

الآن أستطيع اخبار قصتي: دراسة نسوية ما بعد الاستعمار في قصيدة ايفان بولاند  
"ايرلندا الام"

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## Now I Could Tell My Story: A Postcolonial-Feminist Study in Eavan Boland's "Mother Ireland"

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المستخلص

لم تكن ايرلندا عادلة مع نساءها، فقد عانت المرأة الايرلندية من التهميش و العزلة تاريخيا و ثقافيا  
وادبيا، حيث تم تصوير ايرلندا على انها امرأة من قبل الاستعمار و كذلك القوميين على حد  
سواء حيث كانت تسمى ايرلندا "ايرلندا الام". الا ان الشاعرة ايفان بولاند ثارت ضد هذا الاحتقار  
الموجه للنساء و قدمت "ايرلندا الام" جديدة في كتاباتها و على عكس التصوير السابق للمرأة.  
فأن هذه ايرلندا الام تجسد المرأة الايرلندية الحقيقية. الباحث سوف يستخدم نظرية النسوية ما بعد  
الاستعمار لمناقشة اعمال بولاند. هذا البحث يبين كيف تم تهميش واضطهاد المرأة الايرلندية من  
قبل سوء التمثيل الذكوري و كيف تمكنت الشاعرة من كسر الصورة النمطية الذكورية للمرأة  
الايرلندية.

## **Abstract**

Ireland was unjust to its women. For many years, Irish women were marginalized and their voices were silenced; they were absent from history, culture, and even literary works. Ireland is viewed as a woman not only by colonialists, but also by the Irish themselves, the nationalists. Ireland has become feminized and is referred to as "Mother Ireland". Women have lost all humanity through the association of both Ireland and women with the legend of Mother Ireland. Boland revolts against this despised depiction of women's dignity. Therefore, she, in her "Mother Ireland", attempts to present a new Mother Ireland, distinct from the old and traditional one. Unlike the original Mother Ireland, this new image embodies the true Irish woman and her daily experiences, which have long been excluded from the literary world. The researcher is going to use the theory of Postcolonial Feminism to approach Boland's works. This paper shows how Irish women are victimized by the masculine misrepresentation and how Boland challenges the stereotypical male images of Irish women. Ireland has become feminized and is referred to as "Mother Ireland". According to Catherine Nash, a professor of Human Geography at the University of London, depicting the Irish woman as Virgin Mary and connecting her to the concepts of perfection, idealism, and motherhood implies that women's lives are limited to their homes, husbands.

## **1. Introduction**

Ireland was unjust to its women. For many years, Irish women were marginalized, their voices were silenced, and they were absent from history, culture, and even literary works (Stevens et al., 2000, p. 405). Gender and nationality are inextricably linked with the concept of "other" in colonized countries. England colonized Ireland in the 12th century, and this colonization ended with the civil war in the early 1920s. Ireland, like most colonized countries, including Africa and India, is portrayed by its colonizers as "other", "objects of study", "bodies of knowledge", and an entity shaped by men. The colonizers see Ireland as a weak woman in this configuration. The colonizers consider Ireland a useless, ineffectual woman who needs to be controlled by men (Stevens et al., 2000, p. 408).

Ireland is viewed as a woman not only by colonialists, but also by the Irish themselves. They also helped give Ireland a feminine identity. Ireland, through its history, traditions, culture, myths, and even literary works, marginalizes the role of women. Women are associated with Virgin Mary and Mother in the Irish tradition. Women are portrayed as idealized icons. This visualization explores the concepts of subservience



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and submissiveness. It also implies that women's only role in life is to give birth, and their only job is motherhood and domesticity, regardless of their feelings, hopes, opinions, and needs (Karremann, 2004, p. 120). Ireland has become feminized and is referred to as "Mother Ireland". According to Catherine Nash, a professor of Human Geography at the University of London, depicting the Irish woman as Virgin Mary and connecting her to the concepts of perfection, idealism, and motherhood implies that women's lives are limited to their homes, husbands, and children. It also implies that women are submissive beings who are subject to humiliation (Chang, 2016, p. 3).

