
> (Cooke 2011, p.5)

As the holiday continued, the mother remembered some embroidery she had done during her time in America, 'making the statement in stitches that there was a rose in the heart of New York' (O'Brien 1978, p.134). Feeling that they were getting nearer, that they could be true at last, the daughter delicately inquired into the name of this lover in New York, but again the mother would not say. Hoping that something momentous was about to pass

between them, she pushed further but her mother would not be drawn. The conversation closed down when the mother affirmed 'that there was only one kind of love and that was a mother's love for her child' (O'Brien 1978, p.134). Infuriated, the younger woman grits her teeth and is so incensed, she silently vows against a burial with her mother. This tension continues as the mother tries to explain how 'she had done all she could' and the daughter wished her mother's life had been happier and that she had not betrothed 'herself to a life of suffering. But also, she blamed her' (O'Brien 1978, p.135).

The reconciliation that she intended to instigate never came and the next occasion the daughter goes home, is for the mother's funeral. Returning, the daughter cried the whole way through the town and the country road that led towards home, but her grief is actually for a life that never started, it is emptiness more than grief. The mother is dead and the story that began with a labour and the dominance of birthing fluids completes with the death of the mother, descriptions of her corpse and her funeral ritual. In the chapel where the daughter viewed her mother's corpse, she thought back on the fiasco of a holiday:

> The love that she had first so cravenly and so rampantly given and the love that she had so callously and so conclusively taken back.
>
> (O'Brien 1978, p.139)

Going through the family home, she saw bits of her mother's life and in the 'Blue Room' hiding in the usual spot above the mantlepiece was an envelope addressed to her, in her mother's handwriting. Inside was a gold sovereign and some money but there was no letter. All their adult life, they had communicated by letter. In this shared creative space, the

mother in particular, had used this mode to address her position in life to help her daughter gain a better understanding of her. 'A new wall had arisen, stronger and sturdier than before' (O'Brien 1978, p.140) and with it came a silence in the room and beyond the house itself. O'Brien ends the story describing how the 'house itself had died or had been carefully put down to sleep' (O'Brien 1978, p.140). This home defined the boundaries of the Irish nation and included in this text it provides a wider historical/political dimension to O'Brien's work. In recognising her mother's constitutional life within the home and the support she had given to the State, the underlying message O'Brien indicates for women was a life of drudgery, abuse and isolation. Since the family unit was inviolate, the abuse could not be acknowledged publicly, so O'Brien wrote this analogy of the home and her mother's life in it, to highlight the lack of State intervention that inevitably led to rot and decay.

Silenced in death, the author is free to process the woman she was and relinquish the longing for the maternal in favour of a more acceptable love object. This third person narrative describes another of O'Brien's heroines incapacitated by the smothering of a victimised mother that sets the nameless character on a trajectory of abject suffering at the hands of her lovers. Negotiating the porous boundary of self and 'other', the representation of a generation of Irish daughters in O'Brien's texts are wrestling with the emotion of the transition, while trying to succeed in maintaining a relationship with their mothers. Without closure, O'Brien articulates the difficulty of this experience in the absence of a final letter, and the silence that descends on the "Blue Room" represents the silence of Ireland for all

the sacrificial women and the atrocities carried out on them and their bodies. Closing the house and putting it to sleep, old emotions and repressed memories will continue to re-surface, which O'Brien will continue to re-visit on behalf of Irish women. O'Brien's critical sentiments in 'A Rose in the Heart' are semi-autobiographical and give an account of her mother's constitutional life in the home. O'Brien's text challenges the gendered nationalism and the idealised idea of Irish womanhood. In her counter narrative, the national constructed image of women supporting a common good was debunked with images of decaying homes and neglected mothers and children contained within.

## 'Sister Imelda' (1982)

Corresponding their female position towards a greater understanding.

As with many of O'Brien's relationship stories, the protagonist's symbiotic closeness with the mother or, a maternal figure served to empower and disempower her. The author's more mature reflections reveal considerations of this dual, conflicting image to be one of necessity born from abjection and individuation. 'Sister Imelda' keeps faith with the mother daughter struggle in another example of an unnamed girl, uprooted from home to complete her education in boarding school, which serves as a substitute home for her teenage years. Displaced, the student transfers her maternal emotions on to a teaching nun, in order to make sense of her new surroundings and cope with the loneliness. This motif of enduring isolation that began with Caithleen from *The Country Girls* sees O'Brien revisiting the leaving of home again in another human spirit story. The process of

separating from her mother and her home advances and after the initial loss, the reader watches the 'daughter struggling between a need for nurturance and a desire for autonomy' (D'hoker 2014, p.1). When the student successfully progressed in her separation from the maternal, the quick replacement of the devouring mother for a surrogate love object, devours her thoughts:

> That first morning when she came into our classroom and modestly introduced herself I had no idea how terribly she would infiltrate my life, how in time she would be not just one of those teachers or nuns, but rather a special one almost like a ghost who passed the boundaries of common exchange and who crept inside one, devouring so much of one's thoughts, so much of one's passion, invading the place that was called one's heart.
>
> (O'Brien 1982, p.139)

The impossible fulfilment of a relationship between a nun and the student can only end in another love that will never be fully realised, the displacement of maternal love onto Sr. Imelda, is destined to fail. Neither are free, but this friendship provides a mutual comfort that helps fill a void for both of them during their shared stay in this surrogate home. Due to the constraints of the religious and educational situation, they express their mutual feelings through looks and nuance. The secret community that grows between student and teacher alleviates the loneliness for the girl who no longer cries for her mother nor count the days until end of term.

At the annual school performance where the young protagonist is performing the

role of Cleopatra, her stage nerves are calmed and soothed by Sister Imelda who provides a sense of infantile security and love:

> She sensed my panic and very slowly put her hand on my face and enjoined me to look at her. I looked into her eyes which seemed fathomless and saw that she was willing me to be calm and obliging me to be master of my fears and I little knew that one day she would have to do the same as regards the swoop of my feelings for her.
>
> (O'Brien 1982, p.146)

The mother has become an uncanny ghost-like figure for the child, which she has replaced with the student/teacher dynamic. This symbiotic relationship, stronger and more threatening than the standard permissible is what Kristeva considers 'ambiguous' and 'in-between' (Kristeva 1980a, p.4, cited in Kelly Oliver, 1993). This relationship threatens the constructed identity of convent life, which Sister Imelda acknowledges in reminding the girl that 'it is not proper for us to be so friendly' (O'Brien 1982, p.134). Kristevan theory associates the student's improper affection for Sr. Imelda as a pre-oedipal desire for her own mother. A 'maternal erotic love' (Kristeva 2014, p.17) which translates the libidinal forces into a capacity of maternal tenderness on the nun, a symbolic bride of Christ. Sister Imelda is a replica of an idolised and idealised mother figure, the Virgin Mary who leads a life 'unspotted by sin' (O'Brien 1982, p.125). In noting the human subject's loss and longing, Eluned Summers-Bremner hypothesises that western culture focuses on the repressed maternal-feminine. The student has displaced her idealization of and the Virgin Mary on to Sister Imelda, a woman situated within the professional life of a convent that

masks motherhood's physical contribution to culture. Recreating the desired intimacies previously shared with her mother the girl petitions the nun for 'some secret, something to join us together' (O'Brien 1982, p.131). Fulfilling her petitioning Sister Imelda exclusively reveals the colour of her hair to the student, from beneath her religious headdress. Imparting this modest revelation is an act solely witnessed by this student alone, along with the secreted gift of a religious picture. The gifted sacred image depicts 'a mother looking down on the infant child' (O'Brien, p.128) discovered by the student in her prayer book, who interprets it as a silent replacement of maternal love to the girl.

Permeating the text of 'Sister Imelda' are the twin sentiments of guilt and shame mirroring the socio-cultural moral codes in Ireland relating to female corporeality. Adhering to the convent attire of wimple and robes, Sister Imelda's uniform leaves only her face and hands on display. The modest nature of the robes reveals few exposed bodily features, but limited as they are, the girl unconsciously condemns appraisals. The nun's lips were purple 'as if she had put puce pencil on them. They were the lips of a woman who might sing in cabaret' (O'Brien 1982, p.137). Socially inculcated since a young age, the student believes Sister Imelda hides and inverts her lips, modestly concealing their lascivious colour:

> As a sexualised stand-in for both the narrator's mother and the Madonna, Imelda eroticizes stereotypical female selflessness while she models it for the narrator.
>
> (Shumaker 1995, p.187)

As with most of O'Brien's characters, who live daily with their sacrifices or those fallen women who have not reached the impossible Madonna ideal, Sister Imelda mortifies

herself as a sacrifice to God to emulate the virginal qualities of the Mother of God.

As part of the school routine, students were provided with cake and milk before bed and one particular evening, the girl offered her queen cake to Sister Imelda. The physical response from the child when the nun declined the proffered cake, reveals the child's symbiotic closeness to the teacher. This closeness had previously been shared with her mother and echoes the domestic violence of 'A Rose in the Heart' when the mother left home temporarily. In that narrative account the girl had been unable to drink her milk while staying with the neighbours and a similar phenomenon occurs this school evening, following the nun's rebuff. The student is so stunned by Sister Imelda's slighting that she involuntarily transgresses the school code and neglects to drink her milk. O'Brien connotes the direct associations of milk, the symbolic maternal life-giving substance and pointedly introduces the Mother Superior, as the character to notice the untouched drink. The state of oneness the protagonist has entered with Sr. Imelda, leaves the girl feeling betrayed but she hides her tears to protect the secret nature of their relationship. In *Tales of Love*, Kristeva has described maternity as an experience that has been marginalised but not every element of this capability is completely ignored and 'through her milk and tears' (Kristeva 1987, p.249) the most recognisable signs for maternal imagery, the child unconsciously cries for this maternal replacement:

> For the representation of the Mater Dolorosa since the Middle Ages in the Western world. Milk and tears invest motherhood of an earthly identity. The rejection of these two is a clear rejection of the maternal.
>
> (Rooks-Hughes 1996, pp.101-2)

Rejection of the maternal must be lost before a successful recovery and in this act of unconsciously neglecting the cup of milk, the student signals her refusal of the abject to remain banished. The mother's presence remains at the heart of the subject and links with Kristeva's theory of food loathing, considered 'the most elementary and most archaic form of abjection' (Kristeva 1982, p.02). The reader understands the effect of Sister Imelda's rejection for the girl in the cup of milk and likens it to the loathing Kristeva experiences when her 'lips touch that skin on the surface of milk' (Kristeva 1982, p.3) and the sensation approaching abjection that can provoke tears in her.

The mother must be lost in order to be found and so it is the same for her replacement in the form of Sister Imelda, the student must abject her to attain her own selfhood. Following this episode, the un-named girl begins her process of separating from nun. The schooling ends and the student leaves the proxy home she shared with Sister Imelda to begin her life in Dublin, as an alternate love object the nun is abjected abruptly in favour of a heterosexual replacement. One day on a bus to Howth with her friend Baba, the girl has an uncanny encounter with Sister Imelda and an anxiety arises in the protagonist causing her heart to race, because the nun was both familiar and foreign at the same time: 'At first it raced with a prodigal strength and then it began to falter and I thought it was going to give out. My fear of her and my love came back in one fell realisation' (O'Brien 1982, p.156). Reverting to feelings of guilt and shame for not choosing convent life herself, demonstrates the vacillations between approval and autonomy have not yet been resolved and her 'heart began to race with a mixture of excitement and dread' (O'Brien 1982, p.142). The lives of the central women in this text mirror the realities of Irish history, one

represented by the nun who readily conformed to the notion of a desexualised Virgin, whereas the young girl was only beginning her search for a heterosexual relationship. Ireland as woman or 'eternal feminine' is at odds with a new Irish female, striving to find her place in this newly emerging social and economic culture. The 'fluidity of the Madonna, who encompasses diverse female roles, as do the Irish female characters who emulate her' (Shumaker 1995, p.185) has created an impossible position for western women of the 'Madonna myth'.

## 'My Two Mothers' (2011)

### A considered arrival of understanding.

From the collection *Saints and Sinners* (2011), the final textual engagement with female confinement offers a definitive understanding of the author's mother, especially regarding her lack of autonomy within marriage and society. The two mothers of the title offer another duality of O'Brien's fictional mothers, represented as either the birth mother or the model images of Mother Ireland / the Virgin Mother. The conflation of mother and Motherland was a source of tension O'Brien has teased with and tried to abject, in numerous stories before arriving at this position of understanding and acceptance. As Mooney suggests:

> The irruption of the maternal, the abject, the repugnant, and all that is supposed to have been rejected by the formation of the self, signals the refusal of the abject to remain banished, and advertises its presence at the heart of the subject.
>
> (Mooney 2008, p.436)

While D'hoker observes that the duality evoked in the story title refers to both 'the opposition between the narrator's ugly dreams of her mother and the reality of their past together' (D'hoker 2014, p.5). Both secondary sources point towards a theme of resolution, evidenced in the fact that the love and symbiosis between the pair was never in doubt, through any of the bittersweet memories in the rise and fall of their relationship. Revisiting the death of her mother in dreams and memories, it is the love and gratitude that are the resounding emotions, the author acknowledges were her mother's legacy. The constant work ethic of the older woman despite her difficulties is the positive trait inherited by O'Brien who continues writing in her 90s. 'My Two Mothers' opens with the daughter-narrator dreaming of her mother advancing on her 'to cut the tongue out of me' (O'Brien 2011, p.169), but in this reading, we learn that this dream is far from the truth, because 'in life we were so attached we could almost be called lovers' (O'Brien 2011, p.169).

Retrospectively appreciating the psychological impact her writing career had for Lena, the now more mature O'Brien comprehends the impact it had in her rural parish surrounds. 'She would tell me what others – neighbours – thought of what I wrote, tears in her voice at my criminality' (O'Brien 2011, p.174). Fully comprehending the recurring dream to violate her organ of speech as the only method known by the mother, which facilitates their bond and keeps her daughter mute, but safe:

> Yes, lovers insofar as I believed that the universe resided in her being. She was the hub of the house; the rooms took on a life when she was in them and a death when she was absent.

(O'Brien 2011, p.169)

The house epitomised O'Brien's writing and the women and mothers contained within typified the legacy of constitutional requirements. The integrity of the Irish nation was threatened when this fictional mother died, for she had been 'the universe' her daughter 'resided in,' doubling as the boundary by which the Irish nation was defined. Her death marks a new identity for the nation because O'Brien's imbrication of femininity with the national allegory has unshackled them. This passage signifies the depth of feeling between the women and sets up a framework of memories recalling how shared eating experiences provided an emotional axis of tools used to begin the splitting process:

> Tiffs over food that she refused to eat and disapproval about gaudy slides that I put in my hair. I began to write – jottings that had to be covert because she would see in them a sort of wander lust. She insisted that literature was a precursor to sin and damnation, whereas I believed it was the only alchemy that there was.

(O'Brien 2011, p.173)

Many years later the protagonist, marries, divorces and moves to England, away from her mother and her Motherland. Distance and time provide the space for the author to acknowledge that both were her source of inspiration:

> Then came years and years of correspondence from her. She who professed disgust at the written word wrote daily, bulletins that ranged from the pleading to the poetic, the philosophic, and the commonplace. I never fully read them, being afraid of some greater accusation, and my replies were little niceties, squeezed in with bribes and money to stave off confrontations.

(O'Brien 2011, p.175)

In letter writing, the content of the text maintains the relationship and the sender presents only the information they wish to convey. Equally, it permits a lack of confrontation between the two parties through omission. This daughter omits to tell her mother about an affair she is having with a married man. For the mother it is an easy medium to convey love and affection in describing actions of familiarity such as the foraging of berries to make jam, rather than outright verbalisations of love. This ritual of sharing time when 'the girl and her mother took walks on Sundays' (O'Brien 1978, p.112) was noted in 'A Rose in the Heart' and is remembered in this text by the mother character. In a relationship, where the expression of intimacy was through food, she re-establishes their bond by writing this anecdote to her daughter and tells her how she yearns to hand her a pot of jam with ease:

> Without basket or can, she had to remove her slip and put the blackberries inside it where they shed some of their purple juices. Her letter kept wishing that she could hand me a pot of clear jelly over a hedge and see me taste and swallow it.
>
> (O'Brien 2011, pp.176-7)

Placing the letters in a trunk for 'twenty-odd years' (O'Brien 2011, p.175) allows O'Brien to compartmentalise her relationship with her mother and postpone opening the bundle until she is emotionally willing to engage with them:

> Her letters were deeper, sadder than I had remembered, but what struck me most was their hunger and their thirst. Here was a woman desperately trying to explain herself

> and to be understood. There were hundreds of them, or maybe a thousand.
>
> (O'Brien 2011, pp.175-6)

In re-reading the correspondence, she can hear her mother's hunger and thirst for understanding, traits the author herself is both renowned and criticised for. Constantly returning in dreams, reveries and in re-reading old letters, the younger woman refuses to allow the abject remain banished, as Sinéad Mooney noted. O'Brien's autobiographical reflections gave a voice to the lives of rural Irish women and both women in this family, maintained the mother/daughter relationship with this conduit for conversation. Letter writing played a significant role to mediate their emotions in reconciling traditional views of the maternal subject with modern feminist demands for liberation and autonomy. The two generations of women share biology, blood and experiences but they cannot share the same experience of migration:

> Life, she maintained, was one big battle, because no matter who wins nobody does. I began to see her in a new light and resolved to clear up the differences between us, get rid of old grudges and regain the tenderness we once had.
>
> (O'Brien 2011, p.179)

Oral historian Alistair Thomson highlights the significance of letter writing to 'maintain intimate relationships, to reassure and seek assurance and advice' (Thomson cited in Murray 2013, p.92). For the daughter who left home her guilt can be traced by revisiting the primal scene of rupture in the mother's correspondence and for the mother left behind, the domino effect plays an equal role for both as they share their separate existences. These letters provided a scaffold on which their relationship re-connected as both parties

acknowledged old, shared experiences. The senior figure is desperately seeking to make her daughter understand her actions while the younger woman recognised the mellowing nature of her mother through the chronology of communication. O'Brien concludes the story with her mother's final letter:

> Late in the evening she began her last letter – 'my hand is shaking now as well as myself with what I have to tell you'. It remains unfinished, which is why I wait for the dream that leads us beyond the ghastly white spittoon and the metal razor, to fields and meadows, up onto the mountain, that bluish realm, half earth, half sky, towards her dark man, to begin our journey all over again; to live our lives as they should have been lived, happy, trusting, and free of shame.
>
> (O'Brien 2011, p.181)

The story opened with a dream and closes with the same dream again, but this second version is slightly different. It reflects a more hopeful and happier dreamer, at ease with the ghost of her mother. In the revised version Lena O'Brien goes towards 'her dark man', possibly the American from 'A Rose in the Heart' and their journey through life which may be a happier and trusting one, lived free of shame. Finishing the story with a dream for a life free from shame indicates a resounding hope from the author for herself and the next generation of Irish women. Highlighting the plight of these isolated women, O'Brien's imbrication of femininity with the national allegory, has unshackled them from the collective weight of shame.

## Conclusion

From the opening lines of *The Country Girls* (1960) and the reader's first introduction to the infamous duo of Caithleen and Baba, O'Brien has styled most of her female characters off the events of her childhood, imbricated with the duality of Irish girls of that era. Establishing her locus in the opening lines of her literary canon, O'Brien cited fear of her father and a deep, but troubled love for her mother. Male characters are not prominent in O'Brien's texts but the patriarchal codes of their presence as fathers, lovers, priests and politicians, determines the behaviours of all the female characters. Her narrations were stylised by a gendered nationalism that drew heavy criticism for her constant collusion between author and character, and eventually the undervaluing of O'Brien's artistic achievements. Once Philip Roth pronounced a serious awareness of her novel, *Night* (1972), a more favourable shift occurred in terms of O'Brien's critical attention, with reviewers engaging more actively with her literary ability rather than her persona. As Peggy O'Brien notes: '[t]he unresolved nature of these primary relationships' (Peggy O'Brien 1987, p.483), that obsessively blurred the boundaries between child and parental identities, I would argue was an authenticity rooted in her life experience. From her memoir, O'Brien cites her mother 'who filled the canvas' (O'Brien 2012, p.130) and her constant reworking of the maternal, creates a context for the patriarchal structures of inequality to become more visible. Revisiting their dyad poses the question of the embodied mother infant relationship, which O'Brien's critical investigation challenged and discomfited in the Irish establishment. Motherhood, framed constitutionally, was the landscape supporting the ideology of the nation, with each gender playing a precisely defined role:

> But when this girl marries and herself becomes a wife and a mother, we need not be surprised to find that she begins to grow more and more like the mother to whom she was so antagonistic, till finally the identification with her which she surmounted is unmistakably re-established.
>
> (Balzano 2006, p.103)

O'Brien defies assimilation by selecting radical deconstructions of feminism and issues for herself and the generation after her. Her examination of excluded characters from the boundaries of belonging, viewed through a feminine lens, portrayed nomadic individuals disrupting the myth of homogeneity.

In Christian theology, the correct response to sinful acts is atonement. For Irish women this translated as confinements in Magdalene Laundries while atoning for the national shame of sexual transgressions that threatened the national identity of morality. 'O'Brien's women are assailed by a constant need to escape from all these overdetermined enclaves' (Argues 2013, p.191), as they oscillated between incomprehension and a total understanding to arrive at a realistic appraisal of what it meant to be female in Ireland at that juncture. Similarities can be drawn between O'Brien's own mother and these fictional characters who ranged from devouring mothers to women who were simultaneously submissive in a gendered society. From Lena's liminal position, O'Brien comes to appreciate more fully her mother as a subject who prepared her daughter's entrance into the symbolic order of society. Aiding her understanding was the shared creative space that writing provided to allow the daughter to accept the generational intersubjective relation

of expression between them. O'Brien's later works deal with the universality of the female experience in a continuation of a theme that began in *The Country Girls* trilogy.

From the 1940s to the 1990s when Irish women were still largely restricted in their professional lives, confined to the home and denied access to contraception and divorce, O'Brien stimulated debate in these areas. Her writing was abundant with Catholic imagery and conservatism, but she persevered in her battle for Irish women struggling to make a space for themselves. It was not until the demolition of the twin institutions of patriarchy and Church, that feminism and secularism began paving the way for the profound transformation of the role for Irish women. Edna O'Brien's written word brought an early awareness of female issues to readers that saw the seeds of the oppressive gendering destroyed. Her truths flagged the way to nurture a notion of freedom and equality. Colm Tóibín of the subsequent chapter plays a similar role with his written contribution of gay narratives that explore the relevance of shame in the practices of Irish life.

