



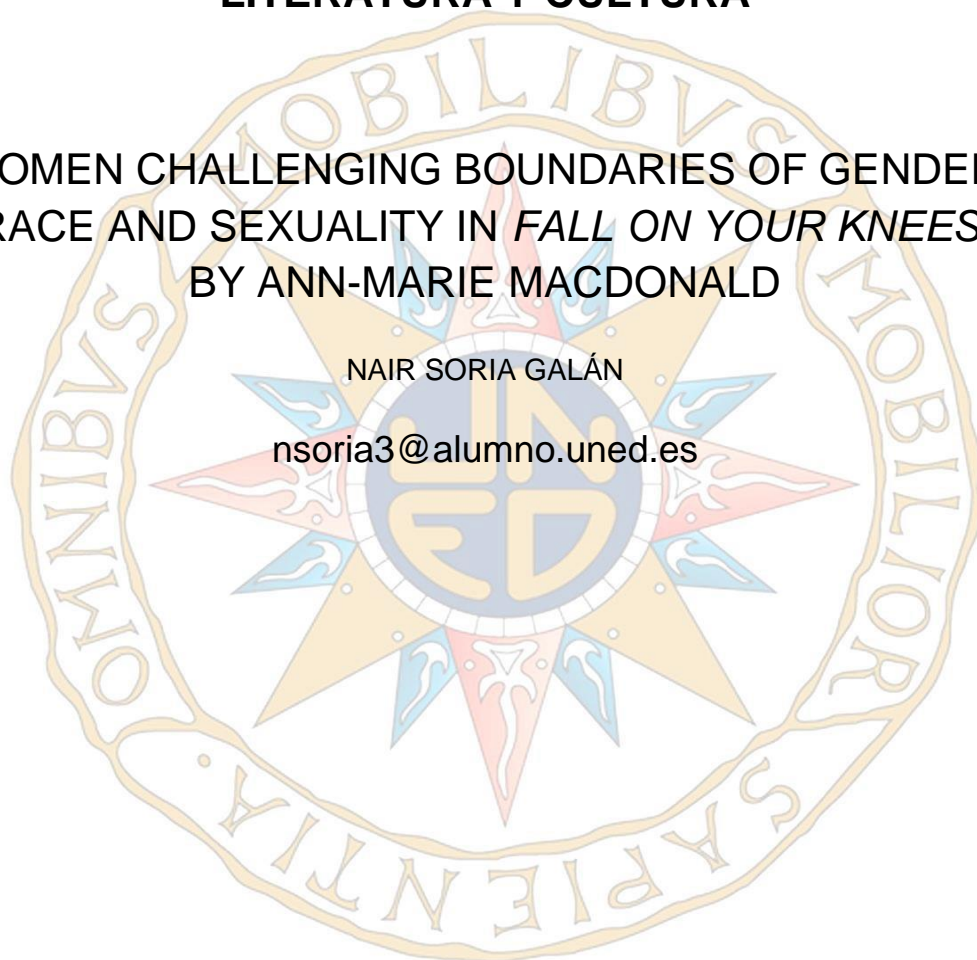
TRABAJO FIN DE GRADO

GRADO EN ESTUDIOS INGLESES: LENGUA, LITERATURA Y CULTURA

WOMEN CHALLENGING BOUNDARIES OF GENDER,
RACE AND SEXUALITY IN *FALL ON YOUR KNEES*,
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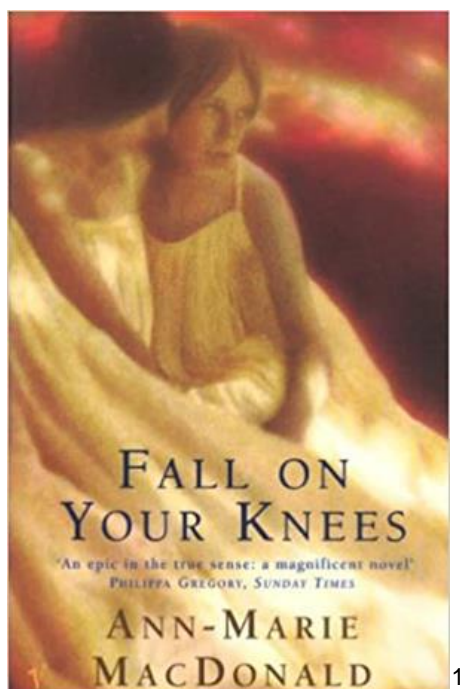
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Abstract

This paper deals with the study of the novel *Fall on Your Knees*, by Ann-Marie MacDonald. My aim is to analyse MacDonald's portrayal of female transgression of boundaries regarding gender, race and sexuality at the end of the 20th century. As I go forward, I will provide a better understanding of its relevance concerning the portrayal of subversive female characters in counter position to a traditional and oppressive patriarchal society. By defying the hegemonic masculinity, these brave women become empowered creating their true identities and influencing new generations. Through examination and recognition of new ways of being a woman portrayed in literary manifestations such as *Fall on Your Knees*, I want to suggest, we can open up debate and promote social change.

Keywords: *Fall on Your Knees*, Ann-Marie MacDonald, women, gender, race, sexuality



¹ Front cover: MacDonald, Ann-Marie. *Fall on Your Knees*. Vintage Books, 1997.

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1.Introduction

Fall on Your Knees (1996), by Ann-Marie MacDonald, is an outstanding example of the portrayal of female transgression of the established limits regarding gender, race and sexuality at the end of the 20th century. MacDonald's novel calls on readers to reflect and explore different ways of being a woman in order to achieve a better understanding of the complexity of female existence in a hegemonic male world.

My main objective writing this paper is to analyse the critical reception of the novel *Fall on Your Knees*, providing a better understanding of its relevance regarding the representation of subversive female characters in counter position of a patriarchal society. To do so, I will study the alternative representations of female experience provided in the novel, focusing on how they challenge traditional depictions of femininity by subverting boundaries regarding race, gender and sexuality. My intention is to prove that MacDonald's writing helps questioning conventional and essentializing gender structures, challenging limited conceptions of what it is being a woman in male-controlled societies. Through the study and acknowledgement of new femininities I suggest, we can support reflection and discussion and encourage new roles for women in contemporary societies.

1.1 State of the Art

The number of studies that deal with MacDonald's novel, *Fall on Your Knees*, published in 1996, has not ceased to grow since its publication. Most of them date from the late 90's, but we can still find revisions in the second decade of the 21st century.

"They're all dead now," is the beginning line of *Fall on Your Knees*, the novel that won MacDonald the Commonwealth Writers' Prize for best first book in 1997. It received outstanding reviews by the Canadian press at the time and sold close to 30,000 copies in Canada and a further 12,500 in Britain. Later on, in 2002, Oprah Winfrey featured MacDonald's work in her Book Club and presented the novel as "a riveting book drenched in secrecy and deceit, featuring

possibly the most twisted family in North America". At that time, Publishers Weekly reported that the novel, which had already sold 63,000 U.S. copies, was being reprinted 25,000 hardcovers and 620,000 trade paperbacks. *Fall on Your Knees* became an international best-seller in the early 2000's and was translated to more than nineteen languages. The way the author deals with a popular genre, and her depiction of the twisted family saga together with how it was marketed, opened up the novel to a wider international audience. Therefore, this novel and its social value became more connected with popular and economic success (Fuller 11). Furthermore, in the years following the publication scholarly criticism appeared all over the world. Therefore, *Fall on Your Knees* can be seen as a best seller but also as a novel with widespread critical recognition.

We find academic scholars from different nationalities like American Associate Professor A. Laouyene with his study "Race, Gender, and the Exotic in Ann-Marie MacDonald's *Fall on Your Knees*", Belgium Associate Professor H. Staels with "Embracing Difference in Ann-Marie MacDonald's *Fall on Your Knees*" or Spanish Associate Professor P. Somacarrera with "A Madwoman in a Cape Breton Attic: *Jane Eyre* in Ann-Marie MacDonald's *Fall on Your Knees*". Most critical literature about *Fall on Your Knees* concentrates mainly on issues of race and gender in relation to contemporary debates about Canadian multiculturalism (Laouyene 197). Moreover, and in general terms, it seems the interests for scholars range from gender, race, or sexuality to ecofeminism or regionalism. It is also worth mentioning that *Fall on Your Knees* has been studied under diverse literary theories and approaches, for example post-modernism, psychology, feminism, post-colonialism, gender and queer theories, deconstructionism, and others. Most recent studies, like McCormack (2014), or Nicholls (2017) consider *Fall on Your Knees* a feminist postcolonial gothic or queer postcolonial gothic novel. It has also been interpreted as a magic realist novel by Andrews (1999). Either way, what most of these revisions seem to have in common is the questioning and deconstructing of hegemonic social constructed concepts of gender and race in the novel, from an intersectional perspective.