Female writers struggle to get recognition. Irish literature has always been dominated by men. For centuries, the literary world revolved around male voices such as W.B. Yeats, Thomas Moor, Jonathan Swift, Seamus Heaney, and others. As a result, women's writings were overshadowed (Chang, 2016, pp. 1–2). This is ironic because Ireland, which has always been conceived as a woman, did not do justice to its women, leaving them on the sidelines with no significant active role (Chang, 2016, pp. 2–3).

In addition, Irish poetry ignored the role of women and did not address their experiences and daily lives (Burns, 2001, p. 217). As a result, the women's role was entirely passive. Women are regarded as a source of inspiration for male poets. They serve as a muse to inspire men. This configuration corresponds to the literary Irish genre known as *aisling*. According to this genre, Ireland appears in a poet's vision as a weak woman unable to defend herself and in need of a man's protection (Belanger, 2000, p. 3). This genre personifies the image of "Mother Ireland".

All of these negative perceptions of Irish women have weakened their social standing. One could argue that such literature has failed to represent ordinary women. Representing women in this way benefited nationalists, who used women as a tool for national propaganda and their call to reclaim their land from colonizers (Chang, 2016, p. 3). All of these false images seek to disempower Irish women and exclude them from participation in all aspects of life (Poloczek, 2000, p. 77). The Irish woman is colonized twice because of her gender (Stevens et al., 2000, p. 407), once by British colonialists and once by her own nation. Ireland has been portrayed by both groups as a weak woman, and thus as a dependable, subordinate, and ineffective entity (Chang, 2016, p. 3).

Ireland gained independence at the end of the civil war in the 1920s. Colonialism came to an end, and postcolonialism took its place. Postcolonialism, like feminism, is concerned with highlighting

marginalized people. It aims to give voice to the voiceless, the other. The arrival of nationalists provided a ray of hope for Irish women. Unfortunately, they continued on the colonial path. They marginalized women and ignored their daily experiences. As a result, women are still described as "other". Though their country is liberated, nationalists' minds are never liberated (Stevens et al., 2000, pp. 405, 407, 409–410).

Women are treated as a source of inspiration in Irish literature, as a muse who provokes the poet's feelings and ways of thinking. This inspired him to write creatively. Even Ireland's most famous poets, such as W.B. Yeats, feminized Ireland by describing it as a pretty lady and giving it a feminine identity. In his works, such as *Cathleen ni Houlihan*, Ireland is described in a romantic, mystical manner. Thus, whether in the colonial or postcolonial periods, women are still considered "other" and entities owned and controlled by men. Women are silenced twice by their nation and colonialists (Stevens et al., 2000, pp. 407, 410–411).

Irish Women are not allowed to express their opinions or feelings. They are not allowed to think and certainly not to write poetry. Writing poetry falls on the shoulders of men only. There are several complex reasons for this discrimination. In addition to the passive role of women in the ancient culture and tradition of Ireland and their position as "other" in the colonial and postcolonial periods, religion also contributes to silencing women and weakening their personalities. According to the church's opinion, a woman's mission in life is to bear children, give birth, and take care of her children and her husband. Thus, religion also wants women to be submissive beings whose lives are bound to domestic life. However, in the 1940s, women began to break their chains and set themselves free from the cage of a male-centered society (Terente, 1992, pp. 132–134).

In this period, female poets began to introduce new poetry that is based on rationality, not emotion. They considered women as an important pillar in life and had an active role, not a passive one. Women are no longer considered a muse to inspire male poets. These female poets liberated Irish women from double colonialism. They broke the silence of women who had been silenced by history. They wrote poetry that was truthful and focused on the daily lives and experiences of women. They transformed women from objects to subjects, from static to dynamic entities capable of change and expression. Those female poets make the concept of the search for identity a central theme in their work (Terente, 1992, pp. 132–134).

