

Against the Oedipal Politics of Formation in Edna O'Brien's *A Pagan Place*: "Women do not Count, Neither Shall they be Counted"

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Abstract:

Edna O'Brien's *A Pagan Place* is one of her lesser-known novels, which discusses decades of women's sexual oppression and anomalous formations; it is a sexually conscious narrative of an Irish formation which enjoyed the socio-cultural and intellectual liberties of the "sexy sixties", and critiqued the Oedipal Irish society of the 1930s and 1940s. Obsessed with physical and spiritual decency, the masculinized Society formed "moral codes" that by definition exiled the Irish woman to social and political marginalia. Socio-politically conscious narratives such as O'Brien's *A Pagan Place*, however, functioned as not just social critiques, drawing on a culture of post-revolution stasis and neoconservative identity politics but also as vehicles for enabling a generation of oppressed women to voice their concerns and struggles with their feminine formation in a dominantly masculinized Society. By drawing on a Deleuzian definition of Oedipal Society, this study explores boundaries, limitations and alternatives of feminine formation in Ireland in the 1930s and 1940s.

Keywords: 1930s, Anti-Oedipal feminism, Irish feminism, Edna O'Brien, Negative Dialectics

Although some feminist critics have ostracized Edna O'Brien's oeuvre for providing a fragile portrayal of women and their plights and tribulations in the post-independence Ireland, I argue it was the dialectical discourse embedded in her works, especially *The Country Girls Trilogy* (1960, 1962, 1964), *The Love Object* (1968) and *A Pagan Place* (1970), that rekindled and spearheaded feminism as a radical socio-cultural, and politically conscious movement in Ireland in the 1960s and 1970s¹. It is the discourse that depicts Irish women's plights of sexual formation, abused by the masculine voice of the Constitution, and critiques not only the colonial feminized politics of female formation but also questions the State's gendered politics of development².

There lies a radical history of resistant feminist literature, however, behind Edna O'Brien's essentially feminist discourse; feminists such as Hannah Lynch, Katherine Cecil Thurston and Bithia M. Croker, and works such as Croker's *Lismoye* (1914) and Lynch's *Autobiography of a Child* (1899) and her famous feminist essay "The Spaniard at Home" published in 1898, which emerged as fictive narratives that echo years of patriarchal oppressive realism and political parochialism³.

While in Croker's *Lismoye* fundamental Victorian concepts such as social mobility, and the apparent difference in men's and women's perception of socio-economic mobility is questioned, Lynch directs the focus of her essay to tackle Victorianism and women's blighted formations at large, covering concepts such as the Victorian "Society – spelt big" as the biased source of deformation, in which the Irish girl is expected to "achieve nothing" (Lynch 1898, 270). As I shall explain shortly, while it is this conservative form of Society which strives to marginalize O'Brien's *A Pagan Place* by introducing women as mere tools for reproduction, and demanding them to surrender to the authoritarian masculine voice, the non-conformist feminist discourse appropriated by Lynch Croker and O'Brien emerges to explore and tackle radical concepts such as broken families⁴, irresponsible parenthood, and unemotional, "cold, inhuman and selfish" Irish mother (Lynch 1898, 353). In fact, the confluence of these texts and the ones by other proto-feminists such as George Egerton (Mary Chavelita Dunne, 1859-1945) formed a feminist repertoire from which later writers, especially Kate O'Brien and Edna O'Brien, borrowed generously, tackling not only their neoconservative Irish State but also the non-libertarianism, which Lynch regarded as the "blighted will" (354), and Edna O'Brien flagged as "psychological choke" (O'Brien 1999, 127) vis-à-vis Irish female (de-) formations⁵.

O'Brien's early works, I argue, stand on a radical dialectical reading of proto-feminists such as Lynch, Sheehy-Skeffington, Louie Bennett and Croker, negating the patriarchal voice and the parochial Society (spelt big), and on producing rebellious characters whose reversed formation and bohemian sexual maturity mirror a negative dialectic of un-Irish, non-conformist formation. O'Brien's feminist inclinations, in spite of critics' accusing her of engaging with the archetypal issues of, for instance, a male dominated society and women's dependence on such a structure, stand as pivots and witnesses to the rise of Irish feminism in the neoconservative, post-independence Ireland. *The Country Girls Trilogy* (1960, 1962, 1964), *A Pagan Place* (1970), *The Love Object* (1968), *A Scandalous Woman and other Stories* (1974) and *Mother Ireland* (1976), in this respect, emerge as modern Irish narratives of formation, which stood not only as faithful socio-political critiques of the conservative Irish society but also as chronologically relevant feminist texts that dealt with un-Irish concepts such as feminine sexual initiation and sexual Bildung, namely, formation, in the 1930s-40s and the early 1950s.

