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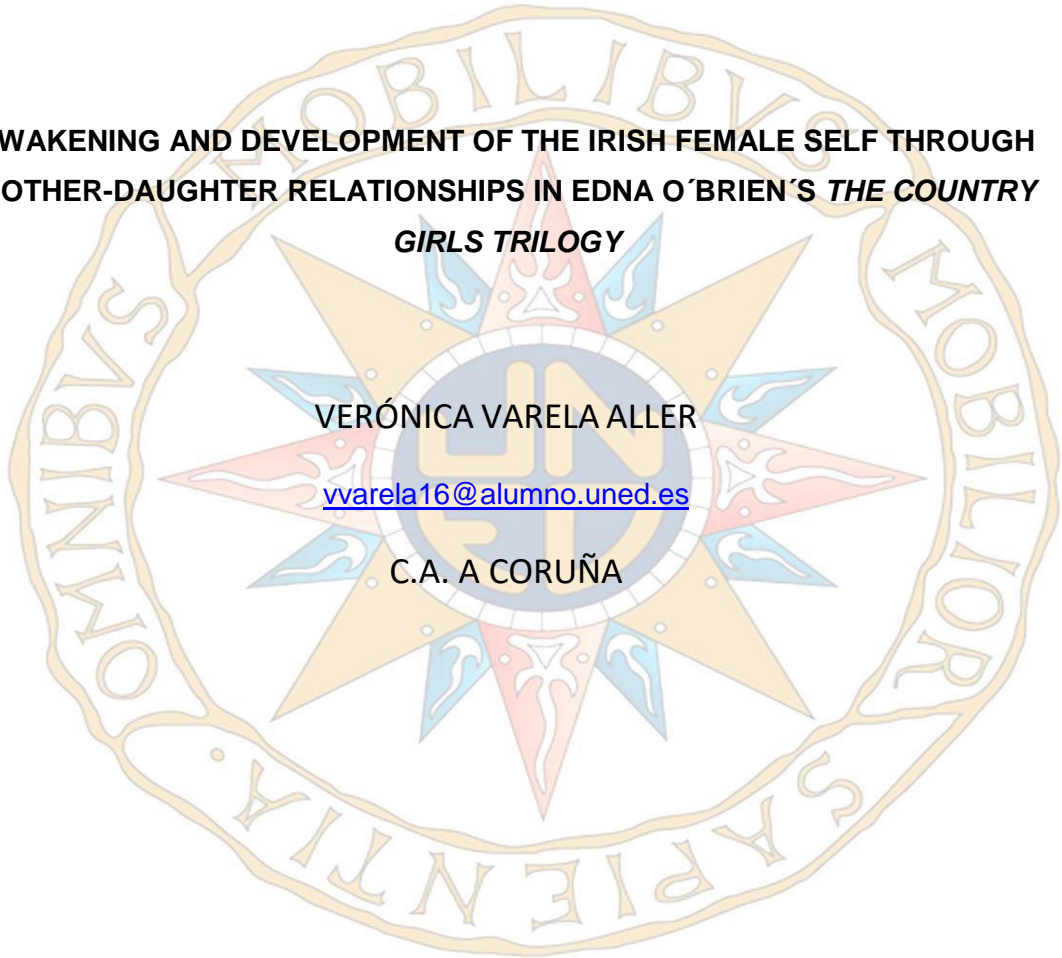
**GRADO EN ESTUDIOS INGLESES: LENGUA, LITERATURA Y
CULTURA**

**AWAKENING AND DEVELOPMENT OF THE IRISH FEMALE SELF THROUGH
MOTHER-DAUGHTER RELATIONSHIPS IN EDNA O'BRIEN'S *THE COUNTRY
GIRLS TRILOGY***

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ABSTRACT

This final project is an approach to Edna O’Brien’s *The Country Girls Trilogy* through a cornerstone in her fiction: motherhood and the mother-daughter dyad. All along this thesis we will consider the different sways exerted on those country girls from the conservative Ireland in the 1950’s-1960’s, examining how Irish women tackled their own personal growth and the construction of a distinctive identity. With a detailed picture of Ireland’s historical context, the conservative patriarchal post-independence culture and the religious society founded on Catholic moral codes, we aim to demonstrate how our origins and surrounding environment leave a lasting mark on individuals. Through a close examination of the *Trilogy* female characters’ selves we will attempt to decode O’Brien’s great influence on forthcoming changes in Irish society.

KEYWORDS: Edna O’Brien; 1950s Ireland’s context; female identity; motherhood institution; mother-daughter relationship.

INDEX

0. ABSTRACT.....	1
1. INTRODUCTION.....	2
1.1. Thesis statement.....	2
1.2. State of the art.....	4
1.3. Methodology.....	6
2. SOCIAL CONSTRICTIONS ON IRISH WOMEN.....	7
2.1. Historical female image.....	8
2.2. Catholic Church.....	11
2.3. Nationalism.....	14
3. THE INSTITUTION OF MOTHERHOOD: DESINTEGRATION OF WOMAN’S SELF.....	18
4. MOTHER-DAUGHTER RELATIONSHIPS: THE COUNTRY GIRLS FEMALE IDENTITIES.....	25
5. CONCLUSIONS.....	36
6. WORKS CITED.....	40

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1. - Thesis statement

The aim of this essay is to make a deep examination and reevaluation of the conflicting and convoluted mother-daughter relationships represented in the pivotal story of Edna O'Brien *The Country Girls Trilogy* (O'Brien 1960), decoding the key contextual aspects that besiege Irish female roles and intergenerational bonds. In this TFG we attempt to pay particular attention to the influence of background factors (historical, ideological, cultural, political...) on Irish women as mothers and individuals, through the exploration of the different female characters that O'Brien portrays in this tale, emphasizing the crucial cultural work accomplished by this *Trilogy* in Ireland. We would like to reconsider how with this *Trilogy* O'Brien tried to throw light on the effects of cultural constrictions on hidden female experiences intending to provoke a shift of tendency towards a modernization and an international opening of her so traditional mother country.

A shared tendency in women's lives as well as women's fiction has always been the harsh quest for their own identity and a suitable place for themselves in an unfriendly patriarchal world. A male-centered world that has exiled them to the fringes of society for so long. Entrapped in such a tangled web of ostracism, confinements, silences, repressions and exclusions, they have always tried to find a voice that unveils this collective female "imprisonment", liberating and redefining women's position in that supposed "renewed" world. In many cases the exploration of female bonding was the path followed by women writers to break through those silenced experiences and be able to build a new cultural and social order for real.

Breaking points such as the Woman Suffrage Movement initiated in 1848, deep social and cultural changes after the First World War, the emergence of the significant "New Woman" figure, and in short, the revisionist spirit of the twentieth century Modernism, allowed female authors to explore in their literary works singular points of view, consciousness insights, stereotyped

female roles and positions, as well as one of the key matters of this essay: the diverse hidden female bonds and relationships from refreshed perspectives.

As I advanced in the development of my knowledges within the interdisciplinary fields of literary studies and feminist analysis, one of the milestone issues that caught my attention about female bonds turned out to be the repressed mother-daughter interrelations. The representation of this almost unexplored tie was disclosed through the gradual increase of women's narratives about it all over the world practically at the same time. Working on the principle that this kind of relation is apparently a resembling experience for most women, I would like to go into detail about not only the idiosyncratic particularities of each relationship, but also regarding the historical, cultural, ethic or geographical characteristics and their possible effects on the individuals' personal growth. I feel a particular interest in the complex and intertwined connection between our historical tradition, our heritage, cultural or social environments, the enforced intricate constrictions on women and the frustrating mission of finding our own identity. Never forgetting that our self-development is inexorably linked to our social interactions, especially family ties during childhood.

Despite criticism about mother-daughter question was first cultivated by American and English literary fields, a lot of European authors kept on and delved into this theme bearing in mind their own surrounding particularities. Such a blend of intimate insights and external forces is one of the main reasons why I have decided to work in this project with the *grande dame* of the twentieth century Irish fiction, Edna O'Brien and, in words of the Irish novelist Eimear McBride, "her most famous, infamous, beloved, and influential" work, *The Country Girls Trilogy*, made up of *The country Girls* (1960), *The Lonely Girl* (1962), and *Girls in their Married Bliss* (1964).

Through the story of Cait/Kate Brady and Baba Brennan, two country girls from rural Ireland, O'Brien offers a rigorous approach to, not only human relationships between both protagonists of the trilogy, or with their family members, friends and lovers, but she also focuses on their deep internal selves, bringing to light unexplored voices of previous Irish women generations living in

such a merciless national context. It is precisely here, on this concrete context, where the author concentrates her keen interest, making an incisively depiction of the uneven post-independent Irish nation and pointing her cutting critique to the historical, political and religious apparatus that besieges and strangles Irish woman's volition and free wills.

Inside the colourful field of characters depicted by O'Brien, I would like to both examine the leading characters' process of maturation along this Irish girlhood narrative and take a good look at the formative relation between daughters and the several motherly figures portrayed. One of my main concerns will be likewise the questionable institution of motherhood in Ireland as both a mechanism of perpetuation of patriarchal norms and as an instrument for the destruction and collapse of mothers' agency as complete subjects.

