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## Resuscitating the Self through Verse: Alternative Histories in the Poetry of Eavan Boland

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### *Abstract:*

Since the dawn of civilisation human life has witnessed multifarious modes of resistance. As an arena for cultivating human experience, literature provides enriching representations of resisting acts. As a matter of fact, the emergence of postcolonial dialectics in the second half of the twentieth century has rendered resistance a prevalent literary theme. Owing to the turbulences that had always cast their shadow upon this magnificent country, Ireland has maintained a unique literary tradition replete with images of resistance. Certainly, poetry, that has been a cornerstone to this tradition, has its ample share of these images. The Irish Canon had contributed a number of master poets such as W.B. Yeats, Seamus Heaney, and George William Russell, all of whom have used their poetic output as a vehicle for resistance against British hegemony. Yet, this rich poetic tradition did not secure a position for women poets. Irish women poets were not officially welcomed into the poetic arena until the second half of the nineteenth century. Their emergence, however, was shaped by their perception by their male contemporaries. Such a strict patriarchal society as the Irish would not have acknowledged their existence easily. Irish women poets then had led a double resistance. This dilemma is amply depicted in Eavan Boland's poetry. Born in 1944, Boland chronicles various aspects of post-independent Irish life. Her poetry tends to tackle women's lives and domestic affairs during times of unrest and turmoil as well as her attempts to establish herself as a woman poet. The proposed paper tends to investigate the techniques and imagery employed by Boland as a means of resisting both political hegemony and patriarchal domination.

*Keywords:* Eavan Boland, Ireland, Irish Literature, Irish Women's Poetry, Resistance

### *1. Alternative Histories in the Poetry of Eavan Boland.*

The emergence of postcolonial dialectics in the second half of the twentieth century has rendered resistance a prevalent notion within literature. Patricia B. Arinto argues that critics like Franz Fanon and Barbra Harlow consider literature of resistance

one of “struggle and revolution against Western imperialist discourse” (1992, 59). According to Olivia Harrison, this emerging literary corpus has been assiduously tackled by Harlow in her crucial study *Resistance Literature* (1987). Harlow has borrowed the term from the Palestinian author Ghassan Kanfani and has applied it mainly to the literature produced by the Third World (Harrison 2009, 2). Arinto further assigns the role of resistance literature more precisely. She states that it “seeks to reinscribe the history of the Third World which has been distorted, misrepresented or altogether ignored in Western discourse” (1992, 60). Relative to this context are some themes that pervade resistance literature. This paper is dedicated to exploring one of them in particular, namely the question of identity. In point of fact, investigating the question of identity within a work of literature would entail two techniques. The first one is reviving indigenous cultures. Authors from once subjugated territories have been keen on demonstrating the grandeur of their history, hence defying the pretexts that have long been propagated by the imperial discourse about the inferiority of the colonized. The other one is looking at gender as an integral aspect of identity cringe: “This involves the analysis of the dynamics between imperialism and capitalism on one hand, and patriarchy on the other, as well as the examination of the role of women in the cultural and political struggle for liberation” (61).

Certainly, poetry that has been a cornerstone to this tradition has its ample share of resistance images. Paulo de Medeiros indicates that “the term resistance literature should be applied to all forms of poetry that voice opposition to oppression” (2013, 81). De Medeiros further consolidates the role of poetry as a tool for political resistance.

Poetry was always engaged in political resistance, whether one invokes the Greek classics or thinks about the latest performance act, which is not to say that all poetry is political. But the dissenting voice of Antigone, calling sovereign power to account is one that has been repeated through ages (82). The Irish canon had contributed a number of master poets such as W.B. Yeats, Seamus Heaney and George William Russell, all of whom have arguably influenced shaping the poetic consciousness of their own times. It would be credible even to claim that their influence has continued to the present. Their poetic output has frequently been used as a vehicle for resistance against British hegemony.