In *Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction* (1996) the Canadian literary and cultural theorist Linda Hutcheon argues that, postmodern aesthetics

has been concerned with identity through difference, dealing with ex-centric, marginalized voices as well as formerly marginalized popular genres such as the Gothic. Then, *Fall on Your Knees* could be read as a Neo-Gothic novel where conventions of the Gothic bear a new message (qtd. Staels 326). MacDonald explores aspects, like class, race, ethnicity, gender, or sexual choice from a new perspective deconstructing old misconceptions and using Gothic techniques. Moreover, MacDonald gives voice to a great variety of female characters from different backgrounds and identities and according to Hutcheon's terms, all of them could be classified as "ex-centric". These female characters are not willing to conform to established norms, destabilising social constructs and enriching the narration. Scholars like Parro (2005), Hammod (2010) and Nicholls (2017) have deeply analysed these women that were previously secondary, hidden, or stereotyped characters and that find a voice and become the centre of the narration in *Fall on Your Knees*.

In reference to gender, MacDonald helps questioning the correlation of gender and sexual identity. Scholars, like Frost (2005) and Staels (2009) analyse identity in *Fall on Your Knees* understood as "a performative social construct", following Judie Butler's writings about the performative theory on gender and sexuality. Butler states that categories of masculine and feminine, and the social roles inherent to these categories, are socially constructed and not natural to human beings. From that point of view, in Butler's work *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (1999), she explores aspects such as how masculine and feminine can combine, in this performativity bringing out a set of characteristics that belong to a different expression of gender not fitting the established heteronormativity and binary codes. To this regard, Laouyene cleverly summarises:

MacDonald creates a feminist counter-utopia where female cross-dressing and transgender role playing actively parody the male dominated, exoticist culture of the time, all the while suggesting that racial, national, and gender identities are performative social constructs that can be transcended as easily as a mere change of costume. (211)

Considering the novel's main plot, the unexpected lesbian liaison that remains hidden till the end, and other subtle queer implications, *Fall on Your Knees* can be studied from an intersectional perspective of race, gender, and

sexual identity. Such is the case of scholars like Kulperger (2009), and Vercooren (2009), who analyse the novel from the intersectionality of queer and postcolonial theories, revising traditional gothic conventions, historical atrocities and traumas deriving from colonisation, making specific focus on gender diversity. In the same light, McCormack's text *Queer Postcolonial Narratives and the Ethics of Witnessing* (2014) studies *Fall on Your Knees* concentrating on unspeakable traumas of colonial and domestic violence, also analysing the novel from the intersection of theories of performativity. McCormack remarks that narrations like this create "space not just for other stories, but also for other ways of telling stories" (187).

Critically insightful though these and other studies are, more emphasis could be made analysing the central female characters that inhabit the novel, and their subversion of stereotypes from an intersectional perspective of race, gender and sexuality. Moreover, the lesbian sexual identity of several feminine characters also deserves a deeper examination. The purpose of this paper then, is to provide a renewed critical attention and address this detailed analysis of the main female characters in *Fall on Your Knees*.

1.2 Methodology

Regarding the methodology carried out for the configuration of this paper, the first step has been an in depth reading of the novel, concentrating on all the particular passages dealing with race, gender and sexuality, that happened to be plenty. Additionally, I have used the search engine provided by Universidad Nacional de Educación a Distancia, linked to Academic Search Ultimate and MLA International Bibliography with Full Text by Ebsco, JSTOR digital library, ProQuest Literature online, Dialnet and also Google Books service. In order to start researching, I have looked for the following terms: *Fall on Your Knees*, Ann-Marie MacDonald, miscegenation, queer literature, identity, diversity, feminist postcolonial studies and other related terms. This search brought a considerable number of articles published in scholarly journals that deal with this particular novel. I have focused on a special issue dedicated to the novel in *Canadian Review of American Studies Volume* (Vol. 35, No. 2, 2005), and some other

essays from different scholar publications. Furthermore, I have consulted specific master thesis and dissertations that study the novel either on its own or in connection to other literary works. Finally, I have also consulted several secondary sources cited on the studied articles, essays and theses.

After studying the most relevant results, I came to the conclusion that most of the research carried out on *Fall on Your Knees* investigated aspects of identity, womanhood, race or gender. I decided that these aspects could be a good departure point to start investigation. Firstly, regarding the in-depth analysis of the text, I concentrated on the main female characters that represent the challenging of boundaries regarding race, gender and sexuality. In this regard, I explored the characters trajectory examining relevant passages of the novel as evidence. Secondly, I studied how the fact of being a female character in the novel shaped life experience in terms of gender, race and sexuality. Finally, I proceeded to a detailed examination of four main female characters in the novel from an intersectional perspective regarding gender and race, exploring their life experience and identity as representatives of alternative female roles. Moreover, I have also analysed thoroughly five female characters, from an intersectional perspective of race and gender, but including lesbian identity. In short, this study intends to examine the critical reception of the novel *Fall on Your Knees* providing a better understanding of its relevance regarding the inclusion of subversive female roles that challenged boundaries of race, gender and sexuality.

2. Ann-Marie MacDonald and *Fall on Your Knees*



Ann-Marie MacDonald² is a Canadian playwright, actress, and novelist. She was born in Germany where her father, a Royal Canadian Air Force pilot, was stationed. However, both her parents were born in Nova Scotia. She has Scottish heritage on her father's side and Lebanese on her mother's. MacDonald's first career choice was acting, however, in 1988 she wrote her first play, *Goodnight Desdemona (Good Morning Juliet)*, that won several awards, later she wrote other dramatic works. Her first novel, *Fall on Your Knees*, (1996) won the Commonwealth Writer Prize and other

² MacDonald, Ann-Marie. Facebook Official Page

relevant awards. MacDonald's second novel, *The Way the Crow Flies* was published in 2003 and proved to be quite successful. In 2018, MacDonald was named Officer of the Order of Canada, in recognition of her contributions to the arts in Canada and her advocacy of LGBTQ and women's rights.

As for this novel, *Fall on Your Knees*, it follows the life of the Piper Family throughout the 19th and 20th century. Its five hundred and sixty-six pages take you on a bizarre journey to the Cape Breton Islands in Nova Scotia trailing the steps of this complex family. James, an ambitious man with Scottish and Irish background, marries Materia, a Lebanese thirteen-year-old. This controversial mixed marriage brings us the lives and misfortunes of their four daughters, the Piper sisters, throughout the years. The story is constructed on the Piper's family bonds, and deals with themes such as dark family secrets, illicit love, sex, incest, death, birth, race, and religion.

Fall on Your Knees is a novel that addresses several major powerful and controversial issues of special relevance at the end of the 20th century such as racial tensions, sexuality, social and religious oppression, inequality, and poverty. MacDonald cleverly integrates some of these delicate and at the same time powerful themes in her narration about a traditional family history. More specifically, the author revised the canon and introduced ethnicity, gender and sexuality issues to convey a new message, a new discourse of inclusion and diversity. At the time the novel was written, the early 90's, it was not only brave on the part of the author, but also challenging for the reader. Women from different racial backgrounds or different sexual identities could finally see themselves represented in literary work.

3. Being a woman in *Fall on Your Knees*

In *Fall on Your Knees*, MacDonald provides a varied representation of women's experiences that challenged traditional female roles. Feminine characters inhabit the novel, portraying different ways of resisting patriarchal oppression and transgressing boundaries in New Waterford, Canada, a postcolonial setting. Expectations of women at that time the story is set, end of the 19th century beginning of the 20th, were based on Victorian ideals that prevail

till nowadays. These reductionist constructs created by society limited women's life experience to the domestic sphere, housewifery, and motherhood, reducing them to objects of beauty according to their physical features. This favouring of male superiority and female submission was contested by the feminist movement in its different historical waves (Riley and Pearce 41).

Particularly in the 80's and 90's, many female authors appropriated these gendered roles, deconstructed, and destabilised them in a variety of artistic explorations ranging from humour to drama, and concentrated on the question of the formation of female identity. MacDonald and several female writers of her generation explored the boundaries of social female perception and patterns of thought. Moreover, they analysed how strongly these fixed cultural constructs were and concluded that stereotypes associated with women needed to be abstracted, deconstructed, and destabilized till they were no longer recognizable in order to support debate and promote social change.