The aim of this study is therefore to look into the way Edna O'Brien represents and verbalizes all these psychological human ties at the same time that she gives us a unique outlook of Ireland's cultural and political atmosphere in the 50's and 60's. She tries to display Ireland's society wounds emphasizing the consequences and lasting marks on individuals originated from national demands and influences exerted in the name of the country. I wish to re-examine the effects and deep impressions of a post-colonial conservative, ultra-religious and institutionally chauvinistic society on the formation of an assertive female identity through this narrative observation. Moreover, another purpose of this project is to highlight the countless worth of literary works in the individuals' learning process of becoming aware of the innumerable impediments within human nature, and the contribution that this revelation might suppose for future generations of women and writers as well.

1.2. - State of the art

Since this essay tries to be an interdisciplinary work, it will be based on multiple academic approaches: from a sociological or "cultural" approximation using a post-colonial perspective; through some feminist and gender theories, as well as deep reviews on the psychodynamics of mother-daughter relationships reproduced throughout O'Brien's account.

In order to achieve a coherent, intelligible and organized treatment of the subject matter, this study takes as a starting point the interplay between the particular Irish context of that time and *The Country Girls* literary representation. This first part of the project pursues to catch a glimpse of the detached social scenario of Irish women in a post-independent “new” nation still under construction, by addressing primarily the threefold patriarchal machinery of the country: the symbolic female images in Ireland’s history, the strict Catholic constrictions and moral codes upon the female sex, and finally Irish nationalism, built upon stiff gender constructs, that is, the political tool of control, repression and erosion of Irish female self. In this regard, I shall rest upon prominent works on the issue such as Heather Ingman *Twentieth-Century Fiction by Irish Women*, focused on ins and outs of gender and the Irish nation.

After suggesting a detailed picture of the country backgrounds, the attention shall be paid to, firstly the institution of motherhood, where I will attempt to decode the cultural meaning of being mother in a country like Ireland. Afterward I shall strive to dig into mothers’ position and their collapsed identities, exploring new appraisals of the maternal figure, from Adrienne Rich’s “matrophobia” to the more positive value of the “mother-quest”, both features that we can recognise in O’Brien’s writing. Feminist literary works of renowned critics such as Rich, Hirsch, Chodorow and more recent Jaqueline Rose helps me to shed some light on the restless trial upon the mother’s role.

In line with this matter, the next section shall deal with the main female personalities depicted in the *Trilogy* story: on the one hand certain maternal alternatives after the loss of Cait’s mother, such as Mrs. Brennan, the Mother Superior of the Catholic convent or the girls’ Austrian landlady in Dublin, Joanna; on the other hand a close examination of each protagonist, Kate and Baba, of this peculiar female *Bildungsroman* journey. The tricky emancipatory process of the two central narrative voices, each one functioning as a kind of alter ego of the other, is a device that O’Brien uses to show us the crucial impact that all these public and private sways have on the unsuccessful foundation of girls’ female agency and on the distressful disintegration of both characters.

Edna O'Brien published this "shocking" first novel in 1960, nothing but sixty years ago. Her literary production since then has been as labelled as criticised, but above all, it has been continually analysed, studied and evaluated from a myriad of perspectives. *The Country Girls Trilogy* has been praised for its innovation and experimentation by some critics; however, others have accused her of frivolity and egocentrism, too personal and too explicit to the extent of being considered anti-nationalist by Irish censorship Board and even publicly burned. Despite all the acclaims and reproaches, the *Trilogy* has undoubtedly become a symbol, a treasure of Irish letters that inspires future generations. Hence the several studies and researches from every part of the world on which I have been able to rely my project. Apart from this, to conclude this state of the matter, I consider it necessary to list a few sources that have contributed in some way to the development of this essay as the academic Heather Ingman's descriptive work about literary Ireland of the 20th century; Dr. Maryann Valiulis, with her profound works on Irish nation and women's studies; groundbreaking feminist literary critics as Adrienne Rich, Jacqueline Rose, Marianne Hirsch, Nancy Chodorow or Lucy Irigaray among others; Dr. Adalgisa Giorgio's incredibly interesting writing journey through mothers and daughters relationships; the Irish novelist Eimear McBride for her evocative foreword of O'Brien's *Trilogy* and above anyone else the remarkable inspiring genius, Edna O'Brien.

1.3. - Methodology

Regarding the methodology carried out for the configuration of this final project, the first step has been an initial reading of the text in question. Later on the establishment of my objective and thesis statement I have acquired some volumes on my research line as primary sources and then I have gone on with a broad searching and approaching to the bibliographic material connected to my study topic available on internet data bases such as Linceo+, LION, DIALNET, JSTOR, Proquest, besides other free sources such as Google Scholar. An accurate search has been made in order to achieve the best possible information, using key terms linked to the main issues of this analysis, that is, Irish Nationalism, motherhood, mother-daughter relationship in Ireland, etc.

Following a first look of all these materials, the sources have been checked and made a second closer examination in order to extract the most useful and valuable details related to the context (historical, political, Church...), body of work (motherhood, mother-daughter relationship, female identity...) or conclusions of this essay (effects of the text on the awakening of an Irish female self, O'Brien's influences on future female writers...).

Her mother usually told Edna "paper never refused ink", and although this statement implied in fact her disapproval rather than her encouragement, it still discloses the deep significance of our mothers' words in the course of our whole life. Therefore, if by means of the development of this essay, I can shed some light on the recognition of the extraordinary path that O'Brien has forged for forthcoming women and why not, men as well, uncovering conflicting even painful, but groundbreaking vital truths embodied within this work of art, I will take my goal for granted.

2. - SOCIAL CONSTRICTIONS ON IRISH WOMEN

In an interview for The Columbia University Press about her book *The Generation of Postmemory*, Marianne Hirsch describes the concept of "Postmemory" as:

The relationship that the "generation after" bears to the personal, collective, and cultural trauma of those who came before — to experiences they "remember" only by means of the stories, images, and behaviors among which they grew up. But these experiences were transmitted to them so deeply and affectively as to seem to constitute memories in their own right. As I see it, the connection to the past that I define as postmemory is mediated not by recall but by imaginative investment, projection, and creation. To grow up with overwhelming inherited memories, to be dominated by narratives that preceded one's birth or one's consciousness, is to risk having one's own life stories displaced, even evacuated, by our ancestors." (*An Interview with Marianne Hirsch* in Columbia University Press).

In the case of Irish women, this transmission of "inherited memories" has been carried out as a collective ideological force, a cultural mechanism to give a concrete domesticated shape to the Irish femininity model, in order to ostracize women's agency in history and national politics, and at the same time prevent them from finding their own space to develop themselves as full social entities.

It is possible that the hopes placed in the fight for Irish independence of the early twentieth century and the promises of equality stated in its foundational ideals lighted the fuse of Irish women's awakening, opening the door to battle for self-awareness and the exploration of their own voices. As Julia Kristeva argues in *New Maladies of The Soul* talking about the relevance of women writing, it is the duty of aesthetics and of the artists as well to make a representation of their contemporaneous community's concerns, not only as a means of expression for that diversity so far silenced, but also as a creative tool to shift and enlarge society's outlooks in a therapeutic way. Art is arguably a kind of reconciliation between individuals and their nation. (Kristeva 1995; 220)

As a way of reinitiating the struggle for autonomy, for recognition of women treated as marginalized individuals within Irish community, the twentieth century Irish feminists and female writers as Edna O'Brien considered necessary, actually, crucial to tear down the historical rigid gender constructs imposed by a deep-rooted patriarchal tyranny. This imbalanced system has been held up, and in fact still does, the repressive national network composed of traditional male-manipulated myths, foundational gendered images or allegorical portrayals of womanhood originated within the Irish culture; also the "disciplinary" Catholic moral doctrines that permeated nuclear grounds of society: marriage, family conception, education...to the very building of the post-independent Irish state. In effect, nationalism is considered the last key element required to underpin these unfair notions of gendered behaviour even going so far as to systematize them into de Valera's Constitution of 1937.

Thus, in this part of the essay we will try to offer some general traces of that national restrictive context established in Ireland in the course of the twentieth century to be able to understand the implications and influences on contemporary literary works such as *The Country Girls Trilogy*.

2.1 – HISTORICAL FEMALE IMAGE

Richard Kearney's beginning of his article "Myths and Scapegoats: The Case of René Girard" makes it clear Irish women's position as "the other" in the foundational myths of Irish nation:

Human societies are founded upon myths of sacrifice. These myths comprise a social imaginary which operates according to a mechanism of scapegoating generally concealed from human consciousness. It is this sacrificial mechanism which provides most communities with their sense of collective identity. But the price to be paid is the destruction of an innocent outsider: the immolation of the “other” on the altar of the “same”. (Kearney, 1995; 1)

By means of the so long customary portrait of Ireland as a subjugated female victim of the English colonizers’ oppressive power, Irish society has supported archetypes of suffering, passive, submissive and dependant women. Such conceptualization involved reducing womanhood to the mere role of “vessel of life” or inspirational muse for national male heroes, the later “Mimic Muse” that the Irish poet Eavan Boland will use to subvert that false representation of femininity. Kearney’s “destruction of an innocent outsider” is translated in the Irish context into an absolute disregard and denial of female individuals as complete human beings, as full right subjects. Not only by oversimplifying their role in society to objects or little admired things for men, but also by concealing their feelings or experiences they deprived Irish women of suitable models of femininity that would help next generations to develop their skills and sense of identity. A good example on this issue is the lack of female literary tradition in the country’s history, the lack of female voices to connect with their womanly heritage.