Establishing a national identity is a recurrent theme in Irish poetry. Owing to its historical status as a colony and of its peoples as dispossessed of their land, writers in Ireland, particularly poets, are engaged in assiduous quest for asserting their national identity. One way to construct this national identity was to portray Ireland as a woman:

Since the nationalist movement that led to the formation of the Irish Free State in 1922 and the concurrent Celtic Literary Revival, in which writers like Yeats, O’Casey [...] shaped a nationalist consciousness based upon a mythology that was drawn only partially from actual historical documents, the image of Nation as Woman and the use of Woman as a symbol for sovereignty and motherland, has become more and more prevalent in Irish culture. (Troeger 1998, 1)

This binary image, that was formed primarily by men, posed an obstacle to women writers and women poets in particular. It reduces women to mere symbols of abstract ideas.

This idea reveals a salient feature of Irish poetry; namely, that this rich poetic tradition did not secure a position for women poets. In point of fact, Irish women poets were not officially welcomed into the poetic arena until the second half of the twentieth century. Yet, to claim that Irish women poets were not existent prior to this date would be a mere fallacy. The late nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth century had actually witnessed the emergence of a number of women poets who displayed a genuine talent. However, a strict patriarchal society such as Ireland would have never acknowledged their existence easily. This is

extremely obvious in the attitudes of major Irish poets like Yeats and Kavanagh. In *Women Creating Women: Contemporary Irish Women Poets*, Patricia Boyle Haberstroh argues that Kavanagh sees poetry as a male dominated profession. He believes that women are not good enough for the writing profession, because they lack the necessary skills required in a writer (1996, 5-6). Yeats, on the other hand has shown some support for some of his contemporary women poets such as Kathleen Tynan and Dorothy Wellesley. His support; however, was patronizing to some extent. Haberstroh goes on to argue that the role played by Yeats' wife in creating his poetry was underrepresented. Moreover, Yeats' marginalizing attitude towards his fellow women poets is reflected in his poetry. He immortalized them in his poems according to his own perception of them regardless of their artistic talent. His poetry also depicts women within a traditional framework emphasizing that they cannot be obedient wives and mothers. It seems, then, that in their attempt to portray an image of their own homeland, Irish women poets are not only seeking the establishment of national identity, but they are also trying to eliminate their long-held marginalization and assert themselves as women, poets and Irish citizens.

This dilemma of identity is amply depicted in Eavan Boland's (1944-2020) poetry. Boland is an iconic figure within Irish poetry. The critic Peter Hühn describes her as

one of Ireland's foremost poets, in the South as well as in the North. Since the beginning of her career in the late 1960s, the Irish poetic scene has changed considerably in several respects. The male-oriented literary tradition and the Irish Revival have decreased in influence and, following Boland, a number of other women poets have come to the fore, such as Eithne Strong, Medbh McGuckian, Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill, Paula Meehan, and Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin [...] widening the range of themes, attitudes, and perspectives. When Boland began to write, the Irish poetic tradition offered her no models, neither for her themes nor for her stance as a woman poet. So she had to establish her role and develop her topics on her own in a long process of reflection and practice. (2020, 454)

She was born in Dublin in 1944 and graduated from Trinity College in 1966. From then onwards, she held several teaching posts in different universities across the world. In 1970, Boland joined the Irish Women's Liberation Movement, a step that influenced the development of her career significantly. Boland married the novelist Kevin Casey in 1969. Together they lived in the suburbs of Dublin and had two daughters. Her experiences as a wife and mother have shaped her poetic career to a great extent:

Boland found herself living the life of a suburban housewife, a life that was very different from her student years at Trinity. As her prose memoirs of the period attest, she began to feel that there was no place in poetry, and especially in Irish poetry, to accommodate the domestic experience of a wife and mother living in suburbia. (Quinn 2008, 163)