# CHAPTER THREE

## Colm Tóibín - Absence and a great withholding in Irish family life.

Born in 1955, the novelist, journalist and short story writer Colm Tóibín hails from Enniscorthy in county Wexford. His father, too, was a historian and teacher, whilst his mother was a published poet prior to marriage. In interviews Tóibín cites Ernest Hemingway and Henry James as his major influences and adds that the death of his father, a period living in Spain, and 'coming out' as a gay author all played roles in contributing to the development of his work. As will be outlined below, a recurring theme of his short story collections is silence, as something unsaid always remains. Writing in *The Irish Times,* Fintan O'Toole describes Tóibín's characters as having 'divided selves', with parts of their minds repressed and compartmentalised, and 'often what they shut away is the trauma of death' (O'Toole, 2016). The manner in which people deal with their everyday lives, especially in the aftermath of trauma, brings shadow and dimension to his short stories. His father's death, when Tóibín was only 12 years old, informs how his later writing provides insightful observations on the family as an institution. Witnessing his mother struggle, following the death of her husband is a recurring theme in his texts but such was his distress for her grief, bitterness and anger, that he developed a speech impediment.

From a literary perspective, his discovery of Mary Lavin and her written accounts of the ways in which widowhood ruptured her family 'were almost too close to the space between how we lived then and what was unmentionable' (Tóibín 2019, p.97). Writing for the *American Journal of Irish Studies,* Tóibín recalls, aged thirteen or fourteen, borrowing

library books in Wexford town and devouring Lavin's works. He remembers acutely her stories that dealt with the life of a widow and the silence around grief:

> The life of a woman alone, the palpable absence of a man, a husband, a father, the idea of conversation as a way of concealing loss rather than revealing anything, least of all feeling – for me to read with full recognition.
>
> (Tóibín 2013, p.97)

Both authors write of a silence that follows death and is difficult to explain but sees many of his maternal characters perform this mode of surviving. In his authorial practice, Tóibín uses his personal history as a means to engage with issues on a wider social scale. One such instance immediately after the death of her husband saw Mrs Tóibín sell their holiday home. The title character Nora Webster from his 2014 novel mirrors this action, when she too sells their modest holiday home shortly after the death of her husband. Tóibín believes these parallels are important for anchoring details as a way of bringing an emotional charge to the story and in engaging with readerly empathy.

A well renowned journalist, Tóibín's literary career began in 1987 with the publication of his travelogue, *Bad Blood: A Walk Along the Irish Border*. Following this was first novel, *The South* (1990), in which Tóibín introduces the reader to the character Katherine Proctor. Katherine is the first of his mother characters to abandon her marriage and son in pursuit of her own journey toward self-discovery. A variation of this leitmotif is apparent in his texts, which recount experiences that seem to build in unexpected ways from the author's own. As a former journalist, Tóibín narrated Ireland's transformative

period of modernisation in the 1990s and has remained at the forefront in tracing this progress without omitting voices of dissent. His first short story collection *Mothers and Sons* (2006) was followed in 2010 by his second collection, *The Empty Family*. 'One Minus One' from the second short story collection provides a useful scaffold to build a more substantial and in-depth analyses of the stories in *Mothers and Sons* and will, therefore, be the solo text from that collection selected for analysis. Aware that his eye is 'filled with its own history' (Walshe 2013, p.3) 'One Minus One' identifies key elements of Tóibín's life that find their way into both short story collections.

*Mothers and Sons*, written during Ireland's unprecedented period of change and modernization, includes revelations of Church scandals, the election of the first female president, the decriminalising of homosexuality and the legalisation of divorce. Radically reflecting different versions of Irishness, issues germane to the national ideal and the burden of contested national distinctiveness are in his characters identities as they cope with the drastic social changes. My inclusion of Tóibín in the thesis undertakes to redress the marginalisation of women from Ireland's literary mainstream. Through his thematic arrangement of bringing them to a more central position in texts, Tóibín breaks down their previously held idealised setting in the home, in favour of showcasing their individuality. Contrasting society of the previous two chapters Tóibín also highlights the new structure of families that can consist of fathers and sons living without a woman in the home. The family cell is outwardly more ruptured in the period of his writing and socially no longer as influenced by Church teachings, which has paved a way for new freedoms that Ireland

has yet to negotiate successfully. José Carregal-Romero argues that many of Tóibín's short stories:

> Are centred round "anomalous" identities that have been traditionally marginalised, punished or strongly stereotyped in order to promote sympathy with characters that embody what was once considered "improper" or deviant.
>
> (Carregal-Romero 2012, p.9)

With such recently acquired personal freedoms, Tóibín is recommending an ambiguous language for a nation to include everyone. He believes there has been a 'shadowy' culture in Ireland and that the time has come to move forward, out of the shadows. A textual analysis of his short stories signals the societal disconnection of national progress, in areas of gender equality, and the politics of the Irish State's ideals that are damaging due to their exclusionary practices within the home and at a national level. The replacement of individual conscience in lieu of previous religious and political authorities sees Tóibín, narrate his own personal freedom as a gay man, breaking away from the old conventions of the heteronormative Irish family. In stories filled with silence and complicity in times of strife, he is advocating for a formula of words ambiguous enough to make citizens feel comfortable in an all-inclusive Ireland. He highlights the complexities and pitfalls of trying to live with these old constraints as they merge with new ideals. He writes of the fluid nature of family and home that can evolve in tandem with people's circumstances. The effect of place informs the make-up of his characters in their reactions and worldviews and echoes his personal formation and experiences. Widowhood informed much of Lavin's writing, as bodily concerns did O'Brien's, but Tóibín updates and expands on the issue of

the maternal. His fictional accounts of the mother-son dyad interwoven through narratives as a pairing not previously common in Irish literature. For all three writers, personal experience was the central creative source for their art, including the space where they lived and worked. Mary Lavin wrote from home on topics of widowhood and small-town merchants, whereas Edna O'Brien wrote from abroad and published in *The New Yorker* to avoid censorship. Tóibín, however, demonstrates that the modern Irish writer is comfortable writing of mothers and their sons or homosexuality, either in Ireland or abroad. He displays, Irish writing which has evolved to be confident and comfortable at home and often sets his texts that shape and reform the home, the constitution and women in Enniscorthy.

From the collection *Mothers and Sons* (2006), 'A Song', introduces the reader to the character Noel, a young adult estranged from his mother who abandoned him to pursue her own ambitions. His inclusion of characters like Noel details the changing Ireland and the people in it, tracing the halting progress of a country's cultural and sexual evolution. Tóibín's refusal to unite the history and religion of his childhood teachings extends to his queries regarding roles within Irish culture and family units as evidenced in his novel, *The Heather Blazing* (1992). Drafting this novel Tóibín teased this out through his protagonist Mr. Redmond, a judge working on a history of the rebellion from the Irish side, who understood that the rebels had left only songs and stories, but no documents. Tóibín's interest in history sees him deconstruct the Great Events of Irish nationalist history and use this same approach to look again at Catholic Ireland. Within *The Heather Blazing* (1992),

he adopts the 1937 Constitution as a situation of social conflict, especially in the definition of 'Family'. By inserting the character of a young student into the plot, Tóibín's sees her expelled from school when her pregnancy comes to the attention of the school authorities. Defending their actions, the educational institution based their argument on her violation of their Catholic ethos. This highlights the rights of 'family' versus institutions, even though this student and her baby clearly constitute a new family unit. It is stories such as these that see Tóibín's texts often considered 'shadowy' or ambiguous in order to create a space for individuals not considered part of the collective consensus of conjugal harmony promoted by clergy and politicians alike. As a gay citizen in a country with a history of coercion and control that left little space for dissident voices and marginalised groups, Tóibín realised he would have to be cautious not to draw attention to his own sexuality, which threatened the heteronormative paradigm. Shifting moral and political landscapes evidenced the disjunction between what was contained in the Constitution and the lived reality and changing identities of the citizens who made up the nation-state. This transformation moved away from the parochialism of Lavin and O'Brien to a metamorphosis that reached even the most remote parts of Ireland, as society became even more invested in personal conscience decisions.

## A reticent and precise style - Tóibín's emotional strategy of economic silence.

Following on from the reinvigoration of the form by William Trevor and Eilís Ni Dhuibhne, it revived a more contemporary interest and, the style typical to the short story

suits the discipline of Tóibín-the-journalist. The prescribed formula of writing copy for newspaper ensured an economic, precise and spare arrangement of sentences. His narratives are devoid of moral judgement, embellishment, colour or bias. The myriad ways of not saying, or choosing not to say certain things, is one of his hallmarks, which he tells Stacey D'Erasmo comes from the influence of Ernest Hemingway and Henry James:

> Two writers who couldn't seem more different stylistically and as men, but who share, in their work and in their lives, a core of silence, of a great deal left unsaid. That silence is resonant, abundant, like a room just after the orchestra has stopped playing. It is anything but empty.
>
> (D'Erasmo 2011, p.164)

Distinctive features of Tóibín's aesthetic become apparent with each text, from the reticence and precise words to his barely suggested hints and nuances. Drip-released by the author, in keeping with the form and technicalities specific to the genre, this style shapes his personal and socio-political narratives:

> To collude and collide to shape not only individual subjects, but also communal realities: this interrelation is both represented and reproduced throughout Tóibín's canon.
>
> (Lang 2012, p.4)

A textual analysis of his short stories, evidences this style and form that Lang has described, beginning with 'A Song'. The reader recognises in Noel's mother Eileen, a woman not reduced to political metaphor, but a working singer not enchained by duty, who

reconfigures the embedded beliefs of motherhood. Set in a pub, Noel calculates that it has been nineteen years since he had last seen her and sparse with information, Tóibín explains their estrangement within a different conversation. Rather than state the facts outright, the reader learns of the ambiguous nature of this revelation through dialogue. 'I'm glad you're on the soda water. I suppose you know that your mother is here' (Tóibín 2006, p.49). Remaining silent as part of a learned emotional strategy, Noel keeps a vital part of himself hidden. Not fuelled by alcohol, his emotions remain intact in the style Tóibín uses to denote the 'shadowy' departure of his mother from the family, all those years ago. During an interview with Fernandez-Sanchez Tóibín expands on his stylistic device of controlling the quantity of required information needed: 'How much you need to slow down a story, how much you stop that part and get on with the next part, and that actually is form' (Fernandez-Sanchez 2009, p.84). His style is not to present Ireland's past or present with approval, but rather to use the narrative form to illustrate his personal reinterpretation of the fluid nature of Irish identity. This fluidity paves the way for voices to follow, that will open up and out the Irish imagined identity and allow for a more inclusive nation. Tóibín used the form to 'empty the family' of its traditional family roles that previously were considered empowering and nurturing, showcasing how people's decisions develop from enforced choices caused by economic necessity, love, sexuality and institutions of authority.

## The deconstructing and reconstructing as theme in Irish families.

Two central preoccupations of Tóibín's work are Irish history and gay identity. Identifying both these preoccupations results in the deconstruction of the traditional family unit to

provide space for the inclusion of "Othered" characters. With homosexuality, bachelors and spinsters threatening the reproduction of Irish heterosexual family cells, any notion of such identities was repressed or given limited agency under Irish censorship. However, Tóibín provides a literary space for characters ranging from gay sons, absent fathers, or narcissistic mothers in order to redefine the cultural notion of Irish families where individuals experienced the disjunction between selfhood and society. Tóibín has managed to subvert the imagined, nuclear, Irish family and re-write these old models as a representation of a more accurate and contemporary version of family units. As Tóibín engages with acts of remembrance and collective memory, we read of an Ireland no longer reflecting cultural memories of idealised motherhoods and female purity, but a literature that comments on some concepts of these identities. The heavily autobiographical isolation and grief in his stories details the interior preoccupations of the individual. Investigating the silence around grief, he states:

> What I didn't know then was that writers must go into themselves first looking for information and sources of inspiration. You can go where you like after that, but if you don't go inward first, you get nothing anywhere else.
>
> (Tóibín 2013, p.110)

By revisiting his own feelings of abandonment and going 'into' himself, he sourced the inspiration for Eileen from 'A Song' and many of his other mother characters. Developing this particular point Eibhear Walshe, writes that Tóibín's protagonists are not from 'submerged populations but rather, theirs is a metaphysical isolation stemming from fractured families to reinforce the notion of new Irish identity' (Walshe 2013, p.114).

Alienated by circumstances, he places his protagonists within limited and constrained worlds to see if they can battle to achieve their own agency. Homosexual isolation becomes more mainstream in Tóibín's texts, demonstrating the struggle between hearts and minds. This loneliness is evident in a variety of forms, as seen in the main characters of his longer fictions, *The Master* (2004), *Brooklyn* (2010) and *Nora Webster* (2014), but Tóibín, like Mary Lavin, refuses to write self-pity or sentimentality into his characters.

The decriminalisation of homosexuality in 1993 was a significant development for Irish society which informed much of Tóibín's writing and three years later he foregrounded gay identity in *The Story of the Night* (1996). This validated identities for characters 'with divided selves' in Argentina, while his next novel *The Blackwater Lightship* (1999) takes up similar concerns and is set in his hometown of Enniscorthy. Tóibín now enfolded sexual practices that previously marginalised Irish citizens as characters into Irish literature. Affording a more centralised space in Irish society to the gay and lesbian communities his stories gave voice to what was previously unarticulated. Outlining the secrecy that once secured the safety of gay persons, Michael Foucault, in *The History of Sexuality* (1990), believes the Victorian bourgeoisie imposed itself as the model of the conjugal family that all others adhered to. Taking custody of sex and strictly defining the rules of propriety 'areas were thus established, if not of utter silence, at least of tact and discretion' (Foucault 1990, p.17). Introducing the theme of homosexuality Tóibín 'realised somehow for Ireland it would matter a lot' (Fernández-Sánchez 2009, p.84). By removing homosexuals from a marginal position, he addresses the previously held silence and levels

of ambiguity in order to confront urgent issues in contemporary Irish society. With the passing of legislation to decriminalise homosexuality in 1993, his fictional writing began to validate identities for characters with divided selves previously marginalised in Irish literature or suppressed by censorship. People exiled for their sexual practices, which were at odds with institutionalised outlooks, are no longer estranged but given a more centralised space in society. For the author as a gay man, this otherness (divided self) reveals itself in the desire for personal freedom. Homoerotic narratives feature with regular frequency in his texts, and Diana Fuss offers a compelling insight that illuminates Tóibín's narration of Irish homosexuality:

> The figure of what we might call the undead homosexual, the homosexual who continually reappears, is absolutely necessary to the production of positive heterosexual identity, at least heterosexual identity produced within bourgeois-dominated economies of desire that, as Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick demonstrates, deploy homophobia to check slippage between (male) homosociality and homosexuality.
>
> (Sedgwick 1997, p.353)

Maintaining the binary of non-heterosexuals with the facilitation of the homosexual characters to facilitate '[t]hose inhabiting, the inside … can only comprehend the outside through the incorporation of a negative image' (Sedgwick 1997, p.353). In stories such as 'A Song', 'Three Friends' and 'A Long Winter' from the 2006 collection, Tóibín addresses the previously held silence and levels of ambiguity in order to confront the issues which Irish society itself was confronting. If the measure of contemporary fiction benchmarks

Irish cultural identity, a cursory glance at other Irish authors and their works regarding both topics of mothers and homosexuality can help contextualise Tóibín's writing. *Mothers and Sons* comes sixteen years after 'Amongst Women' was published by John McGahern in 1990. This renowned story of Moran, the indisputable head of a family is a moment of cultural significance, as he forcibly recognises the emerging position of women and children in Irish society. With declining health, Moran, having always taken his own masculinity and position as paternal head of the household for granted, sees his family occupy and define a new space for themselves within the family and community. Their identity and status display a changing perspective on authority in domestic relations that socially analyses the oppressive nature of Eamon De Valera's vision of domesticity. McGahern inserts the absent presence of Moran's son Luke and the exile of his daughters to liken the oppressive nature of Moran's authority with De Valera's Constitution of 1937. Rituals previously observed by the women in Moran's family shift, signifying an Ireland that is changing the feminist status, from pacifist to more gender equality. In tandem with narratives of Tóibín's marginalisation, comes a lesbian perspective from Emma Donoghue's 1994 coming of age novel, *Stir-fry*. In *Stir-fry,* Donoghue introduces Maria, a seventeen-year-old protagonist from rural Ireland, who accidentally secures her college accommodation with a lesbian couple, Ruth and Jael. In this house, Maria discovers her own desires and sexuality as tropes previously silenced by Irish conventional expectations. Transcending the dominant ideology surrounding heterosexual relationships, O'Donoghue explores a same-sex relationship through Maria's navigation of space, which mirrors Ireland's public navigation of the latter half of the twentieth century.

Attuned to the present, Tóibín extends his dealings with the dynamics of family life by challenging mythical ideals of motherhood. He offers the reader a perceptive variety of contemporary Irish mothers that are both varied and vague and central in his imaginative preoccupation, we find women centre stage in his prose. These women test the limits of their identity and selfhood as mothers, lamenting their own unfulfilled desires, to those who can be emotionally distant, selfish, alcoholic, absent or isolated. All these maternal types occupy a central place in the narratives as women, no longer preserving the supposed purity of society, but redefining family through alterity, while restoring their own freedom. Tóibín narrates an alternative definition of family as a unit that is no longer regulated by either law or moral discourses, but one that thrives when human relations are free to pursue in whatever guise they present. Kathleen Costello-Sullivan, in her appraisal of *The Heather Blazing*, maintains that the mothers of the novel are metaphors for the exclusion of women from the Irish body politic:

> *The Heather Blazing* offers a scathing judgment of the Irish national self-construction that sacrifices women – and generations of Irish - to a non-representative vision of Irish society.
>
> (Costello-Sullivan 2009, p.109)

Tóibín's project is to restore them, even if their outcome is bleak, and often his representations of mothers preserve their personal space along with their ambitions. For some mothers, the son is the obstacle to the mother's freedom, or the mother finds him unknowable and distant. Conversely, for other sons, their ultimate lost object is the mother,

first undertaken during the pre-symbolic separation. Sons are read doing what they need to do, once the mother is absented or removed from their lives and the space her absence has created, forms a locus for male identity to be reconceived. The self-containment from both parties is used as a defence mechanism for keeping their reciprocal emotions at bay, which has paved the way for their personal explorations. Narrativising personal elements in his writing, acts as a catalyst to signal exclusionary practices in both the national imaginary and the lives of his characters. Writing in *Black Sun: Depression and Melancholia* (1989), Kristeva advances the notion that all mourning encompasses the lost-self, and in his fiction, we can observe Tóibín's ambiguity at climatic moments with the emptying of signs signalling a mourning for the lost self. These losses frequently allow a space for gay protagonists to attain a selfhood. This has echoes of Tóibín's experience during his father's long illness and subsequent death. With his father in hospital, the young Tóibín was despatched to live with his aunt but returning home to live once again with his widowed mother, he experienced a distant woman floundering in her grief. This childhood experience of losing his father, combined with observing his mother's grief that remained unexplained, speaks to the complex and fertile pattern of cold and distant mothers explored in Tóibín's texts. Mrs. Tóibín's estrangement from the community mirrored her estrangement from her son and the easy affinity they once shared, is fragmented, and replaced with silences. Told in his third-person narratives with as much unsaid as said, the reader draws their own conclusions in ambiguous endings.

## ‘One Minus One’ (2010)

A self, simultaneously mourned in all mourning before reconstruction begins.

The first of Tóibín’s stories and the only one taken from *The Empty Family* (2010) collection, is ‘One Minus One’. In this text Tóibín devotes narrative space to the themes of mother and son relationships, home, gay identities, migration and exile. An in-depth analysis of ‘One Minus One’ sets up motifs that will be built on again in the stories in *Mothers and Sons*. Written from a location in Austin, Texas, Tóibín responds to a changing Ireland with a critical yet compassionate exploration and looks to the people that make up a more inclusive community forging a way forward constantly. His response centres on emptying the notion of family and reconstructing the maternal, as confirmed by Walshe:

> His familiar themes of exile, of maternal conflict and of covert or hidden sexual desire all form part of this fictive re-evaluation of the family and a questioning of the Ireland of the twenty-first century.
>
> (Walshe 2013, p.126)

Opening in Texas on the anniversary of his mother’s death, Tóibín’s protagonist is coping with the consequences of emptying out the family by engaging in an imaginary conversation with his former partner: ‘[m]y mother is six years dead tonight, and Ireland is six hours away and you are asleep’ (Toíbín 2010, p.1). Haunted by memories of his mother especially the days leading up to her death, Liam Harte writes that Tóibín’s solitary outsiderness: ‘is closely linked to feelings of loss that typically stem from unspoken childhood trauma, the repression of which causes an enduring psychic reverberation’ (Harte 2012, p.7). What he has repressed and escaped from returns this night. Six year later,

and free of ties with his own people, this foreigner feels a solitude that finds him alone and lonely in another continent. In *Strangers to Ourselves* Kristeva questions if foreigners are happy, and for this protagonist, his exiled position is marked as a threshold crossed, his appearance signals that he is "in addition":

> The consummate name of such a freedom is solitude useless or limitless, it amounts to boredom or supreme availability. Deprived of others, free solitude like the astronauts' weightless state, dilapidates muscles, bones and blood.
>
> (Kristeva 1991, p.12)

A loneliness that originated in childhood trauma and grief, furthered by his closeted homosexuality, coexists with a familial legacy of silence. Portions of 'One Minus One' have been hinted at or referenced in story after story, which interviewer Claudia Luppino raised in her discussion with Tóibín in Florence (2011). Identifying the theme of the mother / son relationship, Luppino suggests is a motif that recurs 'insistently and crucially' to which Tóibín responds: 'You know, it is very clear, there are so many images of abandonment, so many, that you would have to say: 'What happened to you to cause all this?' (Luppino and Tóibín, 2011). A recurring motif of Tóibín's stories centres on things unsaid, and included in this pattern are the storehouse of vexations and regrets he has for his mother, concurrent with his loving attachment to her. The character's restraint for what remains unexplained, is still with him all these years later as he meditates on his attachment to her, it reveals a half-hidden longing for her too. He conflates her mothering and the familial legacy of duplicity with the deafening silence surrounding his homosexuality. On this night the hurts he has repressed violently resurface and 'the bitter past has come back

to me tonight in these alien streets with a force that feels like violence' (Toíbín 2010, p.2). Being in this state of 'matricidal anguish' (Kristeva 1991, p.9), the narrator-protagonist from 'One Minus One' is regarded as an exilic subject in his condition of emotional emptiness and geographical distance. From the text, his illusory telephone call to a former lover reveals his emotional and geographical removal of himself from the family and turns to this ex-partner instead for healing.