However, these enfeebled but idealized female symbols-Dark Rosaleen, Hibernia, Mother Ireland, the Poor Old Woman, Cathleen Ni Houlihan- adopted by Ireland’s folk to bring a strong Irish nationalism into being, have not been the only concepts associated with women that the island has counted with throughout its history. The ancient Irish civilization of Celtic tradition in pre-Christian times was a “matri-centred society” in which women were considered the “sacred” vehicle of communication between humankind and the mythical world of nature. Mighty female figures embodied the “holy” power of giving life and for this very reason they were truly appreciated, admired and even venerated. A great number of tales from ancient Irish folklore echoes this synergy with natural forces that culminated in the powerful female image of “the Goddess myth”. Even so, in many matri-centred cultures mothers or possible

mothers with high status and a labeled role within the community suffered the same fate over time: the enforcement and confinement of patriarchal systems. Male dominated systems of western societies have employed for so long the most effective mechanism to achieve the overthrow of female powers, that is, the culture of threat and fear, riddled with a mass of false superstitions. By means of transforming female bonds with natural environments into all kind of demonised ties, women were transformed into wicked entities such as evils, unnatural creatures and the worldwide-known witches. Masculine tradition enacted new conceptualizations of womanhood characterized by their dangerously evil inclinations in need of being controlled by the all-powerful men.

Throughout all this long Irish patriarchal tradition, the method of turning the tables of female myths, images and stories has served as the perfect strategy to silence any sort of relation among women, above all that of mothers and daughters. The ancient mother culture was losing little by little and it was replaced by a kind of “matrophobia”, a term first introduced by poet Lynn Sukenick and later further developed by feminist theorist Adrienne Rich, in which trapped mothers are reduced to basic instruments of transmission of customs. Mothers were supposed to be the bearers and indoctrinating subjects in charge of preserving the stereotyped “feminine” ideals of docility and resignation through the nurturance of their daughters. Nevertheless, this mothers’ preserver status of “the Father” norms became the main source of degradation and annihilation of any possibility for female self-fulfilment, and hence it helped to reinforce their daughters’ repudiation and the anxious fear of evolving into their own mothers. In the light of these idealizations, women as mothers traditionally had only two options: either be the carriers of the harmful submissive stigma or assume the form of marginalized demons of society.

In the conservative rural Irish landscape of *The Country Girls*, O’Brien reproduced the suffering motherly figure (Motherland) in the body of Caitheleen’s mother, Mrs. Brady, a self-sacrificial character who works hard for providing her family whereas she has to bear an abusive and alcoholic husband. O’Brien tries to point out that this genealogical string between foundational myths of “Mother Ireland” and postcolonial Irish ideology has a wider scope which goes even

beyond Irish boundaries. Not only native Irish men but also foreign men merge Irish womanhood with country's mythical representations (Cait's French husband).

Later on, historical patriarchal myths intertwined with successive idealised female models derived from Christianity (cult of the Virgin Mary), underpinning fixed gendered constructs on masculine and feminine behaviours within the ultra-Catholic Ireland. Furthermore, Irish Catholicism doctrines, with their strict precepts of the family unit and domestic women, have permeated and influenced Ireland's lifestyle until nowadays.

2.2 – CATHOLIC CHURCH

Edna O'Brien has recently declared in an interview "I had offended several fashions. I offended the Catholic Church. I betrayed Irish womanhood... I betrayed my own community by writing about their world." ("How Edna O'Brien found sanctuary among Jewish-American writers", *The Irish Times Book Review*, Aug 20, 2019) She has always thought that Irish Catholicism is founded "on the stone of fear and punishment", and this consideration about the influence of religious beliefs on the individuals' psyche is evident in some way in most of her works.

From the very beginning of the postcolonial stage in Ireland until the last decades of the twentieth century, the political ideology of the "new" Free State and the ecclesiastical machinery of the deeply-rooted Catholic Church entered into a solid "marriage". They became the foundational head of restrictive discourses and social practices which would ensure a hegemonic control over Irish society for a long time. This dogmatic apparatus, constituted by what the philosopher Louis Althusser named "social forces", such as religion and national political system, along with the support of the bulk of members of the Irish community, took on the institution of moral doctrines about social key matters as the familiar nucleus, the educational system and the censorship instrument. The Irish Catholic ideology pervaded post-independent Ireland to the extent of having the Irish Free State "kidnapped", restraining even individuals' process of

identity formation. Such state of affairs turns out ironic, even paradoxical in a nation that had been recently “liberated” from the English oppressive system.

As a consequence of “the Devotional Revolution” that took place around the mid-nineteenth century, the Irish Catholic Church strengthened the stereotyped gender constructs contained in its dogma, assessing the proper masculine and feminine behavior depicted all over the Irish literature tradition even in the next century. Catholic codes of conduct for each gender crystallized into national symbols: Irish men, as Mother Ireland’s sons, should be willing to offer their lives in the name of their country; whereas Irish women were lessened to their maternal role as the quintessence of womanhood. Motherhood according to Catholicism but also to the Irish State was defined as the fundamental basis of the political and social identity for Irish women. They symbolized the Irish virtue in the form of passive, asexual, and self-denying embodiments of the country’s purity, manifested through the cult of the Virgin Mary.

The icon of Virgin Mary as illustrative female model to follow, forced Irish women to carry with the heavy slab of national chastity and purity. The oppressive epitome implied women’s seclusion to a bare obscured domestic existence, but also a deprivation of their opportunities and lack of freedom for their own self-development.

The Catholic Church took advantage of the educational system to display a repressive control upon Irish girls and women, heading them to compulsory marriage as their only goal. British feminist Mary Wollstonecraft suggested in her work *“Thoughts on the education of daughters: with reflections on female conduct, in the more important duties of life”* (Wollstonecraft 1787) a kind of opposition between marriage as women’s “job” and the urgency of education for women’s own improvement, that is, she proposes “education as a palliative to marriage” (Goodman 2013). Both schools and convents in Ireland were usually managed by nuns, who under the cloak of symbolic mothers, employed teaching for the diffusion and reinforcing of Catholic beliefs all over the country. It was a perfectly articulated gear in which girls were indoctrinated in the role of the idealized mother (Virgin Mary) by means of encouraging domestic duties

training, the care of other, and of course, the fear, guilt and shame related to sex and their bodies. In spite of being female figures (nuns) who took this crucial responsibility of religious “brainwashing”, their authority was not real but only an illusion, considering that actually they found always under the command of a male figure, the “Father” figure, the ultimate masculine power in a patriarchal universe.

The abuse of Roman Catholic Church reached every tiny corner of society in Ireland thanks to this special “deal” with the Irish state, grounded on deference and subordination to religious leaders. Needless to say, women were one of the most crippled groups. The Church mistreats women through its scornful conduct to them, reducing women to an oversimplified domestic identity (mothers and family cares), the reinforcement of the belief in women’s inferiority to be controlled by powerful men, and finally the deplorable treatment of wayward or “fallen” women alienated in institutions as the Magdalene laundries, where harassment, dreadful mistreatments and torture were silenced and hidden until recent times by both Roman Catholic Church and Irish State.

Another effective Catholic resource used together with the national political branch of the country was the rigorous censorship machinery instituted in Ireland around the twenties as a social teaching device. As Fuller pointed out, the Censorship Board only attempted to “protect Irish Catholics from secularist or corrupting influences emanating from abroad” (Fuller, Louise. 2004 (2002). *Irish Catholicism Since 1950; The Undoing of a Culture*). Under the pretext of avoiding any menace to the public morality of Ireland, they took care not only of restricting artists or academics from their freedom of expression, but also it contributed to the perpetuation of the country’s ignorance and lack of information through the total isolation of any sway from abroad. Edna O’Brien was one of the numerous targets of this “witch-hunting” led by Irish Censorship agents from the very beginning of her career in the 60’s, when she first published her novel *The Country Girls*. The reason: Irish censorship was aimed at the banishing and destruction of those “sinned” books, which should be removed “from good Catholic houses” (Cairns and Richards 1988). With her *Trilogy* O’Brien offended Catholic Church in many different and irreverent ways:

subverting rigid Catholic ideology, deep-seated in rural Ireland; questioning the irrefutable social structure of the Irish family; transgressing the right moral code with scandalously graphic descriptions of women's sexuality; and above all, with her incisive introduction of bold female characters in search of their own voices despite their ultra-conservative Irish heritage.

2.3- NATIONALISM

When the poet Mary Dorcey was asked to summarize life in the 1950's and 1960's in Ireland she made this portrayal:

Silence. Repression. Censorship. Long dark winters. Poor food. Nuns and priests everywhere. Drab clothes. Censorship of books and films. Fear and suspicion surrounding anything to do with the body or the personal life. The near total repression of ideas and information. A Catholic state for a Catholic people. (O'Carroll and Collins, 1995, 25).

At the time of making an insightful analysis of the evolution of Ireland's revolutionary journey from a colonial period to an Independent Free State, it is absolutely necessary to raise some key questions: how do you go from fighting for ideals of independence, freedom and equality in a glorious revolution to the establishment of a restraining, conservative and controlling nation subjugated by Catholic authorities which promoted besides inequality at the core of a "renewed" Irish patriarchal society? To what extent were Irish women involved in the success of the nationalist movement that set Ireland free? This essay does not aim to develop an accurate inquiry into Irish postcolonial studies but only to shed some hints of light on the Irish political outlook of the twentieth century, bringing female gender roles into focus.