In *Fall on Your Knees*, MacDonald explores gender roles, through the portrayal of five captivating female characters, the Piper sisters, and their mother, Materia. These women challenge, question, or disobey their assigned female roles in relation to their father, James Piper, the main male figure in the novel. By means of different strategies they break the established norms, to escape their feminine fate, unable or unwilling to fulfil the impositions of a male hegemonic system.

3.1 Being a “dark” woman in *Fall on Your Knees*

Likewise, in the 80's and 90's, many female authors in the light of feminist movement BME (Black and Minority Ethnic), explored the intersection of feminism, gender, sexuality and ethnicity in their work (Riley and Pearce 100). To this regard, McDonald portrays the life experience of women coming from different origins, giving voice to non-white female characters previously silenced.

Fall on Your Knees takes place primarily in the community of New Waterford, Cape Breton Island in Canada. Its name derives most likely from the Irish seaport Waterford, from which many early settlers came from. At the time

the novel depicts, New Waterford was a coal mining community mainly populated by ethnically mixed Catholics, (Irish, Scottish, English and Eastern Europeans). New Waterford also received other minority groups of migrants such as Asians, West Indians, Arabs, and Jews. This rich settler's community and its cultural heterogeneity is widely represented in the novel with the exploration of main and secondary characters (Frost 197). The lives of families with different origins, customs and beliefs intertwined in fluid ways and others in very complex ones. As Laouyene remarks, "a variety of impulses, ranging from desire and fascination to fear and trepidation are prone to trigger in a multicultural setting with such strong cultural differences" (197).

Regarding race issues from a female perspective, MacDonald's own experience as a woman coming from a biracial background, helps the development, understanding and empathy with the different feminine characters. She playfully undermines notions of race through the interaction of different families. For instance, the Piper family represents the conflicts of miscegenation and hybridity and their daughters become the uncomfortable product of a multicultural community. Likewise, the Mahmoud family's identity that we initially can place as "pure" Arabs is later interrogated in the novel since they are also seen as Lebanese, Mediterranean or Catholics, not Muslims as expected (Hammond 27). The Mahmonds are not even perceived as coloured in face of the Tylers, an African Caribbean family. Other constructed notions such as nationality and religion are also interrogated as such is the case of the Luvovotizs, a Jewish family from Polish-German origins. When the First World War breaks and Mrs Luvovitz's Canadian sons are sent to fight we become aware that "her boys will be fighting their own flesh and blood" in Europe (104).

Macdonald provides an interesting multilayered approach to ethnic and gender identity with characters like Materia, representing the dark woman who is socially excluded and subjugated by her racist violent husband. Moreover, the author portrays characters like Kathleen and Frances Piper or Rose Lacroix, exploring hybrid identities in connection to sexuality and gender roles. As an example, regarding the character of Kathleen Piper as and hybrid identity, and the fear of miscegenation in New Waterford repressive post-colonial setting, MacDonald writes:

The other girls salve their corrosive envy and allay their fear of Kathleen, the antisocial prodigy, with an invigorating dose of racial hatred: "She may be peaches and cream but you should see her mother ... black as the ace of spades, my dear." "You know that sort of thing stays in the blood. Evangeline Campbell's mother's cousin knows a girl had a baby in Louisburg? Black as coal, my dear, and the both their families white as snow and blond blond." "We should've never let the coloureds into this country in the first place." "My uncle saw a coloured woman driving a cart with a load of coal, the next morning he was dead." "They have a smell, they do." "Kathleen Piper belongs in The Coke Ovens!" And they laugh. (97)

Fall on Your Knees reveals a wide variety of characters, a multicultural setting, but what is more important it illustrates women's experience regarding racism and sexism, the fears of miscegenation and the cruel consequences for a woman transgressing racial codes.

3.2 Being a lesbian woman in *Fall on Your Knees*

Fall on Your Knees is also a great example of characters exploration of sexual identity. MacDonald cleverly explores different manifestations of women's sexuality breaking heteronormative stereotypes, sex roles and sexual identities. To this regard, the following sentence in the novel synthetically summarises the author's disruptive aim: "She is a tall slim young man in a curious suit of black and tan. There is nothing to beat her leaning against the bricks of any building 'twixt here and Battery Park Rose" (515). Sexuality is strongly interconnected in the story with categories of race, and gender, and sexual nonconformity becomes another form of resisting and disrupting heteronormativity and patriarchal control.

In an in-depth analysis, we can find at least three main characters in the novel that manifest a lesbian sexual identity or at least sexual desire, Kathleen and Frances Piper, Rose Lacroix, along with a secondary character Giles. Even so, this non-normative sexual desire is most of the time hinted, being necessary to read between the lines for specific references. Only Kathleen Piper and Rose Lacroix's relationship is fully displayed at the end of the novel. On the one hand, we could argue that MacDonald mimics tradition by just suggesting these transgressive sexual identities. Nevertheless, she breaks the norm by introducing a strong intertextual element, Kathleen's diary, to intensely narrate lesbian sexual

experience and desire. MacDonald strategically provides information about Kathleen's life in New York, suggesting that her illicit relationship is with a black man. It is not till the end of the novel that we learn her lover is not a black man but a woman. In *No Margins: Writing Canadian Fiction in Lesbian* (2006) MacDonald explains:

I want to take people to places they don't want to go because they might find the offensive, or wrong or frighten (...). I'm going to invite them to a feast, and if I do my job, they'll stay with me. And it was only after I'd finished *Fall on Your Knees* that I realized I'd been kind of Machiavellian, in that I put all the hot lesbian stuff at the end. So, it was too late for anyone to put the book down. If they had come that far, it meant they really needed to get to the end. I think people are more open-hearted than they are usually given credit for being. (173)

Parro argues that whereas inter-racial relationships are portrayed in this novel, lesbian desire is never openly acknowledged and remains a hidden topic in *New Waterford*. She also states that "lesbian desire haunts the characters of this novel, who consistently ignore it and displace it, seeing and fearing other transgressions such as miscegenation" (189). Parro's vision, considering MacDonald's interview, could be questioned pondering that in the year of publication, 1996, it was easier to openly deal with miscegenation than with lesbian themes. Furthermore, it is worth commenting that the author was probably trying to avoid being stereotyped in her first novel, as a lesbian fiction writer.

In all, MacDonald seems to be saying that what we thought was true, what we believe were stable categories such as race, gender, or sexual identity, by means of which we understood the world are not. The way the relationships and lives of the different characters in *Fall on Your Knees* developed reveals the need and urgency to revise these reductive categories to encourage debate and promote social change.

After this brief description of the implications of gender, race, and sexual identity in *Fall on Your Knees*, we will proceed now to a detailed analysis of the main female roles in the novel. We will concentrate in how their lives intertwined in a colonial setting, regarding the complex associations of race to gender roles and sexuality. Moreover, all these female characters will be read in connection to their relationship with James Piper, the main patriarchal figure in the novel.

4. Female Characters analysis

4.1 Materia Mahmoud-Piper, or “The battered woman syndrome³”

When Materia Mahmoud was only four years old, she was already engaged to marry a cousin who was a dentist in the Old Country (14). So, from a very early age she is just seen as a property in the eyes of her father. Materia’s future was already decided upon her, even before the Mahmouds set foot in Canada (Nicholls 52). Mr Mahmoud, a Lebanese merchant, perceives his daughters as commodities that, eventually, will help him improve socially and financially. Moreover, when Materia first arrives at Sydney Harbor being six years old, she hears her father say: “Look. This is the New World. Anything is possible here” (14). Later on, as MacDonald remarks, Materia will realise that his father was talking to her brothers not her. The author plays here with the stereotype of the possibilities of freedom the New World provides, since for an Arab woman like Materia that will not be the case (Andrews 12).

When James Piper first sees Materia Mahmoud, he is immediately attracted to her differences, and also her youth, fact that foregrounds the later incestuous relationship with two of their daughters. As describing Materia, he comments “the darkest eyes he’d ever seen, wet with light. Coal-black curls escaping from two long braids. Summer skin the colour of sand stroked by the tide.” (12). James is attracted to her for she is different and exotic, and this triggers his desire. In the same way, Materia is attracted to James as the powerful other, he is white which reminds her of the “china figurines of English aristocracy” (10) and his being white represents normativity in New Waterford. Thus, Materia’s attraction to James connects to the post-colonial setting, and to her necessity as the outsider to fit in a white predominant New World.