As O'Brien herself claims, maybe she is "not the darling of the feminists [being] too preoccupied with old-fashioned themes like love and longing"

(Guppy 1984), but it was *The Country Girls* trilogy that broke the social taboo⁶, and boldly (re-) introduced female sexuality and valorized sexual formations in the island⁷. Through *A Pagan Place*, O'Brien explores the forbidden dimension of formation, namely, sex – hetero- and homosexual – in a culture which had demonized sex and sensuality, and tabooed such sexualized representation of women's body, reproducing it as a dreadful "black devil" (1971, 135). For instance, through her candid depiction of the binary of women's sexual deformation and a masculine, authoritarian society in *Night* (1972), and women's struggle with the State's gendered politics of abstinence and containment in *The Love Object* (1968), she not only criticized such socio-cultural taboos but allowed for the emergence of repressed stories⁸.

While it was *The Love Object* which thrilled the conservative Irish Society with an unflinching depiction of extra marital and homoerotic affairs, and of Irish women losing interest in any form of sex, O'Brien re-introduced female sexual Bildung through *The Country Girls* trilogy and *A Pagan Place*. These emerged as textually un-Irish narratives which claimed that women's sexual formation proper must be recognized as part of the national architecture of formation; a claim which allowed women's sexual maturation to be seen in a non-sexist, nationalistic context. It was claims like these, in addition, that placed her novels at the forefront of feminist psycho-cultural warfare, transforming into narratives that not only questioned the authenticity of the State-sponsored authoritarian voice, and the flagrant masculinization of Irish identity through the 1937 Constitution, but prepared Society to have a more dynamic and vivid grasp of women's significance in leading their sexual rite of passage. The path O'Brien's characters choose, I argue, leads to what Hélène Cixous regarded as proper "libidinal education" of women fighting an anti-feminist Society (Cixous 1987, 2), redirecting the Joycean dictum of *non serviam* towards not just the parochial patriarchal State but anyone who tends to deprive them of their *rite of formation*.

Although O'Brien's novels were among the first texts that uncovered socially despised concepts such as women's sexual desires, trials and tribulations, which Gerry Smyth labels as the "odd 'bad egg'" (Smyth 2012, 134), her literary efforts were victimized by the very same unforgiving force of selective masculinity⁹. Moreover, as James Cahalan notes in his dated yet substantial study of "Female and Male Perspectives" in the modern Irish novel, "neither Seamus Deane in his *Short History of Irish Literature* (1986) nor Alexander Norman Jeffares in *Anglo-Irish Literature* (1982) mention[ed] [Edna] O'Brien" and her invaluable contributions to such national socio-sexual awakenings (Cahalan 1995, 55). Although this absence might have been caused by an uninvited parapraxis by such notable scholars, the gravity of such isolating categorizations remains the same, reverberating a message that Irish feminists struggled to address throughout the history of the nation¹⁰.

Despite socio-cultural and political changes in Ireland, especially after the "sexy sixties" (Bolton 2010, 139), social fragmentation and sexual categoriza-

tion have remained as the most dominant topics of the novels (of formation) that tend to divulge certain peculiarities in the conservative history of Irish formation. Topical concerns prevalent in O'Brien's oeuvre, I argue, provide a dramatized account of how the State's authoritarian politics of formation have manipulated and led such socio-sexual bifurcations through a masculinized voice called Society in the 1930s well into the 1960s. This masculine, State-sponsored voice is most notably manifested in the Irish Constitution re-established in 1937, neglecting the Irish women as the largest marginalized people who fought for their place in history¹¹.

Edna O'Brien's *A Pagan Place* discusses decades of sexual oppression and anomalous formation. It is a sexually conscious narrative of Irish formation which enjoyed the socio-cultural and intellectual liberties of the 1960s. Critical texts such as *A Pagan Place* freely examine the State's morbid obsession with spiritual decency and abstinence which resulted in a nation-wide radical understanding of femininity and women's body, a concept which as Jonathan Bolton notes "apotheosizes virginity, revering women's bodies as vessels of procreation while at the same time reviling them as enticement to sin" (Bolton 2010, 126). Novels such as O'Brien's *A Pagan Place* and *The Country Girls*, I argue, narrativized, though in retrospect, a sense of resistance that appeared among Irish women, questioning not only the masculinized Constitution but also Society's limited capacity as a substructure influential in women's (de-) formation.

In *A Pagan Place* the struggle between Irish women and the State's gender politics manifests itself in having the female narrator hide her identity behind the ambivalence and obscurity of second-person voice¹². The narrative begins by deploying an authoritative second-person voice as its sole mode of narration; a voice that reveals events in a dominantly predetermined and planned fashion, leaving no space for narrator's "free will" or self-determination (O'Brien 1971, 149). This is the voice which attacks the opposite sex but permits self-induced sexual pleasure, regarding it as a means to avoid sexual intercourses or courtships that may not end in marriage. In fact by abnegating the socio-cultural image of women in post-independence Ireland and associating female sex(uality) with sin, psychosomatic diseases, and wretchedness at large, the voice, perhaps unconsciously, advocates autoeroticism and masturbatory pleasures among not only men but also young Irish women. Masturbation is regarded as an "aberrant behavior" and a sin (Bolton 2010, 145), yet a form for which she can seek forgiveness: "You put two fingers in. you touched it. What were you doing? What were you doing? It was a sin" (O'Brien 1971, 101); whereas seeking sexual companionship with a man is decreed by the autocratic voice to be punishable by "hell"¹³, the disciplinary fire which stems from "wom[e]n playing fiddle" (28).