Historically, almost all nations as well as national identities have based their construction upon stable gender constructs, as Tamar Mayer states in *Gender Ironies of Nationalism (2000)*, and Ireland has not been an exception. During the first part of the twentieth century, the Irish political field was a hotbed of cultural movements and political discourses, among which the most significant ones seemed to be nationalism and feminism. At that time both movements were not mutually exclusive, actually, a great number of Irish women were involved in the nationalist struggle while they were also committed

to the female suffrage campaign. Still and all, different sensibilities and preferences could be distinguished within the Irish feminism of the time, evidenced in two major contrasting viewpoints: the Irish activist Hanna Sheehy Skeffington and the nationalist revolutionary Constance Markievicz. As Heather Ingman describes in her work *Twentieth-Century Fiction by Irish Women: Nation and Gender*, the dilemma was divided between giving preference to suffragism and putting nationalism first. For Markievicz, female fight should be postponed to be able to concentrate all their forces on nationalist goals. Skeffington argued that unless women prioritize the suffrage movement over nationalism struggle, they would remain in a second-class status subordinated to the needs of a patriarchal nation, what unfortunately happened in the end.

With the Rising of 1916 the path for the achievement of Ireland's independence was opened, a way that it was not a bed of roses with the subsequent Anglo-Irish War, the destructive Civil War... reaching its culminating point with the establishment of the Free State of Ireland in 1922. The Proclamation of 1916 afforded women the opportunity to have a place in the public sphere of the country. Although their participation violated all the established gender norms, they carried on with the fight for independence alongside their male comrades. The Proclamation read by Patrick Pearse on Easter Monday declared:

We hereby proclaim the Irish Republic as a sovereign independent state...The Irish Republic is entitled to, and hereby claims, the allegiance of every Irishman and Irishwoman. The Republic guarantees religious and civil liberty, equal rights and equal opportunities to all its citizens, and declares its resolve to pursue the happiness and prosperity of the whole nation and of all its parts, cherishing all the children of the nation equally, ...Until our arms have brought the opportune moment for the establishment of a permanent National Government, representative of the whole people of Ireland and elected by the suffrages of all her men and women...¹

What the document entailed was a new ideology of freedom, inclusion and equality for each and every Irish citizen, universal rights and opportunities for all. A new scene of hope was unlocked for female aspirations, and the future

¹ Poblacht Na hÉireann, reproduced in Declan Kiberd & P.J. Mathews (eds), *Handbook of the Irish revival* (Dublin, 2015), pp 104-5.

role of women in the public sphere became a recurring theme throughout that historical time. The 1922 Free State Constitution gave the impression of extending these equality ideals by the vote granting for women over twenty-one and its Article 3, which stated: “every person, without distinction of sex, shall enjoy the privileges and be subject to the obligations of such citizenship”. (Ingman 2017; 10).

From then on the feminist struggle and suffragette movement were progressively degrading not only in Ireland but throughout the European territory, in part due to the rise of fascist ideologies during the 20’s and 30’s, in which women had only one option: stay at home. After the Anglo-Irish Treaty of 1922, the Irish Proclamation and its revolutionary core turned radically into a restrictive gender ideology of domesticity and inequality, whose only goal seemed to be the maintenance of a male political dominance that empowered an already patriarchal society, even at the expense of the ostracism of “the others”, including women. The promises of 1916 were broken and Irish women were forced to deal with the harmful aftermath of the Treaty and the growing influence of the Roman Catholic Church, which resulted in women’s employment restrictions, deterioration of job conditions, erosion of their political rights and public voices, in addition to the absolute exclusion from the public life and consequent exile to the asphyxiating domestic atmosphere of Irish sacred homes.

The above mentioned relationship between Irish nationalism and Catholic Church was considered by Marianne Valiulis in these terms:

In the 1920’s and 1930’s, because of the bargain the Free State made with the clergy, the Catholic church controlled morality, regulated education, hospitals, institutions and the like. This bargain, which allowed the Roman Catholic Church unfettered control over all who were in the church’s care, resulted in rampant abuse...there was a natural affinity between political leaders and the church. (Valiulis 2019; 168)

The patriarchal apparatus (both Church and state) in charge of the systematically undermining and isolation of Irish women was firmly settled in society mainly by the conservative legislation of Cosgrave and succeeding Eamon de Valera’s 1937 Constitution. With a strong Catholic basis and tough

patriarchal implications, de Valera's Constitution thwarted any imaginable improvement in women's lives, going back to an unfair gender-biased system founded on the family unit as its cornerstone. In this way, the Irish state allowed for the intrusion of politics and priests into the private domestic sphere with appalling consequences for Irish womankind. A reality that could be observed on the cultural treatment of domestic violence, revealed in countless literary works as O'Brien's *Trilogy*. Irish state promoted male dominance at home, denying for example a bank account for a woman without the signature of her husband, but also silencing any report of wife-beating under the precept that "these matters" should remain within the "private domain of the family" (Ingman 2017). Given that the family unit was inviolable, these abuses could not be publicly exposed. Baba's comment about her husband's behavior in the *Girls on their Married Bliss* book discloses an accurate picture of this situation: "Frank was very careful; you know, slaughter your wife so long as you do it indoors." (O'Brien 1964; 518).

The ideal feminine place within Irish society was endorsed by the 1937 Constitution in its Article 41 about the family, which stated:

The State recognises the Family as the natural primary and fundamental unit group of Society, and as a moral institution possessing inalienable and imprescriptible rights, antecedent and superior to all positive law.

The State, therefore, guarantees to protect the Family in its constitution and authority, as the necessary basis of social order and as indispensable to the welfare of the Nation and the State. In particular, the State recognises that by her life within the home, woman gives to the State a support without which the common good cannot be achieved. The State shall, therefore, endeavour to ensure that mothers shall not be obliged by economic necessity to engage in labour to the neglect of their duties in the home. (cain.ulster.ac.uk)

Under the shelter of this legitimate establishment of the family concept enacted by the anti-feminist 1937 Constitution, post-independent Ireland confined, always for the sake of the nation, woman's role to the domestic domain, with marriage as her only expectation in life and in order to protect the stability and preservation of its pillars: the nation, the family and the Catholic principles. Mothers became for Irish folk the landmark, guards of traditions, the

life-bearers of the nation with no other ambition or aspiration than rearing children and taking care of the house and the whole family.

In its entirety, all these measures had an unequivocal aim: to prevent women's from their natural development through a compulsory impoverished status, both economic and educational. Irish state's constraints on female emancipatory processes could be appreciated in the vast number of injustices exerted on women during this period such as the marriage bar, lower pays for female civil servants, compulsory retirement for teachers, less working opportunities or even exemption from jury service (Ingman 2017). Girls' education was regarded as an irrelevant matter; in fact, it was not until 1967 that secondary education was available for Irish youth including female individuals. If you are deprived of material means and abilities to mould your own voice, breaking free from the imposed social shackles may seem an unattainable feat.

The cultural starvation of Irish women was increased by the political and economic lethargy of the country itself in the 50's decade. In the case of rural women, apart from household workings and family care, rough physical tasks of countryside labour were added. The psychological and social pressures altogether with the scanty margin of progress offered by the country, brought about a large scale of women emigration during these years. Restrictions, poor life conditions, marriage bar, besides the fixed inferior female status in which they are trapped in Ireland, lead them to see "escape" as the sole denouement for this story of imprisonment.

The wave of emigration that returned to the country throughout the 1960's meant the beginning of change, renewed airs that sowed the seeds for the later vibrant feminist movement of the 70's. The openness to external cultural influences, the escape mechanism of exile , a stare beyond national borders, a way out of national isolation...all these topics were recurrent themes in the work of Edna O'Brien. Along her *Trilogy* O'Brien attempts to build a subversive discourse of resistance with the opening of a window to the "global" world beyond religious, nationalist and ideological Irish constrictions that surrounded her.

3. – THE INSTITUTION OF MOTHERHOOD: DESINTEGRATION OF WOMAN’S SELF.

The essayist, poet and feminist Adrienne Rich, one of America's foremost public intellectuals, was one of the pioneers appreciating women's necessity to acquire learnings and wisdom from their repressed tie with their mothers. In this way they could become stronger in a male-dominated environment: "Before sisterhood, there was the knowledge- transitory, fragmented, perhaps, but original and crucial- of the mother-and-daughterhood" (Rich 1976; 225).

The concept as well as the institution of motherhood have been long debated over the past seventy years, in fact, they still continue to be very controversial if we speak of feminist criticism, as a kind of taboo topic. We might think that, being the same biological process, the experience of motherhood would be very similar for most women around the world; however, each experience is subjected to historical(myths),racial,cultural, ethnic, religious, political or economical constructs and pressures which turn each of them into a unique experience . As we have already seen, motherhood topic is surrounded by a great deal of idealisations that burden women with tight traditional images, a kind of female punishment indeed. One good example of these false idealisations is found in the best-seller *Mother Love Myth and Reality: Motherhood in Modern History*(1980) of the feminist philosopher Elisabeth Badinter, where she tries to offer an actual challenging perspective, questioning the deep conviction that mother instinct is inborn and universal. So, is it innate the maternal instinct? Does it come from a "feminine nature" or is it due to a social and historical behavior that varies according to times and customs? All along her narrative, Badinter states that our perceptions of what constitutes "normal" mothering are culturally constructed.

