

Edna O'Brien *The Country Girls* (1960): Deconstructing the Irish Women's Myth**Rachida KADDOURI**Department of English language, University of Djillali Liabes
Sidi-bel-Abbes, Algeria**Nadia LOUAHALA**Department of English language, University of Djillali Liabes
Sidi-bel-Abbes, Algeria**Abstract**

The rigid cultural and political environment of the 1940s post-independence era in Ireland placed a significant limitation on women by socially constructing and consistently implementing a strictly-defined Irish Catholic female identity. Over time, women could no longer stand this situation, and movements for women's rights were set up. Political, social as well as cultural transformations in the country were accompanied by a necessarily urgent literary reaction, especially by female writers. Edna O'Brien, one of the most loved, and influential Irish women writers, published her first novel, *The Country Girls* (1960). She helped open discussion of the role of women and sex in Irish society and of Roman Catholicism's persecution upon women. The present paper intends to focus on Irish women through *The Country Girls*. It explores the conflicts and compromises of Irish woman identity as this has been represented in the 20th-century Irish literature; concerning the more generalized categories of society, nation, and religion.

Keywords: feminism, Irish identity, patriarchy, *The Country Girls*, women

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Introduction

Irish women have been active since the mid-1960s in a brutal political, economic, and social revolution and painful clash between traditionalism and modernism. They have been driven from marriage and family safety into a dynamic world full of massive psychological tension and danger. They had to resist all difficulties, and so managed to create a new order to ensure their survival.

While no more fiction than those who precede them, Irish authors tackle topics never before explored in Irish literature; they create female characters that criticize society and attitudes that narrowly represent the experiences of women. They are intrigued by “what disturbs questions, offends, angers, or may even be morally and culturally subversives” (Stuart, 1982, p. 5).

Living in a modern world, women writers portray a society in flux, a culture whose traditions and values are in question. However, the revolution of thirty years has shattered stereotypes and wrought profound social changes.

To speak of women’s difference may not always be essential or even desirable but, as Elaine Showalter (1977) argued: “thirty years ago, when women writers are studied as a group we may discover recurrent patterns, themes and images which are almost impossible to perceive if women are discussed only in relation to male writers.” (p. 11)

In her introduction, St. Peter also points to the significance of developing a particular social tradition of writing to foster the imagination of women by explaining her decision to view women writers as a separate category in the light of the different social situation of women. Therefore, the Irish writings of women, from all parts of the 20th century, dealt with women who sought to find a place within the story of the Irish nation indirectly or directly.

In the 1970s and 1980s, the upsurge of feminist movements also caused women’s literary activities to flourish in Ireland. Publishers such as Attic Press or Arlen House began to publish “books by, for and about women” (McCarthy, 2004, p. 105). Consequently, more and more women began to write, many of them also about subjects, which were once taboo, as Ingman claims (2007): “an explosion of Irish women’s writing from the 1980s onward.”(p. 1). So, starved by the developments of the previous decades, women writers’ stories became increasingly outspoken and challenging.

Edna O’Brien: Transgression of Boundaries

O’Brien was a feminist before the term became fashionable, but her works also affirm a wider humanistic sympathy. Early, she took up the topics of women’s attitudes toward their bodies, their sexuality, and their roles as mothers and daughters. In Ireland, several of her books have been banned because of their negative commentary on the Roman Catholic Church, more common in her early work, and her frequent use of graphic sexual terms and scenes, As J. Casey and M. Casey (1990) explain: “Women writers following Mary Lavin, Edna O’Brien, and Julia O’Faolain write with conviction against the background of 1960-1990 Ireland. They are feminists,

experimentalists, and stylists; political and social reformers; and, as Irish writers accomplished storytellers.” (p. 5)

O'Brien has constructed gender roles criticizing the capitalist patriarchy that is particularly Irish and Catholic. The differences pointed out in the gender question are not necessarily simple or natural; it is a category constructed through social and cultural systems. It is not biologically determined, but sociology has discussed sex roles for a long time, calling attention instead to the assigned than determined nature of gender. Furthermore, she does not only focus on the status of women in society, but also on the status of women in literature: "...[Her] texts offer a commentary on the prescribed roles for women in literature, challenging the adequacy of the female romance plot for representing women's experience in fiction." (Byron, 2006, p. 15). O'Brien's fiction works against male literary culture, as it depicts female life. It is not necessarily about life and solutions offered for women living in a patriarchal society. If you are born in Ireland, it is conveyed as if it was the "worst of luck" (Haule, 1987, p. 223) "Women are objects of literature, neither subjects nor producers of it." (Thompson, 2006, p. 32).