In this imaginary conversation, he recalls the week before his mother's death, and explains the joy of those few days in New York, ignorant of what was to come. 'The days when no one in Ireland could find me to tell me that my mother was dying' (Tóibín 2010, p.3). Wandering into an internet café this innocence ends abruptly when he reads numerous e-mails from his sister, Sinéad, asking him to make contact urgently. Phoning her, he learns that his mother is dying. He hoped to hear that she was asking for him, 'but she said nothing like that' (Tóibín 2010, p.3). He leaves for the airport and checks in for the Dublin flight home where he encounters his aunt's old neighbour Joan, now working for *Aer Lingus*. This woman is significant in triggering the association of the traumatic period when he was 'shunted off' to live with his aunt as a child: 'Her name was Joan Carey, and she had lived next door to my aunt's house, where myself and Cathal were left when my father got sick. I was eight years old then' (Tóibín 2010, p.5). Further examples of the way Tóibín's canon consistently interrogates the portability of personal history continue in passages that remember:

Nobody did us any harm in that house; nobody came near us in the night, or hit either

> of us, or threatened us, or made us afraid. The time we were left by our mother in our aunt's house has no drama attached to it.
>
> (Tóibín 2010, p.6)

As Tóibín records this episode in his text, he notes that 'it should be nothing' (Tóibín 2010, p.7). Later he describes this period of living with his aunt as 'barely worth recounting', because no one harmed them, when they were 'left' by their mother, but the silence of the shadow world thrust upon him was in-comprehendible to the young child:

> All I know is that our mother did not get in touch with us once, not once, during this time. There was no letter or phone call or visit. Our father was in the hospital. We did not know how long we were going to be left there. In the years that followed, our mother never explained her absence, and we never asked her if she had wondered how we were, or how we felt, during those months.
>
> (Tóibín 2010, pp.6-7)

The silence that his mother never felt necessary to explain emptied him of everything and he 'learned not to trust anyone' (Tóibín 2010, p.7) and:

> He knows that going home to his mother's bedside, would not be simple, that some of our loves and attachments are elemental and beyond our choosing, and for that very reason they come spiced with pain and regret and need and hollowness.
>
> (Tóibín 2010, p.8)

In the hospital, sitting at his mother's bedside, the author-narrator has time to contemplate

many regrets. These range from how little they knew about each other and the silence he maintained around his sexuality, a further regret is that he should have come home more often, and his last regret and the one he purposefully kept at bay, 'I had been given no choice, that she had never wanted me very much' (Tóibín 2010, p.12). Having repressed this thought Tóibín writes it into this text because he could contain it no longer, 'literature may also involve not an ultimate resistance to but an unveiling of the abject' (Kristeva 1982, p.208).

Kristeva advocates, in *Powers of Horror*, that literature 'represents the ultimate coding of our crises, of our most intimate and most serious apocalypses' (Kristeva 1982, p.208). In 'One Minus One' the son also discovers that his mother was indeed aware of his homosexuality and had disclosed this knowledge to her friends but not to the son himself. By inverting the Kristevan paradigm of abjection, Mrs Tóibín was both the agent of culture who taught the child the necessity of abjection and the one to help carry out this act. Never a neat category, Kristeva asserts that the subject will always be marked by the uncertainty of its borders and following the death of his father, the paternal function was no longer existent. The mother-son bond in Tóibín's work is central to his vision and is relevant as an interpretative approach of Kristevan theory revealing a son who must escape, to form, and free the separate self and disavow the maternal other. It is only during the funeral that he learns this information, when a friend of his mother's enquires about his 'friend' with an insinuating emphasis. Ambiguous as ever, it is unclear to the reader when the mother learned of her son's sexual orientation and her possible motive for abjecting him:

> For abjection, when all is said and done, is the other facet of religious, moral and ideological codes on which rest the sleep of individuals and the breathing spells of societies. Such codes are abjection's purification and repression. But the return of their repressed make up our "apocalypse," and that is why we cannot escape the dramatic convulsions of religious crises.
>
> (Kristeva 1982, p.209)

With his mother dead, he can now disavow the stranglehold she had over him that was pulling him into melancholia. She is not the 'object of loss' any longer, but she is still a repository for regret to the first love object that is lost, but he is free to mourn their relationship, such as it was.

Tóibín's first collection of short stories includes nine texts that engage with the institution of, as well as the competing notions of, family. Five of these stories are addressed in this chapter: 'The Use of Reason', 'A Song', 'The Name of the Game', 'A Priest in the Family' and 'Three Friends'. As the collection's title suggests, fathers are side lined, which clears the stage for the mother-son relationships to define themselves on their own terms and challenge generational pieties. Breaking with the traditional notion of mothers who sacrificed their strong sons for the good of the nation, Tóibín circumvents the paradigm. Instead, we read of sons who created a space apart from their mothers and their motherland, in order to attain their own identities. The variety of mothers narrated by Tóibín are given space in his texts, and the reader can observe a pattern in these female characters who keep a secret self, closed off from others. Nothing in the self is what it

appears to be and the consequent return of the repressed reveals itself in their actions. Mother Ireland has symbolised an anti-British sentiment to marginalise women and corral young Irishmen into action to protect their country. Against that historical backdrop, this collection of stories negotiates the concept of Irish domesticity, and it dramatises the incompatibility of this inter-generational relationship, with sons refusing to recognise their mothers. These sons are attempting to undermine their mother's overbearing presence and her legislatively proscribed power in the home environment, while underscoring the limitations of the dominant heteronormative family model. Tóibín affords a space to include a view of the interior thinking from both parties of the inter-generational relationship. Tóibín's mothers have a duality about them, with their 'absent presence' that has a discernible influence on their sons. These boys must abject and overcome their mothers before attaining complete psychological development. Equally, the sons must negotiate their divided selves and deal with areas of trauma or homoerotic desire they want to shut away and compartmentalise. Understood from the viewpoint of Kristeva's theory of mourning and melancholy within a matrix of grief, children view their mother as an object of loss punctuated by the rupture of the pre-Oedipal separation. In this context the 'ultimate lost object is the mother/breast that is first incepted during the pre-symbolic separation of the infant-child dyad' (Post 2014, p.129).

## 'The Use of Reason'.

### Individual conscience in post-Catholic Irish life.

'The Use of Reason' opens the collection and establishes the tone of the stories to follow.

Tóibín narrates the still troubling histories in a socially realistic mode, navigated through the interior monologue of the criminal surveying the 'wide waste ground' (Tóibín 2006, p.3) of Dublin. The story mirrors the mourning and loss felt by the citizens, as the country negotiates unprecedented change and the realism of this text steers the reader towards the spaces and silences that followed. The repetition of the word 'empty' on nine occasions in the first paragraph continues throughout the text and resounds loudly with the author's notions of contemporary freedoms. The freedoms of this era allow new creations of family permutations as sexuality is no longer regulated nor outlawed, and married heterosexual parents are no longer a requisite consideration of family. Published in 2006, at the height of the 'Celtic Tiger' boom and three years prior to the Ryan Report, Tóibín the journalist will have been on-point to these events regarding the authority of Gardaí, judges, prison wardens and religious leaders. Matching the shifting ground of Irish people in their attitude towards figures of authority, his texts bring previously repressed social issues to the surface. Ambiguity is required now, asserts Tóibín, 'words ambiguous enough to make [the Irish] feel at home' (Tóibín 1993, p.6).

'The Use of Reason' offers a social commentary on the Irish State and society by metaphorically signalling the damaging consequences of abusive figures in authority. These authoritarian figures encroached on the personal evolution of the protagonist attempting to navigate an identity, as an individual belonging to a family unit far removed from the idealised model in the Constitution. From the Brothers at the 'Lanfad' institution he inhabited periodically, corrupt members of the Gardaí, his alcoholic mother and his

absent father, this character exists in a solitary alienated existence. Matching form with content, Tóibín sets this story in the empty streets of the capital during the early hours of the morning, as an additional layer of suggestion to capture the vacuum experienced: '[t]he rendered emptiness of the physical environment mirrors the psychological interiority of the protagonist' (Tyler Post 2014, p.129). Something always remains unsaid in the spaces of Tóibín's texts, suggesting alienation from previously held securities following the horrors unfolding in areas of clerical abuse. A former child of the fictional 'Lanfad' institution, he survived by feeling nothing, but this detachment serves to accentuate his ability to disengage and alienate himself from the vicious criminal acts he carries out later in life: 'The city was a great emptiness. He looked out from the balcony of one of the top flats on Charlemont Street. The wide waste ground below him was empty' (Tóibín 2006, p.3). Thoughts and images continually haunt the author bringing memories from childhood to his everyday actions, akin to the un-named protagonist, whose memories and emotions flood uninvited. Tóibín and this character deal with these sentiments by compartmentalising them, but like Ireland itself, it could not hide in the dark past any longer.

While the criminal at the centre of this story was not subject to physical or sexual harm during his time at 'Lanfad', he remains scarred having witnessed the abuse of his fellow classmates. The reverberations of these events follow him around like a ghost he constantly questions but cannot banish. Uninvited thoughts frequent his defenceless mind in much the same manner he surveys these houses for burglary. Drawing similarities with

Kristeva's theory of abjection, the opening narrative lines point to the disruption of Ireland's social order, 'your mind is like a haunted house' (Tóibín 2006, p.7). The protagonist refers to the ghosts haunting his memory and reminding him of the religious Brothers who took advantage of defenceless boys. Abjected himself from Irish society, he can be considered what Kristeva describes as:

> The in-between, the ambiguous, the composite. The traitor, the liar, the criminal with a good conscience, the shameless rapist, the killer who claims he is a saviour … any crime, because it draws attention to the fragility of the law, is abject, but premeditated crime, cunning murder, hypocritical revenge are even more so because they heighten the display of such fragility.
>
> (Kristeva 1982, p.4)

Abjected himself, he penetrates the 'fragility of the law' repeatedly, having recently broken into 'Landsborough House' and stolen a number of paintings. One of these paintings was Rembrandt's *Portrait of an Old Woman* which he hoped to off-load via the Dutch men, but, examining it, he cannot see the point of this portrait and thinks the old woman is dark and sour looking:

> Most of it was done in some dark colour, black he supposed it was, but it looked like nothing. The woman in the painting appeared as though she needed cheering up, like some sour old nun.
>
> (Tóibín 2006, p.8)

Illustrating Fintan O'Toole's observation regarding 'divided selves' (O'Toole 2016), the

thief does not link the woman depicted in the portrait with his own mother, whom he has described with similar physical characteristics. He has so compartmentalised a part of himself that it can seem to belong to another, but the consequent return of the repressed inevitably occurs by the end of the story. Detective Inspector Frank Cassidy, meanwhile, is passing Garda surveillance information to the criminal for a fee and 'in return for the money, Cassidy gave him information he mostly knew already' (Tóibín 2006, p.5). Receiving confidential information from Cassidy represents his abjection of self and the failure of a country's national ideals. Tóibín highlights these failures through the thief and his advantageous connections with this Detective Inspector. In what Kristeva describes as a weary fruitless attempt to identify with something on the outside:

> [He] finds the impossible within; when it finds that the impossible constitutes its very *being*, that it *is* none other than abject. The abjection of self would be the culminating form of that experience of the subject to which it is revealed that all its objects are based merely on the inaugural loss that laid the foundations of its own being.
>
> (Kristeva 1982, p.5)

After Cassidy's departure, he drifts off to sleep in dreams of 'Lanfad,' wondering again if he would ever stop dreaming about it, twenty-four years after leaving. In his dream, what unsettled him was the feeling of happiness he experienced under lock and key, 'to have order in his life, to keep rules, to be watched all the time' (Tóibín 2006, p.13). Aware that he felt like that during his 'only adult sentence in Mountjoy Jail' (Tóibín 2006, p.13), the contentment afforded by institutional rules and regulation provided a stability, previously

absent in his experience of family and society. His desire for command over the construction of self sees him assert control in areas of his own agency. When the Brothers instructed him to notify his mother of his release from 'Lanfad', 'he gave her the wrong date in the letter. He came home on his own, and soon he drifted away' (Tóibín 2006, p.39). He continues to deliberate on his mother by highlighting her personal destructive needs and behaviours during court proceedings as she beseeched the judge: 'All the same I don't know where I'd be without him. His other brother was no good. Oh no good! Billy was no good for anything' (Tóibín 2006, p.36). The Gardaí in the courtroom had to group together to stop his mother moving any closer to the judge and furthermore, they had to hold her securely by the arms as her son passed her by on his way to the transport van. He stepped back from his mother's reach at this point and was later careful not to look at her from inside the van, when she banged on the windows. This battle for personal space between the generations is fraught with a lack of communication and is a recurrent topic in many of Tóibín's short stories.

Separation between mother and son haunts Tóibín's prose, sometimes angrily, sometimes ambiguously and more often silently. In this instance, the son recognises his need to escape the mother. This woman does not embody the maternal self-abnegating mother lovingly idealised in Padraig Pearse's poetry. Shortly before his death, Pearse referenced the Virgin's sacrifice of Christ, which he likened in *The Mother* (1916). Written in the tradition of the *Sean Bhean Bhocht* from Cathleen Ní Houlihan, *The Mother* signifies a complete contrast with this woman's maternal pride garnered from her son's criminal

activity. Proclaiming equal rights for all men and all women on Easter Monday, the son of Mrs. Pearse 'shall be spoken of among their people' (Pearse cited in Ryan 1963, p.24). The mother of this text, however, takes misplaced pride in her sons, whose criminality will be their deeds of remembrance. Her grief too is not silent nor reserved for her 'hearth', but loud and inappropriate at the courtroom setting; while her 'joy' comes from the untouchable position she holds in society. Her courtroom outpouring interweaves opposites of strength and brokenness; failure and triumph; sorrow and joy, thereby indicating the complex emotions aroused by the fear and exhilaration of criminality in her sons and the shared experiences that bind this family together. Tóibín's characters are constantly on high alert in defence of their personal space and, recognising these behaviours, the son creates a distance between himself and his mother. Quietening his mind, his thoughts return to 'Lanfad' and the Brothers who allowed him to work on the bog: 'He loved that, the silence, the slow work, the long stretch of flatness to the horizon. And walking home tired at the end of the day' (Tóibín 2006, p.19). However, like a photograph he had previously taken, but cannot rid from his brain, another destructive image interrupts uninvited and he pictures the Brothers beating two boys who had tried to escape their care. Watching this punishment but hidden from view, were two fellow Brothers who masturbated while this rough treatment was being meted out. 'The two brothers in the lightbox did not look like men in charge; they looked more like old dogs panting' (Tóibín 2006, p.22). The emotions stirred by this image sees him fantasizing about deathly revenge on these Brothers and with the passing of years, this sentiment remains:

When he sees a cop, or a barrister, or a judge, he saw the Brothers in 'Lanfad',

> somebody loving their authority, using it, displaying their power in a way which only barely disguised hidden and shameful elements.
>
> (Tóibín 2006, p.23)

This individual conscience in a post-Catholic Ireland stems from the revelations unearthed in institutions by persons of entrusted authority who abused power. Persons who acted silently and with complicity in horrific deeds sees him strike out on his own to take command of his life and define himself on his own terms. The text narrates the examples of Inspector Cassidy and a barrister called Kevin McMahon. When Cassidy had relished telling him his own mother leaked information to the Gardaí, the reader learns that the criminal's thoughts immediately link to the strangulation of this Inspector. Correspondingly, in the case of Kevin McMahon, he instructed Joe O'Brien from his gang to carry out his act of revenge. Planting a bomb under McMahon's car resulted in a double leg amputation for the barrister who got personal about his family during Billy's court case.

The un-named son visits his mother to warn her not to be drinking and leaking stories to Gardaí: 'I will take action against you if I hear another word' (Tóibín 2006, p.42). With the possibility of matricide nuanced, John McCourt suggests that 'Tóibín is comfortable with leaving the reader to fill in the emotion, to draw what conclusions, if any, are possible to imagine what is seething beneath the surfaces' (McCourt 2008, p.153). Having issued a warning, he came away renewed and feeling invincible, he decided to burn all the stolen paintings. The fissures of this mother-son dyad propelled the son into a moment of self-realisation where the stolen painting and his mother merge as one. The burning of

'Rembrandt's sour old woman' (Tóibín 2006, p.44) would create 'a vivid emptiness in the space where it had once hung' (Tóibín 2006, p.44), and clearing his mind hauntingly links the reader back to previous thoughts he associated with the abuse of power displayed by Inspector Cassidy and barrister Kevin McMahon. Throughout the story it becomes increasingly evident that the protagonist is on the verge of being drawn into a melancholic state, as revealed through his admissions of feeling 'love for no one' (Tóibín 2006, p.24), and his preference for everything to be dark and empty:

> This repeated desire for erasure and the emptying of signs, the summoning of pre-symbolic existence, harkens back to Kristeva's notion of the semiotic and the pre-objectal "Thing," the part of the self that is simultaneously mourned in all mourning.
>
> (Tyler Post 2014, p.130)

Like any quest for a mother figure, this man seeks unconditional acceptance and a settling of accounts and under cover of night, he goes to the mountains to unearth the painting. The rhythm of this digging draws his memories back to 'Lanfad' and the memory of contentment in the silence and slow work digging the bog. In burning this maternal image, the erasure he was seeking will be satisfied, and with her matricide will come relief: 'He would go back to the city renewed, unafraid, smiling to himself at what he had done. He had the solution now. He was sure he was right' (Tóibín 2006, p.43). Like the painting, the void created would make a vivid emptiness in the space it had previously occupied. Connecting the stolen Rembrandt painting, he thought 'dark and sour' with his mother, he would set himself free. Building a construction of the self, he would free himself from dealing with these un-invited intrusions, his past, his cultural trauma and his relationship

with his mother.

## ‘A Song’

### Reclaiming those previously lost cultural positions.

Eileen, the mother in this story reconfigures the idea of family. Neither silenced nor confined, she is a working singer whose absence from the traditional role of parenting Tóibín narrates to indicate another mother at odds with the expected role of nurturing. Not circumscribed by duty to her son, Eileen belongs to a generation of women that lived through the rapid changes in a country rushing to modernise. Not enchained by duty Eileen sought personal meaning in her life through art and, like other Tóibín mothers, dramatises the incompatibility of mothers and sons in pursuing a freedom for herself and her love of music. In doing so, she evaded the biological relationship with her son, and cut loose from the society that had the potential to make the relationship enslaving rather than liberating. Eileen contradicts this model of mothering and Tóibín narrates her without judgement but leaves space for the reader to negotiate the received pieties themselves. Raised by his father, who is nonetheless a marginal figure, Noel’s life risks being upset when he has an unexpected encounter with his mother. Voiced from the perspective of her son, the story details his own singing prowess during a music festival in Ennis.

Setting the story during one of the sessions in a pub gives an additional resonance to questions of tradition and mothering, as his friend quietly informs him of his mother’s presence. This presence invokes her absence and sees Noel calculating that it has been

nineteen years since he had last seen his mother and he did not think that he would recognis her: ‘His friends knew that his parents had separated but none of them knew the bitterness of the split and the years of silence which had ensued’ (Tóibín 2006, p.49). This recurring theme of silence sees it remain painfully locked and secretive for the character Noel. Tóibín’s aesthetic of leaving something always unsaid is in evidence between these friends, with whom the character never felt comfortable sharing details. Having ordered a drink, he found that his mother was staring directly at him. Remembering her face from newspaper articles and the cover of an album, he calculated that she was in her early fifties now. This remembering suggests a sense of longing that Toíbín includes for the continuous presencing of the mother through her absence. The father had blocked Noel’s access to his mother and maternal grandmother. Furthermore, he returned all her letters unopened, reinforcing the space extended by his silence. This contrasting model of silence from both parents takes a shift when Noel switches from the loss of his mother into a reassertion of his father and a promise to re-engage in their relationship on his return after the weekend.

Statia, the pub’s proprietor, calls on Eileen to sing and so she begins her lament in a song of unrequited love that Noel found himself drawn into: ‘He found that he had come closer to her and stood alone between her group and the bar’ (Tóibín 2006, p.53). As the mother sings her lament she continues to stare at Noel, but he does not reach out to her for a possible reconciliation. Successful mourning during his childhood, gives him strength to avoid an unwanted reunion. The relationship has shifted from the realm of the semiotic in infancy, furthered by his loss and abandonment in childhood. His successful acquisition of

language and the symbolic is momentarily haunted by the return of what was repressed as he negotiates the rhythm and sound of the song and forsakes his mother:

> She did not take her eyes from Noel as she came to the famous last verse. He, in turn, had worked out in his head a way of singing above her. He imagined fiercely how it could be done, how her voice would evade such accompaniment, and perhaps deliberately wrong-foot it, but he believed if he was ready to move a fraction more up or down as she did that it could be managed.
>
> (Tóibín 2006, p.54)

Drawing on Kristeva's theory of the semiotic maternal *chora* here, we read of Noel silently accompanying his mother in the tune. Controversial among feminist critics because Kristeva's *chora* deals with a law before the law, the maternal body, Kristeva argues, is an incarnation of the split subject. Their music and singing could potentially join them together, but Kristeva's discourse of maternity calls up a crisis in identity, which suggests abjection, and is partially responsible for women's oppression. When Eileen lowers her head almost speaking the last words of how her love had taken God from her, it unleashes the abandonment and grief in him. He is not prepared to forgive her and conversely resolves to improve the relationship he has with his father and align with the 'father, form, [and] schema' (Kristeva 1989, p.32) on his return to Dublin.