Feminists, above all those of the second wave of 1970, asserted that throughout human history, women's roles and experiences have been built by patriarchal conventions. Cultural male powers have treated motherhood as a mere object. What is more, they used it as a social oppressive instrument of imprisonment behind which to hide female subjectivity, hindering women's

personal growth and silencing the own voice of the mother. One likely reason for men's reprehensible behavior towards mothers is explicitly exposed in the first lines of Rich's book: "all human life on the planet is born of woman. There is much to suggest that the male mind has always been haunted by the force of the idea of dependence on a woman for life itself" (Rich 1976). Therefore, if they managed to control the discourse that shaped the "ideal" image of motherhood, they could thus calm those feelings of envy, resentment and fear of the uncontrollable force of human nature, that is, the universal need of women for life itself.

In general, critiques of motherhood state that femininity is widely reduced to women motherly instincts which transform them into basically selfless life suppliers, it means, socially accountable as caregivers of future generations. This simplistic construction of women and mothers started from a patriarchal system led to universalized discourses about femininity and motherhood that benefited the development of female individuals very little or nothing. While it is true that during the early years of feminism in the 1970s, feminist analysis focused on motherhood as a patriarchal tool of oppression for women (excluded from public life and reduced to the domestic sphere and role solely), Adrienne Rich is considered to be a turning point that opened the way for alternative interpretations of maternity, seeing it not only as a controlled restrictive institution, but also within a more positive view, a potential source of female empowerment. Taking into account traditional myths, religious ideals, and so on, she used anthropologist and psychoanalytic approaches altogether, bringing to the forefront mothers' primacy in female individuals' development of the self.

Notwithstanding the refreshing exploration of optimistic values, in most women's writings throughout the 1970s and part of 1980s, maternal figures were conceived as the vehicles or messengers of the patriarchal law, the "Father" rules which reinforced those deep-founded gender stereotypes that cancel them out of society. Through the familiar nurturing and educational proceedings, mothers become the primary responsible for the internalization of "feminine" clichés or models of conduct imposed by male frameworks, and this complicity with patriarchal norms often resulted in mother-blaming, mother-

hating or even daughters' feeling of anger or fear. For that reason feminist analysis at that time put the focus on judgements of mothers as the "sponsors" of the male culture perpetuation, blamable for blocking daughters' evolution as autonomous individuals, regulating their sexuality and not allowing their complete emancipation or individuation. It seems a rather conflicting concern for daughters, because they have to face serious contradictory feelings: on the one hand resentment and anger at the maternal powerlessness, submissiveness and capitulation to the system; on the other the phobia of suffocating mothers' "profound love" that asphyxiates and confines them to the same miserable fate.

Which could be the motives or explanations for this so widespread female subjugated position of mothers? According to several feminist theoreticians as Nancy Chodorow or D.W. Winnicott, the different social and psychic position of women is due to children's early internalization of social structures, including motherly practices, which constitutes the core of this perpetuated social pattern. One of the key issues of this belief is stated by Chodorow's idea of the uneven treatment of daughters and sons that mothers often employ, identifying themselves more and for so long with the female kid, which amplifies girls' relational abilities and capacities significantly, yet at the same time it generates a more complex process of separation for them. As a result of this mothering mechanism of identity formation, Chodorow states an asymmetrical development of personalities between men and women "women tend to define themselves in relationships to others, whereas men do not." (Chodorow 1978). Just the same fact is also reflected in later feminist works of Carol Gilligan about women's "different" moral voice or Sara Ruddick "maternal thinking"(The Columbia Dictionary of Modern Literary and Cultural Criticism).

The role of women in society in those years was changing little by little, but when they became mothers, then they were completely blurred as individuals, their voices silenced and their possible subjectivity erased. Winnicott's concept of "good enough" mothering requires the sacrifice of the mother's self, subjectivity, interests, desires... to acquire her own emotional fulfillment by way of meeting all the child's needs. It means, mother's accomplishment in life depends solely and exclusively on their infants' welfare. As Adalgisa Giorgio declares in her book *Writing the Mother-Daughter*

Relationship “Lack of “subjectivity” is both the origin and the consequence of women’s traditional exclusion from “culture” and of their confinement to the realm of “nature”.” (Giorgio 2002; 13). The exclusion from language, from public discourses, from society, from our own history, from a female-maternal genealogy, ruled out any possible tool or mechanism to escape from the symbolic masculine order which took the control of women’s bodies and possibilities.

Within such a distorted and troubled mother-daughter relationship, and given the mother's inability to guide the female child entrance into the world, the only possible response that a male-dominated system offered daughters was the “murder” of the maternal figure. Luce Irigaray claims that “the whole of our western culture is based upon the murder of the mother” as the sole means of acquiring an identity in that symbolic order (Irigaray 1991; 47-52). So what she does is to put matricide at the origin of patriarchy and phallogocentric culture. She attempts to deconstruct these established assumptions on the mother-daughter bond through the search of more positive alternatives, as Rich and other feminist theorists will do in subsequent years. Little by little matriphobic trends began to shift towards a more feminocentric angle, as the “mother-quest”, that is, daughters’ exploration of their maternal heritage for the correct construction of their own identity. From Irigaray’s viewpoint, the crucial aim is to recognize “the mother in every woman” and “the woman in every mother”, allowing the differentiation of each individual, with their own requirements, desires, and uniqueness, but without the need for abandonment or murder of the mother in order to achieve it.

A way of rectifying this ingrained situation of women was to shed light on it, make more visible common female relations, carrying out a process of creation or reconstruction of the mother-daughter dyad. For this, it was fundamental the recovery of diverse portrayals about intimate hidden connections between women as well as building alternative suitable female symbolic images. The new female ideals would redefine the maternal ability and power of entailing positive values and thereby women could leave a female mark in history. To be successful, it would be necessary not only submitting maternity literary portraits to a close scrutiny but also reexamining the

contextual and psychological environments in which they were produced. Textual and contextual aspects were the task of feminist literary criticism from the 1970s onwards. Their working on constant women's struggles between the reality of motherhood and the expectations of society, based upon unrealistic idealizations of maternal figures, along with the review of literary narratives of women have served to release the institution from patriarchal confining constructions. Likewise, it has been very useful for connecting a huge number of female individuals of every part of the world through shared experiences as mothers or daughters. That is, writing as a recovery therapy, a recurrent image employed in a great number of literary works to uncover intricate familiar knots.

In line with this matter of reviewing positions, the work of Marianne Hirsch from the late 1980s tried to give voice to the untold story of the silenced mother, a tricky question within feminist studies, but already present in the African-American feminist texts where maternal heritage entails a keystone in daughters' personal growth. Hirsch's perspective highlights literary depiction of mothers' voices in contemporary matrilineal accounts, going deep into the unexplored field of mothers as individuals, as subjects. Hirsch looks for "tell the story of female development" in both mother and daughter specific voices, seeing them as separate individuals, a defying viewpoint that previous feminist theorists had avoided prioritizing habitually daughters' voice (Hirsch 1989; 161).

The particular case of Ireland in relation to the institution of motherhood is highly related with the specificity of its context as we have already seen. Irish women's difficulties in the extremely patriarchal and religious culture of the island were exacerbated by the idealized mythical figures of the mother as a national emblem and a pure Catholic model of conduct (Virgin Mary) throughout its history. For a long time they were relegated to the margins of Irish society without the slightest possibility of expressing themselves or being heard in some way. This forced alienation reached women's writing as well, rendering invisible female accounts of women's experiences and relationships from other perspectives different from those offered by male writers. However, this does not mean that Irish women fiction does not exist or be unwritten; it was simply silenced and hidden by the male-dominated framework that ruled the nation.

Links between mothers and daughters in Irish fiction have been depicted in many cases as conflicting, tensional, and tempestuous relations, putting the focus on the negative influence of maternal powers. The entrenched stereotypes in which mother and daughter figures have been enclosed responds to a threefold social oppression composed by: the archetypal and mythical dimension of Irish historical mythography with “Mother Ireland” as the traditional feminine image of the nation; the hegemonic dominance of the Roman Catholic Church insuring maternity as the principal essence of womanhood, trapping them into their family roles of wives and mothers; and last but not least important, the state social oppression with the institutionalization of motherhood as the basis of Irish women’s identity. All these conservative doctrines reduced women possibilities for autonomy and mothers authority. The effect of “protect” Irish mothers resulted in a loss of social power and economical disadvantages. Female authors attempted to reimagine and set out new scenarios for the conventional mother-daughters plots that usually offered only the options of antagonistic rivalries between women or unending chains of fate duplication. The main goal of authors like Edna O’Brien, Deirdre Madden or Mary Lanvin, was to help with their stories to overcome those apparently unconquerable prejudices about the dark malign force of Irish maternal powers composing new motifs and a renewed mythology of the feminine world.

All this problematics related with the mother-daughter bond have been displayed in Edna O’Brien’s fiction since the publication of her first novel, *The Country Girls* (O’Brien 1960) and throughout her fruitful literary career. Her different fictional narratives have always been full of tensions and ambivalent feelings that often surrounded the embattled mother-daughter dyad, key concern in her fiction, always from a connection of the personal dimension with the cultural Irish context. She achieves to evoke the great richness of female subjectivity through her grandiose narrative style, without forgetting to stress the enslaved place of women within the Irish society.

A recurrent theme in O’Brien’s fiction is that of the death of the mother as a sign of crisis in daughters’ story, a life-footprint which mark in some way the development of an identity of her own, as we will see later examining

O'Brien's *Trilogy*. In the next section we will be able to make a deep insight into female relationships outlined among the miscellaneous feminine characters of *The Country Girls Trilogy*, and analyses as well the opposite and varied female roles that O'Brien suggests us on this literary journey across her deep traditional Ireland.