Eavan Boland, Edna Longley, Gerardine Meaney, and others are among the most prominent Irish poets who raise their voices to give voice





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to voiceless Irish women. Longley, in her "From Cathleen to Anorexia", criticizes women's oppression and the idea of viewing them as icons for the benefit of nationalists seeking to reclaim their land (Sanches, 2014, p. 68). Iris Murdoch and Edna O'Brien are two more female poets who reject the contempt for women and regard them as inferior objects. They express their anguish over women's inferiority (Chang, 2016, p. 2).

Eavan Boland, an outstanding Irish poet, offers hope to Irish women. She exposes the dual colonialism to which Irish women were subjected in her poetry. She investigates the suppression of women's identities and works to restore them. Irish women have historically been marginalized. They are revered as a muse, the Virgin Mary, and Mother Ireland. Boland's writings are centered on real-life experiences of women. She rejects the stereotypical images introduced by male poets and claims that Irish women should not be used as motifs or stylistic elements (Chang, 2016, p. 2). Boland also criticizes her own history for ignoring women's roles, and she attempts to rewrite history by introducing a new image of Irish women. Furthermore, she introduces a new history that does not dismiss the role of women, a history that recognizes women as real human beings. Boland herself affirms that "I have never felt I owned Irish history; I have never entitled to the Irish experience" (Boland, 1995, p. 126).

Women all over the world have long faced oppression and injustice in all aspects of life. This long history of prejudices against women resulted in the emergence of the feminist movement in the Western world in the 1960s and 1970s. Feminists began re-examining the concepts of sex and gender, as well as their incorporation into cultural, social, and literary discourses (Mishra, 2013, p.130).

Feminism is a broad discourse that penetrates the world quickly to end the bias against women. However, it is wrong to think that this movement is fair to all women, especially women in once-colonized countries or third-world women. These women have experiences, lives, and circumstances that are different from those of white Western women. So, it is necessary to have a new discipline to study and evaluate these unique experiences; thus, postcolonial feminism is considered (Mishra, 2013, p. 129). Western feminism erred when it followed the hegemonic approach and assumed that all women in the world shared the same experiences and the same conditions. Those feminists had assumed that their suggested solutions to end gender discrimination in the West were applicable to all women (Riyal, 2019, p. 84).

The concept of "differences" is where postcolonial feminism, also known as anti-racism, originates. According to this notion, women have



different lives, experiences, and circumstances. No two women have the same thoughts or behaviors. This movement is, therefore, a reaction to Western feminism's failure, which has universalized and homogenized all women throughout the world. The essentialism advocated by white Western feminism has been questioned by the theory of postcolonial feminism. White feminism has made the assumption that the problems faced by white educated middle-class women are the same problems faced by all women worldwide. As a result, it silences the voices of certain groups, particularly black women and women from developing countries. Furthermore, it creates a distinction between women from the first world and those from the third world (Lewis & Mills, 2003, p. 4).

Postcolonial feminism; in this case, has replaced monolithicity with diversity and seen differences as its primary characteristic (Gamble, pp. 41–42). This novel discipline represents a ray of hope for non-white women. It refutes all of Western feminism's fabricated beliefs that universalize all women. It also rejects the concept of eurocentrism advocated by Western feminists. As a result, postcolonial feminists study and evaluate all women's issues around the world. Furthermore, they associate the concept of gender with class and race. Thus, this new movement protects the rights of women and does not favor one group over another (Mishra, 2013, p. 129).

For a long time, female writers in Irish literature have faced marginalization and ignorance. All of this is due to Ireland's dark history and traditions, which transformed women into national icons. However, in the last few decades of the twentieth century, there has been the emergence of thriving projects and researches that support the writings of intellectual female writers such as Eavan Boland, Edna Longely, and Geradin Meaney (Sanches, 2014, pp. 67–68).