Soon after, when Materia elopes with James to marry him without her father’s permission, what enrages Mr Mahmoud is not that Materia choses

³ Battered woman syndrome (BWS), mental disorder caused by long-term domestic abuse, considered a subcategory of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Women develop a learned helplessness believing they deserves abuse unable to escape from it. ([healthline.com](https://www.healthline.com))

James, whom he disapprovingly perceives as English (*enklese*), but the fact that she has defied his patriarchal authority. "It wasn't so much that the piano tuner was '*enklese*', or even that he was not a Catholic or a man of means. It was that he had come like a thief in the night and stolen another man's property" (17). The magnitude of the transgression Materia made forbids her to contact her family again, becoming ostracized, she will never be able to ask her family for help. From a very early stage of the marriage, James becomes disenchanted with Materia, he does not find her attractive anymore and starts concentrating on what he thinks are her faults or her inability to fulfil the roles he had expected from her as a woman. James realises that he has married a child, that belongs to what he sees now as a different inferior race. James connects and explains his dissatisfaction with Materia and his mistake marrying her in those terms:

How had he been ensnared by a child? There was something not right about Materia. Normal children didn't run away with men. He knew from his reading that clinical simpletons necessarily had an overdeveloped animal nature. She had seduced him. That was why he hadn't noticed she was a child. Because she wasn't one. Not a real one. It was queer. Sick, even. Perhaps it was a racial flaw. (34)

James shows extreme cruelty and racism and does not take responsibility for his marriage. Also, he blames her for having seduced him, insinuating that a normal child will not seduce a grown-up man. Here, James is not only not assuming responsibility for the marriage, but also foregrounding that he is not to blame either for his future incestuous relationships with two of his daughters

Furthermore, James is obsessed with the superiority of his European origins and he wants to belong in his Canadian community from his privileged Anglo-Saxon origin, thus, he tries to hide the mistake she made marrying Materia, thus staining his family line (Hammond 18). On his determination to cultivate himself he learns from Encyclopedias and book collections he orders from the Old World, focusing on Charles Darwin's work, and determinist theories related to eugenics, that were fashionable at the end of the 19th century (Staels 328). As McCormack points out regarding the novel's setting, "Colonial informed theories of evolution dominate domestic and community life, and whiteness is idealized through a narrative concern with the purported purity of blood relations" (138). Victorian traditional categories regarding race and gender rule the New Waterford

post-colonial setting, described by MacDonald. Moreover, James's readings justify his position of superiority as a white male in this community, reinforcing his thought superiority and rejection of the other.

After Materia's family disavows her, she does not know how to act or how to be what James expects from her as a woman. Materia is just a teenager and without any feminine role model to guide her, not even an in-law, she is at loss. When she falls pregnant for the first time, she becomes depressed and starts acting up in weird ways. James wonders "weren't women supposed to be happy about something like that?", he does not understand Materia and finds her behaviour "disturbing and unhealthy even" (23). Materia does not fit the category of woman as he understands it and soon James starts pressuring her and exercising his patriarchal violence to make her fit in the expected female roles (Nicholls 53). Eventually, with the help of her close Jew neighbour Mrs Luvovitz, Materia partially manages to fulfil the role of dutiful wife and mother. Mrs Luvovitz serves a female role model to Materia. She teaches Materia how to cook, to tend her house or be a mother (28). She becomes a substitute mother for Materia and a transmitter of gender roles.

Concerning motherhood, Materia is unable to connect or love her first baby, Kathleen. James blames this inability on Materia's faults: her skin colour and Arabic origins. At one point, he even separates Kathleen from her mother breasts, "the child would have to be weaned before it was poisoned" (34), denoting his fear of this mother-daughter connection and the influence of Materia's darkness on the white looking baby. Materia is relegated to a role of just "caretaker" of her daughter with very limited functions. Kathleen's white skinned and good looks soon become James's obsession, that develops into an incestuous attraction. The first time we as readers are aware of this fact, is when James slapped Kathleen. Materia consoles her daughter and puts her to bed tending to her as "a mother is meant to." However, after doing so she takes a pillow and "places it gently over the sleeping face" (61). Even though Materia regrets this action and removes the pillow, a tragic end is here foregrounded. By James oppression mother and daughter become estranged. As Kathleen grows up, she starts becoming the woman James's thinks he should have married, on the other side Materia will always remain his "dark" mistake.

Regarding Materia's siblings, she does not manage to produce a male heir. Thus, her father's curse produced in these severe words "May God curse her womb" (17) bring her one more alienation regarding her relationship with James. Materia believed that a son would have helped her regain her family's and James's acceptance and love. In the end, Materia's life experience represents in Nicholl's words "how the roles of wife and mother are not inherently natural for all women, highlighting how patriarchal ideology constructs feminine domesticity and motherhood as natural and fulfilling" (54). Materia is doomed, her female clan becomes her burden and the impossibility to avoid her fate. She will never escape James's oppression and her entrapment to motherhood and domesticity is definite.

Nevertheless, by diverse and little but significant acts Materia tries to combat James's white patriarchal oppression. For instance, even though he forbids Materia to speak in Arabic to her daughters, she manages to teach them little love words, folk songs, and dances. She succeeds in creating this special mother-daughter unique connection, particularly with her two younger daughters, from which James is excluded. The fact that all the Arabic words and folk songs are not translated in the novel could also be read as MacDonald's Lebanese heritage signature.

Furthermore, another significant act of Materia's combat against James's repression is when she starts playing piano in the Empire Theatre to support her family. She happily plays piano creating her own musical mix, earning money and appreciation for it. Materia defies James's obsession with whiteness and purity playing what he thought to be "coloured music" (230). The fact that she resists James's rules and that she does it in a public space, as James's Piper wife, and gaining social recognition, and money, is even more challenging. For a short moment, Materia is a free woman and her music and success become her retaliation. Yet, when James starts making enough money working in the mine, he forbids Materia to work. Back in the house, with no social life, she starts depressing and looks for comfort in her Roman Catholic faith. Aware of the danger that awaits her daughter, Materia starts acting as a "harlot" with James in order to lure him and "prevent a greater sin" on James's part (63). Materia as a mother is sacrificing herself for her daughter. James uses her as a sexual object

and even though he despises her, he regains her sexual interest for Materia: “Her dark body and soft mind allowed him to enjoy her in an uncomplicated way. Why did he ever look to her for conversation or mental stimulation?” (63). Materia could not prevent James’s obsession and influence on Kathleen’s education, but she tries at least to avoid her daughter sexual subjugation.

Eventually, Materia is freer to exercise the mother role assigned to her since James’s oppression has lessened due to his obsession with Kathleen. Materia performs her assigned women roles, housewife, mother, and sexual object. She tries to be the perfect wife and mother. She starts cooking and cleaning and tries to cater for everybody in the family pretending to be “the angel in the house.” But as Nicholls remarks Materia has no life, her relegation to the domestic sphere alienates her throughout the years (56). Materia loses a fourth child after birth, and soon after, we observe her physical and mental decline. She has become isolated by all the unspoken repression, lack of identity and domestic violence. At one point, suicidal behaviour and thoughts are displayed, “Materia slowly let her mind ebb away. Until she was ready to part with it once and for all” (56). When James enrolls to fight in World War I, to avoid Kathleen and his incestuous desire for her, Materia just wishes him death. She is aware that James’s death in the front will mean the only way out from her entrapment. While James is away in the war, Materia is a free woman again with no men supervision, nor her father nor her husband (Hammond 30). Unfortunately, things develop very differently and after James’s return from the war, he once again takes control of the household and the education of their daughters relegating Materia to her old care-taker role.

At the start of book 2 in *Fall on Your Knees*, titled *No man’s land*, we see Kathleen pregnant. Later in the novel, we will find out that James has raped her and summoned her back to New Waterford, after discovering her illicit love affair with a black woman. When Kathleen pregnancy comes to an end, Materia is obliged to kill her daughter to save the twin babies inside her. Materia states “I knew she was better off that way. I didn’t know her well, but I knew she didn’t want to live any more. She preferred to die, and I allowed her to do so” (138), displaying a final self-sacrifice act of mercy for her daughter. At this point, Materia confronts James for the first time “after nineteen-year slumber” (145). The rage and sorrow she felt for Kathleen’s tragic end gave her the strength to think of

killing his oppressor. Despite this confrontation, Materia's life also ends up tragically, since she commits suicide three days after killing Kathleen, unable to cope with everything that had happened. Materia succumbs to James's domination and quits life unable to escape her female doom. This final act represents the suffering of years of domestic violence and repression that went unseen and accepted by her community, where patriarchal dominance was the norm. Moreover, the fact that her husband was white and "English" justified this dominance and final subjugation in New Waterford postcolonial setting (Kulperger 120).