4. – MOTHER-DAUGHTER RELATIONSHIPS: *THE COUNTRY GIRLS* FEMALE IDENTITIES.

“All women become like their mother. That is their tragedy. No man does. That's his”. This quote of the famous Irish writer Oscar Wilde from his play *The Importance of Being Earnest*, in addition to fitting perfectly with the story of the leading character of *The Country Girls*, Caithleen, with her mother, reveals as well the ambivalent position towards the Irish maternal figure that has been spread across both Irish literary and cultural scene for so long time.

Irish literature, concretely that of female authors, has vividly reflected this ambivalence and antagonistic relationships in the bosom of the sacrosanct Irish family. As we could see previously in this essay, Ireland was not immune to the external influences and changes from American and British contexts of the 1960s. In this atmosphere of renewal the fixed, rigid and “pure” precepts of the Irish lifestyle of the 50s, ruled mainly by the conservative rectitude of conventions and the all-pervasive Catholic Church, began to experience an international metamorphosis with the inclusion of fresh radical ideas and new ways of living beyond the parochial Irish climate. It was during this watershed stage of openness to foreign sways and coinciding with the rise of the second wave of feminism in the sixties, when Edna O'Brien brought forth her notorious primary literary work: the *Country Girls Trilogy*. The trio of novels is made up of *The Country Girls* (1960), *The Lonely Girl* (1962), *Girls in Their Married Bliss* (1964) and a little later the *Epilogue* in 1986. All along this tale of Irish girlhood, O'Brien narrates the intertwined stories of development and entry into adulthood of two Irish girls, Caithleen Brady and Baba Brennan, from rural backgrounds of the mid-twentieth century Ireland: their childhood in the rigid religious rural West; subsequent years of Catholic education in a convent boarding school and deliberate expulsion; their moving to Dublin in search of new urban ways of life

and possibilities: a job, first loves, frustrating sexual experiences, failed “love stories”, marriages...and, finally, their forced exile to London as their last escape route to flee from national restrictions, an attempt to get to terms with themselves.

O’Brien’s pioneering fictional work tries to renegotiate an alternative image for Irish women, showing intimate unexplored vital aspects veiled within the so suspicious Irish society and also in the literary realm. Despite Irish literature had already engendered narratives on maturity and growth processes (Joyce’s *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* 1916), O’Brien was able to portray in a remarkable way the unknown private life of Irish women in those years. Through her accurate, almost painfully realistic depiction of rural Irish girls as complex, self-sufficient and sexually uninhibited female subjects she turned the personal feminine intimacy into a public matter. The explicit interpolation of women’s body and sexuality was seen then as a terrible offence for the strict virtuous Irish morality, a national threat that subverted the prevalent norms and became unstable the national foundations of the new post-colonialist Republic.

The point is that some critics have reproached O’Brien for a certain fondness or predilection for female stereotypes of submissive, volatile, wounded and expiatory women figures with tragic fates, the case of many female characters of this *Trilogy* indeed (Cait, her mother...). Still and all, her representation of Irish womanhood along these three novels was actually intended to deconstruct these romanticized notions of female suffering images, through the use of an intricate method based on capturing the whole real universe of women’s experiences, the silenced language and the unknown psyche omitted until then. Within the conservative framework of the new Irish State and the tough national pressures exerted on women, O’Brien achieved to subvert Irish conventions on women’s issues throughout this epic journey of female emancipation in which, despite the final success or failure of her characters, she manages to turn these country girls into full human beings with agency and emotional complexity, even though they have to run away from their own motherland looking for a long-awaited opportunity in London, “Ireland...The

West of Ireland...the places from which she derived her sense of doom.” (O’Brien 1964; 629).

Under the umbrella of nationalist standards of decorum, common Irish woman suffered the consequences of traditional allegories of passive alienated beings without psychological complexity or expectations in life. As O’Brien notices about the Irish literary tradition in her short essay “*Why Irish Heroines Don’t Have to Be Good Anymore*” (1986):

Times changed and things became more conventional. The daring or dauntless woman was still retained in fiction but as a secondary or even a ludicrous character. Irish heroines had to be gentle, tremulous, gullible, devout, masochistic and beautiful...There was of course another kind of heroines and two in particular were living legends both for their beauty and their patriotism...It was with this jumble of association and dream and hope that I first sat down to write. Realizing that the earlier heroines were bawdy and the later ones lyrical I decided to have two, 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 that there was. As well as that, their rather meager lives would be made bearable by the company of each other. (“Why Irish Heroines Don’t Have to be Good Any More.” *The New York Times on the Web*. May 11, 1986).

The development of the *Bildungsroman* form within the Irish context, if we speak besides of female individuals, seems of an exorbitant difficulty. The genre of *Bildungsroman* is usually understood to be a narrative of growth, of an emancipatory process, with a young hero or heroine gradually coming to terms with his/her inner conflicts during the long way to maturity. The final achievement of a balanced unity or relation with society takes place after a great evolutionary process of learning to understand “the meaning of life” (Moretti 2000). However, as O’Brien exposes through the stories of her two heroines, the effects of the intrusive national Irish ideology and its restraining conventions taking part in the citizens’ identity formation, reaching unsuspected levels on Irish women’s maturation for generations.

Being realistic, O’Brien realized that a lonely Irish girl could never face up such an emancipatory journey alone in this context. Therefore, she decided to make use of a twin but opposing couple of heroines, an innovative literary

strategy of a struggle between current female types, developed here as a way of instantiating contradictory national female epitomes (good/bad, Virgin/whore, romantic/pragmatic). By means of this duet she attempts to find some uneasy equilibrium between both types but also a way of broadening women's expanse of experiences. As later O'Brien would state talking about this strategy "I decided to have two, 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 that there was" (O'Brien 1986). At both extremes of this stereotypical dichotomy, and operating both as the alter ego of the other are the sorrowful vulnerable Caithleen, the portrait of the conventional naïve virginal image of mid-century Irish women, and the bold pragmatic and indomitable Baba, reflection of the transgressive and defiant new concept of womanhood. Over the years, Cait and Baba complement each other in many ways, in a kind of love-hate relationship that in spite of their extremely polarity and contradictory nature, as Cait states in her early thoughts "Coy, pretty, malicious Baba was my friend and the person whom I feared most after my father" (O'Brien 1960; 18) keeps them together forever and helps them to survive and coming to their emancipation. We should not overlook the fact that this use of alter ego characters projects wide-ranging shared female experiences, women's hidden facets and at the same time it helps readers to concentrate on the inherent incongruities within each individual, those inner conflicting feelings, thoughts, and decisions which gradually mould Cait and Baba's identities.

One of the most remarkable features that I would like to highlight of this *Trilogy* is O'Brien's employment of different entwined narrative voices, an alternation strategy developed in the plot with different goals, as showing women's diversity or as an instrument for the author to say unappropriated obstinate statements about Ireland's ideological apparatus "The conspiracy was too enormous, the whole machinery too thorough" in Cait's words (O'Brien 1964; 642). Moreover, this stylistic technique further enriches characters' insights as well as O'Brien's literary skilfulness and demonstration of her knowledge of the Irish female conscious of the time.

One of the key incentives for this re-evaluation of the mother-daughter dyad through *The Country Girls Trilogy* shall be an exhaustive exploration of female characters, digging into the description of the personalities of both daughters and the diverse mother figures. By way of identities close examination we will be able somewhat to distinguish the possible impact or the way on how their interactions and relations have influenced womanhood future forecast.

O'Brien's leading protagonist and first-person narrator in the two first novels of the *Trilogy*, Cait/Kate Brady, is portrayed as a sensitive, breakable and dependent romantic girl whose entire life will be marked by the tragic early loss of her mother. At the beginning of the story, it is already clear that Cait has learned to imitate the lethargic behaviour of her mother, internalizing a pattern of suffering and abjection as the basis of her own being that walk with her until the end of the story. According to Baba:

Her son and I will have to take her ashes there and scatter them between the bogs and the bogs lakes and the murmuring waters and every other fucking bit of depressingness that oozes from every hectometer and every furlong of the place and that imbued her with the old Dido desperado predilections. I hope she rises up nightly like the banshee and does battle with her progenitors (O'Brien 1986; 668).

On account of the lack of this particular maternal link and a failed incapable fatherly figure, Cait's kindness and intelligence are not enough to overcome the haunting desolation and loneliness of being completely defenceless in the hostile miserable environment of rural Ireland. In order to prevent herself from a total fragmentation, she is always seeking suitable support on other people, as her lifelong best friend Baba. Over and over she makes a huge but futile attempt of escaping from this horrible turning point in her self-development (the loss of her mother), challenging Irish social restrictions and struggling to leave behind all the psychological burdens and fears of the past. Nevertheless, Irish national boundaries, in collusion with the many legal frames of coercion previously mentioned, entrapped her and torn her weak romanticist personality making impossible to find the strength to raise her own voice no matter how far she run away from her suffocating mother land. It might be said that Cait and Baba succeed someway in fighting against at least

part of the social constrictions women suffered in the Irish society, becoming in some aspects rebels to religious values and sexually inhibited. But, notwithstanding all her efforts, Cait is not able to get rid of the most harmful effects of Irish gendered heritage of mythologies and idealizations, as she demonstrates constantly with her relentless pursuit for the idyllic romantic love, which ends in a failed marriage and other loving breaches that sink her so deeper in the doomed martyr stereotype of perpetual disillusionment that finally finishes her off: “why couldn’t she see that people are brigands, what made her think that there was such a thing as twin-star perpetuity, when all around her people were scraping for bits of happiness and not getting anywhere.”(O’Brien 1986; 675).