Eavan Boland, Ireland's most famous poet, was born in 1944. Her mother was a painter, and her father worked as a diplomat. Her father became Ireland's ambassador to England in 1950, so he took his family to London. Boland moved around a lot as a child because of her father's job. Her father's diplomatic job then forced them to relocate to New York. Boland spent her childhood away from Ireland. Then they returned to Dublin. She attended Thirty College and graduated in 1967. Boland married novelist Kevin Casy two years later. After that, they moved to the suburbs, which was one of her favorite themes, and had two daughters (Gonzalez, 2006, pp. 26–27).

What distinguishes Boland's writing is that it focuses on two main fields, Postcolonialism and feminism. In her poetry and prose, she exposes the difficulties of Irish people, specifically women, with British





colonialists. Moreover, she expresses her discontent with Irish poetry and traditions that are dominated by male poets. She disapproves of the depiction of Irish women as emblematic, passive entities. In her essays, like "Object Lessons", she attempts to create a special space for Irish women. She tries to rectify Irish poetry that was, for a long time, male-dominated (Cory, 2015, p. 960).

In her essay "Outside History", Boland states that Irish poetry is male-centered. Such a kind of poetry tries, in every way, to despise women. It uses women as "motifs" and as elements of style. Women are depicted as "often passive, decorative, raised to emblematic status". Boland considers such a depiction as an insult to Irish women. Thus, she tries to correct these old-fashioned thoughts in her writings. Having "moved from being the objects of Irish poems to being the authors of them", Irish women take their rightful place (Craps, 2009, pp. 165–166). Boland also focuses on the theme of lost identity. If a person loses his/her identity, he or she will be invisible and almost non-existent. There is a tone of colonialism and postcolonialism in her writings. She shows how colonialists repress people's identities, then she tries to restore that identity. Moreover, she explains that Irish women are doubly colonized by virtue of their sex and their nation (Atfield, 2008, pp.168, 171).

Furthermore, Boland criticizes Western feminism's false principles, which undervalue the rights of third-world women. Western feminists have a tendency to speak for these women; thus, they mute them. They ignore their experiences and thus contribute to their colonization. As a result, Boland's poetry and prose center on the unique daily experiences of oppressed women (Fogarty, 1999, p.256).

## 2. Now I Could Tell My Story: "Mother Ireland"

Boland refuses to treat Irish women as idealized and simplified icons in literary works and myths because this marginalized image empowers men to impose their control over the ordinary women. In her poem "Mother Ireland", the poet criticizes the relationship between women and Ireland. Nationalists have portrayed their country as wounded, like a weak woman in need of rescue by national heroes. This stereotypical view has also led the Irish man to perceive women as submissive and weak, always in need of him, and incapable of defending or representing herself because there is always someone to do so (Al-Wattar, 2020, p. 24).

Women have lost all humanity through the association of Ireland and women with the legend of Mother Ireland. Males regard women as ideal, beautiful, and unaging, and their role is rigid and consistent. The poet

revolts against this despised depiction of women's dignity, claiming that Irish women have been oppressed and victimized twice, once by colonialists and once by her people, the nationalists. Therefore, the poet, through her writings, attempts to present a new Mother Ireland, distinct from the old and original one. Unlike the original Mother Ireland, this new one embodies the true Irish woman and her daily experiences, which have long been excluded from the literary world. The poet humanizes this new Mother of Ireland, who is no longer silent as she once was, but now has a voice and the authority to speak (Al-Wattar, 2020, p. 25).