4.2 Frances and Mercedes Piper, or "The Madonna-whore dichotomy"⁴

Mercedes, Materia's middle daughter, is a pious girl, devoted to the well-being of others and willing to sacrifice herself for her family. On the other side of the female gender spectrum, we find Frances, Materia's younger daughter, a rebel and provoking teenager that strips and prostitutes herself in a speakeasy. MacDonald constructs these two characters in opposition, the good and the bad, the pious and the prostitute, what is expected from a "good woman" and what is not.

From a very early age Mercedes is the submissive daughter who behaves properly and respects her parents' authority. Regarding the looks of the two sisters, Mercedes will "turn out on the plain side" whereas Frances is a cute, lively little girl with a "mischievous green" and already "James can't help being particularly taken with Frances" (129). We see here how looks determined a woman's life in the domestic space and later in her relation to the world. From a young age both girls establish a relational pattern with their father. Mercedes needs to be extremely well-behaved to compensate for her lack of looks, whereas Frances's misbehaviours are tolerated for her good looks.

⁴ The Madonna-whore dichotomy (MWD) denotes polarized perceptions of women as either "good," and chaste, Madonnas or "bad," and promiscuous, whores. Feminist theory suggests the MWD stems from a desire to reinforce patriarchy. [PsycNET \(apa.org\)](http://PsycNET.apa.org)

When she is only six years old, Frances witnesses Kathleen's death in the hands of Matera. James, down from the sorrow for having lost Kathleen, the object of his obsession, starts molesting Frances. A sexual and physical abuse relationship is established from that day on between James and Frances. When Mercedes is eight years old, she witnesses this first episode of sexual abuse. Unable to understand what she has seen and lived from such a very early age, those memories of what happened that night remained blurry in her mind as she grows older, "Daddy and Frances in the Rocking Chair" (375). Mercedes loves and respects his father and does not question his authority or behaviour. All at once, she shows love for her sisters and particularly for Frances. She displays a sense of responsibility towards them, and particularly protects Frances, "whenever she loses track of Frances, bad things happen" (168).

In contrast, Frances grows up into a difficult teenager, always provoking her father anger and seeking revenge. She starts performing in a speakeasy in the black neighbourhood, *the Coke Ovens*, run by relatives from her mother's side. As a victim of child abuse, Frances showcases a series of typical behaviours such as isolation from her family, anxiety, alcohol abuse, or eating disorders. Moreover, Frances fights back her horrible experience by using her sexuality as a tool to control men and their instincts (Somacarrera 72). For instance, Frances manages to get expelled of Our Lady of Mount Carmel School by sexually assaulting a fellow student with "priestly vocation", Cornelius "Father Pie" Murphy (291). MacDonald clearly subverts stereotypes with this particular passage. Moreover, when Frances starts prostituting herself in the speakeasy she seems to be in total control of the situation, establishing limits maintaining her "technical virginity" (293). Also, the fact that she prostitutes herself in the black neighbourhood and in a club run by her Arab relatives represents the fiercest way to get back at his racist father and reaffirm her hybrid identity.

Later, Frances seduces Leo Taylor, Kathleen's black driver, to get pregnant and have a mixed-race baby. In her quest, she becomes alienated and gets in a series of conflicts with the Taylors. Frances uses her sexuality first in her job at the speakeasy, and later seducing Leo Tyler, as a subversive way of seeking rebellion and revenge. By means of this character MacDonald debunks Victorian conventions of female sexuality (Somacarrera 67). Particularly, Frances

and Leo Taylor's short liaison breaks the established norm in many ways. Frances just seeks an encounter with Leo to get pregnant. She is not romantically interested in the encounter not even sexually; her aim is purely biological. Moreover, Leo appears to have no control of the sexual encounter since he seems to be under a spell (372). In a way, the description of the situation looks as a form of sexual assault since Leo is seen as a victim that does not verbally consent the intercourse. The fact that Frances, a young white woman, plots a sexual encounter with a black married male, an encounter that she utterly dominates, becomes a powerful disturbing passage in the novel portraying extreme transgression of gender and race roles.

Frances Piper becomes an unpredictable rebellious character, whose resilience and subversiveness seem endless. Yet, at one point in the story, we see how Frances defeats James. All her rebellious acts pay back when James Piper admits defeat and instructs: "If you're going to live here ... whatever you get up to ... keep it away from Lily" (290). By her rebellious acts and questioning of the domestic patriarchal oppression Frances has managed to finally be a free woman who decides for herself free from abuse, and with a powerful voice.

In contrast, Mercedes becomes the model daughter that loves her father unconditionally. She is a devoted catholic, defender of traditional values in the Piper's house, and after Materia's death, she reproduces the role expected from her gender becoming the new "angel in the house" (Nicholls 67). Even though Mercedes was a good student and dreamt of going to University, once again she sacrifices herself for his father to take care of Lily and Frances. She grows into a guardian of James legacy, regarding the transmission of racist and misogynists' values and education. Yet, we can also interpret that Mercedes fate is doomed even though she has followed the conventional rules and perform in the way that was expected from her. Mercedes hopes of developing those roles outside the Piper's household failed. Her love for Ralph, Mrs Luvovitz's son, is unrequited, and she will never become a mother. Mercedes character represents a woman that remains subjugated to patriarchal control and to gender expectations, unable to question or to break free from them.

About their relationship with Lily, their sister-niece, both women, Frances and Mercedes, influence her in different ways. Mercedes tries to act as a

substitute mother transmitting James's bigoted values and protecting Lily from Frances's corrupted influence. On the other hand, Frances tries to exercise a positive and liberating influence on Lily, guiding her in the search of her true-life story. Both, aunt and niece search their origins and try to resurface their heritage and the pain and trauma that come with it, fighting back the heteronormative white made up discourse that James has imposed (McCormack 157). A special bond is established between the two, a sorority that will link them with Materia and her rebel ways and Kathleen and her also subversive female spirit.

When Frances finally achieves her goal and becomes pregnant of Leo Tyler, she changes her defiant attitude. She stops drinking, starts taking care, cleaning the house, cooking, and wearing some of Materia's old dresses. Frances finally succumbs to traditional female roles of motherhood and domesticity, but she does it in her own terms, as a single mother of a mixed-race child, and once James patriarchal oppression is under control due to his old age and sickness. Unfortunately, she will never meet her baby since Mercedes shows her true nature in a final act of safeguarding James racist values. Mercedes not able to cope with having a half black nephew, hides Anthony in an orphanage (Vercooren 68). Even knowing her father's perverse side, Mercedes still cannot question the values he has transmitted her and reproduces his racism becoming James's image.

In the end we reflect on how the lives of Mercedes and Frances are shaped by the obsessive control, pain, and abuse cause by this strong and perverse patriarchal figure that James represents. It could be interpreted that after Materia's and Kathleen's death, James somehow reconstructs his family in a malicious way by subjugating her daughters into the established female gender roles. Mercedes fulfills the role of housewife and substitute mother for Lily, whereas Frances becomes his sexual object. In short, Frances is probably the more complex and multilayered character together with James Piper. Moreover, in an oversimplified reading we could interpret that James represents the hegemonic male discourse and Frances the personification of womanhood and the subversion and undermining of the patriarchal tyranny. Furthermore, we could understand that when James is sick and old and gives Frances Kathleen's diary, his old values, and abusive nature will die with him. On the other hand, Kathleen's

free transgressive spirit and independence, and Frances's strength, determination and resilience will be transmitted to the next generation, their daughter and niece Lily and their son and nephew Anthony.

4.3 Lily Piper-Lacroix, or "There is hope for women"

Unlike her sisters, Lily Piper does not suffer fully James's controlling authority. Lily that strongly resembles her true biological mother Kathleen, also becomes James's favourite and educational project. However, this time James is older, has suffered Kathleen's loss, and his influence and control is not as strong. Due to her physical disability, she catches polio while still a baby, Lily is protected by all the members of the Piper's family. As it has been mentioned before, Frances facilitates her pilgrimage to New York to learn about her mother's past. During the trip, Lily learns through Kathleen's narration about her true mother, her coming of age, her sexuality, and the existence of Rose, her lesbian lover. A different and freer female model is revealed to her opening up these possibilities to the third generation of Piper's women, and breaking up for good the transmission cycle of ancient values regarding femininity.