The other side of the coin in this literary duo and the second narrative voice introduced at the last book and later *Epilogue* is Baba Brennan, a dauntless practical girl who undermines the lyrical ideal Irish female image not only through her bold bawdy behaviour and direct explicit language but also through her non-stopping resistance to the national structures of subordination imposed on Irish women. Since her childhood, Baba is presented as the embodiment of Cait’s “dark side”, with her great self-reliance, an irreverent wit and a pragmatic outlook enlarged possibly as a response to Cait’s fateful tendencies, a kind of compensational mechanism. Her practical “down to earth” conduct is revealed in O’Brien’s comments: “Kate was looking for love. Baba was looking for money. Kate was timid, yearning and elegiac. Baba took up the cudgel against life and married an Irish builder who was as likely to clout her as to do anything else” (O’Brien 1986). The inclusion of Baba’s voice introduces the forerunner female character of a new type of Irish women, more assertive, liberal, and defiant, to respond the fixed social categorization of yielding domestic women in Ireland and on the other hand put into words the unspeakable experiences and emotions of the so long hidden Irish female world. The character and voice of Baba portray the brazen answer of Edna O’Brien to the conservative moral regulation of the Irish Republic, and at the same time, in words of Eimear McBride “they set a precedent, raised a flag, drew a line in the sand. With their creation O’Brien gave voice to the

experiences of a previously muzzled generation of Irish women.” (*The Country Girls Trilogy* foreword 2017).

Mother-daughter relationships have been a cornerstone in Edna O’Brien’s narratives since her first novel *The Country Girls* in 1960. Her overriding concern seems to be the long lasting consequences or effects that these controversial dealings with the maternal figure arise when they are socially constructed by the national Irish context. In O’Brien’s fiction motherhood and the conflicted bond with daughters give off tension or frustration between the paradoxical necessity for nurturance and the acquisition of freedom to find autonomy. Throughout the development of *The Country Girls Trilogy* O’Brien depicts several sorts of maternal characters to evoke the variety of motherly types present in Ireland at that time, but also beyond the national frameworks. All these maternal portrayals are revealed in some way disfunctional according to certain literary critics, but it is also possible that they are only describing realistic fallible women that attempt to survive at an inauspicious historical moment, place and circumstances.

The starting point of Cait’s developmental journey begins in a claustrophobic rural environment of west Ireland, with an abusive alcoholic father and a suffering mother caught in a domestic oppressive cage in which her only alternative is the maintenance of certain household order through her constant exhausting hard work and self-sacrifice. Mrs. Brady, despite her closeness and deep love for Cait, is bound through her daughter’s description with the well-known victimised mythical female images from historical Irish traditions: a worried martyr, distressed, old for her time and sadly downhearted; in Cait’s words:

In her brown dress she looked sad; the farther I went, the sadder she looked. Like a sparrow in the snow, brown and anxious and lonesome. It was hard to think that she got married one sunny morning in a lace dress and a floppy buttercup hat, and that her eyes were moist with pleasure when now they were watery with tears. (O’Brien 1960; 12).

What O’Brien aims invoking allegorical Irish figures in the body of Mrs. Brady is to carry out a revision of the links between women and national

conditions in Ireland, questioning the ongoing lack of authority, agency and freedom of Irish women as a general rule in the patriarchal system. Moreover, it is clearly stated that to overturn or alter these impoverished circumstances was not a choice or possibility for Irish women, if we look closely at the tragic punishing end by drowning of Mrs. Brady's escape attempt from her suffocating domestic imprisonment. Cait's legacy from this stifling maternal tie and her subsequent insuperable loss is translated into a propensity for unhappiness and suffering passivity that will walk with her until the end of her story, moment when she sets out, after a lot of years, her real hidden feelings about her mother:

Hills brought a sudden thought of her mother, and she felt the first flash of dislike she had ever experienced for that dead, overworked woman. Her mother's kindness and her mother's accidental drowning had always given her a mantle of perfection...Now suddenly she saw that woman in a different light. A self-appointed martyr. A blackmailer. Stitching the cord back on. Smothering her one child in loathsome, sponge-soft, pamper love...For days she went around hating her mother, remembering her minutest fault...In that fever of hate and shame she thought one day of something that lessened her rancor. They had laughed together once... (O'Brien 1964; 607-608)

After the loss of her biological mother, the following maternal alternative in Cait's life is Baba's mother, Martha Brennan. Mrs. Brennan is a frustrated ballet dancer who lives prisoner of an unhappy marriage and repeatedly regrets her sacrifice in front of her own children, as Baba remarks on a couple of occasions "Jesus, stick to the same story" (O'Brien 1960; 40). So she is also perceived as a "victim" of the social Irish system and suffers the effects of a constrained marriage that has restricted her possibilities in life. Mrs. Brennan searches relief to her bitterness in other men's attentions, in her appearance care, in the excessive drinking... "Martha was not ever sad, unless being bored is a form of sadness. She wanted two things from life and she got them—drink and admiration." (O'Brien 1960; 39). Contrary to Mrs. Brady relation with Cait, her motherly linkage with Baba is more a kind of friendship or sisterhood, acting as intimate confidants more than into the mother-daughter roles. Actually, according to Cait's own view of Martha "Not that Martha was motherly. She was too beautiful and cold for that." (O'Brien 1960; 39). This sort of ineffectiveness as a serviceable mother is demonstrated in multiple comments along the *Trilogy*

and through the sharp words of her already adult daughter after her newly marriage:

I even confided in my mother. I hardly ever talked to my mother about anything, because when I was four I had scarlet fever and she sent me away to a Gaeltacht to learn Irish. She really sent me away so that she wouldn't have to mind me...I don't hold it against her. I don't expect parents to fit you out with anything other than birth certificate and an occasional pair of new shoes (O'Brien 1964; 490)

In both cases, mothers' behaviour as well as their compensatory strategies to hold on their respective unsatisfactory marriages (generally relief or support of other men) left unmistakable marks on both girls' developmental process of the self, on their future behaviour with men, and even on their expectations of life.

Another significant point on this "maternal" path through Cait and Baba's story is the role of nuns and the severe Mother Superior of the convent school, whose figure embodied the cult of purity, religious discipline and cold disregard. Nuns managed convents and take control of the educational system for Irish girls; they symbolised motherly figures in the deep rooted Catholic culture in Ireland, in charge of the instauration of preferred ideals and behavior for women and their expected domestic duties. In consequence they performed an indoctrinating function to mould feminine personalities in order to adapt them to the patriarchal stereotypes imposed by the Roman Catholic Church, exercising a strict control over their minds and their bodies as well:

The new girls won't know this, but our convent has always been proud of its modesty. Our girls, above anything else, are good and wholesome and modest. One expression of modesty is the way a girl dresses and undresses. She should do with decorum and modesty. (O'Brien 1960; 87)

Catholic cultures valued attributes of motherhood related with the Virgin-image of self-sacrifice in evident contrast with representations of bad mothers, who were subdued to public scorn or isolated in horrible places as Magdalene laundries. While it is true that both girls fled from the convent in their childhood, only Baba was really successful in subverting and leaving behind conservative Catholic doctrines. Cait's mind was since then pervaded with self-denying and guilt feelings originated and rooted in Catholic traditions. Such a model of "good

Catholic mother” will lead and take part in certain way to increase Cait’s fall when she is finally drift apart from her own child.

In the light of recent social changes in the last years about different alternative family models and current disparate parental figures, it seems really interesting to pay some attention to the potential role of Caithleen and Baba’s Austrian landlady in Dublin, Joanna, as a kind of “surrogate” mother figure. After the previous failed female models in the role of mother, the appearance of a sympathetic emigrant as a source for female intimacy could be considered a strategy of the author for both blaming Irish deficiency to provide trained mothers and to highlight as well the need of the country to look beyond its frontiers to amplify Irish narrow-minded views. O’Brien presents an “outsider” as the only example of functional mature woman in the whole life of the girls, demonstrating the lack of “Mother Ireland” as provider of suitable national progenitors. Joanna is able to elude somehow Irish femininity’s constraints departing from the fixed social script written for Irish womanhood thanks to her condition of foreigner. In this way she is able to show both girls an alternative position for women and even a viable marital relationship with her husband Gustav. In spite of her stingy character, Joanna, for her part, is repeatedly displaying her concern for both girls not as a landlady but as a watchful caregiver: feeding them, waiting for them in bed, going to the cinema together, etc. Throughout the second book, *The Lonely Girl*, the maternal instincts of Joanna begin to grow and be clearer: “You cannot leave me, eh? I am *gut* to you like a mother. I stitch your clothes and your ironing” (O’Brien 1962; 246) Joanna pleads at Baba’s threat to leave the house. One of the most illuminating picture of this substitute maternal bond and the consolidation of the intimacy between them is the scene in which Caithleen confesses her secret trip with Mr. Gentleman to Joanna and asks her to loan her nightgown for the occasion:

I went into my own room and in a few minutes she came in after me. She had the nightgown in her hand. It was folded in tissue paper, and as she opened the paper camphor balls kept falling out and rolling onto the floor. It was lilac color and it was the biggest nightgown I’d ever seen... “Lovely. Pure silk...Show Gustav”. (O’Brien 1960; 214)

This ritual ceremony of passing a sentimental symbolic gift from one generation to the next has been continually ascribed in the profound deep relation between mothers and daughters, and Joanna's proud exhibition does nothing but reinforce the idea of an exceptional devoted tie between them.