Boland's oeuvre includes both prose and poetry. Her poetry collections include *Domestic Violence* (2007), *Against Love Poetry* (2001), *The Lost Land* (1998), *An Origin Like Water: Collected Poems 1967-1987* (1996), *In a Time of Violence* (1994), *Outside History: Selected Poems 1980-1990* (1990), *The Journey and Other Poems* (1986), *Night Feed* (1982), and *In Her Own Image* (1980). She is also the author of several prose books, the most acclaimed of which is *Object Lessons: The Life of the Woman and the Poet in Our Time* (1995). One major collection that reflects Boland's concern with the question of identity is *The Lost Land* (1998). In this collection

she continues to explore the issues and emotions of those who are victims of exile and colonialism. These are especially the burdens of 'Colony,' a major poem that makes up the first half of the book. Colonization, Boland says, is not just an act of governments, but an act of individuals – any exercise of

power and dominance at the expense of the independence of others. It even applies to the relationships of parents and children, husbands and wives. These echoes weave their way more noticeably through the shorter poems in the collection. Along with the losses of place that Boland records – ‘place’ having political, cultural, and psychic significance – she expresses here the loss of motherhood – another ‘place’ of position that vanishes with time. Boland’s constantly growing artistry, her ability to fasten on the telling concrete detail, and her hard-won personal and public authority make this collection outstanding. (Canfield Reisman 2012, 45)

Although she was born and lived in the post-independent Ireland, Boland’s poetry offers a vivid representation of the question of resistance. Resistance in Boland’s poetry manifests itself in three ways. First, Boland seeks to assert her country’s possession of a history as grand and ancient as that of the coloniser’s. One technique she employs to achieve her goal is through classical allusions. Out of concern for her usurped history, Boland juxtaposes her own local history against the classical one. In doing so, she is perhaps attempting to state that her own heritage is grand and stands on equal footing with the classical history, the cornerstone of Western civilisation as a whole. As Jay Parini puts it: “the literal site of [Boland’s] poems is often Ireland itself, with its heroic gesture, high rhetoric” (Parini, 2007). Examples of poems in which Boland recreates historical sceneries are numerous. “Atlantis – A Lost Sonnet” (2007), falls within this category. Divided into four stanzas and a couplet, the poem relates the abstract idea of loss to historical circumstances of her country. The title of the poem is itself allegorical of the classical myth of the drowned city. The poem is about loss. Everything in the poem suggests loss, even the poem itself is lost; it is “a lost sonnet”. The speaker is trying to create a tangible image of everything the people living there have lost hopes, dreams and memories. Therefore, they depict the whole idea of loss in the creation of the so-called Atlantis. To emphasize their lack of hope, they portray loss, which is symbolized in Atlantis, as a lost thing that drowns in the ocean. Thus, even loss could be lost too. Although the poem is very morbid, yet the fact that everything is only lost and does not totally disappear implies that one day things could be found again. It is arguable that in reviving this classical myth of loss, Boland is echoing the loss of her own homeland. She wraps the legendary city with an ordinary air. In addition to the grand “arches, pillars, and colonnades”, Boland speaks of “white pepper and white pudding”, items that are found in simple and ordinary households. By writing such a poem, Boland is perhaps attempting to equate her own local history with the long heard of classical and grand one. She is trying to assert that both nations stand on equal footing, without any claiming superiority over the other.

Boland gives her possible answer to the old myth. She suggests that the story of Atlantis was produced to teach the audience a moral. Even though the poem conveys the feelings of nostalgia that the poet experienced, yet it indicates that there is still a spark of hope left:

Maybe

what really happened is

this: the old fable-makers searched hard for a word  
to convey that what is gone is gone forever and  
never found it. And so, in the best traditions of

where we come from, they gave their sorrow a name  
and drowned it. (Boland 2007, n.p.)

New countries with better future could be rebuilt by learning from the past. Boland explains the possibilities of what might have happened to a city disappearing. The speaker states that she misses the “old city”, which suggests that this poem is about the changes of time and places. The poet indicates that Atlantis’s whole purpose of existence is to comprehend the inevitable change that takes place with time.