In this poem, Boland investigates traditional images of women in Irish literature, specifically images of Mother Ireland's national icons, in order to provide authentic images of Irish women. This poem belongs to *The Lost Land* in which the poet deciphers the ancient link between nation and womanhood. Nationalists have created this bond in order to elevate women to the status of national icons. In fact, the poem depicts Mother Ireland's transformation from a passive, helpless, silent being to a strong, independent, active woman of blood and flesh (Villar-Argáiz, 2005, p. 372). In his "Gendering the Irish Land: Seamus Heaney's Act of Union" (1975), Josep M. Armengol believes that by making real Irish women "mythical, bodiless, idealized, and motherly figures", the personality of women has been weakened, and they have been dominated and controlled by males (Armengol, 2015, p. 9). Moreover, he thinks that there are two aspects to women's association with Ireland. The comparison of Ireland to a helpless, weak woman makes the Irish man arrogant and completely impose his control over women. This connection, on the other hand, aides the nationalists in their propaganda regarding their national identity, which was robbed by the British occupation, in order to give them an incentive, motivation, and pride in their patriotism (Armengol, 2015, p. 9).

The poem begins with Mother Ireland's words about her former condition according to nationalist ideology. The first lines also demonstrate the association of women with "land", "field", and "a hill" (Villar-Argáiz, 2005, p. 372). The poet does not use abstract images of women, as is usual in male narratives, but instead uses concrete images to describe the women's way of dressing, their behavior, their ability to make decisions, their expressions of grief and pain, and even their movements. The poet refuses to romanticize women and instead uses real, concrete images of ordinary women and everyday life:

**At first**

**I was land**

**I lay on my back to be fields**





**and when I turned  
on my side  
I was a hill  
under freezing stars. (Boland, 2013, p. 200)**

These lines describe Mother Ireland's previous state as incapacitated, unable to move. Boland emphasizes this by using static verbs like "I was", "I lay" but she gradually begins to use verbs and words that indicate change and transformation toward autonomy. Also, she describes Mother Ireland as "fields" "land" which are areas that are easy to control by humans, for the purpose of, for the example, planting and plowing them. Then, the poet associates Mother Ireland with "hill" "freezing stars" which are high places that are difficult for humans to exploit and control. The poet also associates Mother Ireland with stars that are distant and bright to people. However, these stars are freezing; thus, they are fixed (Villar-Argáiz, 2005, p. 373).

In fact, the first lines of the poem demonstrate both a humanist and a rebellious sides. Mother Ireland emphasizes that she is no longer a "land" built on "back to be fields," but that she has started to move and "turned on my side," indicating that she is on her way out of traditional freezing. She also has a voice, for she is the main subject of the poem, and she is the one with the authority to speak, as evidenced by Boland's use of the first person pronoun to confirm that Mother Ireland is the one speaking and does not require another person to speak on her behalf, and thus Boland breaks the Irish woman's silence (Al-Wattar, 2020, p. 27).

Then, Mother Ireland speaks about her previous situation: how traditional Irish history and poetry has kept her silent and passive, and how she has been imprisoned within a male-made stereotypical image (Al-Wattar, 2020, p. 27). Boland has refused to represent women in unrealistic images. After all, a woman is a living being that has her own existence and experiences that are both sweet and bitter. She is not a symbol or icon to be exploited by patriarchal and nationalist ideologies:

**I did not see.  
I was seen.  
Night and day  
words fell on me. (Boland, 2013, p. 200)**

Mother Ireland has her own voice to speak in this poem; she has her own story. Mother Ireland is humanized by giving her personal traits. She is transformed from a national icon to a real human being with blood and flesh (Al-Wattar, 2020, p. 26). In most of the poem's lines, a first-person pronoun is used to indicate that Mother Ireland has the authority to speak.



Boland gives her a voice, so she could express herself (Villar-Argáiz, 2005, p. 372).

The linguistic analysis is extremely significant. Boland uses the passive voice in "I was seen" to emphasize that Mother Ireland has previously been passive and that there is always someone to speak for her. The poet uses short lines in the first lines of the poem to demonstrate that Mother Ireland is still stuck and unable to do anything. Boland also uses the term "seeds" to refer to a new life, implying that there is a change and a new birth for women. Women, like seeds, give new life. These seeds are the beginning of a new feminist identity (Villar-Argáiz, 2005, pp. 373-374).