At the end of the novel, we see that Lily Piper is living with Rose (Doc Rose), and when Anthony (Frances's lost son) arrives to their house, he takes them for an old couple. To this regard, Vercooren and Stevenson argue that Lily is romantically involved with Rose, now living as a male (Vercooren 82; Stevenson 51). Nevertheless, MacDonald does not make any specific reference to this love relationship. Lily has established a father-mother figure reference with Doc Rose. This alliance could be interpreted as one more example of subverting stereotypes on the part of MacDonald. The writer seems to be saying that family is where you find love and understanding. Thus, Doc Rose represents Lily's real family, her lost mother/father figure. Moreover, the fact that thirty years have gone by and Lily is single and childless, leaving with Doc Rose, represents her choice for being a free independent woman who has decided not to fit in the assigned female gender roles and live life on her own terms.

At the end of the story, we realize that Lily is the final narrator whose first and final words close the circle of the Piper's story. Finally, all the Piper family

members have come to rest, each of them on their own terms. The plot line ending with probably the more bizarre union, crippled Lily sharing her life with Doc Rose, famous black pianist man/woman, welcoming Frances's lost mixed-race child. Three generations, past, present, and future, coming together in a final embrace of understanding and acceptance of diversity.

4.4 Frances Piper and Teresa Tylor, or "The complexity of lesbian desire"

Frances Piper does not show any interest in men throughout the novel. Not a reference is made regarding her interest in the opposite sex romantically or sexually. While an adolescent, Frances prostitutes herself but she establishes certain boundaries and tricks such as her "communion glove" to detach herself from sexual intercourse with men (293). Moreover, Frances's idols were always female movie stars like Mary Pickford, Louise Brooks or Lillian Gish (Vercooren 77). When referring to Brooks Frances remarks:

Her hair is perfect, her eyes are perfect, her little mouth is perfect. She is so small and so brave. She can be bent, but never broken. Men are brutes, and if they are not, they are big galoots or else chivalrous princes who arrive too late. (197)

Not only her comments can be interpreted as lesbian desire but also her references to men sound indifferent and uninterested. As for Louise Brooks, it must be mentioned that her sexuality was questioned at the time and she admitted having had lesbian romances. Even more, one of her movies *Pandora's Box*, Frances's favourite, dealt with a lesbian relationship and was polemic at the time (Vercooren 77). It could be argued that Kathleen, whom we clearly identify as a lesbian in the novel, had male idols in her adolescence such as Rudolph Valentino. Nevertheless, MacDonald is making these remarks in order to make us reflect on the fluidity of sexual identity, and the absence of definite or true categories.

Additionally, we see a complex, and at the same time subtle love connection with Teresa Tylor. Frances met her when she was a child and from the very first moment she was transfixed and attracted to her: "Teresa touches one of her hands. The one holding the envelope. Teresa smiles down at her. Frances collects the moment and puts it in a safe place with two or three others."

(120). Teresa's beauty and darkness acted as a magnet, and Frances referred to her as "Queen Teresa" (141,320). In her brief different encounters Frances exhibits what we could consider a platonic love for her. When Frances is at her mother's funeral MacDonald writes "She dares not sneak another look behind her at the woman of her dreams" (141). Frances fantasizes about Teresa rescuing her and running away in a taxi "into the land of black and white liquorice peppermint rock candy" (141). Once more, MacDonald is subverting and playing with stereotypes. Frances as a girl is meant "to be saved" by some patriarchal figure. The myth of the handsome prince, saving the girl in a horse, and taking her to his castle is humorously debunked by subversive Frances. She is to be saved by a Black Queen in a taxi heading straight to Candyland.

It could also be argued that Frances's fascination with Teresa relates to a motherly figure, not a lover. However, in several passages, MacDonald playfully suggests lesbian desire "she watches the fizzy gold slide past Teresa's lips and ripple down her throat, Frances feels a craving" (321). All the more, we see Teresa's strange and complex fixation with Frances. It is no easy to read their connection but we see this strange platonic love developing when Teresa confronts Frances after several incidents regarding herself and her family, and out of rage she shoots her while pregnant. As Parro notes, "her bullet provides Frances with a way of having her baby with a person she loves" (188). MacDonald uses the metaphor of the bullet to allude impregnation and to reveal Frances true desire. For Frances, no reproductive liaison with Teresa was possible, thus, the closest possibility was her brother Leo.

Frances looks up and experiences an arrow through her heart at the crucivision. The arrow is love, its pain spreads outward and the pain is faith, the source that launched the arrow was sorrow. 'Teresa', thinks Frances, and her lips move around the name as she stretches her arms up and holds them out to the woman standing above. (399)

After the shooting, Frances absolves Teresa and takes the blame. MacDonald ends this complex love story with a very confusing line "Nine and a half months later, Teresa gives birth to a perfect baby girl she calls Adele Claire. Adelaide was right. Hector still worked" (411). We are left wondering how it was possible that Teresa finally was able to get pregnant by her impeded husband in a wheelchair, that till then have proved incapable of conceiving. MacDonald

probably wrote this metaphoric distorted passage to subvert gender roles regarding sexual identity and to expose reproductive limitations affecting lesbian love at the time.

4.5 Giles, or “I am the New Woman”

Even though Giles is a secondary character in *Fall on Your Knees*, it is key in relation to Kathleen and lesbian identity. Giles is James Piper’s cousin on his mother’s side. When James can no longer control his incestuous attraction for Kathleen, he sends her to live with Giles in New York. James describes Giles as an “old maid with an odd first name” that works with nuns (113). At the time, the term old maid was used derogatively to refer to a woman that did not marry. It is also worth mentioning that Giles is a name commonly used for boys not girls, thus probably chosen intentionally by the author. She is a sixty-year-old retired single woman, who lives on her own in an apartment in Greenwich Village. This particular neighbourhood is associated with the homosexual community and it became known as *the Bohemian Capital* where people explored unconventional lifestyles. The fact that MacDonald places Giles residence in this neighbourhood suggests that Giles also lives an alternative lifestyle.

Furthermore, we learn Giles volunteers in a convent helping console old dying nuns. MacDonald describes her not as a compassionate or pious person but as someone who is used to listen without judgment. When describing confessions and repents, MacDonald writes “Ancient sins bloom afresh, fragrant with the purity they possessed a moment before they were named and nipped in the bud (124). Historically nunneries have been associated with lesbian relationships. Free from marriage and living in an all-female community, a nunnery became a safe haven for women. Moreover in 1985, the book *Lesbian Nuns: Breaking Silence* was published by a small feminist and lesbian press. The book was controversial and became very popular within the LGBTQ community, probably inspiring MacDonald. Introducing this character, Giles and her connection with the nuns, the author subtly brings forward a provocative topic such as illicit lesbian affairs in female religious communities.

Just as Giles is respectful with the dying nuns, she is also respectful with Kathleen's life and she asks no questions. She is portrayed as a liberal and more open-minded parental figure and allows Kathleen greater amounts of freedom that permit her to start finding her way in life. She also exposes Kathleen to different cultural experiences that the city has to offer (130). Kathleen acknowledges this fact in her diary "Without her total lack of vigilance my life could never have got started" (278). What initially might be interpreted as negligence later in the story we realise is complicity since Giles allows her to experience love and life freely. Giles plays a very important part on Kathleen's self-discovery and transformation.

MacDonald portrays Giles as a spinster but breaks the idea of the old maid and destabilises the stereotype. Giles is a free woman, that lives on her own terms, volunteers, rides a bicycle, and has a rich cultural and social life in New York City at the beginning of the 20th century. She could be interpreted as a representative of the feminist ideal of the time "the New Woman."

4.6 Kathleen Piper and Rose Lacroix, or "Finally a true lesbian love story"

The illicit love affair between Kathleen Piper and Rose Lacroix is a magnificent love story that represents the main hidden plot in *Fall on Your Knees*. The lesbian relationship openly helps questioning the correlation of gender and sexual identity. Kathleen and Rose represent alternative non heterosexual identities and to fully understand their love, it is necessary to analyse both characters and their complex features regarding gender roles and hybrid identities.