Secondly, throughout her poetic oeuvre, Boland has repeatedly recreated historical incidents in a more humane context. An example of these poems is “Quarantine” (2001). Instead of juxtaposing local Irish history against classical one, Boland this time re-narrates an incident from Irish history. “Quarantine” highlights the suffering of the poor during the Great Famine<sup>1</sup>. The poem begins by depicting the wretched couple trying to find Shelter. The reason of their misery is given only in the second stanza: “she was sick with famine fever”. The historical link is not established until almost towards the end of the poem “Their death together in the winter of 1847”. However, earlier in the poem it is stated that starvation was not the sole cause of their death: “In the morning they were both found dead. / Of cold. Of hunger. Of the toxins of a whole history”.

They were murdered by history with its political and social associations: “Also what they suffered. How they lived.” Both nature, symbolized by the “freezing stars”, and historical circumstances are conspiring against them. The very brief phrases in which the causes of their death are stated: “Of cold”, “Of hunger” and “Of the toxins of a whole history” suggest the abruptness of the act. In “Quarantine”, Boland is revealing the social and humane consequences of a calamity such as the great famine upon Irish society apart from what has been chronicled in historical treatises.

“The War Horse” (1975) is another poem by Boland that falls within the same category. Written during the troubled times of the 1970s in Ireland, “The War Horse” poses a crucial question regarding one’s dedication to battle for their homeland. Boland provides some insight to the poem in *Object Lessons: The Life of the Woman and the Poet in Our Time*:

I married in my mid-twenties and went to live in a suburban house at the foothills of the Dublin mountains. The first winter in the suburb was harsh. The weather was cold; the road was half-finished. Each morning the fields on the Dublin hills appeared as great slates of frost. At night the street lamps were too few. And the road itself ran out in a gloom of icy mud and builder’s huts. It was early ‘70s, a time of violence in Northern Ireland. Our front room was a cold rectangle with white walls, hardly any furniture, and a small television chanting deaths and statistics at teatime. One evening, at the time of the news, I came into the front room with a cup of coffee in my hand. I heard something at the front door. I set down the coffee and went to open it. A large dappled head – a surreal dismemberment in the dusk – swayed low on the doorstep. The reattached itself to a clumsy horse and clattered away. There was an explanation. It was almost certainly a traveller’s horse with some memory of our road as a travelling-site and our garden as fields where it had grazed only recently. The memory withstood the surprises of its return, but not for long. It came back four or five times. Each time, as it was started into retreat, its huge hooves did damage. Crocus bulbs were uprooted. Hedge seedlings were dragged up. Grass seeds were churned out of place. Some months later I began to write a poem. I called it “The War Horse”. Its argument was gathered around the oppositions of force and formality. Of an intrusion of nature – the horse – menacing the decorous reductions of nature that were the gardens. And of the failure of language to describe such violence and resist it. I wrote the poem slowly, adding each couplet

<sup>1</sup>As is widely known, The Great Irish Famine (1845-1852), was a period of mass starvation, disease and emigration in Ireland. It is sometimes referred to as the Irish Potato Famine because about two-fifths of the population was solely dependent on this cheap crop. The famine was caused by potato blight. The famine led to the fall of the population between 20% and 25%.

with care. I was twenty-seven years of age. At first, when it was finished, I looked at it with pleasure and wonder. It encompassed a real event. It entered a place in my life and moved beyond it. I was young enough in the craft to want nothing more. (Boland 1995, 56)

The context of the poem is partly revealed through its title. Whereas, a war horse is historically renowned as a strong stallion ridden by warriors and perhaps accelerating their victory, in Boland's poem the war horse had lost his way out of the battlefield into her suburban modern garden. Written during the turmoil that pervaded Ireland in the 1970s, the poem might give a false impression of being morbid and gruesome. However, this thought is immediately dismissed with the opening lines: "This dry night, nothing unusual / About the clip, clop, casual / Iron of his shoes as he stamps death / Like a mint on the innocent coinage of earth".