In fact, Mother Ireland makes a significant step forward when she says, "I rose up" "I remembered it". This movement of rising as well as her ability to learn and remember her name, indicate that she is no longer possessed and passive, but has evolved into an active being aware of her identity and voice (Al-Wattar, 2020, p.27). In her writings, Boland has destroyed the clichéd image prescribed for women by challenging her male predecessors and traditional poetry. Boland has developed a personal voice and manages to liberate herself and all women by embracing her creativity and her potential:

**Seeds. Raindrops.  
Chips of frost.  
From one of them  
I learned my name.  
I rose up. I remembered it. (Boland, 2013, p. 200)**

When she regains her voice, her strength, and her identity, she is now able to tell her story (Al-Wattar, 2020, p. 28):

**Now I could tell my story.  
It was different  
from the story told about me.  
And now also  
it was spring.  
I could see the wound I had left  
in the land by leaving it.  
I travelled west. (Boland, 2013, p. 200)**

Mother Ireland can now tell her story in a way that male authors cannot. The image of women was fabricated and unreal, but Boland has



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overcame the masculine representation that has long silenced women and reduced them to either rigid national icons like statues or beautiful idealized goddesses, and in either case she is passive and her role is contagious (Al-Wattar, 2020, p. 28). Mother Ireland is able to know her name. Knowing her name is the first step toward establishing her identity (Villar-Argáiz, 2005, p. 374). Boland begins by using dynamic verbs and words to show that Mother Ireland is no longer the fixed, unchanging figure depicted in traditional images. Mother Ireland has become the subject rather than the affected object, able to perform actions and movements; she has become a voice after being muted and voiceless (Villar-Argáiz, 2005, p. 374).

Also, the lines are no longer short than the first lines because Mother Ireland now has a voice and can speak and tell her story; she has an identity and a voice, and she is known rather than unknown and passive (Villar-Argáiz, 2005, p. 374). The scars left by nationalists and traditional Irish literature are now visible. She has regained her mobility and is able to travel west (Villar-Argáiz, 2005, p. 377). She is completely free and able to move and travel. She begins with "turned" then "rose up" and finally "travelled". These stages of physical movement confirm her determination to change her previous situation and to be liberated from the patriarchal shackles, as well as her declaration that she, as an independent woman, separates from the land and becomes an independent entity capable of making decisions, moving, and traveling (Al-Wattar, 2020, p. 28).

### Conclusion

Males have imposed a prescribed gendered role on women, which Boland rejects. The mythical, male-created woman has long cast a shadow over the real Irish women. Women's representation has been limited to two images: helpless weak woman in need of rescue or a beautiful ideal goddess. Both images have imprisoned women within male-created stereotypical images that marginalize women and make them a roleless emblem. Boland, in her "The Achill Woman" and "Mother Ireland", has humanized the woman and given her a voice, strength, and authority. She has brought the ordinary woman and her daily experiences into the Irish poem after they were an object in the male-directed Irish literary tradition. Boland is now able to liberate women from the constraints of nationalism by revising Mother Ireland, creating an identity for women, giving them a voice, and thus empowering them.

The roles assigned by males, who lead Irish poetry and classical myths, to Irish women do not define them and do not represent them properly and truly. Therefore, Boland has sought to recover the stolen identity of women and their lost rights by revising the classical myths, and thus the poet has managed to liberate them, strengthen them in society, and affirm their existence. Actually, the poet has emancipated herself as a poet and woman, and so are all Irish women and women poets who will follow in her footsteps. Boland, as a woman poet, has to break free from the shackles of nationalists and patriarchal systems, which are regimes that follow a policy of marginalization, oppression of women.

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