From the very early days of Kathleen's life, we see how James becomes obsessed with her daughter. "He was going to give that girl everything. She was going to grow up a lady. She'd have accomplishments. Everyone would see" (32). James plans every aspect of Kathleen's life, from a "baby pram" and her clothes, to her dolls and books, and when he finds out she can sing, he plans a brilliant future for her as an international opera diva (Nicholls 59). He fantasizes Kathleen would become "a modern girl", the "New Woman" (60) he has read about in his books, not aware of what the feminist concept of the "New Woman" really meant

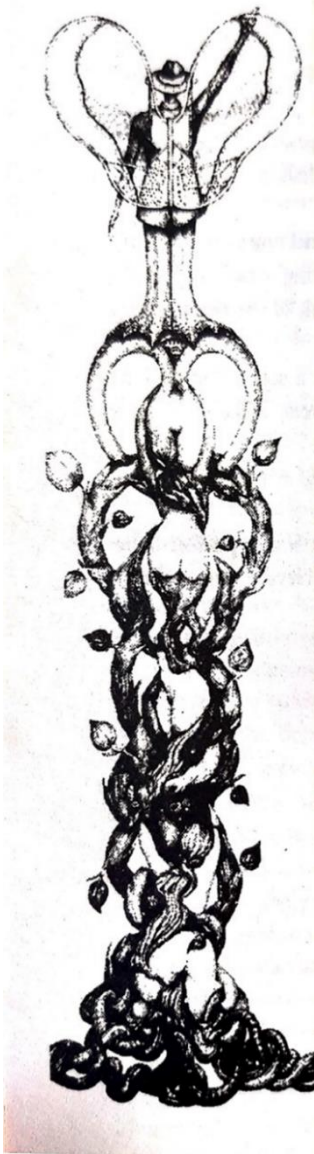
and the repercussions regarding freedom and transgression it could have on Kathleen's life. James becomes a patriarchal oppressive figure fully in control of every aspect of Kathleen's life till he sent her to New York and entrusted her to Giles (Nicholls 60).

Because James despises Materia, Kathleen mimics this behaviour from a very early age, and she does not establish a healthy bond with her mother. In a heart-breaking passage where Materia has Kathleen in her lap, and she is singing to her in Arabic, we read "Kathleen tried not to breathe. Tried not to understand the song. She tried to think of Daddy and light things - fresh air, and green grass – she worried that Daddy would know. And be hurt. There was a smell" (39). Thus, a proper bond was never established between mother and daughter due to James's influence and coercion. Kathleen is clearly ashamed of Materia; she is determined not to follow her mother steps and refuses to replicate her life or the female roles she performs. Due to her good looks and her singing talent, Kathleen is not assigned the typical women tasks. She is educated to pursue her father's ambitions evading domesticity and marriage patterns. Nonetheless, she cannot help being instrumentalised and sexualised by her father to become an object of desire and a product for consumerism in a social system controlled by men.

From page 175 onwards in *Fall on Your Knees*, MacDonald introduces intertextual elements to narrate Kathleen's life experience in New York. These passages are displayed in a very interesting format, with stunning illustrations on top and bottom of some pages. It seems as if these artworks wrap the narrative, providing different pieces of a complex jigsaw in the form of poems, letters and beautiful metaphors, that hide the illicit love affair that finally unfolds the plot (176,

235 ,279, 308, and 412⁵). Moreover, in book 8 *Hejira*, a key intertextual text is included: MacDonald fully reproduces Kathleen Piper's diary, where she chronologically narrates in detail her coming of age in New York City. MacCormark argues that Kathleen's diary is her way of "writing herself into existence in opposition to his father's imposing narratives" (172). Kathleen's

powerful narrative voice shows a young woman experiencing life for the first time away from her father's obsessive control.



In New York, Kathleen falls in love with Rose Lacroix, her piano accompanist. Regarding Rose, we must admit that she is probably the more intriguing character in the novel. Rose is a half white, half African American pianist that lives in Harlem. Rose personifies transgressions and destabilization regarding gender and race identities. About Rose Lacroix cross-dressing, much has been written by different academics in connexion with *Gender Trouble* (1990), Judith Butler's study on gender performativity⁶. Thus, it seems obvious that MacDonald was portraying with this love story several issues that were on the agenda at the time. On the road to understand Rose Lacroix decision to cross dress, we need to analyse the description of the character provided by the author. Lacroix is always depicted as being uncomfortable in her own skin. In Kathleen's eyes we see her dress oddly in a pale, pink dress with "puffed sleeves", braids, ribbons in her hair, in sum, lots of girlie-girl features that do not seem to fit her characteristics and

personality (125). Frost interprets that this can be read as "an exaggerated

⁵ Drawing reproduced from page 412 in *Fall on Your Knees*. Might represent sorority, women supporting each other building a tower to escape patriarchy. On top, Rose Lacroix, wearing a fedora, and fairy wings that allow her to escape and be free.

⁶ In *Gender Trouble*, Butler explores aspects such as how masculine and feminine can combine in this performativity bringing out a set of characteristics that belong to a different expression of gender not fitting the established heteronormativity and binary codes.

performance of femininity, a woman in female drag” (205). The dresses and hairdos seem to be remarkably feminine, insinuating and attempt to disguise Rose’s lack of femininity. Furthermore, we can understand that Rose wears clothes probably provided by her mother, trying to compensate for her blackness. Mrs. Lacroix may be trying to emulate by dressing her daughter, what her social class should had been, had she not been disavowed by her family due to her “black transgression”. We are not fully aware of whether these attempts are made by her mother or by Rose herself, conscious of her inability to fit in her gender role assigned by birth.

Initially for Rose, dressing up in men’s clothes is just a way of feeling his deceased father (496). Then, first time Rose wears her father’s suit it seems to be an unintentional event in a playful situation with Kathleen, where she is challenged by her. Still, we later see how Rose is more comfortable in this new attire and how it facilitates, on the one hand, the exposure of the lesbian lovers in public spaces and, on the other, the integration in the Harlem jazz community (520). Thus, when the couple expose themselves to society, they do it assuming heteronormative roles: Kathleen performs as the woman or “femme”, and Rose as the man or “butch”. These femme-butch roles performed by Kathleen and Rose become very relevant in their acquisition and acceptance of their identity as lesbian lovers.

Later in the novel, we find out that Rose lived her life as male jazz musician, Doc Rose, right after Kathleen’s abrupt departure. MacDonald was probably inspired here by the life of Bill Tipton, a female born jazz musician who lived all her life as a male. To begin a serious jazz career, Tipton decided to permanently take on a male role. At the time the novel was written, Tipton was a case study in the essentially fluid boundaries of human sexuality, thus probably an inspiration in the development of character Rose Lacroix, Doc Rose. At that point, jazz was a “male world”, thus with Tipton and Lacroix we are left wondering whether we are dealing with gender identity or a strategy to perform and succeed in the music industry. The fact that both Doc Rose and Tipton are performers of music and performers of gender identity, could be read as the author’s need to communicate different representations of performativity and a reflexion on how male and female are part biology and part performativity in each cultural context.

Thus, the fact that Rose decides to spend her life as Doc Rose, after Kathleen's dramatic departure, could be interpreted as a strategy to fit in the jazz world.

At the time Kathleen and Rose's love story is set, 1918, lesbian relationships were interpreted through the term *sexual invert*. It was common for some women "to pass" as men, to perform as men to be accepted, access certain jobs or even fight in wars.

Butch women's more masculine clothing and short hair conflicted starkly with feminine norms at the time, and femme women exaggerated femininity and became known for their bright lipstick and seductive dress. Femme-butch couples resembled popular media images of heterosexual gender in the culture of that time, and increased public awareness of lesbianism through their discernible gender representation. (Levitt, Gerrish, and Hiestand 99)

These "passing women", according to some theorists, represent early articulations of lesbian identity and desire. Passing women were the forerunners of the term "butch" identity, which became visible in the 1920s (Newton. E web). Consequently, Rose and Kathleen's performativity can be read in those terms, understanding their social exposure as pioneers of the femme-butch New York scene.