O'Brien's fiction consistently interrogates the cultural and political imperatives that reproduce femininity in Ireland by showing the ideals and the impossibilities of living up to them. It undermines the sanctity of the family by exposing its dysfunctions, lighting its subsequent disintegration, and showing its repressive and, therefore, debilitating effects on women's psyches.

O'Brien reveals what is special, unique, and desperately required in writing from her own Irish experience. She is the first Irish author to make women's literature fearless. Roth (1984), in an interview with O'Brien, mentions the foreword that he wrote for her book, *A Fanatic Heart*. Here he refers to Tuohy's citation, in which he indicated a unique distinction between Joyce and O'Brien: "While Joyce in *Dubliners* and *Portrait of the Artist*, was the first Irish Catholic to make his experience and surroundings recognizable, *the world of Nora Barnacle* had to wait for the fiction of Edna O'Brien." (pp. 38-40)

Hence, O'Brien has seldom been regarded as a feminist writer at first. However, her literature has encouraged her generation of Irish women novelists to write about their experiences and sell books. O'Brien did not necessarily want to have a feminist voice in her fiction; she wanted to write and hope to write with vigor, with muscle. "I don't care whether I'm a man or a woman; I want to write as an androgynous person for whom language is sacred." (O'Brien, 1998, p. 3) O'Brien produces female characters who, through their marginalization, struggle with the same topic of loneliness, identity, and loss by giving the women of Ireland an appropriate presence. O'Brien sends several of her characters in search of love and stability, always unsuccessfully reaching out for answers. The result is almost always disappointment and blindness. O'Brien herself states that:

I have depicted women in lonely, desperate, and often humiliated situations, very often the butt of men and almost always searching for an emotional catharsis that does not come. This is my territory and one that I know from hard-earned experience. (Roth, 1984, p. 6)

O'Brien's fiction is always in dynamic communication with the land of her birth. Her relationship with that country is intimate. She depicts the constricted, hardscrabble life of the villages and farms of the west. Irish culture and history have preserved functions metonymically for the nation in O'Brien's fiction, which insists on the link between domestic and political colonization and between obsession about the power of land and the control of women. These links do not only inform the work of O'Brien but also the work of many contemporary women artists.

The foundation of O'Brien's Myth

The Country Girls is about sudden moments of understanding of life and its dichotomies, freedom and entrapment, failure and success, moments of lucid insight, which go beyond individuals and point towards a more familiar view of the human condition. What makes these novels so interesting is O'Brien's way of establishing a relationship with her characters through her everyday activities, struggles, and humbling lives.

The Country Girls begins the bittersweet story of Caithleen and Baba, two girls brought up in the close-knit, cruel world of a small Irish village, narrated by the soft and sympathetic Caithleen in a confessional tone. It traces the tender development of Caithleen Brady from age fourteen when her beloved mother dies in a boating accident. When she was seventeen years old, she was freed from a convent through a ruse devised by her friend Baba. Caithleen finds employment in Dublin.

O'Brien exposes the profound and sometimes sexual disappointment of women with unrealistic, romantic assumptions about love and marriage through confessional first-person narratives. O'Brien stresses women's sexual desire in their novels, and the hunt for lovers and husbands by heroines is deceitful.

O'Brien's sharp writing style appears to be based on the nuances of person's life. In *The Country Girls*, the main characters frequently become so alone in the novels that they know little or no more about a larger universe. They are all about their tragedy or feelings.

Besides, the cumulative effect is much broader, whether these women are typically taken into consideration or novels considered to be part of O'Brien's legacy. O'Brien has a distinctly and profoundly positive view of women who suffer from their inability to cope with life's circumstances. *The Country Girls* form the basis of O'Brien's myth: voice creation and a women's vision. Thus, *The Country Girls* focuses on questions of indignity, women's bodies, and the land and how their representation is shaped by colonialism and its negative consequences for women in newly independent Ireland.