This story exemplifies again, a love that cannot reach maximum potential by either party. Although Noel initially drew closer towards her, his grief for her allowed his defence of personal space to kick in. Fleeing from both his mother and the pub, he informs his

friends that he will wait for them in his car. Having spoken 'falsely and too fast' (Tóibín 2006, p55) his friends look puzzled and here again we see that it is his body that betrayed him, so he sits into his car to compose himself, detach from her and contain his emotions. The story reveals the role of parental relationships functioning within a matrix of grief. Noel continues to grieve a mother who absconded with a lover to England. As an object of loss, he has great difficulty trying to 'exude a natural impatience' (Tóibín 2006, p55) so he fled the pub promptly to escape any possibility of reconciliation. Avoiding the threat of being pulled into melancholia and in order to maintain the normative autonomy of the ego, he does not engage with her and detaches himself emotionally as quickly as possible. He chooses not to understand her perspective or create a space that might entertain dialogue to accommodate a forgiveness and understanding for a mother who felt that leaving the family home was the best option open to her:

> Outside, as the first car of the evening with its full headlights on approached, he was shaking. He knew he would have to be careful to say nothing more, to pretend that it had been an ordinary evening. It would all be forgotten; they would play and sing until the small hours. He sat in the car and waited in the darkness for the others to come.
>
> (Tóibín 2006, p.55)

He maintains the silence. There was no big moment. Tóibín is spare as always during these key instances allowing instead, for the things left unsaid, to draw the reader in and generate the energy. This silence, which is an essential element of Tóibín's work, allows him to

explore the many forms of silent communication. Noel's silence is an emotional strategy, learned from his father, which contributes to the ambiguity surrounding his mother and leaves much unexplained. Just as this tendency is traceable in Tóibín's autobiographical approach in engaging with his own mother and their fractured relationship. Noel refused to acknowledge his mother and his ambivalence towards her exists as another textual eschewal of traditional representations of Irish self-sacrificing mothers. Reclaiming the previously lost cultural position of her generation, Noel's grief is undeniable and his physical functions reacted to her proximity. Once registered, Noel quickly disabled the involuntary movement towards her. Like the criminal from 'The Use of Reason', we see another character separating and keeping a vital part of himself hidden rather than running the emotional risk of confronting his feelings. Having composed himself, Noel recognises that silence will be the mode employed by himself and his friends as a defence mechanism against feelings and in preserving his personal space. Following this mother's departure to England, a space was created in the nation's self-definition that Tóibín, the artist, uncovers as a diverse representation of Irish life. The constitutional master narrative placed the welfare of the nation in the home and set a specific role for the mother which presupposed her willingness to sacrifice her own self interests. In this story, Eileen subverts the notion of family sacrifice, in lieu of a musical career. This results in her being marginalised from the family unit for her non-conformance to the privileged version of the institution.

## 'The Name of the Game'

An unsettling presence.

In ‘The Name of the Game’, Tóibín writes another female protagonist back into the national narrative in the form of a strong entrepreneurial widow called Nancy, who turns her life around when this enforced situation befalls her. In addition, the story provides further context to the position of sons in the larger argument that speaks to the constitutional role of women in the home, parenting their male offspring. This story writes of the changes affecting contemporary Ireland but is set against a backdrop of traditional ways to highlight the cross-section of dynamics operating within a modernising country. Living through the peak of the ‘Celtic Tiger’ economy, this widow introduces a fast-food outlet, and later, an off-licence to the unnamed town they live in. Both enterprises create rapid profits that enable her to pay off her husband’s debts and leave this small town for the anonymous suburbs of Dublin. Not considering herself a legatee of patriarchy or tradition, this woman wants to show her children a more modern way of being. This text was included as part of the thesis to highlight the social and cultural representation of Irish widows Tóibín unsettles, as carried out in his novels *The Blackwater Lightship* (1999), *Brooklyn* (2010) and *Nora Webster* (2014). As with many of Tóibín’s families, secrets and silences are present, creating space for ambiguity in the withheld details.

In ‘The Name of the Game’ the reader learns that prior to his fatal accident, Nancy’s husband, George, had ‘mortgaged the shop and the living quarters above it, and the store beside it’ (Tóibín 2006, p.63). As the newly widowed Nancy chats to their children after work each night, there are echoes of the author’s own childhood in the issues never discussed: ‘They never mentioned George or how he had died; and she never told them that

she had stopped making payments to the bank' (Tóibín 2006, p.71). This mother craves isolation and privacy from middleclass merchants and petty snobbery and is not unlike the central widow character in *Nora Webster,* which Tóibín admits was 'inspired by his mother's story - it's more than a little autobiographical' (Tóibín and Leonard, 2015). A key feature in Tóibín's fictions is the solitude of the central character in the crucial moments of the narrative. Nancy launches the chip shop on her own and later the off-licence. Continuing with the leitmotif of many of Tóibín's characters, both of these events occur without consulting even her close friend, Betty Farrell. Betty had helped her with money to make both these opportunities possible, but Nancy feels she must keep a part of herself hidden and separated from others, in order to survive. Nancy's focus is to be away, self-contained and removed from expected norms, she desires freedom from enchaining townspeople and her old way of life. Defining her place within the social order of this community is her marital status. With the death of her husband his absence created a space that allows her to take ownership of her future. She especially desires to escape being on display in the constrained world as the proprietor of a shop: 'All her life she had been on display like this; from the time of her mother's small shop, people had been able to gawk at her as much as they liked, or look past her' (Tóibín 2006, p.109). Tóibín deconstructs the heteronormative ideal privileged in this sleepy town, with a woman who lifts the burden of the imagined role of the mother. Widowed Nancy refashions this responsibility for herself and hopes to provide a broader outlook for her children. The tension in the drama arises between the authority of the mother's role and the misgivings of Gerard her son, in relation to it. It is a relationship of repressed friction and, as with all of Tóibín's mother

and son stories, one party wins out at the cost of the other, it is never equal, nor does it ever occur simultaneously. It appeared preordained to the neighbours that Gerard would inherit the shop, but Nancy is part of a society that is fundamentally changing, and, in her practicality, she oversees what is best for both her and her children. Tired of living in the shadow cast by her deceased husband, she managed to turn her newfound experiences into a space for growth and renewal. Nancy is coming from an enforced position that she converts into a story of survival firstly before freedom and empowerment follow. Fiercely loyal to her children, the perception of Nancy demonstrates a busy woman who will not tolerate behaviour from her son Gerard, who tries to manipulate her for his own needs.

Tóibín draws our attention to a version of Nancy's husband, George Sheridan, that locals assumed had died leaving her in a robust financial position. This, however, is not the case and she does not want to enlighten them either. This is narrated by Nancy, in Tóibín's spare, unadorned style. Like Lavin before him, he underscores the conservatism of the old lineage of shopkeepers and merchants with the addition of financial institutions, as a variation that left Nancy feeling undermined by the men in management. In a telling story of Irish life during the Celtic Tiger years, we see her survival and success determined by the availability and exchange of cash. Told through her initial meeting with the local bank manager, whom she met to clarify her finances, the scene remained with her like a rash: 'There's no money in the account, there's less than no money.' He stopped and smiled as if the thought of less than no money amused him' (Tóibín 2006, pp.64-5). As per the Gardaí, judge and Brothers from previous stories, Tóibín subtly foregrounds this bank

manager as another character with a minor position of power in Ireland. With less than no money, Nancy secures some liquidity through the sale of two Francis Danby oil paintings hanging in her husband's former home. Tóibín parallels this aspect of Celtic Tiger behaviour, when he notes that Nancy offered them to a furniture dealer for a much-reduced, cash only price. Following this transaction and with an envelope full of twenty-pound notes she 'knew that if she put it in the Credit Union, she would be able to borrow double her savings' (Tóibín 2006, p.87). With a prior agreement from Betty's husband, Jim Farrell of the Credit Union committee, this is exactly what she does. Armed with cash, Nancy hands it over to a builder and his crew, down from Dublin who work rapidly through the night to convert her supermarket into a fully functioning chip shop by morning.

The crux of the story centres on Gerard, her clever but difficult teenage son who appears to have a good aptitude for the business. Helping her with the paperwork, he noticed a large amount of money was missing:

> She had no choice now but to tell him that the building in which they lived and did business was mortgaged and that they were, despite the money they were making now, heavily in debt. When he asked her for precise figures, she realised that he had completely ignored the story of what she had been through, and the effort she had made. He was busy counting.
>
> (Tóibín 2006, p.106)

Gerard had made enquiries and announced to his mother that Frank Wadding was the man,

an accountant who 'would do her taxes for her' (Tóibín 2006, p.106). Unlike his older sisters, Gerard, as the only male, assumed he would inherit the business. On the strength of this alone, he came home one particular day to inform his mother that he had quit school:

> I won't be needing that anymore. I told Mooney to fuck off and then they called Brother Delaney and I told him to fuck off. I told them all to fuck off. You can expect a visit from them, but I'm not going back, that's the end of it.' She saw that he was close to tears. 'I'm not. I'm finished with school.' Suddenly, he had become brave.
>
> 'Well, you needn't think you are working here. This is my business and I'm not having you.
>
> 'You can't run it without me,' he said.
>
> 'Watch me, watch me' she said.
>
> (Tóibín 2006, p.113)

Similar to the mother character in *Nora Webster,* Tóibín writes Nancy as fiercely loyal to her son at all times. Nancy knows Gerard and understands that the personality he is displaying is both brittle and invented but would harden over a number of years. An unwilling Gerard must now recognise how little he knows about his mother's determination having always taken his own form of masculinity for granted. He must watch her emerge from her previously marginalised position and define a new space she is occupying as her own. The clash between tradition and modernity for Nancy provides a text that has been excluded from images and histories that do not correspond with Gerard's imagined self-conception.

Tóibín always privileges the unsaid that forces characters into a climactic moment. The men of the story want Nancy to remain in the margins like other widows. Even her friend and mentor, Birdseye, mentions that she should retire to a bungalow and hand the business over to her son:

> He'll make a great fist of the business. It's in the blood. I remember his grandmother here, she was a real businesswoman. And you'll be able to put your feet up, take holidays and everything. She imagined herself trapped, an old woman fussing in the shop where she was not wanted. Or stuck in a bungalow out the country, a little car on the tarmac drive, with nothing to do all day as Gerard, married now and with responsibilities, egged on by his wife, explained to her that he would need the business made over to him if he were going to stay there.
>
> (Tóibín 2006, pp.113-4)

Rigid and inflexible definitions of what societies and families expect, pave the way for the social inequalities and marginalisation that Nancy has to fight against, and deal with, in order to create and hold on to her own space. This is a woman living in the shadowy presence of her husband, his family, their business, furthered by the bank, credit union and local politician too: 'Her situation resonates with the difficulties faced by generations of independent – or non-male dependent – Irish women who strive to make their way on their own' (John McCourt 2008, p.161). As an unsettling presence in Irish life, Nancy's widowed position in Kristevan terms, deems her well suited to combat the autocracy of national life. Within the context of nationalism, Kristevan theory can be applied to the

interests of Irish women in the twentieth century and her concerns around women that have been imprisoned in stereotypes of womanhood not of their making. Using psychoanalytic discourse for her review of borders, Kristeva notes in *Nations Without Nationalism*, that 'women have the luck and the responsibility of being boundary-subjects' (Kristeva 1993, p.35) and from this position they can make raids on a nation's homogeneity. Confined to a boundary position not of her making, society cast Nancy as a female merchant in a small town. This was widely considered to be a permissible position for widows, as it was imagined Nancy was maintaining the business until her son was old enough to take over. In the case of the widowed Mary Lavin, she managed this position by maintaining both farming and writing, while raising her children. Neither of these two employments were on public display or considered the exclusive realm of men, as women historically helped out in farming duties. Therefore, if a husband or man was not present, society dictated that hiring a 'hand' for such chores was acceptable. In retaliation for bringing this modernisation to their town, the story unfolds with planning permission and health food officers rapidly alighting on Nancy. Kristeva describes what is situated outside the symbolic order of civilization invokes repulsion, this abjection 'is immoral, sinister, scheming, and shady: a terror that dissembles, a hatred that smiles' (Kristeva 1982, p.4).

Following community complaints, the planning authorities informed Nancy that she would have to close her premises. Tóibín inserts these details to nuance the parochial nature of small communities and rural Irish politics, which consequentially see Nancy going to her local councillor for assistance. Nancy is once again beholden to old patriarchal

structures, this time in the form of Ned Doyle, her local politician. She duly visits him in his home office and explains her financial situation outlining her ability to turn the situation around if the planning and health authorities could remain at bay. Carrying out this interaction under the framed photograph of Ned and Eamon De Valera shaking hands, Tóibín anchors these details to re-enforce a contextualisation of the period. In a nod towards the political state of Ireland, where such things can happen amid the abuse of soft political influence and power:

> Slowly, people in the square, those who owned shops, began to understand how well she was doing. And word got around too, with the help of Ned Doyle she believed, how much debt she had inherited. They stopped complaining about the litter. Ned Doyle called by one day and told her that she had everyone's admiration for keeping the business going for Gerard.
>
> (Tóibín 2006, p.108)

With 'The Name of the Game' Tóibín brings another binary tale of the mother and son locked into a struggle for identity that is difficult to escape. Another test in the configuration of the maternal trope as a family unravels after a bereavement. Along with Gerard, Nancy's battle from start to finish was against crippling patriarchal figures and small-town life, all of which were confining her to the marginal space normally assigned to a widow.

The literary and cultural inclusion of this text reformulates the inter-locking

relationship between mothers and sons once again, and it is Gerard who is an obstacle the mother must overcome to achieve her ambition and recalibrate their lives. He was battling for space, but Tóibín sees Nancy win this one. She successfully fulfils her individual needs and freedom in her ability to sell her business enterprise profitably and afford successful relocation to a home in Dublin.

## 'A Priest in the Family'

### A failure of idealised positions, mothers and individual mediation.

Sentimentality and nostalgia are absent from this story as it intersects with the clerical abuse scandals in Ireland, with characters illustrating the personal impact of these maltreatments. Tóibín's journalistic background continues to be evident regarding the clash between selfhood and society that witnesses another family dealing with repressed secrets. And '[b]y representing the failure of supposed domestic or national ideals, Tóibín underlines the difficulties and pitfalls of such social models' (Costello-Sullivan 2012, p.3). Offering just enough detail to hold the reader's attention without reverting to flashbacks of plot or explanation, it opens a space for the story to reveal itself. Tóibín allows both Catholic and national legacies to be inverted with a newer approach as he introduces another widowed character, named Molly. Molly's constitutional position in the home is tested by her son Frank, who has been charged with clerical abuse. He will now be one of those priests led from the courthouse 'with their anoraks over their heads' (Tóibín 2006, p.160). Women of Molly's generation previously narrated in literature as the politicised

embodiment of the wished-for nation, the Kathleen Ní Houlihan type or the deeply Catholic mother who was obedient to the Church, are unlike this mother. Having lived through the rapid change of recent decades she identifies with neither, so Tóibín introduces her character to challenge key assumptions of motherhood. Molly's role also interrogates and openly rejects ideologies of Catholicism, to highlight some failings of the institution while simultaneously destabilising canonical definitions of sacrificial mothers within their socially prescriptive institution of a family.

In the introduction to her *Mother/Country*, Costello-Sullivan outlines her belief that Tóibín's fiction concerns itself with exploring and representing the interrelation of the personal and the political. Tóibín writes his character Molly in this story, as a mother straddling both these positions. Costello-Sullivan furthers her contention by acknowledging that:

> A closer look at Tóibín's engagement with the construction of the family, for example, highlights his tendency to portray the damaging effects of political exclusions and normative ideologies for his characters. Families in Tóibín's canon at times double metaphorically for the State, collapsing the boundaries between the personal and the national.
>
> (Costello-Sullivan 2012, p.3)

Molly is neither silent nor confined but traces the progress of Ireland's cultural evolution and will not sacrifice her own self-interests for the benefit of her family. The story opens

when fellow priest Father Greenwood visits Molly and enquires if Frank has visited recently. A casual conversation follows, allowing the reader to garner Molly's religious attitudes: 'He prays for me, I know that, and I would pray for him too if I believed in prayer, but I'm not sure I do. But we've talked about that, you know all that' (Tóibín 2006, p.151). This conversation indicates the more contemporary approach Catholic institutions and clergy have with Irish women. Gone are the days when women attended church and priests preached sermons and ideologies from the pulpit, now we read a relationship built over time with understanding and conversations.

Father Greenwood is cognisant of Molly's opinion on prayer but rather than admonish her, he smiles warmly and reminds her that her 'whole life's a prayer' (Tóibín 2006, p.151). Her response includes a reminder to the priest that the majority of Irish people no longer have a close identification with the Catholic Church: 'Years ago, the old women spent their lives praying. Now, we get our hair done and play bridge and go to Dublin on the free travel, and we say what we like' (Tóibín 2006, p.152). Considered a progressive woman by her neighbours, Molly attends classes at the library, learning the necessary skills for email and internet use. Tóibín contrasts her activities with her sister-in-law, Jane, a woman who spent all the time alone in her house, which Molly thought 'was changing her face, making her responses slower, her jaw set' (Tóibín 2006, p.158). With the characters contextualised, Tóibín progresses the story with the arrival of Father Greenwood to Molly's house for the second occasion, the following evening. She ushered him into the kitchen 'where she could stand up and make herself busy if she did not want to sit listening to him'

(Tóibín 2006, pp.158-9),

> Molly, Frank asked me –
>
> 'Is there something wrong with Frank? She interrupted. Father Greenwood smiled at her weakly.
>
> 'He's in trouble,' he said. Immediately she knew what that meant, and then though, her first reaction to everything else had been wrong, so maybe this too, maybe, she thought, maybe it was not what had automatically come into her mind.
>
> 'Is it…?'
>
> 'There's going to be a court case, Molly.'
>
> 'Abuse?'
>
> (Tóibín 2006, p.159)

Grappling with this information, she quizzes Father Greenwood as to who else knows of this court case. When she realises that her daughters, her sister-in-law, Jane, and the whole town were talking about it, she is furious that 'the only person who hasn't known is the old woman? You've all made a fool out of me!' (Tóibín 2006, p.161). Angered by other people's silence and the consequences of an Irish legacy of silence that leaves her the last person to know, she rages against the assumed authority held by Father Greenwood as he begins to explain to Molly that:

> 'He'll need all –'
>
> 'Don't tell me what he'll need,' she interrupted.

> ‘It’s going to be very hard for you,’ he said, ‘and that’s killing him.’
>
> (Tóibín 2006, p.161)

Her initial reaction shows a woman who will be able to deal with the clerical abuse in her own terms, but not being informed of the situation sees a feisty and resilient Molly resolving ‘to face anything now’ (Tóibín 2006, p.161). Tóibín does not offer any explanatory view on Frank’s actions but offers, instead, an exploration of the complexities and ambiguities in this mother’s behaviour. Alerted by Father Greenwood that Molly has been informed, her daughters visit together immediately after his departure. She berates them for not having the courage to tell her, and maintaining this brave stance, it struck her that the grandsons would have to live with this too. The girls propose a vacation for Molly to the Canary Islands for the duration of the trial, she politely thanks her daughters for their generosity and ushers them out of her house. Molly recognises that Frank has attacked the cornerstone of Catholic life by abusing these students, and she will not partake in the historic cultural silence by escaping on vacation but will stay and address the consequences. As has become common knowledge by now:

> The Church, which had been looked to for guidance against sexual immorality, now appeared as backward and repressive. In recent years, the legal prosecution of clerics has replaced the traditional Irish reticence concerning the sexual abuse of minors.
>
> (Carregal-Romero 2015, p.75)

Irish child abuse was not contained within Clerical institutions alone, and Molly would not join the accord of people facilitating the impunity of abusers in families and communities, so she asked a favour of her friend Nancy:

> ‘Would you do something for me, Nancy?’ Molly said, standing up, preparing to leave. ‘I would, of course, Molly.’
>
> ‘Would you ask people to talk to me about it, I mean people who know me? I mean, not to be afraid to mention it.’
>
> ‘I will, Molly. I’ll do that’.
>
> (Tóibín 2006, p.167)

Empowering herself, we see Molly taking charge of her limited situation by opening up and out about Frank, which acts as a declaration to the community that all is not well in their home. Breaking the silence traditionally associated with Irish families, Tóibín provides Molly with a space to voice her appeal for inclusion and social cohesion as an alternative model to older, repressed secrecy in Irish families. In refusing to absent herself on holiday for the court case, this mother remains to face the grim reality of her son’s actions. Her stance to remain in the home attaches greater significance to the shame Frank is experiencing, knowing that his mother will learn the minutiae of his abject and egregious exploits of children.

Ambiguity is evident as always with Tóibín and it is up to the reader to decide if this stance of remaining is an action driven by personal motivation or in defiance of her son and the Church. Not revealing her interior thoughts, Tóibín offers only her actions. Molly may not approve of Frank’s behaviour but she is tolerant of her son and during his visit two days before trial, he apologizes for not telling her the news himself: ‘I’m sorry I didn’t come in and tell you myself what was happening,’ he said. ‘Well, you’re here now, and it’s

nice to see you,' she replied' (Tóibín 2006, p.169). Communication between Molly and Frank is difficult, all that remains now are things left unsaid. They are each locked into this unit of identity and her presence and steeliness is the burden Frank must carry:

> 'We'll do the best we can for you, Frank, she said.
>
> 'What do you mean?' he asked. When he lifted his head and took her in with a glance, he had the face of a small boy.
>
> 'I mean, whatever we can do, we will do, and none of us will be going away. I'll be here.'
>
> 'Are you sure you don't want to go away?' he asked in a half-whisper.
>
> 'I am certain, Frank.'
>
> (Tóibín 2006, p.169)

Guilt had sharpened Frank's feelings and he must contend with the mounting significance that his mother will be a gnawing presence during the trial. His failure to navigate her maternal presence for his court case pulls him into melancholia and self-reproach. In *Black Sun* Kristeva proposes that all mourning is for the lost self. If 'matricide becomes our vital necessity' (Kristeva 1989, p.27) where this is not possible, the alternative she proposes is the 'putting to death the self' (Kristeva 1989, p.28). Recounting this key climatic moment, Tóibín's characteristic ambiguity and all that remains unsaid underscores key assumptions about the mother's role in Irish fiction. The emotional world portrayed by Molly is not one of shame or oppression. This invites comparison with an older Ireland and women's former relationships with the Church, which left those subscribing to old-world tenets hopelessly

at a loss. Survival in this story requires a re-articulation of social norms, as embodied by Molly and her attitude that established a voice for herself within the life of the Irish nation. This type of political effectiveness begins on the level of each individual in relation to those around them. Just as Kristeva believes that women are never entirely at home in the symbolic order, they 'have the luck and the responsibility of being boundary-subjects' which can be turned into an advantage (Kristeva, 1993, p.35). Tóibín offers Molly this opportunity when he narrates her subverting the representation of the maternal presented in this text. She reflects the shifting moral and social landscapes of the basic and the imagined versions of Catholic Ireland, which constitutionally promises to cherish all its children. The inclusion of paedophilia in this story generates a literary space that engages most deeply with the religious and social histories in Ireland. In Molly's action to remain present during Frank's trial, she brokers the boundaries between Ireland's sanitised and polluted spaces. She further dissolves previously sanitised and repressed social ills in her request to create a consciousness of Frank's abuse through open dialogue with neighbours. By taking responsibility to bear witness, she uses her 'luck and responsibility' to create a place of recognition for victims, while simultaneously remaining part of her community.