The speaker does not find the scene trotting on the road within the city bizarre or shocking. Yet, she considers it a harbinger of chaos and violence. Though the beast does not seem frightened or escaping hurriedly. Still, wherever his feet *casually* thud the ground, he brings about mess and destruction. As an onlooker from her window, the speaker goes on to vividly describe the scene:

[...] watch the ambling feather  
Of hock and fetlock, loosed from its daily tether

In the tinker camp on the Enniskerry Road,  
Pass, his breath hissing, his snuffling head

Down. He is gone. No great harm is done. (Boland 1985, 17)

Punctuation plays a vital role in helping the reader to visualise the horse's movements. The lack of full stops in the previous stanza indicates its non-stop running. Meanwhile, the following stanza employs commas and full stops reflecting how the horse has come to halt suddenly and eventually relieving the speaker. As the horse is completely out of sight, the speaker is left to discern its impact on the surroundings:

Only a leaf of our laurel hedge is torn –

Of distant interest like a maimed limb,  
Only a rose which now will never climb

The stone of our house, expendable, a mere  
Line of defence against him, a volunteer

You might say, only a crocus its bulbous head  
Blown from growth, one of the screamless dead. (*Ibidem*)

As the poem develops, Boland triggers several questions pertinent to the notion of patriotism. Should one be involved heart and soul in lethal combats to be labelled a patriot? Does the lack of "fierce commitment" condemn one as traitor or at least indifferent? Her skeptic attitude towards the threat of war perhaps echoes the Irish people's dread of war and the violence and casualties it entails. As the horse enters, she becomes more anxious. This time it "stumbles on like a rumour of war". The link between the horse and war is explicitly established. Unlike her neighbours who watch from behind their curtains, she opens her window. She gazes at the horse as it "stumbles" over the road until it gone again. The fact that she decides to open the

window, follow the beast's behavior and its consequence marks a pivotal change in her attitude. She is no longer the passive onlooker who fears the threat. She has become, at least, emotionally involved with her worry and concern about the horse's raid. Through this concern, she is able to relate to her Irish ancestors:

Then to breathe relief lean on the sill  
And for a second only my blood is still

With atavism. That rose he smashed frays  
Ribboned across our hedge, recalling days

Of burned countryside, illicit braid:  
A cause ruined before, a world betrayed. (18)

She believes that she is experiencing a critical situation as her ancestors once had when their homeland was ablaze. Since history repeats itself, both Boland and her neighbors are unwilling to stop the horse the same way their ancestors felt they did not have to participate in the war to defend Ireland against its foes. Eventually, Ireland is left to be long drained and exploited; a situation that would not be easily resolved.

In addition to the national level, Boland has attempted throughout her career to resist the relegation she suffered from at the beginning owing to her womanhood. In an article entitled "Retrieving Home: An attempt to Reconstruct Identity in the Poetry of Eavan Boland", Shadan Hamodi Zain Aldeen argues that "Boland is identified in her country by her role as a mother for Irish children not for herself as an Irish woman because as it is said before, she is rejected by her country as one of its citizens" (2022, 412).

She chose to resist patriarchal hegemony that characterized the Irish society in a relatively mild way. She attempts to reconcile both her feminine and poetic entities without melting one of them into the other. In order to achieve this reconciliation, Boland attempts to pursue her search for identity through a domestic context. The domestic context is perhaps a means by which she celebrates her gender. According to Reisman:

Hearth and history provide a context for the poetry of Eavan Boland. She is inspired by both the domestic and the cultural. Her subjects are the alienating suburban places that encourage people to forget their cultural roots, her children with their typically Irish names, demystified horses in Dublin streets that can still evoke the old glories from time to time, and the old Irish stories themselves, which at times may be vivid and evocative and at others may be nostalgic in nature [...] Boland perceives women as far less sanitized and submissive. (Canfield Reisman 2012, 35)

Boland's output in this category has been prolific, yet this paper shall examine only two of them "Love" (1994) and "The Pomegranate" (1994). Both poems tackle filial bonds an issue that is of paramount importance to Boland. In her poem "Love", Boland reflects on her marital life and her relationship with her husband. She intertwines her own personal experience with the myth of Aeneas returning to the underworld. By combining the two topics, she makes the theme universally appealing. The poem begins with Boland talking about her husband and herself. She recalls time when their love was exciting, and passionate. She portrays him standing on a bridge at night where "It is dark". The use of the present tense gives the readers a sense of this memory being so vivid in her mind that she describes how passing cars headlights shone behind him. The cinematic imagery allows the readers to visualize the scene. To her, he seemed "a hero in a text". The time when their child was