Irish Woman's Quest for an Identity

O'Brien talks about Ireland's house emotional issues. She is opposed to the colonizers. The masculine and virile power in a patriarchal culture is harshly criticized. She condemns the patriarchal dominance of men over Ireland's female sensuality. Females have male supremacy in Ireland. She points to this definition of Mother Ireland. Her fiction shows through women's

sensuality the devastating effects of those representations. She has produced a new image of Irish women, other than Mother Ireland or the Virgin Mary and 'Mother Church'. Her women must *not only be viewed as muses or companions but as human beings*. She criticizes patriarchal hostility and repression in Irish life. She gives an appreciation for them through a practical portrayal of women's sensuality.

Pelan (1993) argues somewhat more astutely that *The Country Girls* can be seen to trace not only an entertaining tale of two young Irish girls but 'the loss of female identity', and that this "was consistently passed over in favor of an emphasis on the humor and the freshness and clarity of the style [which] accorded to some notion of lighthearted whimsy which was also perceived as typically Irish" (pp. 73-74). Explaining why O'Brien has not been significantly taken up by feminist critics, Pelan suggests that "[her] writing ... fails to qualify [as 'feminist'] through its representation of women's oppression and powerlessness with no apparent attempt to analyze those conditions" (p. 75). Apparent is crucial; Pelan goes on to point out that "... writers like O'Brien write from marginalized social positions about women in similar positions" (p. 76). Pelan is mainly interested in the 'Irishness' of O'Brien's 'marginalization', but the treatment of 'loss of female identity' or compromised female subjectivity in *The Country Girls* and beyond does manage to transcend cultural context.

Only five years after the publication of *The Country Girls*, Friedan (1965) identified "the problem that has no name", arguing that "the core of the problem for women today is not sexual but a problem of identity" (p. 68). Friedan went on to point out that "a woman who is herself only a sexual object, lives finally in a world of objects, unable to touch in others the individual identity she lacks herself" (p. 293). In this condition, women are likely to enjoy reading fiction which itself explores "loss of female identity" (Pelan, 1993, p. 73)

The Intermixed Clash of Colonialism and Patriarchy

In *The Country Girls*, O'Brien creates two female main characters. She explains in *Why Irish Heroines Don't Have to be Good Anymore* (1986) that she wanted to have "one who would conform to both my own and my country's view of what an Irish woman should be and one who would undermine every piece of protocol and religion and hypocrisy there was."

The Country Girls determines the crushing pressure imposed upon modern Irish women, be it from family, church, or nation. Overall, the novel tells of the adventures of two girls, Caitheleen and Baba, escaping from their Irish hometown and convent school to Dublin and then London in search of their castle of love. The trials, temptations, and temporary excitement they encounter en route, however, bring home to them the hard-won realization that they are walking on a path of frustration. In the novel, the patriarchal power viruses virtually spread far and wide around Caitheleen in the form of father, male lover, religion, and so forth. In a sense, Caitheleen's life is composed of her aspirations toward love and, sad to say, complete bafflement and desperation caused by a long line of rascals, including his drunken father, Mr. Gentleman, and nation.

Isolated in such a stifling world of men, Caithleen stands little chance to secure a room of her own. Caithleen's problem is foreshadowed in that of her mother, who has long been a victim of her father's abusive drunkenness. Such worries about her husband, coupled with the responsibility to care for the whole family, crumple Caithleen's mother, which explains why she has a tighter relationship with her daughter, from whom the mother manages to seize a slice of solace and identification. The lack of a reliable husband happens to be compensated for by Caithleen; on the other hand, her mother's love significantly makes up for the absence of a responsible father. The mother and the daughter then combine in an interlocking, interdependent bond. The three concerns for children of Ireland mentioned here, Catholicism, nation, and family pose a tremendous threat to the lives of modern Irish people, especially those of Irish women.

The repressive effects of the patriarchal society are hardly assuaged by the Catholic Church and its proscriptions. On the contrary, the Catholic Church, in reality, intensifies the restriction on Irish women from still another aspect. The influences of the Catholic religion on Caithleen can be found everywhere in the novel.