## 'Three Friends'

### Wholly connected as a sanctuary of escape from the mother

One of the defining aspects of Tóibín's identity is his homosexuality and he draws on material from his own life to shape his writing. Notions of Irishness, propriety and behavioural obedience towards heterosexual marriage defined a form of sociability.

Responding to this, Tóibín's fictions examine outmoded Irish limitations and the first novel he set in Ireland engaging with gay characters was *The Blackwater Lightship* (1999). Shortlisted for the Booker Prize it tells the story of Declan returning to County Wexford, dying from AIDS. Declan's queered presence is undramatic in style, and Tóibín's inclusion of these characters set a precedent in Irish narratives. Tóibín has continued his journalistic interest in the influence of the Catholic Church, which provides compelling deconstructions of received concepts of the family unit. Querying notions of sexual identity within Irish culture, 'Three Friends' opens with the character, Fergus, at his mother's funeral. As he sits beside her for the final time in the funeral parlour before they enter the cathedral, a space emblematic of the Catholic world from which she has passed, Fergus is another of Tóibín's characters who bears the burden of historical constraints. For Harte:

> Tóibín's resistance to fundamentalist paradigms and refusal to harmonize the present or the past into a fixed, abstract philosophy are especially marked in his attitude toward the shibboleths that surround notions of Irishness.
>
> (Harte 2014, p.110)

In this moment, there is a vast space between this mother and son, symbolised by the corpse and useless body of the mother, housed in the funeral parlour with 'all the life gone out of her' (Tóibín 2006, p.185). There is an explicit generational disconnect between the two and soon, Fergus will feel free to challenge the traditionally conceived family unit and explore his homosexuality. Immediately after the funeral traditions are complete, he begins on this quest.

> He had planned all along to stop at the graveyard on the way out of town and stand

> by his mother's grave and offer to her, or receive from her, some comfort, but he was tired and drained. All night they had laughed until there were no more funny stories left. He felt a gnawing guilt at her death as he drove past the graveyard as though he were implicated in its cause. Rather than move closer to her, he needed to get away from her house, her grave, the days of her funeral.
>
> (Tóibín 2006, p.191)

Fergus is on the verge of melancholia at this point and needs to put distance between himself and his mother. Policing the Irish family cell historically fell to the mother and in this role, she functioned as a purveyor of Catholic ideology, so now that she is dead Fergus can move on from this gnawing guilt on his exploration of a previously repressed identity. His inability to mourn her death in Kristeva's terms will see him displace his energy from the social code. As seen in the previous story, matricide is 'the first step on the way to becoming autonomous' (Kristeva 1989, p.27), and Fergus's initial steps in separating his ego from the lost mother occur at a beach rave. There he will tentatively redirect his libidinal energy to his friend Mick, in his first encounter with the Other. This action will be formative of a new secure identity for Fergus, who had little room to express his sexuality while his mother was alive.

After the funeral, and back in Dublin, Tóibín introduces another marker of social acceptability in the form of a beach rave, highlighting Ireland's shifting moral and social landscapes. The group of three friends set out for the rave by car when night had fallen, and they began their steady consumption of cocaine, ecstasy, joints and alcohol. Hidden

from public view, the rave's secret location is tricky to navigate and involves narrow roads and lanes heading for a beach. Caught between the lethargy that the dope had brought on and the 'sweet electric shock of the cocaine' (Tóibín 2006, p.193), Fergus is reminded of trips to the beach taken with his family in previous years. This difficult negotiation of the sandy passage towards the beach is what Robinson Murphy considers a reversal of the birthing experience:

> Briars and brambles hit against the body of the car as they drove along the narrow lane, so rutted that a few times something seemed to cut through the underbelly of the car and Mick was almost forced to stop. They were silent as though frightened as the car rocked from side to side more than it appeared to move forward.
>
> (Tóibín 2006, p.194-5)

Murphy contends that Tóibín's use of movement here is one of inverted birth, with a violent and unnatural trajectory, 'a return to the womb-like cave, the entrance to which requires ascent back into the mother' (Murphy 2009, p.488). This road is seldom used by traffic, but Murphy argues that it is 'for Fergus a route that must be broached to pass again into the world of the living' (Murphy 2009, p.488). Kristeva generally follows Lacan's parameters of psychosexual development while adding a more central place for the maternal. In early infancy, what Lacan calls the 'Real', Kristeva calls the 'Chora' when the separation between infant and mother is established. Broaching this route and confronting the threat of falling back into the 'Chora', Fergus actively begins redirecting his relationship from the mother, distancing himself from her maternal function in order to

become autonomous. This rave links Fergus to the youth culture he is familiar with acting as a sanctuary of escape from his mother as part of the wider social order.

> As part of a throng at the beach, with the tempo rising:
>
> He was wholly connected to them, a part of the group they had formed. He needed only to feel that connection and a rush of warmth would go through him and he hoped that he might stay like that until the dawn and maybe after the dawn into the next day.
>
> (Tóibín 2006, p.197)

At the first stirrings of dawn, Mick proposes a swim. The three friends were in the water ahead of Fergus, who stood on the shoreline preparing himself for the cold ordeal ahead. Knowing he could not return to the strand and the comfort of his clothing, he is fearful of reproach from his friends who 'beckoned him not to be a baby' (Tóibín 2006, p.200). The rhythm and the sounds of the waves bring his mother's presence to the fore and the threat of the return of the pre-linguistic stage of the *chora* strikes Fergus with fear. As per Kristevan theories on the primacy of mother's music before language and drives before stasis, Kristeva's *chora* is not a self-evident form, but the place where Fergus is both generated and negated. The rhythmic movement and space between each wave, constitutes a temporary stasis for Fergus, but this space is symbolic as it connects the two separated positions.

> He made himself think for a moment that he was nobody and nothing, that he had no feelings, that nothing could hurt him as he waded into the water. He crashed into

> a wave as it came towards him and then dived under it and did a breast stroke out towards his friends. His mother, he remembered, had always been so brave in the water, never hesitating at the edge for a single second, always marching determinedly into the cold sea.
>
> (Tóibín 2006, p.200-1)

Steeling himself to feel nothing, he thinks of his mother once again, but determinedly crashed into a wave and dived under it swimming towards his friends signifying his onset of selfhood.

Elaborate horseplay in the water continues between the friends and, swimming out further, Fergus felt Mick touching him deliberately. Tóibín overlooks references to religious baptism but in this created space, Fergus finds a route for his drives towards a homosexual encounter. Before emerging from the water:

> he began to direct his energy, all of it, all of his drug-lined grief and pure excitement, into taking Mick's tongue in his mouth, holding it there, offering his tongue in return tasting his friend's saliva, his breath, his feral self.
>
> (Tóibín 2006, p.202)

If homosexual desire is not conducive to oedipal reproductivity, it therefore has no place in the social structure. In queer theory, homosexuality names a rupture in modes of sociality that Jennifer Cooke says 'whether as authors or critics, we are engaged in a process of re-inscribing and renegotiating our part in this process' (Cooke 2013, p.16). When Tóibín began to include homosexual intimacy in his writing, he brought culturally appropriate

behaviours into being for an Irish audience in a text that details a more sustained focus on pleasure than Lavin or O'Brien before him. The synthetic intimacy of ecstasy promoted feelings of emotional communion in Fergus. This temporary oneness with his friends enhanced by empathogens allows him to express that compartmentalised part of himself.

As the day dawns Fergus and the group dress and prepare to leave the beach. The sandy route is again difficult for the car to navigate and rocks silently along a lane. Filled with blackberry brambles, it reminds Fergus of his mother and siblings on some road out of his hometown:

> With a colander or an old saucepan gathering blackberries from the bushes in the ditches, his mother the most assiduous, the busiest, filling colander after colander into the red bucket in the back seat of the old Morris Minor.
>
> (Tóibín 2006, p.203)

Ambiguity from Tóibín enables the reader to decide if it is Kristeva's notion of matricide that allows Fergus to explore his homosexuality at this stage, while successfully recovering his mother through signs. As Kristeva suggests:

> I have lost an essential object that happens to be, in the final analysis, my mother… But no, I have found her again in signs, or rather since I consent to lose her I have not lost her, I can recover her in language.
>
> (Kristeva 1987, p.43)

Narrating the lure of familial memories again in this text, but part of Tóibín's style is that something unsaid always remains, and the abjected never entirely disappears. Returning

alone to his house in Dublin, Fergus felt as though he had been: 'brushed by the wings of some sharp knowledge, some exquisite and mysterious emotion almost equal to the events of the past week' (Tóibín 2006, p.205). When a hungover Mick calls round, he instructs Fergus to shower while he cooks him breakfast. The requirement of this male mothering is necessary for Fergus due to the repressed vulnerability the maternal evoked in him. This quest for male mothering is more about unconditional acceptance and defining himself on his own terms. Ultimately, the story consists of three stages:

> The first, an introduction of the mourned object; the second, the need to successfully separate one's ego from the lost object; and the third, the redirection of libidinal energy from the lost object to a new object of desire.
>
> (Tyler Post 2014, p.132)

Following the death of both his parents, we see the traditional family unit broken down, youth and homosexuals are the new social cohesion for Fergus, whose open acceptance overtly challenges the traditional order. The impact of societal pressure on his construction as an individual is not evident, and he has severed ties with his mother. Securing new connections with his friend group allows Fergus to feel wholly connected to his friends and their social scene consisting of raves, drugs and homosexuality. Drawing artistically from his own experience, Tóibín contributes to the personal and the socio-political progress Ireland has made. He drew on the enigmas of relationships to communicate what is silent and unknowable, in characters with divided selves and therefore expands on the previously traditional family unit, publicly incorporating a gay community.

## Conclusion

Both short story collections bear the traces of Tóibín's complicated childhood, including the death of his father and his mother's subsequent struggles in the aftermath. Tóibín has returned to this personal loss and abandonment frequently with fictional mother-son dyads. These relationships describe a variety of physically or emotionally distant mothers, most notably in 'One Minus One' when the son is preparing to fly home from America to be with his dying mother. Haunted once again by the nature of their complex relationship this trip home would be difficult:

> This going home to my mother's bedside would not be simple, that some of our loves and attachments are elemental and beyond our choosing, and for that very reason they come spiced with pain and regret and need and hollowness and a feeling as close to anger as I will ever be able to manage.
>
> (Tóibín 2010, p.8)

This observable regret and hollowness in Tóibín's characters underlines his interest in familial relationships as arenas of conflict for members in their quest for personal space. For generations of Irish women, it was the constitutionally idealised vision of the maternal, and for gay citizens it was their absence from public spaces, that created an incomplete vision of Irish society. Tóibín displays a refusal to grant these terms of difference in his texts and constructs, instead, a cultural form to shape and reform contemporary Ireland and the family cell. The mother in Tóibín's canon offers a challenge to fundamentalist paradigms, especially the failure of the State to acknowledge their role. Tóibín's stories

reshape a wider cultural discourse of Irish identity that, in *Revolt She Said,* Kristeva argues is necessary for a nation's identity and values 'to be continually redefined' (Kristeva 2002, p.12). This in turn will prevent the difficulties generally found in political discourse and together with Tóibín's revisionist agenda, they advocate for a better understanding of the culturally absent women and silenced Others to create a more pluralist society. For Tóibín, life is a central source for his art and provides raw material to create his stories and elements of this, including the influence of Church and politics, find their way into his stories. He claims he was unaware of repeatedly using the maternal trope and the darker side of his autobiographical experiences, until the work was finished and it became apparent. Like Mary Lavin and Edna O'Brien before him, he revisits these tropes in various guises in his belief that writers must go into themselves first and achieve some form of meaning on their own terms, before they can explore other areas. Solitude and loss established so clearly in his stories resonates with the reader in a silence that can evoke emotive states of mourning and loss. Since the early 1990s, Tóibín has reworked and revisited his personal history including darker moments of his autobiography, which has enabled him to re-engage with these issues on his own terms.

He wrote the position of gay sons as a scathing judgment on the Irish national self-construction. Immediate and radical reshaping of cultural norms is challenging but confronting homosexuality in his stories brought a rupture to the social structure by ending the silence of non-normative sexuality. By queering the iconoclastic trope of heterosexual marriage, he spot lit society's own rules and expressions of status, demonstrating through

narrative resignification that a shift has occurred and nudging it towards self-interrogation and change:

> In this sense, the politics that the author seems to advocate is that, for Ireland to be pluralist and tolerant, its society should develop an understanding of the conditions of the silenced other.
>
> (Carregal-Romero 2012, p.8)

Tóibín destabilised canonical definitions in institutions such as marriage and family by giving a voice to the marginalised who rebelled against conditions imposed on them. In doing so, he demonstrates how these new relational modes could exist alongside previously held forms of sociability for cultural assimilation. Major transitions in Irish culture and society, especially the acceptance of non-normative gender and sexual identities occurred against the backdrop of a weakening position of the Catholic Church. The interrelationship between sexuality and national identity had profound implications for those excluded from the canon of national belonging. He addresses the deep shift of the 1990s in Irish society in gay texts with bodily-driven desire of individuals as opposed to previously held metaphors of singular organic heteronormative traditions. The delimitations of the heteronormative family model were fraught with silence that Tóibín destabilises through texts full of ambiguity to accommodate gay sensibilities. Tóibín connects the Irish social climate of alienation and denial with his personal experience as a gay man. Dwelling on the harmful effects of a painful past of shame, he underscores these pitfalls in characters, burdened as a source of familial shame in stories that impart a single aesthetic experience. Tóibín has been at the forefront in narrating otherness, to debunk the meta-narrative for

generations excluded by the imagined values. Personal biography is not his main concern though and his construction of Irish national identity is clearly representative of supposed political ideals. By successfully negotiating gay identities into the public sphere and re-inscribing their identity in the process, his gay characters have allegorically modernised Ireland.

The gender-balanced comparison Tóibín's short stories bring offer a new critical direction to my argument regarding the constitutional wording of women in the home. Article 41.2 was detailed differently by Tóibín, as evidenced by the centrality he gave to his mother characters, and their absence or their presence in the home. The next chapter will look at this position from another direction again with the author Melatu Okorie from Nigeria forging a new dimension to Irish literature as she examines Irish culture from a foreign perspective. In forging a future for herself and her family in a society with constructed cultural and social systems, she calls attention to the socialised patterns of behaviour and its' relation to maternal identity.

# CHAPTER FOUR

## Melatu Uche Okorie - Migrant, Mother, on the Hostel Margin of Irish Life.

The Irish short story writers of the three previous chapters interrogated the notion of women and the refraction of culture through gender in texts that recognised this as a destructive ideal. What characterises this chapter from previous endeavours is the introduction of a writer from Nigeria. Arriving in Ireland in 2006, Melatu Uche Okorie entered a more globalised country than the Irish experience of the three previous authors. The newly distinguished Ireland she entered was characterised by transnational capital flows, together with the movement of people, goods and cultural influences. Writing about whiteness and the literary representation of 'multicultural' Ireland, Anne Mulhall quotes Ghassan Hage in reference to the types of borders that divide the global world.

> The first and most obvious type is the national border, which separates different nation-states. The second and less obvious type is a racialised class border, which separates two different experiences of mobility in the world of national borders.
>
> (Hage, cited in Mulhall, 2020, p.182)

Okorie's experience builds on the border conversation and represents another form of globality, one that involves a movement of 'home' for refugees, working migrants and asylum seekers, all of whom arrive, and seek to establish a legitimate political space. It is from this space that Okorie's short stories provide a foreign lens on Ireland's history of self-imagination, giving readers a chance to explore the experience of the outsider,

searching for belonging and a home. With a fresh perspective the literary landscape of Ireland is decentred in texts that assert the importance of cultural representations of women and colour within the nation. Okorie's story of migration suggests the continuation of the many journeys made by women and the history between the female body and the State. She defines her relationship between narrative and movement in political terms as that of an "asylum seeker", someone who is legally and spatially Othered from society until state regulations granted permission for her to remain. Just as society determined place for generations of Irish mothers, many migrants continue to navigate the space called 'home' within Direct Provision centres.

Following her arrival in Ireland, Okorie's journey towards social acceptance began in a country whose citizens historically had notions of racial and territorial distinctiveness influencing their lives. Luke Gibbons argues such racial and territorial notions stem from the citizen's response to their historical legacy, which originated as far back as the early modern period. In his 2004 study, *Gaelic Gothic, Race, Colonization, and Irish Culture*, Gibbons states:

> Race and empire begin at home, and that both colonization and the animus against Catholicism were inherently bound up with the subjugation of the Celtic periphery – Gaelic Ireland and the Scottish Highlands – from the early modern period.
>
> (Gibbons 2004, p.12)

This anti-Catholic hostility of the gothic genre in the eighteenth century, combined with ideas of racial inferiority and geographical location, served to exclude the Irish from the

modern world. In keeping with the demonology of the gothic, the Irish were a threatening presence as 'Celts', associated with contamination and disease, while any civilised political claim to legitimacy rested on a conflation of *ethnos* and *demos* (nation and people). In founding the modern nation-state, a focus was placed on constructing an ethnic group that signified the populace of the democracy and was 'projected as the ancient and inalienable right of a pre-defined, historically continuous 'people'' (Brannigan 2009, p.146). On an organisational level, the Catholic Church was ideally suited to ally the State in creating this stability and remove any ethnic inferiority sustained during the Penal Laws. In *The Making of Inequality* (2019), Maryann Gialanella Valiulis addresses this twinning:

> The Civil War however, changed all that and the Catholic Church embraced the Free State government and emerged in the new state as the dominant force in civil society. It promised order and stability. It condemned rebellion, and threatened eternal damnation to those who threatened to bring down the State.
>
> (Valiulis 2019, p.47)

With Article 41.2 unchanged for the past 85 years, Melatu Okorie entered the country in a marginalised position, as a woman of colour under constant threat of deportation. Without a home, she began the process of dismantling narratives of belonging by negotiating the problematic ideology of *ethnos* and *demos* to challenge the mollifying Irish multicultural self-image in her representation of female migrant protagonists. Okorie continues in the Irish woman's response on her quest for inclusion as a gender constantly struggling to gain an equal place with Irish society at large. From her position as a writer, she continues to

recover the lost voice of female migrants to redress the neglect that some migrant writers have suffered. In doing so, she brings their marginalised migrant experience into the larger national consciousness. Born in 1975 in Enugu, an Igbo-speaking region of Nigeria, she has an English degree from the University of Port Harcourt and was awarded with MPhil in creative writing from Trinity College, Dublin. She has continued her studies with Trinity College and is currently working towards a PhD in creative writing for young children. In October 2019 she was elected to the Arts Council for a five-year term, by the then Minister for Culture, Heritage and the Gaeltacht, Josepha Madigan.

The previous three chapters have looked at writers based in Ireland who gave their accounts of living with the legislative control of Article 41.2 of the Constitution. Each has a personal relationship with the experience of migration that adds suggestive and comparative dimensions to their texts. Mary Lavin migrated from America to Ireland, Edna O'Brien left County Clare for London, and lastly is Colm Tóibín who migrated to Spain, then Argentina and currently lives between Ireland, Spain and America. Tóibín explicitly touches on the transitory nature of populations and Ireland's history with migration:

> You know, this godforsaken, wet little place on the edge of things and its level of obsession about itself! And the argument I've made myself, which really has been the winning one – so it's not worth making anymore – is that place needs to be opened up, opened out. There has been a need to make clear that there's no such thing as pure race in Ireland. We live in Ireland, we're born in Ireland, like Leopold Bloom was.

(Wiesenfarth 2009, p.16)

As this thesis is being finalised, so too are decisions to amend the system of housing asylum seekers, speed up the process of integration and employment and have Direct Provision phased out by 2024. No longer disavowing the migrant experience to Ireland, an advisory group on Direct Provision published their report in October 2020 outlining how the government could replace this system. The recommendations from the Group's report will inform the development of a White Paper, expected by the end of the year, with input from the Department of Justice and other relevant Departments. Chaired by Dr. Catherine Day, the Government agreed with the Advisory Group's conclusion that the current system is not fit for purpose and must be replaced, involving the support of residents and civil society as well as Government Departments and agencies (See www.gov.ie for full report). Cultural thinking which was fundamental to Irish nationalism is outmoded as the economy and politics have become more globalised. New approaches to belonging are evolving in the context of global modernity that no longer equate with the former cultural homogeneity but now include cultural pockets and diversities within the nation at junctures of different traditions. The political entity of the home, or the room space, continues to function as a favoured substitute for the conventionally marginalised woman who now establishes this as her legitimate political locale.

By engaging with her condition in relation to her nationally circumscribed space, Okorie has succeeded in addressing issues of belonging that will draw attention to people marginalised and displaced to this space as their new home. In bringing this query around

full circle, Ireland's exclusion of women has encouraged the discussion of subjectivity and national identity, in relation to modes of spatialisation. Feminism involves constant negotiations across spaces and boundaries to arrive at a sharing of certain beliefs between local and national in the writing of home. The previous chapters examined the manner in which authors constructed narratives about women from the perspective of their reproductive bodies and the space they occupied within the private sphere of home. As an author of colour, this chapter will explore Okorie's mobility across international borders to examine her experience of the regulatory system in Ireland. The format of the previous chapters remains unchanged and Okorie's short stories will be textually analysed for her experience as an immigrant seeking to belong. This will continue the investigation into the validity of Constitutional commitments offering citizens protection conducive to conducting themselves in ways that support the functioning of family, home and society. The history of the Irish State is one that has been determined by exclusion and rejection, Derrida questions this in relation to the ethics of hospitality. As Brannigan outlines in the Irish context:

> There is no hospitality, in the classic sense, without sovereignty of oneself over one's home, but since there is also no hospitality without finitude, sovereignty can only be exercised by filtering, choosing, and thus by excluding and doing violence.
>
> (Brannigan 2009, p.145)

During the 1990s, following a successful period of economic development and growth in Ireland, economist Kevin Gardiner coined the phrase 'Celtic Tiger'. This in turn facilitated a reversal of migration from outward to inward. The country transformed into a destination

for tourists, students, asylum-seekers, political refugees, and EU nationals to coalesce in a more multi-ethnic society. Aside from students, tourists and EU nationals, Ronit Lentin has identified the arrival of 11,634 Convention Refugees in 2002 as a significant increase of applications 'from the 39 in 1992' (Lentin 2016, p.25). This number has been decreasing ever since, but back in the late 1990s with a growing number of people in search of international protection from the Irish State an interim procedure called Direct Provision was established. For asylum seekers this 'filtering' process, to use Brannigan's term, begins in Direct Provision accommodation centres like the one Okorie resided in for eight years with her daughter. This model of dwelling provides temporary accommodation for a cohort of foreigners whose belonging and subjectivity is relational to the State and situates Ireland, as a guarantor of universal rights for those conferred with citizenship. As part of the Good Friday Agreement in 1998, Article 2 replaced the constitutional entitlement (since Article 9 of *Bunreacht na hÉireann*) of all those living on the island, if they so desired. This humanitarian principle defined anyone born on the island as entitled to birth right citizenship. The consequences of rising inward migration, however, led to questions arising over the right to Irish citizenship and consequently, a referendum in 2004.