Towards describing Kathleen's and Rose's love making, as it has been mentioned before, MacDonald uses beautiful powerful metaphors some of them related to water (176). Moreover, at one point Kathleen starts feeling uneasy in their sexual intercourse as she states the following:

I thought I would feel calmer, surer, but each time we come close I almost feel sick at first. As though each time vibrates with the time before. I feel a terrible sorrow coming up my throat, I don't know why. And it can only be consoled against the length of her body. (530)

It might seem that by allowing herself to follow her true lesbian desire, Kathleen has broken her false identity, or the identity James had constructed for her. The "wave of sorrow" that reaches her throat represents what she has not been allowed to be, a free child, loved and accepted by her family and with healthy relationships. Kathleen can no longer pretend or perform this old identity, and necessarily she is overwhelmed by all the issues she must face to be her true self: the relationship with her mother, the implications and acceptance of her Lebanese heritage, her sexual identity and love for Rose.

Concerning her hybrid identity, Kathleen is ashamed of her Lebanese origins and tries to omit or hide her mother's ethnicity. While growing up Kathleen always functioned as an Anglo-Saxon girl, hiding half her identity instructed by her father. As Vercooren puts it, she was educated to perform "whiteness" (46). While Kathleen was in New Waterford, she was trained by James to prevent close contact with other races interiorising this bigoted discourse. It is not until Kathleen reaches New York, and falls in love with Rose Lacroix, that she is able to explore and face racial issues outside James prevalent influence and presence. When confronted by Rose regarding a family picture, Kathleen states "I 'm not ashamed of my mother, but I take after my father. My mother is devoid of ambition and not terribly bright, although she is a devoted parent" (504). While this conversation between the two lovers takes place, Kathleen feels uncomfortable and sick. At one point in the conversation Rose makes this explicit remark, "You are ashamed of your mother" (504). It is only then, that Kathleen is finally aware of who she is and the fact that she needs to come to terms with her hybrid identity. Once more Kathleen is obliged to question what has been repressed by James's manipulation.

Likewise, through her love for Rose, we see the metaphoric understanding of Materia and her Lebanese heritage (Staels 331). It seems as if Kathleen away from his father perverse influence and separated physically from her mother, can find Materia, accept, and love her. When hugging Rose, Kathleen notices that she smells like "a spice in Mumma 's rack at home" (493). In the same way she is shocked and cries when she sees her "Mumma's hands" in a stranger in the street that happened to be black (476). Additionally, Rose wears a fedora that symbolizes that through her half black lover, Kathleen is finally able to accept her mother and reconcile with her hybrid identity (Somacarrera 71). Thus, Rose becomes the tool that facilitates this acceptance.

From the very beginning regarding Rose hybrid identity, we picture her belonging to the black community. Even though, Rose has a hybrid background, she is obliged to perform her black side to fit. However, in New York's black Harlem she is not fully accepted either as she is seen as an oddity. Both girls, Kathleen and Rose, are subjects of hybrid identities and are asked to choose and perform one of them. Choosing or forcing someone to renounce to half their

identity, may have emotional consequences. In Rose's case, and according to American standards regarding race, she is a white person with "one drop of black in her blood", then categorized as black. Thus, Rose's choice was made for her by society, not her parents.

Apart from establishing this parallel between these two girls' racial identity there is another equivalent concerning their mothers that needs analysing. Jeanne Lacroix represents the embodiment of intersectional inadaptation regarding race, sexuality, and class. She is a white fallen girl from an upper-class family, living as a prostitute drug-addict in black Harlem, isolated for having trespassed race codes. She is probably the more obscure character after James Piper. Both girls' mothers, Materia and Jeanne, were rejected for their racial transgressions, both committed miscegenation and both were disavowed by their rich families and declared death. In the same way, both women become outcasts in their communities or, as Frost puts it, they turn into "virtual exiles" from both worlds (205). Materia and Jeanne are rejected women, unable to fulfil the roles that society expected from them and marked for life for falling in love with people of a different skin colour. By the counter position of these two characters, Materia and Jeanne, MacDonald briskly explores two sides of the same coin, the fear of miscegenation. Cape Breton rural community, although mixed and multicultural, is dominated by the white Anglo-Saxon community that rejects the Piper's for their mixed identity. On the other side, the urban black Harlem community in New York treats Mrs. Lacroix as a fallen castaway and her daughter Rose as a hybrid oddity. In the end, we resume that their tragic lives represent the outcomes of the racist and bigoted societies of the time, no matter region, country, or skin colour.

Finally, concerning Kathleen's father perception of her love affair with Rose, it must be mentioned that when he received Rose's mother anonymous "well-wisher" letter saying: 'by crossing nature's divide, your daughter courts her own ruin and can end only by yielding to the dark remnants of the beast in man" (235), both Laouyene and Parro, interpret this passage in similar ways. To them, Rose's mother in her letter informs James Piper of his daughter illicit interracial affair but not the lesbian nature of it (Laouyene 199; Parro 181). However, as Stevenson remarks, we are never clear of whether the reference is made only to race since "crossing nature's dived" could also be interpreted in terms of their

sexual transgression (52). Once more, MacDonald plays here with our own prejudices as readers: what is worst? the fact that Rose is black or that she is a woman? The author wanted readers to reflect on their own preconceptions and bring into question the mental hierarchy we establish when we use them.

Due to this anonymous letter, the most horrific passage of the novel unfolds, where James finds Kathleen in bed with Rose, hits her and ends raping his own daughter. Regarding this passage, Laouyene interprets James's inability to see that Rose is a woman (199). Yet again, MacDonald skilfully leaves the door open for readers to interpret whether James's mind could see in the heat of the moment what was in front of his eyes. Did he see a black man? A black woman? Or he just saw "blackness"? MacDonald is purposefully unclear in this passage seeking readers questioning and reflexion on the intersectional of both categories race and gender. As Frost remarks, the themes of gender and ethnic performativity in the novel metaphorize one another (203). This construction of identity interlaces the recognition and acceptance of lesbian love and hybrid identities.

Moreover, what follows, the brutal and incestuous rape, becomes the final act of James oppression and annulment of Kathleen's identity and freedom. After this episode and Kathleen's death, James reflects on it and again he blames race, Kathleen's hybrid identity, for her queer sexual choice of a half black women. Once again, he goes back to his books to find explanation to what he considers Kathleen's perversity. In the following excerpt we clearly see how even after all that has happened to him, and having lost his beloved daughter, James is still unable to comprehend the world:

James is grateful that all his girls turned out so fair. But there's obviously a morbid tendency in the blood they inherited from Materia that made Kathleen lean towards colour. James has taken delivery of another crate of books. He has dipped into Dr Freud in an effort to discover where to lay the blame for Kathleen's perversity. Freud calls women "the dark continent". James couldn't agree more. He doesn't hate blacks; he just doesn't want them near his bloodline. (359)

As it has been previously mentioned, the epic finale of *Fall on Your Knees* represents the union of all the transgression and traditional norms that were broken. Secrets, repressed memories and the final truth is exposed in the family

tree that Anthony brings to Lily and Doc Rose's house (565). The fact that the family tree is finally completed is a way of acknowledging the truths of this complex saga regarding gender, race, and sexual transgressions (Andrews 15). The completion of the tree can be interpreted as a symbol representing the end of James Piper's perverse legacy (Vercooren 86). Doc Rose, queer jazz musician and Kathleen's lover, Lily Piper, Kathleen's mixed-race daughter with his father, and Anthony (Aloysius), Frances's mixed-race son, are the remains and the fruits of the Piper's family history and the personification of destabilisation of gender, race and sexual social constructs throughout the novel. As Staels remarks, *Fall on Your Knees* ends at a very significant point in time, the 60's when feminism, gay liberation and African-American civil rights movement were blossoming (328). These characters' stories could be considered the groundwork for the acceptance of the other. They represent a future of diversity and acceptance, where a family can sit down and talk about their life choices with respect and acceptance.

5. Conclusion

In short, MacDonald's novel suggests that race, gender, and sexuality are markers of difference that as social constructs have been used historically to classify and separate people. These constructs need to be questioned since they help power structures perpetuate privileges for some, and exclusion for most.

Fall on Your Knees is a novel that repeatedly questions these social constructs, by destabilizing fixed categories to provoke readers and promote social change. MacDonald in an attempt to bring forward these issues wrote this novel almost 25 years ago. *Fall on Your Knees* explores the uncertainty of identities and its complex characters perform race, gender, and sexuality according to society's demands, within a system of inequalities, and constantly seek strategies of resistance and change.

Thus, I strongly believe that MacDonald's work is relevant in terms of portraying women experiences that challenged boundaries regarding race, gender and sexuality that were previously silenced. *Fall on Your Knees* made visible female experience, embracing diversity and broadening the limits, at a time where it was not common to do so in the literary world.

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