“touched by death [...] and spared” was a time when their love was at its strongest. She compares her husband crossing the bridge, to the myth of Aeneas crossing the river Styx to hell: “[t]he hero crossed on his way to hell”. She moves on to describe their present relationship. The “we” changes to “I”: “I am your wife”. She questions, “will love come to us again?”. The rhetorical question is just like the myth. Aeneas’s comrades try to speak out to him, but their voices fail. Their words are like “shadows and you cannot hear me”. Just as Aeneas’s comrades cannot communicate with him, Boland cannot communicate with a memory. The poem ends on the melancholic note that one cannot relive time. “The Pomegranate”, on the other hand, represents the complex web of feelings involved in the relationship between mothers and daughters. According to Greek mythology, Persephone was the daughter of Ceres, God of the harvest. Hades kidnapped Persephone and held her hostage in the underworld while Ceres turned the world above to winter during her grief. The young maiden was eventually returned to her mother, but while below she had eaten the food of the underworld – the seeds of a pomegranates – and therefore must spend half the year below (one month for each eaten seed) with her underworld husband, and only half the year above ground with her mother. This then explains the cycle of seasons coinciding with Ceres’ cycle of grief for her daughter. Boland uses the myth of Ceres and Persephone to represent the tangle of her feelings for herself and her own daughter. In her essay “Daughters in Poetry”, she refers to it as “One of the true human legends” (2005). The beauty of the legend, in which Boland writes the poem, is that [she] can enter it anywhere. First, she is the child lost in unfamiliar surroundings, “a city of fogs and strange consonants”, most likely an allusion to London, where she moved from Ireland with her parents at a young age. She wanders “the underworld” underneath “stars blighted”.

Yet right on the heels of this image comes another. “Summer twilight” replaces “crackling dusk”, and instead of the child she is suddenly the mother coming outside to call her daughter in to bed. It seems she has some foreknowledge of what is to come, however, and even though in this first instance she retrieves her daughter “I was ready / to make any bargain to keep her”, she knows of the loss that is yet to come:

But I was Ceres then and I knew  
winter was in store for every leaf  
on every tree on that road.  
Was inescapable for each one we passed.  
And for me. (Boland 2013, n.p.)

Boland’s poem reveals the cyclic nature not only of the relationship between mothers and daughters, but of life itself. We are born young, we experience life and we die. Our parents and elders take care of us, love us, watch us grow, they die and we in turn become parents and elders of our own young ones, and so on.

In the next lines, Boland watches her daughter, now a teenager, while she sleeps, and spies a fruit amongst the bedroom’s clutter. “The pomegranate! How did I forget it?” She wishes she could keep her daughter safe, keep her from harm, from knowledge of the terrible things in the world. “I could warn her”, the mother muses, “There is still a chance”. Yet she knows, and Boland knows, and we the readers know too that this is impossible. It is part of the cycle; it cannot be changed. It is, in fact, one of the oldest stories, that of a young woman and a fruit, Eve and the apple from the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil.

There is grief, and sadness, in the poem, but beauty too. The pomegranate is fantastically described as “the French sound for apple and / the noise of stone”; “unshed tears” are “ready to be



diamonds”, and even now she rests beneath “veiled stars”. The mother fears heartbreak, but she is wise. “If I defer the grief I diminish the gift”. The beauty is in the cycle, how summer cedes to winter, for winter will blossom into spring. In the end, through bittersweet emotions, the speaker accepts her and her daughters’ role in the life cycle, “The legend will be hers as well as mine”.

In conclusion, Boland has undoubtedly enriched the oeuvre of resistance through her quest for identity. Her poetry tends to depict landscape and the cultural icons of her homeland, emphasising its independence of the British Isles. In addition to paying homage to her own womanhood, her poetry is replete with domestic images that hail the Irish women at large. Such images can also be considered a projection of Mother Ireland.

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