A contestation of these notions of home, belonging and identity against the backdrop of citizenship began following a plethora of misinformation with respect to immigrant mothers-to-be. Gerardine Meaney contends that, in Ireland, postcolonial theory and the gendering of national identity offered feminist critique a necessary way of understanding sexual conservatism and its relationship with Church and State. She relates

this position to female migrants arriving in the country and says that postcolonialism is still part of the context in which 'non-national women were made central to the racial configuration of 21st century global Ireland' (Meaney 2012, p.6). Disputing the rights of Irish citizenship led to moral panics about 'floods of refugees' that culminated in the citizenship referendum of 2004. The rights of female migrants and the issues that surrounded their reproductive bodies as a biological basis of race illustrated the continued threatening positioning of sexually active women as a danger to the State and the Nation. A racial dimension underpinned the State, when a perceived influx of pregnant African women arrived in Ireland and the imagined purity of race and colour manifested itself in xenophobia. Irish-born citizens and migrants were now occupying the same geographical space but their positionality effecting their relationships within groups now included a dimension of power that Okorie expresses in her texts. Among the arguments cited was the tendency of destitute asylum seekers to drive down wages and bring maternity hospitals to abject African standards. Pregnant women following ''illegal' crossings via the birth canal' (Thornton 2018, p.61) created a perceived maternity issue of non-nationals. As Breen et al. identify:

> The maternity issue surfaced early in the debate and, although much of the data was acknowledged as questionable, did not quite go away. In March Minister McDowell painted a picture of pregnant 'citizenship tourists' placing great strain on the State's maternity services and explicitly stated that the Masters of Dublin's maternity hospitals had come to him to express grave concern, and had pleaded with him to change the law. The Masters of the maternity hospitals challenged McDowell's

> version, saying they neither sought a meeting, nor did they plead for a change in the law. Despite early recognition that the numbers of non-nationals using the maternity system was much less than originally suggested, the myth persisted.
>
> (Breen et al; 2006, p.6)

Investigating the myth, Diarmuid Doyle identified that the 'strained maternity services' were not under threat from an influx of pregnant African women, but women living legally in Ireland having originated from the UK, France, Germany and a host of other countries. Yet, defying correction, the myth echoed previous marginalisation trends, which now included colour as an existential threat to the Irish State. These children were categorised as 'Irish born children' and remained as abject outsiders of national identity. The previous articulation of oppressive biopolitics centred on the female Irish reproductive body, now shifted control over 'non-national' women. In Kristevan terms, this Other revealed the 'ideal' of an Irish subject that these 'Irish born children' did not represent and the desire to erase or abject what was not considered integral to the national body needed to be repressed or regulated. Breen's findings in "*Citizens, Loopholes and Maternity Tourists: Irish Print Media Coverage of the 2004 Citizenship Referendum*" concluded that the print media were uncritical in accepting xenophobic comments from politicians, produced in broadsheets considered reputable.

Following the referendum, a repetition of this systematic Othering was borne out in Direct Provision centres. Many asylum seekers have experienced racism directly and institutionally since arriving in Ireland:

> Through state discourses, particularly legislation and political rhetoric, asylum seekers have been variously portrayed as illegal, criminal, bogus or as fraudsters who have flooded into Ireland as economic migrants in order to exploit its generous welfare system. They have been represented as a drain on resources and as responsible for the housing crisis.
>
> (Loyal 2002, pp.190-1)

Prior to the establishment of Direct Provision, asylum seekers were considered homeless and the local authorities could 'directly arrange and fund emergency accommodation' (www.ria.gov.ie) under Section 10 of the Housing Act of 1988. Charged with meeting the needs and ancillary services of residents in Direct Provision is the Irish Reception and Integration Agency (RIA), which is a division of the Department of Justice. Among the first documents issued to residents by the RIA is the 'House Rules', which proclaim the direct provision centre to be 'your home while your application for protection is being processed' (www.ria.gov.ie). "Home" is a fundamental theme of all European and international human rights, including Ireland, who constitutionally declare that 'The dwelling of every citizen is inviolable' (www.ria.gov.ie) under Article 40. Applying to citizens and non-citizens the legal concept of 'dwelling' provides for the protection of an individual or family, and the symbolic implications are of a sacrosanct space providing an environment of nurture for the self, with an attachment to structures and environments. With the material needs of asylum seekers met, Steven Loyal theorises Direct Provision Centres as:

> 'Total institutions' where residents are controlled by centre managers as to what

> and when they eat, who they share rooms with, who can visit them, and what access they have to amenities such as crèche, laundry, kitchen facilities and appliances'.
>
> (Loyal 2011, cited in Lentin 2016, p.22)

Managed by private for-profit companies under the supervision of the RIA, apart from bed and board, residents receive a small weekly 'residual income maintenance payment' to cover personal requisites. Originally intended to accommodate refugees for a maximum of six months, Okorie's long residence in Direct Provision signifies a weak commitment from the State to anti-racism. This practice of containment and separation from mainstream society serves to undermine the capacity of individuals, and such prolonged stays arguably contributes to people becoming bored, de-skilled and left to languish until institutionalised.

Reduced to existing in what the Italian political philosopher Giorgio Agamben calls a 'bare life', (Agamben 1998, p.08) this was an experience shared by Okorie as a refugee in Ireland's Direct Provision. Concurring with Agamben is Loic Wacquant's argument that this liminal space between inside and outside is similar to 'state-sponsored enclaves of non-existent rights' (Wacquant 1999, p.218). And this is a point expanded upon by Lentin:

> Being trapped between spaces and statuses arguably relegates asylum seekers to Agamben's extra-juridical category of *homo sacer*, or 'bare life', s/he who can be disposed of with impunity by the sovereign who puts himself above the law employed to isolate, separate, and eventually dispose of populations deemed superfluous, dangerous or polluting.
>
> (Lentin 2016, p.25)

Drawing similarities with Magdalene laundries, the disavowal of the migrant experience saw both groups subjected to distinct institutional governance that controlled and incapacitated residents as inmates of the government. From this liminal position, the asylum seekers experience in the Direct Provision centres greatly constrains their choices and lives as *homo sacer*, or 'bare life'. These inmates are existing in a 'pure, absolute, and impassable biopolitical space' of exception, which 'distinguishes and separates what is inside from what is outside' (Lentin 2016, p.28). Indeed, living in such settings where residents share communal spaces for laundry and dining, led the Irish Refugee Council to issue warnings of their risk of contracting coronavirus. In May of 2020 the Department of Justice and Equality cited '7,700 asylum seekers in Ireland of whom, 1,700 people shared a bedroom with non-family members' (C. Thomas, 2020).

Systems of oppression that began in Ireland's management of Magdalene laundries has some comparative analogies in the current management of Direct Provision. Both systems deliberately confined a group of people abjected from the social order, the former by institutionalizing Irish women and the latter with its current handling of asylum seekers. Subjected to the State's commitment regarding the dwelling of every citizen both groups endured racializing technologies of control. Failing to confront the arrival of refugees effectively will embody a repetition of Ireland's previous transgressions, rather than the many opportunities for transcending difference Kristeva considers would be possible:

> We are, for the first time in history, confronted with the following situation: we must live with different people while relying on our personal moral codes, without

> the assistance of a set that would include our particularities while transcending them.
>
> (Kristeva 1991, p.195)

In Kristevan terms, Okorie's presence and integrity is threatening the boundaries of hegemony by disturbing identity, system, order. Her presence subverts the symbolic for moments of interruption and calls on individuals to interrogate their moral codes. The sexual conservatism previously held in the State is central to the pattern of gendered racism that her position poses. In *Strangers to Ourselves*, Kristeva observed that in countries that receive multiple immigrants, such as France, right-wing parties agonise over the in-comers willingness to embrace the national culture. The left-wing parties, however, attend more to the culture brought by the newcomers, and she concludes that modernity works best with both cultures receiving 'equal attention from all parties and there is a hope of a consequent newness through fusion' (Kristeva 1991, p.194).

Melatu Okorie's experience is distinctive, and her stories mark her off from genealogically native writers because hers is an experience grounded in a foreigner's relational, cultural and structural positions. This is not to suggest that all non-Irish writers working in Ireland experience their position in a similar way, but the experience of Direct Provision occupies a position within a moving historical context. Being unable to choose the freedoms everyday living afforded to people in non-Direct Provision accommodation, emphasises their status as a special group with a unique collective of experiences. Asylum seekers living in these conditions can become the territory over which power is exercised,

including, the power to grant citizenship, the power to grant a work permit, the power to allow them to remain in Ireland. This complex of power relationships gives rise to what Michael Cronin terms 'positionality':

> The sets of relationships obtaining at any moment between and within groups, relationships that are subject to an endless process of change, change that is the very stuff of the human life-line and which crucially includes the dimension of power.
>
> (Cronin 2009, p.142)

Adaptation to her host country is of central concern to Okorie, as she explores her experience through Direct Provision. In the sense of considering Ireland as a nation that is evolving slowly to become more multi-ethnic, her collection of short stories is highly useful and offers a voice to the marginalised Irish migrant. She writes from a space within the host nation to represent the multiple subject positions which are contested, denied or juxtaposed from what is culturally accepted or socially transgressive. These short fictions use what Roddy Doyle describes as an expressive orality of characters, who subtly depict 'their surroundings while also highlighting the most prosaic aspects of their precariousness' (Martín-Ruiz 2017, p.172). Her texts broaden the account of Ireland in the 21st century, with key elements from her own life that anchor her life and continue to contest the notion of homogeneity, the maternal body and national space. Renewing Mary Lavin's, Edna O'Brien's and Colm Tóibín's interrogations and repositioning's of motherhood and nation, Okorie's writing represents new forms of community.

The Direct Provision system is another structure of conformity forming a chain that contributes to the domination and exclusion of the marginalised from Irish society. Okorie's stories represent a portion of people in Irish society who are generally silent or invisible. Her first short story, 'This Hostel Life', (2018) which gives the book its title, recounts characters experiencing institutional racism described by Okorie as 'inhuman' (Martín-Ruiz 2017, p.180). Stepping outside her centre of accommodation and into the wider community for the second story, 'Under the Awning', the narrative thread of xenophobia continues in the everyday reality's asylum seekers experience. Okorie's second narrative, accords with previous migrant experiences in Ireland as documented by Bryan Fanning, who traces a similar repulsion at the foreigner in the inhospitable reception then offered to Hungarian refugees after the Second World War. Back in 1956, the Government agreed to admit 250 refugees from Hungary. Housed in an army barracks at Knockalisheen, County Clare, questions of racial difference arose which coloured native reactions to the presence of these outsiders. The association of race with disease and contagion closes the gap between environmental and biological theories of race, when deliberating infectivity through physical proximity. Exhibiting a willingness to assert themselves, the majority of Hungarian refugee adults participated in a hunger strike, following the State's inadequate response to their presence. Article 17 of the UN Refugee Convention conferred the right of refugees to work in 1951, but disavowing their experience, Fanning documents that, 'considerable efforts were made to prevent the Hungarians seeking employment' (Fanning 2018, p.169). Additionally, a report from the Department of Defence likening their accommodation to an internment camp, manifested in the majority of these Hungarian

refugees, willingly relocate to Canada to escape the monocultural deference to authority experienced in Ireland.

Mary Gilmartin and Bettina Migge draw from their longitudinal research project exploring the experiences of belonging and not-belonging for migrant mothers and conclude that '[a]s a spatial context that lays claim to privileging the mother, Ireland is a particularly useful site for this examination' (Gilmartin and Migge 2016, p.148). Their findings reveal the isolation migrant mothers experienced, prevented them from potentially developing a broader sense of belonging due to the lack of familial support in childcare. For families on low incomes or those with several children, the prohibitive cost of childcare limits the options for fulltime careers. The difficulties encountered in accessing affordable childcare was a contributory factor in the de-skilling and exclusion of migrant mothers from the workforce. This absence from the labour market creates an economic dependency and vulnerability that creates difficult conditions for their active participation in Irish society. The study focused on 'home' as a material act and through the participants, they evidenced friendships as crucial to establishing a connection to Ireland because migrant mothers do not have any other support networks. Their sense of place belonging came from both online parenting groups and networks of friend groups, often in similar situations to their own.

Unlike their indigenous peers with family-based support, these migrant mothers found themselves defined primarily as mothers with specific and restricted roles. Apart

from the centrality of friendships which offered an effective bonding solution they:

> Had limited options to forge connections with Ireland outside of networks related to mother and caring. The realities of life for many migrant mothers thus came into conflict with a broader politics of belonging in Ireland that frames mobile women as problematic and potentially threatening, and that marks the space of mother as the home. In this context, migrant mothers in Ireland are compelled to negotiate the simultaneous processes of belonging and not-belonging in their everyday lives.
>
> (Gilmartin and Migge 2015, p.161)

The caring work of migrant mothers, many of whom have migrated as independent agents, while discursively supported by the Irish State, lacks practical support. Bridging the gap in relation to domestic and care work means active migrant women can fill this gap in the labour market. When Okorie arrived in Ireland her sense of belonging as a single mother, linked her to the process of mothering and home. Without childcare and waiting for documentation, she was initially unable to work. Unlike the care workers cited in Gilmartin and Migge's research project, Okorie identified her emerging understanding of place in relation to her home within the Direct Provision accommodation, previously silent in literature. Having written a couple of plays, Okorie finds 'short stories more concise as a writer' (Ruiz 2017, p.178), and her texts narrate the crippling cultural and political movements that have impacted her sense of autonomy while trying to negotiate the processes of belonging. In her first story, 'This Hostel Life' (2018) she details her relationships with the staff at her Direct Provision centre. She includes the experiences of

her fellow asylum seekers to indicate the active collusion of the State in dictating the terms of integration through the repressive treatment of migrant mothers, an echo of Bryan Fanning's documented "othering" of Hungarian Jews in the 1950's. The fictional un-named mother at the centre of Okorie's second story 'Under the Awning' is separated from her husband and working in a supermarket. Identifying a system that occasions specific issues for women, Okorie includes these details for the many who have travelled alone. Demonstrating her active participation in society, her identity as a foreign woman emerging into a newly constructed policing of Irish identity continues to be problematic. She begins the task of straddling legislative authority and cultural expression as a visible woman of colour on both the streets of Ireland and in her supermarket workplace.

## Emerging racial formations in the short story collection

Published in 2018, *This Hostel Life* is a collection of short stories by Okorie that engages with the nation by addressing issues of belonging and asking questions about the nature of that nation. Therefore, voices of the marginalised Other need to be represented to notably 'alter and shape the ways we make sense of our lives' and 'give rise to what was not there before' (Gibbons 1996, p. 8). In the *Author's Note,* Okorie describes how the stories in this collection represent a part of her life since arriving in Ireland, cataloguing the emotions that affected her and the clarity brought through the act of writing them down:

> I was beginning to feel the isolation of living under direct provision. My child was growing up with me as her only family. As much as I was trying not to let it show on the outside, I was hurting desperately on the inside.

(Okorie 2018, pp xi-xii)

Okorie's stories detail the ways that new subjects freshly negotiate notions of Irish 'home life' from the perspective of a Direct Provision facility. Two of the three short stories are set in Ireland and concern African migrant women addressing the historical movement of population, while the third story *The Egg Broke*, due to its Nigerian setting and traditions not centrally relevant to this discussion has been omitted from this thesis.

Okorie likens hostel conditions to an abusive relationship, where fearful residents are unwilling to protest against their precarious marginalised positions. However, intent on speaking her identity through the short story format, Okorie styles her writing from the margins to engage with Ireland from the circumscribed space afforded to her. In this way her work strives to edify the Irish reader, a necessary turn, given Kate Huber's point that:

> Instead of explicitly addressing colonial traumas, postcolonial Irish society refuses to empathise with experiences they recognise from their own history of emigration in more recent immigrants and asylum seekers of colour.

(Huber 2022, p.04)

This lack of empathy was stated in the 'Author's Note' above, where Okorie likens Direct Provision with an abusive relationship: 'Abuse in itself is homogenous, no matter what race, class, or in this case, the hostel of the abused' (Okorie 2018, pp vii-viii). The enforced dependency between an asylum seeker and the Institution of Direct Provision sees their days and time systematically managed outside of their control. In stories that offer diverse representations of the unofficial discourse in a variety of aspects of life, her

texts of 'home' will be approached as a cultural institution still regulated by State. This defunct 'master narrative', once idealised as a site of safety and stability, is undermined in Okorie's text through the plot lens of family, conflict and homes. Informing her work are the eight years spent in Direct Provision qualifying Okorie to function as an intercultural and inter-lingual communicator between Ireland and Nigeria. Leaving Nigeria, she entered an uncertain future in Ireland, and she writes about things that are close to her, issues that may not have 'affected me directly, but certainly things that I have observed close to me' (Martin-Ruiz 2017, p.178). Her stories make the hidden realities of migrants visible by providing an opportunity to disseminate the concerns and priorities of migrant voice. Threaded throughout her work is the feeling of not belonging and of challenging the status quo.

In furnishing descriptions of the Direct Provision system, Okorie empowers the subject to control the narrative, rather than the customary mode of referring to asylum seekers as a cohort in society or, speaking on their behalf. In fictions of the short story genre, the depiction of society is a series of junctures and silences, which Okorie introduces in her characters to give voice as a protest against the State's efforts to foreclose a sense of belonging. Okorie's texts interrogate definitions of home, Irish-ness, and the instrumentalization of women and mothers within the Irish State. In expressly underscoring the benefits of home and family, the Constitution of 1937 continues as an experience that is unequal in practice by omitting any reference to their place of dwelling, but to the set of practices that accompany this notion of home and belonging that make it meaningful. For

displaced migrants their 'identifications with multiple homes represent a desire to secure a place of being and belonging' (Fathi 2022, p.1098) and the temporal nature of home within a Direct Provision centre hinders their ability to experience the positive aspects of belonging. However, the current Irish hybrid of cultures must re-imagine itself as plural and integrate people to further their lived and idealised notions of safety, home and belonging.

## Hostility within Direct Provision

The opening sequence and Okorie's first-person recall of events in Direct Provision forms an achievement of voice focused principally on the concept of space/home. In the dialogue between fictional husband and wife below, Okorie raises a wide range of issues germane to a woman experiencing a sense of cultural duality. The wife's subjection to the mores of gendered ideology is narrated through dialogue, a formal tactic used to realise the frustration of characters in congested spaces. Adding further frustration to this environment are oppressive systems native to Nigerian culture of inflexible attachments to identity, involving traditional practices in domestic chores. Imbricating Okorie's old native traditions with the new systems Direct Provision management had preordained, demonstrate her relational position inside her accommodation and her ongoing negotiations in the cultural imagination across wider society.

'why you carry buggy and you don have baby inside?'

'Dat is what everybody do here!' me I tell him.

> But dat is before. Now, if he ask me dat type of question again, me I'm gonna say to him: 'How you gonna know what everybody do when you sit inside all time for watch football?'
>
> (Okorie 2018, p. 3)

The word 'buggy' has significant cultural connotations as a slang term widely accepted in Ireland to denote a child's pram. The buggy, highlighted by Roddy Doyle in *The Deportees and Other Stories* (2007) connotes the imagined waste of public funding by migrant mothers. As one of Ireland's early literary responses to a narrative of immigration, Doyle's use of the buggy mirrors the practice by Okorie's character, who uses her buggy as a means to transport provisions back to her sleeping quarters. In his 'Introduction' Doyle communicates how he wanted to capture the anxieties that African mothers in Ireland experienced and inserts what he refers to as 'an urban legend of the late 1990s' to represent the drain on Irish resources these mothers supposedly represented. Doyle recalls a persistent myth involving an African woman who 'got a brand-new buggy from the Social Welfare and left it at the bus stop because she couldn't be bothered carrying it onto the bus, and she knew she could get a new one' (Doyle 2007, p.xii). Significant, purely in terms of symbolisation, the buggy implies negative identification against the maternal. The un-named husband character of 'This Hostel Life' did not assist his wife in the transport of provisions back to their quarters, so the woman (later identified as Beverlée) uses what resources she has at her disposal, namely the buggy. Equally, in the Doyle example the pram serves as a visible, tangible representation of motherhood, negatively used to identify women in a similar vein to Michael Breen's findings on the 'citizenship tourists' noted

earlier.

The focus of this story is on characters attempting to lay claim to a feeling of belonging within Direct Provision and to establish independence as symbolised by autonomy in selecting their individual preference over the temporal time to wake, sleep, eat and do laundry. Juxtaposing homes within the boundaries of Direct Provision, Okorie underscores these centres as one of the most heterogeneous multi-racial, multi-class spaces in Ireland. However, like the legislated homes of 1937 various indicators of oppression continue to feature, which impede on the lives of the women living there. Okorie embeds a system of boundaries and limitations fundamental in any exercise of power in descriptions of the building's space, design, and security for the reader to discern. The spatial politics within 'This Hostel Life' question the notion of a 'home' as a site of conflict between management and residents, locals and foreigners, expectation and fulfilment. Writing within this highly controlled place, Okorie employs the environment within as a subtle language to explore political contexts for her characters in a narrative that draws attention to heavy doors and over-crowding which further depress her autonomy: 'I use my back to push open the door because I hol buggy for my hand and the door is too heavy to open with my hand and hold the buggy at the same time' (Okorie 2018, p.1). At the outset, Okorie draws attention to the manner in which she negotiates space in her new home by highlighting the difficulty she has navigating the space and her experience in it. The lack of ease she endures in carrying out daily domestic tasks discloses how simple errands sees her disadvantaged by her environment in the home. In procuring provisions, Okorie adjusts

her actions to the rhythms imposed by the institution that structurally silences her self-determination. Repeating the experience of women in Magdalene Laundries, this extreme form of institutionalisation has similarities with the lives of contemporary women migrants in Ireland. Direct Provision as a home, became a site where access is taken for granted by the privileged subject that manifested into an inaccessibility for residents.