Therefore, though pressures from the patriarchal Irish society come in diverse forms, rural female characters in Edna O'Brien's fictions tend to defy unreservedly such constructive forces, Caithleen struggles with the patriarchal forces from all directions, but she fails time and again in her attempts. From early childhood, her life is overshadowed by the unhappy marriage of her parents. In contrast to her mother's care and kindness, her father's irresponsibility and brutality produce a feeling of repulsion in her mind. Thus she manages to run away from her father's control by turning to some male lovers for help.

Following the deconstruction of the representation of women in O'Brien's fictions, how women can break loose from the prison-house of language and culture constructed by male culture, and express their voices instead has been a complicated issue for an ocean of critics. In effect, this severe problem is by no means peculiar to the Irish condition but widespread throughout the post-colonial world.

As a female scholar straddling the first world academy and her indigenous Indian origin, Spivak is exceptionally sensitive to the subjugated position imposed upon the marginalized third world women. The vast majority of the colonized has, for Spivak, left no mark on history because it cannot or is not allowed to make itself heard. This inability is common to colonized man but even truer of colonized women, for within the colonial, patriarchal society women are doubly unheard. Therefore, Spivak (1985) observes that both as an object of colonialist historiography and as a subject of insurgency, the ideological construction of gender keeps the male dominant and that if in the context of colonial production, the subaltern has no history and cannot speak, the subaltern as female is even more deeply in shadow. This very idea of the gendered subaltern well exemplifies the predicament modern Irish women encounter and might help shed light on why Caithleen in *The Country Girls* suffers so much.

Conclusion

Edna O'Brien has been giving voice for the last 40 years to Ireland's voiceless rural women. In 1959, when she left Ireland, she dismissed all of what Ireland had taught her because she felt the need to speak out for what she hated. O'Brien portrayed the victims of the Irish countryside through her writing. In the 1960s, she initiated this trend with *The Country Girls*, and in the past decade, she expanded it with her second trilogy. Her truthful representations of Irish country life and most significantly, her unique expression of Irish women's experience deserve closer critical attention. O'Brien created some of the most realistic and thus brutal images of what life in rural Ireland was like for women during the 1940s, 50s, and 60s.

O'Brien has managed to articulate Ireland's unheard women as an artist. She was successful throughout her career despite her book being banned and burned. Through this, she remained to be a title to her subject and her calling.

All of her characters struggle with gender stereotypes deeply rooted in these societal forces, whether they embrace or reject them. Through this process, O'Brien places herself firmly amongst the company of authors seeking to create authentic female characters in Irish literature. However, rather than giving the reader easy answers, O'Brien's novels tend to leave lingering questions. Given the variety of female characters in her work, her evolution as a writer is evident in *The Country Girls*. Although some critics express discontent with the unhappy, oppressed, and bleak portrait of the female character that O'Brien paints, many others point out that, however grim the picture is, it is accurate and real. And it needs to be painted.

In Irish literature, O'Brien's female characters have a fascinating location, offering a few answers on the space for the author in the Irish literary canon. It takes the historical context in which they live and the diversity of the many characters they have developed to dismiss all O'Brien's female characters as progressive.

O'Brien's Ireland represents the people who have a lot of experience behind them and who cannot step on with their suffering and loneliness. In every novel O'Brien's Ireland is an entity, and its effect on women is far stronger than previously thought. The message of O'Brien to the women of Ireland remained consistent: they are the only ones who can feel safe.

However, O'Brien developed Caithleen in *The Country Girls* from her background of childhood. For several of O'Brien's characters, Caithleen soon became a template. This person showed the world how a Catholic woman in a small village in Ireland grows up. Conservative and dependent, Caithleen falls victim to the forms of patriarchy, against which Baba fights incessantly for excitement and exploration without hesitation. Indeed, while Caithleen tends to be more reserved in her attack of the injustice imposed on women, Baba always utters her censure outspokenly. If Caithleen is on behalf of the traditional, underprivileged women, then Baba in striking contrasts. As the speaking subject of the narration, Baba, to a certain extent, takes charge of the story. If Baba speaks, can Irish women's voices be far behind?

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