Following with her real-looking approach, Edna O'Brien extended failed maternal inheritance and shows us how the incapacity of being "good" mothers is transferred to Cait and Baba the moment they become mothers. Cait with her suffocating maternal love, her feeling of guilt for having failed her child, and subsequent castration, and Baba's abortion attempt against an illegitimate child and the final rejection of her own daughter "from day one": "I'm not a mother like Kate, drooling and holding out the old metaphorical breast, like a warm scone or griddle bread". (O'Brien 1986; 657) And it is she precisely, Baba, who put into words the harsh reflection about children in the entire Trilogy:

I though, we're lonely buggers, we need a bit of romp so as not to feel that we're walking, talking skeletons. Kids don't do really; at least not when they grow up, and that was Kate's mistake, the old umbilical love. She wanted to twine fingers with her son, Cash, throughout eternity. (O'Brien 1986; 657)

O'Brien's narratives of mothers and daughters as well as other texts of the mid-twentieth century have depicted this intimate female bond from a convoluted tempestuous point of view, relating it with insecurities, trauma, pain and frustration. In regards to Cait's story, her sorrowful inclinations since her childhood were severely aggravated by her worst nightmare: "There were tears in my eyes. I was always afraid that my mother would die while I was at school"(O'Brien 1960; 11). Her mother's memories intertwine with traumatic products of the past forever. This lost maternal link creates an eternal absence that becomes a key fundament in the development of Cait's identity, remaining her without the needed psychological resources for a complete and coherent formation of the self. The heritage between both Brady's generations is one of post-traumatic indecision, fear, doubts, disempowerment, and gaps, as Baba states in the epilogue "She said it was the emptiness that was the worst, the void...I suppose it was the future she couldn't face, the thought that it would be the same forever, eons of fucking emptiness."(O'Brien 1986; 675-678). And is here, almost by the end of the third novel, when Cait is finally aware of her

resentment, even hatred, to her mother, claiming that her early nurturing would have been the source of her unstable ego, fully of deficiencies and faults. And probably part of that resentment comes also from the fact that she abandoned her, left her alone without a farewell.

Despite all the immense attempts carried out by Cait to fight against the stereotypes of the severe Irish patriarchal culture, in spite of several efforts of breaking away from the same miserable life and grim fate of her mother, she is finally not able to overcome the fragmentation and annihilation of her inner fragile self; as a consequence, she ends up unfortunately sharing the fatal destiny of her own mother.

Be that as it may, Edna O'Brien developed a realistic mother-daughter plot through an apparent usual trend about traditional Irish symbolism of the mother figure, but the point is that despite the disturbing depiction of all these "imperfect" mother examples in the trilogy, if we dig deep into the heart of the story, what O'Brien would be looking for is a reconsideration of Irish women's prospects in such a restrictive context which exterminates any chance of deviation from the imposed norm. Therefore, O'Brien encourages us to put ourselves in Irish mothers' shoes in order to take cognizance of their adverse circumstances, of women's lack of room to manoeuvre in such a rough context, but at the same time she is opening a window to enlarge a potential successful world of options if we are able to look beyond the Irish national confines.

5. – CONCLUSIONS.

From the very beginning of this project my main aspiration has been to reappraise the place and role of Edna O'Brien's narratives of *The Country Girls Trilogy* in the evolution of the Irish female identity both within the Irish society and in its literary representations. As I stated in the introduction, I have paid particular attention to the social and cultural characteristics that surround them and how these historical, national and geographical idiosyncrasies play a fundamental role in our development as female subjects, but also as mothers and as daughters. With a critical approach to the entrenched patriarchal values of post-colonial Irish society of 1950, whose foundations were laid by the

country historical dominant forces, that is, the Catholic Church and a persuadable Irish state, I have attempted to do a social immersion in order to locate us in the exact context which encompassed the author at the time of writing as well as to ask me to what extent her fictional work mirrors the period's framework. After evaluating all these national circumstances, constrictions and idealizations we might say that in a country like Ireland it was a great deed to achieve individuation as a female subject, likewise State and Church's intrusion in the life of Irish citizens has resulted in a relentless struggle to achieve an own genuine identity and voice. In the particular case we are dealing with, that is, feminine identities, ties and the venerated ideal of motherhood, they have been undoubtedly exposed to the pressures and coercions of the patriarchal control for years, becoming a successful source of self-cancellation of women individuation, as Edna O'Brien has epitomized in the bodies of the varied motherly figures along this *Trilogy*. Under a complex process of deconstruction she performs a demythologizing exercise of Irish cultural traditions, on the one hand questioning romanticized ideals of Irish womanhood (embodied in Cait's character) by exploring the complexity and variety of female experiences, subjects and voices (introduction of Baba's voice), and on the other hand, amplifying Irish views to a liberating cross-cultural exchange that would enrich the country and "Irishness" itself.

After sixty years, this masterpiece of art designed by Edna O'Brien keeps on arising great interest; actually, it has not ceased to be eagerly analyzed over the time. As critic Declan Kiberd asserts in *Inventing Ireland* "she is the writer who made many of the subsequent advances in Irishwomen's writing possible".

The Irish awarded author Eimear McBride properly describes "both it (*The Country Girls Trilogy*), and O'Brien have become era-defining symbols of the struggle for Irish women's voices to be heard". Although the novel's fame was long rooted in its revolutionary and controversial publication, the truth of the matter is that there are many innovations and new perspectives to explore behind this human true text. Worthy of remark is her beautifully honest portrayal of the Irish women's harsh reality. Her women's depictions as actual people of flesh and bone are masterly constructed with authentic, realistic and unadorned

images of daughters and mothers as they really are: subjects with ups and downs, kindhearted but with their imperfections, in other words human beings. Through stylistic and formal innovations as her rigorously sincere plural writing, O'Brien not only achieves to incorporate an alternative symbolic female panorama, in doing so she is also creating a new female language with which the new Irish woman (Baba's character) will give shape to her discourse of rejection and resistance that will last in time.

After reading this truthful work there is no doubt of the immense contribution that Edna O'Brien has supposed to Irish female community and Irish literature as well. Despite not being a radical groundbreaking portrait of motherhood, her recognition of mothers as subjects on their own right with a complex emotional domain laid the foundation stone for future narratives of female empathy, awareness and reconciliation. As I have said before, she "set a precedent" for subsequent Irish women writers, as Louise Nealon recently declares "Every Irish writer should aspire to follow the path O'Brien has forged for us through her vocation...As an Irish woman, I am indebted to O'Brien for seeing that blue road and for writing words before we realized they needed to be written"(www.irishtimes.com/culture/books/infamous-influential-beloved-irish-writers-celebrate-edna-o-brien) In this sense, we have to say that later Irish female writers have known how to take advantage of O'Brien's legacy: Danielle McLaughlin praised O'Brien's faithful "illuminating works" and "recognize her Ireland, the rural one, in O'Brien's fiction"; Irish novelist Anne Enright states "Looking at *The Country Girls* now, it is not so shocking, but what endures is the way she portrays the friendship between the two girls...Female friendship had not been written about in that way in an Irish context until she came along."(the guardian).Under O'Brien's sway are not only Irish writers but the myriad of women writers developing mother-daughter plots around the world as the English journalist Miriam Foley, born and raised in London to Irish parents who last year has published her first literary work *Her Mother's Daughter*(under the pseudonym Alice Fitzgerald), a novel that tells the story of a conflicting and emotionally abusive mother and her innocent ten-year-old daughter against the backdrop of London and Ireland, with a manifest influence of one of her literary idols: Edna O'Brien; or also "one of the biggest literary European literary

phenomena of the twentieth-first century Elena Ferrante” according to Jacqueline Rose, and the quartet of Neapolitan novels beginning with *My Brilliant Friend* (2011) a modern masterpiece, a colorful, generous-hearted and profound story about two friends, Elena and Lila. Ferrante tells the story of both girls’ developmental process but also of a nation (Italy) through a careful meditation on the nature of friendship, motherhood and female identities, as we can see, a great tide of shared nuances with O’Brien’s *Trilogy*.

Edna O’Brien has returned to mother-daughter plots along her sixty year-old career in different new lights, as in *Sister Imelda; Saint and Sinners; In the Light of the Evening...* but always from a frank and faithful record of the reality. Eimear McBride declares in *The Country Girls Trilogy* foreword:

Not only was O’Brien giving voice to the voiceless, she was washing the nation’s dirty laundry in public, laundry which has indeed proved so dirty that, more than fifty years after *The Country Girls*’ momentous publication, it is still proving in need of a rinse... *The Country Girls* is not the novel that broke the mould, it is the one that made it. (McBride 2017 *The Country Girls Trilogy* foreword).

As frequently occurs with literary masterpieces, each new reading allows us to discover new nuances, new meanings and reconsiderations that make us emerge aspects of our own identity that were hidden in our depths until that moment. This is absently true of my first reading of O’Brien’s debut novels.

It is normally said that truth is stranger than fiction but as we have been able to observe here, the long way of external and internal obstacles travelled by *The Country Girls* heroines, Cait and Baba, was the same difficult way that O’Brien travelled in her early years; and in the same way both girls did, always within their possibilities of carving out a future, Edna O’Brien has never given up either. Edna O’Brien without doubt, one of the voices that awakened the change in Ireland.

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