Institutionally containing asylum seekers with procedures of structured waiting 'the Direct Provision system deconstructs time and space in the residents' (Huber 2022, p.15) lived experiences. In this way, the female protagonist finds herself on Monday at 10.26 a.m. along with other asylum seekers of this facility in the allotted space queueing to collect her weekly necessities. Already it is packed to capacity and 'from the window, me I can see everybody is here, and me I can see the place is also full' (Okorie 2018, p.1). The hostel abuse referred to by Okorie begins early in the title story concerned with the Nigerian and Congolese women as they wait to collect their fixed rations. Emphasising the nature of abuse, Okorie records the waiting and queueing that demarcates their days and routines while living in this liminal space. Matching form and content, Okorie presents the system matter-of-factly with temporal markers, through the lens of an observer on a Monday from 10.26am to 12.01pm. Her protagonist Beverlée joins the queue to collect 'provision and toilet-tings for dis week' (Okorie 2018, p 2). The dualism between Beverlée's interior mind and exterior world is built into Okorie's structure of time and space. She utilises the contrast in her confrontations between private and public spaces to highlight how her space disrupted Irish life and the nation's traditional domestic sphere. Okorie details the

procedure, firstly, from her own perspective, then in the character of Mummy Dayo and, finally, through Mercy, providing a polyphonic narrative of events, illustrating the multitude of nationalities residing there:

> From laundry to collect provision, from collect provision to check laundry, from check laundry to see GP, from see GP to collect food, from collect food to check laundry.
>
> (Okorie 2018, p.4)

The temporal demarcations of the opening sequence highlight the daily queueing, waiting and lack of autonomy experienced by asylum seekers. Likened with prisoners or hospital patients, the strict timetabling that manipulates their time is the authoritarian mode employed by the women issuing provisions: 'Wearing a white coat, like the type the nurses wear for hospital and me I can hear the sound of keys jiggle for inside the pocket of her coat' (Okorie 2018, p.9). On this occasion, only two of the four provision windows are open and a large crowd of people are queueing, so Beverlée questions why 'only two people is serve all dis number of people?' (Okorie 2018, p.18). Mummy Dayo replies, 'Dem dey outside dey smoke, […] After dat, dem go take break. Dat's Irish people for you!' (Okorie 2018, p.19) This unequal access to power denies the mother her rightful sense of belonging. However, Beverlée does create some minor autonomy for herself when she acknowledges her preference for 'dis hostel more than my last hostel' (Okorie 2018, p.2),

> Because here, we have one big room, and inside, me I use one corner for make small my own kitchen, and we get bathroom and toilet for inside the room, and my husband and me we have our own bed and my two daughters have their own bed too. Before,

all of us use common toilet and bathroom and common room.

(Okorie 2018, pp 2-3)

Okorie emphasises people's resilience in the actions of Beverlée who is adjusting her institutionalised experience, and recasting the rules imposed as she creates a makeshift home for herself and her family. In reshaping and restructuring their bedroom, Okorie uses her limited materials to recreate a sense of a home to achieve more normalised domestic life through Beverlée's perspective.

Identifying the absence of anti–immigration politics in Ireland, Okorie simultaneously draws readerly attention to the fact that this does not equate to an absence of systems and organisations that manage to marginalise people in institutions or professions. When another resident is seen leaving the provision booth 'holing a jar of honey' (Okorie 2019, p.20), the frustration expressed by a character named Ngozi erupts. The needless queueing, lack of agency and unequal power distribution, leads Ngozi to voice her protest over the unfair distribution of supplies. For Okorie, Ngozi's protest represents an opportunity within the fictional narrative space to challenge every episode of absurdity and unfairness she has encountered in the host country. Her resistance against languishing in Direct Provision is equally a registration of the manifold emotional frustrations endured across these locations. Returning quickly to the manager at the provision window, Ngozi questions why allowances were not distributed equally and the 'staff not give everybody the same because everybody for equal' (Okorie 2018, pp 17-18). In response to her demands for the equal distribution of supplies and in a display of an indifference towards

her humanity, the staff shut down the hatch windows and exit the room. Locking the door, they leave the remaining congregation short in their own supplies and as they begin to form a new line outside the dining room for lunch, they berate Ngozi for the futility of her protest: 'If there's no honey, why not take sugar? Is sugar and honey not the same thing?' (Okorie 2018, p.22) This petty cruelty by the manager, is an action that Okorie includes to emphasise the institutional abuse that occurs at this micro level. Okorie allegorically uses the significance of 'Honey' over sugar to link the asylum seekers arrival in Ireland with the Biblical reference to the Promised Land. Descriptions in the Old Testament detail a land flowing with milk and honey to symbolise prosperity and joy. Okorie reimagines the passage from *Exodus*, and the occasion when God told Moses that the rescued people were safely brought out of the hand of the Egyptians 'unto a land flowing with milk and honey. (Bible 2012, p.88). In their analysis of this episode, Bracken and Harney-Mahajan posit:

> Ngozi, therefore, protests alone and the potential for collective resistance is not realised. The story poignantly signals the insidious domination of the Direct Provision system and its ability to maintain biopolitical control. Okorie suggests that the reader might applaud Ngozi's wilfulness, but at the time she raises crucial questions about the efficacy of protest within the Direct Provision system.
>
> (Bracken and Harney-Mahajan 2017, p.109)

Brought together through estrangement, Ngozi's trauma highlights the differing levels of precarity for each migrant. Their fragile positions as refugees on the margins, their lack of cohesion to unite and disrupt the unity and order of this liminal space, saw all but one protest the inequality. The lack of solidarity between the Direct Provision residents results

in displaced abjection for Ngozi that even her friend Beverlée separates with distance:

> I am quiet and sad as I go. Ngozi is my best friend for dis hostel but I have to leave her. From the window outside, me I can still see her stand alone for the dining room, fighting for her honey.
>
> (Okorie 2018, p.23)

Framing the story through the lens of a window, Okorie gives readers an interior view of events inside Direct Provision, as an allegory on how the infrastructure of containment effects residents. In this liminal space, where time becomes everything, regulated with systematic queueing and waiting for supplies, doctors and laundry, Okorie reviews the navigation process until the confirmation or denial of citizenship papers. Confronting her protracted period of immobility, she created an experimental 'voice' to mimic the polyphonic chorus she encountered during this time. By giving voice to the voiceless in this amalgamation of linguistic interactions, Okorie demonstrates a strategy of coping that also articulates the multiple perspectives from the Congo, Nigeria, Benin, Cameroon, Somalia, Zimbabwe, Kenya, Uganda, South Africa and Eastern Europe. These voices were central to renegotiating the story's style as she explains in interview to Martín-Ruiz:

> The language of the story is a completely made up one; by this, I mean the voice of the main character, Beverlée. It may come across to the reader as Pidgin English, but a study of the West African Pidgin English will show that the language of the story is different, and does not fit the construct of the Pidgin English, if there's any such thing!
>
> (Martín-Ruiz 2017, p.181)

From a theoretical vantage point, Avtar Brah's notion of 'diaspora space' establishes how both migrant and host populations are deeply implicated in the social, political and cultural processes and effects of migration. Diaspora space, she argues, is:

> Where multiple subject positions are juxtaposed, contested, proclaimed or disavowed; where the permitted and the prohibited perpetually interrogate; and where the accepted and the transgressive imperceptibly mingle.
>
> (Brah 1996, p.208)

Relatedly, the diversity of peoples co-habiting in Direct Provision highlights outmoded notions of the homogenization among asylum seekers Okorie encountered, likening it with a condensation of the United Nations:

> The different languages, the different people … you learn so much, and you deal with so much prejudice as well. It's like you're thrown into a 'Big Brother' house with these bunch of strangers so you have to be constantly aware and alert.
>
> (Martín-Ruiz 2017, pp.180-1)

It is this combination of form and content that allows Okorie to construct a fictionalised reality with which readers can identify. Writing about the space a Direct Provision centre provides, creates conditions where migrants and non-migrants can cross boundaries and recognise one another's common strangeness. In *Stranger to Ourselves,* Kristeva addresses the incompleteness of a person's subjectivity, which becomes a hallmark of their ethical landscape and position within their new diasporic space. Okorie acknowledges this as part of their personhood, which is constantly in process. As a migrant mother, she roots her framework of identity in her personal experience growing up in Nigeria, infused with an

emotion that affects her coping mechanism for motherhood away from home. Her identity formation continues and her literary process functions as a vehicle to engage with the frustrations she is experiencing.

The story ends without a cathartic conclusion for the narrator, providing a platform of focused interrogation that imaginatively engages with her experience of arriving and settling in the Irish host nation. Her story provides a lens through which to view Ireland as a shifting and porous terrain, reconfiguring and reframing how long-term Irish settlers redefine notions of belonging. The significance of setting up Direct Provision as a historical event can influence a national moment of re-evaluation on how indigenous people view citizenship and deconstruct notions of previously held beliefs concerning mono-cultural ethnicity. Okorie reclaims the memory of those subalterns, marginalised by society as one who must now live on, that resonates with an understanding of the geopolitical moment in Irish society. Her lack of empowerment and the temporal nature of home within an institution depicts the traumatic experience of displaced people, isolated and without a sense of belonging. Okorie's articulation of waiting and racial hierarchies indicates the ongoing precarity asylum seekers endure in Ireland's Direct Provision system. 'The apartheid logic of the border regime appears at the micro level of the interpersonal, spelled out in the petty cruelties of the manager's actions' (Mulhall 2020, p.190). Okorie framed Beverlée's subaltern position with the use of a window frame to view her best friend. Walking away, highlights the ambiguous position of their friendship and her survival is exposed in the contradictions of constructing Afro-Irish subject positions in an Irish cultural

space. Unlike Irish society with the agency to welcome or refuse entry to racialised immigrant others, without residency documentation Beverlée cannot sustain a friendship with Ngozi.

## A Place of Shelter

In Okorie's second narrative, 'Under the Awning', the impacts of cultural memory and political trauma are evident in the ways they shape this story of belonging and subjectivity. This second text is a dialogue between belonging and displacement that Okorie narrates as a story-within-a-story. Following her recent arrival in Ireland, restless motion sees the teenage character, Didi, spatially negotiating her way around Dublin in search of place. Anchored by autobiographical references to frame her experience as an African student, the narrative begins at a shop called "Spar". A conflicted Didi begins her quest for belonging by navigating the process in the private sphere through reunification with her family and in the public sphere as a college student. The story is told through the medium of a presentation to a writer's group and 'today was her turn to present' (Okorie 2018, p.25). Using a short story she wrote, her classmates hear first-hand the casual and daily racism endured by her un-named character. Presenting her story her unnamed subject controls the narrative and the response from her fellow students provides a window through which to view the experience of othering in the Irish context. Such prescient observations by Okorie, via the endurances of the African women included in her texts, provides a glimpse of the casual stereotyping of migrant identities by Irish people. These moments range from the little children who call her 'Blackie', to people purposefully not sitting

beside her on a crowded bus. The story-within-the-story outlines the necessary adaption to local habits, mannerisms and speech.

Reading her work aloud, Didi begins with a female character sheltering from a drizzle of rain under the awning of a 'Spar' grocery shop:

> You stood under the awning outside the Spar shop, staring straight ahead, barely moving, a pink plastic folder tucked under your arm, waiting for the drizzle to stop. You felt uncomfortable not standing at the bus stop on the edge of the pavement because you knew that back home, life would not stop over 'this small rain'.
>
> (Okorie 2018, p.26)

With the 'home' constitutionally enshrined as a place for women, Didi's fictional protagonist was additionally marginalised because the idealization of the nation was founded in white Irish women. This made public appearances all the more exclusionary for the un-named 'other' who has not been assigned to this 'place,' and she is relegated to an even more extreme form of the marginal. Okorie further develops the motif of restriction by emphasising the systemic sense of control that operates over the female migrant subject. Didi's need to locate her new life within this context is a metaphorical and spatial journey that captures a teenager in flux. Entrapped within a nation home that does not offer her a place she negotiates between her old life and her sense of place and self in this new country, beginning at the 'Spar' awning. The character simply referred to as 'the girl' shelters from this 'small rain', cautiously not looking 'directly at anyone', pretending not to be paying

attention, having observed 'it was the way of things here, so people were not made to feel uncomfortable' (Okorie 2018, p.27). Flashbacks used by Okorie illustrate the protagonist's dual consciousness and her attempts at reconfiguration to Irish cultural norms. Repressed memories of rain back home crash into her loss and transport her back to where 'rainfall meant other things to you' (Okorie 2018, p.27). Rainfall back home meant hawkers who lined up along your street to sell roast corn, fresh coconut, and Agege bread. Didi remains lost in the memories of home until she is orientated back to her present location sheltering under the awning 'desperate not to stand out' (Okorie 2018, p.27). The Nigeria where she spent her youth bubbles up most prominently in her thoughts, so when she encounters a memory of rain it is to experience estranged familiarity. Continuing on her journey home underpins the girl's inability to translate seamlessly across cultures and her sense of identity is profoundly unsettled at being located outside the constitutionally recognised special place in the nation.

In 'Under the Awning,' a dual consciousness is immediately deployed as Didi's fictional character gets off the bus and anticipates the taunting from 'the house with the little children who always shouted 'Blackie!'' (Okorie 2018, p.28). Emanating from their dominant culture, the children's malediction underscores her ethnicity and identity as a Nigerian woman; in Tate's terms, '[b]lack women and men continue to be placed as other: as Black others imprisoned by discourses of skin' (Tate 2001, p.209). Arriving home, Okorie sets the scene to construct difference between these White, Irish, children, in the actions of Didi who 'went quickly to the window facing the small front garden and drew

the curtains' (Okorie 2018, p.28). Tired of her visibility she closed the curtains on her public sphere, but her displacement continues in the form of her mother's visiting friend, Muna. Her simple salutation causes further negotiation between tradition and modernity for Didi. Greeting her mother's friend with the customary 'Good Afternoon, Aunty' (Okorie 2018, p.28) drew an observation that Didi was 'becoming the only African teenager she knew in the country who still said good afternoon' (Okorie 2018, p. 28). Listening to the two women converse, Okorie inserts details of television footage from American elections in the text at this point, to highlight the difficulties of belonging and negotiation between two worlds. Speaking to the Irish author Louise O'Neill, Okorie explained that the election of Barack Obama colours her story with current affairs and highlights some of 'the crazy stuff that goes on' (O'Neill YouTube, 23.02.2022). Observing the Irish man on the screen claiming Obama was a relation, Aunty Muna comments:

> Wasn't it interesting that the same people who were quick to claim this black man from America were the same people who said the black girl from London could not be a Rose of Tralee.'
>
> (Okorie 2018, p.29)

The framing of contemporary migration in the Rose of Tralee context, illustrates the dynamic situated at the intersection between women and belonging in the idealised Irish inclusions. Such representations of migrant women can entail an additional dispossession of those at the sharp end of global migration regimes who are fashioned into mediated objects of the intercultural paradigm across the various media spheres of arts in Ireland.

Aunty Muna is musing on the complexities of belonging and identity in Ireland detailing the split affect Okorie assigned to Didi. The entrapment idealised in enshrining a woman's place in the home that standardised gender roles, is highlighted by Aunty Muna watching the Irish man on the screen. The interviewee claiming Obama was a relation induces Okorie, to draw readerly attention in the succeeding sentence, to the female 'other'. The comparison of marginalisation is underscored by Okorie who notes how the 'black man from America' was welcomed but the 'black girl from London' was not, depicts the disjunction between Didi's fictional character who finds herself entrapped within a nation home, but has yet to be sanctioned a visible place in it. This disjunction conveys the fractured sensibility of the isolated Okorie herself, a displaced woman whose social marginalisation and existence in Ireland seems insubstantial. Okorie develops on the very process of this loss with Aunty Muna's concerns for the African children born in Ireland but, 'were not even accepted as Irish and do not hold the same passport as other Irish children' (Okorie 2018, p.29). Juxtaposing the 44th American President, with the Irish 2004 citizenship referendum highlights notions of belonging that speak loudly to the conflicting emotions of the teenage Didi and sees the rationale for specific national building practices continued by the State. Anchored in past exclusionary monocultural nation-building ideologies of Irishness, it signals a reminder of cultural anxieties from explicit gender narratives used in the Constitution of 1937. The complexity of this conversation troubles the very categories of belonging and its political inclusion in this text signposts her representation of hierarchy and exploitation of people in Ireland.

This sense of displacement manifests as melancholy in Didi, functioning as an emotional substitute for the teenager 'unhomed' at the very hospitable axis on which she placed her hopes. Examining home, belonging and temporality, Mastoureh Fathi addresses how 'belonging permeates memories of the past, informs practices within the present time and helps the formation of future aspirations' (Fathi 2021, p.1001). Curled up on the sofa, long after Aunty Muna had gone, Didi thinks back to the day in Nigeria when she received the call from her mother informing her that 'the application for family re-unification had been granted' (Okorie 2018, p.30) and she would now be able to join her siblings in Ireland. The reunification with her family in Dublin was the very juncture she expected love and belonging, but the reader sees Didi ruminating on her life back in Nigeria. Musing from the sofa, Didi's thoughts drift back to school days in Nigeria and the descriptive letters to pen pals they were encouraged to write by their teachers. In these, she would explain how hot and dry it was during the Harmattan, 'the leaves so dry they could cut your fingers quicker and deeper than any knife' (Okorie 2018, p.30). Removed from life in Nigeria, the descriptive letter writing with details of Saharan winds underscores the liminality of Didi's current position on a wet day in Ireland. Displaced, her lack of place continually wrestles with her past and her thoughts drift back to her younger sister, who does not want to visit Africa, 'because Africans were poor and the African children shown on the television had no shoes' (Okorie 2018, p.2). Failing to reconcile the two cultures either privately at home or publicly in college, the student character Didi, remains alienated and culturally distant. Her cultural duality is emphasised with questions regarding Nigeria, asking Didi where she 'learnt to speak English so well and if it were true Africans live in trees' (Okorie 2018,

p.32). Desperate not to display her real emotions at college, like Kristeva's foreigner who 'survives with a tearful face turned toward the lost homeland' (Kristeva 1991, p.271), Didi confines her sadness to the privacy of her bedroom. The reader is privy to her crying into her pillow as she grapples to understand the fake tan and pop music culture of her classmates.

Her process of understanding only begins after an introduction to her mother's Irish friend, Dermot. Having worked with charities in Africa, Dermot bridges the divide and acts as a conduit in her translation of cultures. Over a traditional Nigerian meal of jollof rice with prawns Didi's mother had prepared for him, the girl begins to unleash what she had repressed. Okorie patterns this bridging in an insistent, repetitive anaphoric form, in more than three pages of text to reclaim a viable space for herself:

> You had started with the small things first. And then you started telling him bigger things… You told him how for a long time you had felt as if all your family had died when your mother left you behind… You told him then about the little children down the street who called you Blackie… You also told him about the girls in your college.
>
> (Okorie 2018, pp 34-6)

The repetition of things 'you told him' and things 'you wanted to tell him,' reflects the push and pull of the displaced person through the dialogue of a girl whose existence seems afloat and untethered within highly controlled spaces. Okorie continues her use of environmental language in this second story with respect to buildings, windows, home,

college, balcony and garden all of which enact her complex dialogues about people, place and power. Using the trope of urban spaces in Dublin to depict the marginalised persons attempt to fit in and live, or to tolerate people such as classmates and neighbours. Didi's attempts to immerse herself in their world sees her old world constantly leaking into her present and intruding in unexpected ways. Replete with memories of home, her sense of identity as a Nigerian living in Dublin sets her apart ontologically from her siblings who have no memory of living there. Learning from her environment and her cultural duality sees Didi shelter under the awning waiting for the bus without making eye contact with the other people. Dublin defines Didi's sense of belonging as a person of colour with a different accent, set apart from her college classmates who are born in to a family framed constitutionally, to recognise their emplacement. Didi lives almost entirely in set spaces and uses them to make sense of the outside world. These feelings constellate around being out of place and estranged from the very people she expected to understand her, namely her family. This state of displacement engenders profound despair leaving her to wonder if sadness functions as an emotional substitute for a totalising eradication of self. Okorie focuses on the female body in public life and the politics of representation she symbolises in the offer of one hundred euro from a man on a bus 'if you slept with him' (Okorie 2018, p.34). Both reader and Didi learn that Didi's mother, too, had a similar experience when a man at the supermarket followed her to the car park and 'told her that he wanted a BJ'. The mother explained to Didi that 'she had felt bad she didn't have what he wanted until she realised what he meant' (Okorie 2018, p.36). Registering the abject as that which is located outside the symbolic order of civilization, Kristeva described 'the jettisoned object,

is radically excluded and draws me toward the place where meaning collapses' (Kristeva 1980, p.2). And this is demonstrated in both incidents, where the men involved challenge the symbolic, like the abject, to situate Didi and her mother somewhere between object and subject. Subject and object push and pull each other, collapsing the boundary of what is thinkable and both women were racially shamed through their bodies, as carriers of culture for future generations. These episodes highlight the exploitation of women while providing a revision of racial and gendered dynamics. We abject, Kristeva argues, what we fear most in ourselves when we encounter the stranger in others, and the rejection that the foreigner aroused in the rigid national identity of these men was experienced as sexual abuse for Didi and her mother. Outlining a portrait of the foreigner in *Strangers to Ourselves*, Kristeva's writes that 'the foreigner is within us. And when we flee from or struggle against the foreigner, we are fighting our unconscious' (Kristeva 1991, p.191). Didi's foreignness, highlighted through her encounter with the stranger on the bus, evidences her insecurity in these Irish surroundings that situate her on a boundary position that she has yet to negotiate.

Eve Walsh Stoddard links the manner in which migrants transcend their nation and register their ambiguity regarding 'home' through the lens of Freud's uncanny and a return to what was once well known and familiar. Walsh Stoddard contends that in '*Mourning and Melancholia* Freud compares the loss of a loved one to a general sense of loss from the destruction of self-worth' (Walsh 2012, p.167). If a person is mourning, there is a consciousness of the lost love but in melancholia, the loss becomes unconscious and internalised. Okorie's allegorical story concerning the return of what is repressed

communicates to the reader how loss and grief are instances of larger societal silence about migration. In this case, it manifests for Didi in a Freudian repression that blocks migrants from attaining a full sense of agency. Ireland, which may have originally served as an idea of family reunification, is illusionary for this girl in her new 'uncanny' home, Ireland is figured as *unheimlich*, strangely familiar, but unsettling. Therefore, Didi endures the oscillating alienation of the uncanny, which her experience in Ireland has awoken. Following the conclusion of her piece, the workshop leader asks for feedback from the students, all of whom conclude that it would be useful to temper the racism 'so that it's not all bleak and negative' (Okorie 2018, p.37). This response from the creative writing class brings a new level of agitation and discomfort for Didi. Their disbelief at her account of racism sees her real-life experiences dismissed and the rigidity of Irish identity continues to preclude her. Ignoring her perspective as a person of colour, her classmates minimised her first-hand experiences and they skirt around the issue by directing their feedback towards her use of the second-person style instead. This resonates with the Kristevan foreigner who is:

> To be of no account to others. No one listens to you […] your speech has no past and will have no power over the future of the group: why should one listen to it? You do not have enough status – no 'social standing' – to make your speech useful.
>
> (Kristeva 1991, p.20)

In 'tempering the racism,' her Irish classmates suggest that Didi name the main character as a corrective to their centring of the dominant white Irish point of view on the 'migrant other'. Okorie, however, has consciously opted not to name many characters, reflecting her

personal migrant experience in Ireland. Her formal selection acts as an exclusionary device similar to the experiences of those voices that Irish society has minimised. Fellow Nigeran writer Ebun Joseph Akpoveta critiques the systemic failure of the state that migrant women are always added on to conversations of equality. Akpoveta considers respect for difference, 'in being treated fairly, equally and with respect' (Akpoveta cited in De Salazar, (2017) as the real litmus test for diversity in Ireland. In offering their feedback to Didi, her creative writing classmates perform this systemic failure. The cathartic effect of writing to help align herself with Irish society sees Didi go back to the original 'Spar' shop the following day to purchase a diary. Her diary begins her journey of belonging, just as writing 'This Hostel Life' did for the author herself. The act of writing down the binaries of space and time addresses the visualization of Okorie's reality in Ireland. Ebun Joseph Akpoveta, believes migrant women must expose the way in which foreign women carry the burden of alienation:

> In the end the achievement of changes and the realization of the "new" values of these immigrant women must be solely theirs, and not the ones shaped by society, media, family or religion.
>
> (Akpoveta 2017, p.164)

In *Revolt, She Said*, Kristeva argues that a nation must constantly rethink its values to avoid rigidities found in political discourse. She advocates 'that women, as strangers and exiles, have a vital role in this' (Kristeva 2002, p.12) and they should be regarded as individuals in relation to others for reform, rather than rupture of society. Like dreams, flashbacks or letters, the diary is a useful literary trope that allows characters project their hopes and

understand themselves. Okorie the author, and Didi, her character, use the forum of a writing group to establish a dialogue with society from their individual perspective. This echoes Kristeva's assertion that a marginal position can bear responsibility, as each 'artistic experience can also highlight the diversity of our identifications and the relativity of our symbolic and biological existence' (Kristeva 1995, p.223). The task of the author allows the reader to see the inner core of Didi 'to represent contemporaries' anxieties in a way that may be creative and healing for society' (Kristeva 2002c, p.106). The ideals central to a migrant woman freely recorded in diary format begin the process of understanding Didi's migratory experience and emotional connections made, clearing a space for Didi to focus on different values from those racist and sexist abuses.

## The un-named woman called Mother

A crucial aspect of Okorie's narrative is the mother-daughter dyad and the link between the mother and home, which Didi lays bare when she tells Dermot that she blamed her mother for leaving her behind in Nigeria:

> for a long time you had felt as if all your family had died when your mother left you behind to travel with your siblings, both of whom were young enough to go with her on her passport.
>
> (Okorie 2018, p.34)

Her father equally left her behind and subsequently separated from the family, but Didi does not consider this a personal punishment from him. She directs her sense of abandonment solely at the mother because 'leaving you behind was her way of punishing

you' (Okorie 2018, p.34). These hurts and mis-placed feelings remain unrectified because conversation between them is currently strained. Okorie's mother daughter relationship draws comparison with Edna O'Brien's observation of intergenerational cycles in chapter two. O'Brien's scrutiny of symbiosis and loss, are reframed through the lens of the teenage Didi in this text. The frustration arising from her lack of subjectivity, sees Didi cast her mother in the same unsympathetic light as Lena O'Brien before her. Didi feels herself to be a victim of racial and class biases and does not imagine her mother could have similar experiences. While still in Africa, Didi had imagined her mother to be successful 'because of the money your mother sent every month for your upkeep' (Okorie 2018, p.31). She continues in this vein, recalling that:

> You were so excited to join your mother and had imagined she lived in a big house and drove a big car. Your aunt and your cousins had thought so too because of the money your mother sent every month for your upkeep.
>
> (Okorie 2018, p.31)

These thoughts do not consider the impact of sending wages home by a mother who 'stacked shelves in a supermarket' (Okorie 2018, p.31). Through employment, friends and Church, the mother had re-orientated herself and her younger children in their new environment.

In this thesis one key part of the argument focused on the maternal, as obstacle, that Lavin, O'Brien and Tóibín before Okorie all had to overcome. Umbilical forms ranging from letters and writing were brought under control, before their own identities could be

successfully secured. All four authors have presented their mothers as evoking a mixture of anguish and disempowerment with respect to their own security, even while acknowledging their mother's strengths within limited circumstances. The un-named mother figure of this text positively supported her daughter's selfhood in explaining that the racism Didi was enduring was not personal, when she relays Muna's racist experiences in the workplace, in stories and anecdotes but 'this was at the time when you and she still talked' (Okorie 2018, p.31). Didi's silence and lack of empathy towards her mother is similar in tone to the writing of Edna O'Brien, who was angry with her sacrificial mother for not protecting her daughter more or enjoying a fuller life. Both authors purposefully do not name some of their female characters, thereby depriving these women of humanity while highlighting their lack of autonomy. Her youth and lack of experience prevents her from exploring her mother's perspective and all she endured to arrive at their current position in life. Didi ignores the mother's reasons for leaving her homeland, her marital separation after arriving in Ireland, and her endurance of a low paid job to send money back to Africa for Didi's upkeep. Her mother was equally subject to Irish racism and sexual abuse in a supermarket carpark, but her daughter does not recognise these aspects of her daily life. Didi ignores the fact that her mother possessed the foresight to enrol her daughter in college, or the fact that she introduced Didi to Dermot, knowing he would help untangle her experiences. This migrant mother shares similar experiences with her daughter and from her limited situation, she assists and improves her transition to Ireland.

However, like the mothers of Lavin, O'Brien and Tóibín, through the daughter's

struggle for self-determination she has to be abjected before Didi can take her place in her new home and nation. Unlike the three previous authors, this story, however, chooses not to mobilise Catholic religious beliefs and merely recognises church affiliation as an opportunity for integration. Didi does not agree with her mother's conviction in the variety of opportunities existing for the re-articulation of 'home'. To this end, the mother suggests that Didi keep a diary as a means of processing and articulating her transitional experiences. Her belief that 'the church, the school, the road, the shops and the playground should provide enough opportunities for people to integrate if they want to' (Okorie 2018, p.33). Tackling this point, Louise O' Neill asks Okorie her opinion:

Louise O'Neill: How can Irish people tackle racism?

Okorie Melatu: It is a mindset, a nationalistic tendency at the moment. Everything is temporary. I don't see the point of racism – life is a continuous movement, constantly changing, i.e. the pandemic. Life is crazy. I don't see the point in racism or nationalistic qualities.

(YouTube 23.02.2022 O'Neill)

Didi's journey traces her personal evolution through her new environment while questioning the nature of Irish cultural space and her placement in relation to both. Her experience is geographical, cultural and psychological, and the way she navigates the space recreates her cultural and personal experiences. Her new environment in Dublin sees her transported to a community firmly grounded in its place:

Okorie reworks the bifurcation between an implicitly white Irish-citizen reader and

> non-white migrant writer to disrupt fixed notions of racialised subjects amid shifting immigration policies.
>
> (Huber 2022, p.5)

Her texts deal with the ambiguous place migrants occupy in Ireland, a culture that has kept a fitting place for the marginalised in a totality already constructed by a longer national history. In both stories, Okorie introduces African migrants to represent the strangers who fill vital roles in Irish society, encouraging readers to consider what it means to identify as Irish. In these stories, the characters control the narrative with credible voices that articulate racial dynamics of discrimination and abuse. We are witness to the use of writing as a means of gaining an understanding of the self and the environs, all the while providing a voice for the voiceless. Immigration originally rooted in 'Celtic Tiger' prosperity signifies a shift in our understanding of the reception given to migrants, and Ireland is a hybrid of cultures that has begun dissolving old, fixed identities to re-(imagine) itself as plural. Recent CSO figures indicate that people from Pakistan and Africa are the two largest migrant groups coming to Ireland and entering the system of Direct Provision. Frequently debated in terms of the environment, room size, stipulated meals, budget allowances, the shared spaces and years of waiting sees some parallels drawn between Ireland's history of institutionalizing women and the original complicity regarding the system of Direct Provision. Okorie situates her fictional characters in the crossover between spaces and subjectivities, as they make their limited space their own in their constant negotiations between the particular and the universal. However, embodied memories of the homeland persist as new and old spaces leak into each other.

## Conclusion

Either forced or voluntary, ethnic migration has changed Ireland's cultural landscape that saw the institution of 'family' privileged in the 1937 Constitution. Shifting the biopolitics from 'Irish' women to 'non-national' women perpetuated the State's control of childbearing women once again. In the stories told by Okorie, the transition through literature begins the process of recovery, and abjected women of colour voiced by Okorie are part of a critique of the enforced dependency between migrants and the State. Okorie writes as a means of navigating her experience as a female migrant faced with powerful forces of assimilation and differentiation. As a Nigerian writer, her case provides a contemporary panorama of Ireland, in which past certainties were examined. Both Lavin and Okorie are part of thoroughly patriarchal societies, from their place of origin to their place of settlement; but they navigated, through literature their experiences across their cultures of origin and their new destinations. Drawing on the struggles of individual migrant women, Okorie's personal testimony is a contributing voice to the modern writing of Ireland, addressing female lives impacted by the asymmetries of power. The redemptive capacities of her testimony offer a space to explore through fiction the societal clashes migrant women can encounter. Ireland currently has the opportunity to establish solidarity instead of entrenching colonial racial hierarchies and reiterating Kristeva's aspiration for 'equal attention from all sides there is a hope of a consequent newness through fusion' (Kristeva 1991, p.194). As a writer, Okorie undermines the genealogical model that was concerned with histories of relationship and authority in Article 41.2, favouring fixed roles

and identities. Okorie portrays her female characters as individuals actively struggling against their environment and the life the Irish government has determined for them. In texts that represent the emergence of women of colour in a country constructed upon the foundations provided by nationalism, she writes against the oppressive institution of Direct Provision and releases herself in the act of writing. Re-racialization of Irishness in new ways has been shaped by refugees, asylum seekers and a migrant workforce working towards a redefinition of both Irishness and (m)otherhood. Her writer's discourse of alterity favours an alternative definition for the concept of 'Home' in Ireland with a fluid nature evolving in correlation with the personal circumstances of each individual. With new patterns of migrant labour available, Okorie's collection condemns and refracts Ireland's approach to migrants confined in institutions of destruction for years of human life and potential. With similarities to the legislated woman's place in the home, and the thousands of women incarcerated in Magdalene laundries, these institutions of Direct Provision are also sites where women existed and persisted in spite of the confinement created by the State. The effect of place and the integration of the personal in Okorie's collection from Nigeria to Direct Provision is an element clearly influencing her representation of the personal and political interrelation. Without the autonomy of a domestic space, it is difficult to construct a sense of home as a site of practised belonging for characters like Beverlée. Working towards a culture of being with the marginalised is a task of our time, no longer instructed by Catholic duty, but one imposed on Irish society via globalisation.

For an imagined cosmopolitan Ireland, the cultural space afforded to migrants needs

to harness positive notions of heterogeneous connections without prejudice. The recent debate from non-governmental organisations arguing for the right to work in terms of human rights emphasised an economic orientation ahead of a cultural contribution towards a more cosmopolitan Ireland. The recent pandemic underscored the precarious position of migrants when asylum seekers and economic migrants continued working in meat-plants and nursing home facilities, exposing themselves to the virus and in some cases, bringing Covid-19 back into their shared accommodation in Direct Provision centres. The voices that have been minimised in Irish society are described here to highlight how difficult, hateful and exclusionary the reality of life is, for some black women in Ireland. Okorie demonstrates the portability of culture and personal history in stories that manifest a tension between location and dislocation, as she reconfigures a new form of family within an un-natural setting indifferent to individual vicissitudes. The constitutional position of women within the home did not acknowledge other facets of their lives, and the dichotomy determining the differences between national and migrant identity is queered and the protracted quest for the constitutional 'Home' enact and trouble the cornerstones of Irish life; marriage, family, home and motherhood. The cultural losses of female migrants in the Irish nation-state were similar to the female exclusion of maternal inheritance. Both sacrificed women in non-representation but their absent presence is finally being addressed and shifting the identity of the citizens rendering them visible. Their inclusion will highlight a more representative basis for alternative forms of community, contributing to the experiences shaping the nation. Migrant affinities have tested the fixed identity of 'home' and 'belonging' in times of perceived crisis. Having continually negotiated our

position as a Nation State and forged new kinship structures within which to flourish, migrant literature provides a useful framework to gauge our ability to accept new modalities of otherness. Okorie's use of genre is appropriate for the fragmentation associated with the short story by foregrounding the cultural and racial difference currently represented in Ireland's literature.

# CONCLUSION

The primary aim of this thesis was to evaluate an eighty-year period of female representation since the inclusion of Article 41.2 in the Constitution. Previously held concepts of family were significant for colonising and decolonising narratives that left a residual impression on the Irish cultural imagination. These lingering contradictions saw Irish society built on a precarity of imagined nationhood that has been documented in short stories foregrounding individuals and groups traditionally repressed through marginalisation. The first three authors narrated experiences personal to them and their wider community of the silence, suffocation and old anxieties attached to a nation building state. Voicing social protests and recording injustices, they underlined a society experiencing turmoil from new beginnings. The principal debate of gender parity, which in the context of this thesis began with the Proclamation of 1916, continues to unfold in Irish society as delineated by the fourth and youngest author, Melatu Okorie. Born in Nigeria, she writes her prose with the lens of a foreigner that effects and disrupts the social and cultural realities constructed through the Irish constitutional language. As a woman of colour, homed in Direct Provision with her family for over eight years, her stories add a different texture to the constitutional text. Her illustration of woman and the maternal reflect on the different faces of suffusing the maternal in Irish cultural, social and political life. Article 41.2 of the 1937 Constitution enshrines the place of "woman" in the home and argues that this is an idealization that is exclusionary, restrictive and marginalizing. However, Okorie is a maternal 'other' who does not match the assigned place and is relegated to an even more extreme form of the marginal from her direct provision home.

Her texts decode the functionality and contradictions of Irish society for a particular cohort of submerged peoples. The content of Okorie's narratives communicates a society that continues to use structures and silences that impinge adversely on the lives of asylum seekers. Her stories recount a fictional language as a newer approach for the formation of a culture of people on the intersection of combined traditions, which would otherwise have been unrecorded from the literary canon.

The introductory section of my study outlined the historical background of Ireland after the civil war. This offered contextualisation to the religious, political and cultural influences that defined the nation and ultimately the inclusion of the Article 41.2 to the Constitution. As politics and economy continued to globalise, an Irish reticence to embrace diversity in the home and public sphere, shaped the way individuals interacted with each other. The previously held truths of Irish isolation are no longer valid causing former nationalist ideologies and cultural anthropological methods to shrink through legislation, migration and feminism. Progressing through the thesis, the notion of Motherhood linked with marriage was a consideration of a functioning form of social control, which intimated women to dedicate themselves to reproduction and sacrifice. Female jury service and the Succession Act of 1965, were just two issues identified chronologically as part of a wider focus on women as a group, requiring parity and assistance of the state. These exampled two of the protracted feminist gains towards gender equality that greatly improved, when Ireland attained membership of the European Union in 1973. Membership legislated an obligation on Ireland to advance the conversation of equal rights, which included

rescinding the marriage bar. These stipulations provided critical advancements of the feminist outlook that Irish women had been advocating for, since the early stages of independence, right through to the current Irish position.

While this research was not representative of a comprehensive examination of the canon of short stories, nor a detailed discussion on the gains of Irish feminism, it does seek to promote further discussion. A more qualitative analysis centring on the role of carers in the home is now required to provide an in-depth understanding of people as agents within their natural settings. This role continues to evolve and currently sees both genders undertake the role of caring with variable capacities. A role no longer confined to their offspring, it may also include parents, siblings and any family members who need care. In a discussion framed by the contextualisation of the social order, one of the more pressing tasks for Irish gender parity has been the halting progress towards hybrid identities. Yet to be completed, the recent Citizens Assembly on gender, including a discussion on Article 41.2, is an advancement on that trajectory.

The project introduced Julia Kristeva for her injection of critique on the futurity of the nation as one that is polyphonic, flexible and heterogeneous. For the achievement of futurity in modern Ireland, an oscillation between difference from its shifting populations and global economy is required. No longer homogeneous, the Irish nation-state is concurrent with Kristeva's psychoanalytic theory that demonstrates a view of human life, with divergent male and female experiences. My findings challenge Article 41.2 of the

written Constitution and De Valera's national policy of the common good. Critically denounced since inception, but enshrined constitutionally, the law and Constitution of Ireland is in place to protect all persons of human rights. This fortification failed in its legal responsibilities to women by confining them to the home post-independence to necessitate nation building, but this homage to women undeniably affirmed the concept of the patriarchal family.

The suppression of female identity excluded from political discourse thus has been undertaken in a longitudinal study of four sections. Each section consisted of a chapter with an individual author allocated to identify the symbolic authoritarianism of their era. Beginning in chapter one with Mary Lavin, who widened the portrayal of women in her pronouncements that included the role of unmarried women and widows. Lavin narrated both groups of women from their socially and culturally marginalised lives on the fringe of society. Abjected in their role, which went unrecognised by the State, single women provided support towards achieving the common good and often found they were not able to marry having dedicated their life to the care of elderly parents, or unpaid farm labourers. The other consistent thematic thread of Lavin's work were the women who formed part of a wider focus on widows. Having outlived their husbands, and fulfilled their reproductive duty, they now found themselves abjected from society and without protective assistance of the state. Until The Succession Act of 1965, these widowed women remained impoverished from a lifetime of inequality and lost opportunities to work.

The second chapter of my thesis engaged with Edna O'Brien and her treatment of women challenging their mother-daughter relationships in tandem with cultural and social stereotyping. In O'Brien's texts, daughters tried to break with the stifling perpetuation of their mothers while simultaneously combating gender inequality. Battling against their mothers and mother country for autonomy over their bodies and lives, her texts were problematic for including topics that second wave feminism endorsed. Writing from London during the sixties her short stories were more explicitly feminist than Lavin before her resulting in censorship for the artist, who did not promote the imagined ideal aesthetic. Instead, she voiced a social concern regarding the difficulty of the everyday struggles of influence and habit that culminated in a structure that became hard to dismantle.

Colm Tóibín's engaged literature of chapter three, probed Ireland's shameful history of abuse and secrecy that occurred in family and religious settings. He opened up, and expanded on, the previously held secrecies of society to include a discourse of homosexuality. By acknowledging and analysing these topics, the reader gained an insight in the profound way Irish people interpret the body and their relationship with it. Frequently writing from the female perspective, his utility of ambiguity was a calculated strategy to emphasise a representation of woman's experience, previously sacrificed in the public and private sphere.

The final chapter engages with the conflation between authors and characters in texts providing a visceral account of the contemporary nation by the more current accounts

from Okorie. Her encounters with displaced women illuminating the migrant's perspective documents their experience of navigating the indelible obsession of home in Ireland. Following the financial boom of the Celtic Tiger era, opportunities arose for workers and asylum seekers to migrate to Ireland. As an asylum seeker herself, this section offered a comparative analysis of experiences, with Okorie foregrounding a discourse based on reality and truth, as constructions shaped by the manner people interact with their surroundings. Female iconography, which had played an important part in Gaelic culture fed into a colonialist tradition allegorizing Ireland as woman, that no longer accords with the modernised nation state it has become. Immigrants however, bring with them traditions and beliefs Ireland must embrace and respect, in order to form a fully rounded inter-ethnic society as important to future generations in areas of racializing technologies and cultural polices. The border of the state must facilitate and fully interrogate the premise of universality and not make demands of immigrants to encode Irish assumptions of shared experience, language and tradition. Okorie's work will bring important signifiers towards the role of African women whose experiences were largely unvoiced in Irish literature and with shared access to resources, a polyphonic richness can be hoped for. Her efforts to influence this experience begins a move towards a more inclusive discourse that will contribute positively towards achieving change in future society.

This thesis has been concerned with the emergence of writers articulating a range of experiences previously marginalised from mainstream society. A feminist perspective would indicate this impact on the most intimate practices of Irish female identity. Ending

my thesis, I conclude that the old tropes of land, gender and religion have not disappeared from the Irish imaginary but continue to challenge notions of diversity and inclusion. Former evaluations of nationalism contextualised in the authorities of Church and State control, have advanced in the more contemporary secular society but need to continue this progress with a focused programme of inclusion for an inclusive society.

The recent Covid-19 pandemic has identified the State's ability to act with innovation for social transformation in a crisis, which underscores the halting progress of social change for marginalised women in the home. The addition of theory from Kristeva provided a deeper understanding of silence as a trope sustained across the works of all four authors. This theoretical lens also allowed for a sharper focus on societal constructions, and on the value of fiction to portray truths that perhaps are not available in normative political discourses. Through the short story genre, examining the issues organically in their natural settings as a phenomenon in terms of the meaning people bring to them. I have attempted to delineate an imagined Irish past through these texts to facilitate access to the innermost, private thoughts of the human condition. With the importance of literary fiction lying in its facilitation of a social critique across moral and immoral situations, Article 41.2 is no longer fit for purpose. Conceived during a time of economic depression, it no longer serves a modern nation and thriving economy. The state commitment to gender parity, women and more recently anti-racism, is not only weak, but contradicted by the state's control to ignore contestations and multi-ethnic diversities. By analysing issues surrounding home as a safe space and the foundation for the life of a family, my thesis

serves not as the conclusion of a discourse, but the initiation of the contemporary position of Irish women in the home and wider society. This will engage with the vast array of women's lives in Irish society enabling them to foreground a discourse of national perspectives from their global experiences in addition to previous research on the female connection with bodies and representation in Ireland.

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