According to Dennis Schofield the second-person voice in fiction is utilized to either achieve an intense sense of intimacy with the audience, providing them with special moments in the narrative that have been imagined for them to enjoy, or to maintain a strict idiosyncratic dominance and authoritarian

distance with not only the audience but also characters, rendering their stream of consciousness useless by depending on its indefinite foreknowledge of any event that is about to happen (Schofield 1998). "Thou shalt not" or "thou shalt" as its imperative variation emerges as the very foundation of such a distinctively idiosyncratic voice and the concomitant narrative form, dictating events to the narrator's psyche instead of allowing for them to be unraveled by the narrator. In the modern Irish novel of formation, the voice of "thou shalt not" is founded on the unquestionable authority of the Constitution, namely, an authoritative source for the Irish, revised by the order of de Valera in 1937 who was seeking further political dominance and assertion by indulging in the essentially patriarchal power of the Church¹⁴.

The totalitarian ethos of "thou shalt (not)" transforms into a stringent and governing voice which takes the shape of an unnamed young girl in a crowded Irish family of five, which like many other proletariat Irish families has been hit by the post-war financial hardships, and is culturally bound by the island's politics of containment. The protagonist is introduced as a young Irish girl with her young untold ambitions of formation, bound to surrender to the voice's unreservedly restrictive, confessional nature. The voice generally practices its dominance by transforming into an interrogator that sifts through the protagonist's conscious and unconscious psyche, wild and repressed thoughts, scavenging for pieces of un-Irish, urban, "pagan" trends (O'Brien 1971, 190). For instance, when she wishes to join the young priest and enjoy his sensual presence the voice intervenes and disturbs her train of thought: "how you would love to go to the Tropics with him and see people who offered mangoes and sweet potatoes" (171); or forbids her not just from having thoughts about her most intimate parts of her body but also from even trying to understand her body: "your diddies were hardly formed. You got stinging pains in them from time to time. You discussed those pains with no one. You couldn't touch your diddies, not even with your own fingers" (139). In this respect, a woman's body, as the unvoiced narrator reveals, should remain as alien and undisclosed to others as to her own, the only exception, however, would be joining Jesus as becoming his "spouse" (192).

Sexual pleasures are treated by the voice only ambivalently, oscillating between the trio of sin, guilt, repentance, on the one hand, and the simpler version of sin, guilt and wishing for more guilt, on the other:

You sang dumb about the biggest sin of all, sitting on the carving chair in the front room and opening your legs a bit and putting the soft velvet paw of a bot doll in there, squeezing with all your might and then when the needles of pleasure came getting furious with him and chastising him and throwing him face down on the floor [... the] old way. (41)

The narrator's concept of acting like the "the old way" reveals more than a pure sense of repetition in just a childish act of self-pleasure; rather,

it suggests that not only is the narrator lost in between the double standards of her environment, between the rural and urban, and between the Catholic and Protestant dualistic realities of Irish life in the 1930s, but she also has become a marginal subject that only reflects the internal duality of sexual maturation and parochial formations. She, as an individual and an example of post-independence Irish formation isolated by internal and external binaries, appears to be torn between the “Confession on Saturdays” and “the same set of sins every week” (41); between developing a sense of hatred towards her older sister, Emma, for her premarital sexual activities and the eventual unwanted pregnancy, and her wild desire for the seductive, young priest.

To the unnamed, unvoiced female protagonist, social cognition and sexual formation meant nothing but “bad thoughts you didn’t divulge”, or concepts which she was meant to be unaware of (*ibidem*). For it is only the voice which defines right and wrong, innocence and deviance, identarian Catholic Irishness and the rebellious non-identarianism of modern Irish women; and generally, what needs to be contained not only from her internalized mental narrative but also from the audience. The voice, in this respect, appears as an authoritative, self-referential judge, who decides on morality, acceptability and possibility of sex and sexual formations at once in the girl’s novel and in the general domain of Irish formations, policing her mind and rejecting whatever plans she might have for her life. By so doing, not only does the voice reduce the girl’s significance as the narrator in her personal narrative of formation, downgrading her to a selfless marionette, but it also emerges as a register more instrumental in defining the girl’s identity than her general self-understanding. The girl, hence, appears as a puppet who finds her weekly programs planned, a repetitive cycle of non-formative religious chores: “On Saturdays [...] You went to the curate [...] and the sins had to be shouted at him. The same set of sins every week. I cursed, I told lies, I had bad thoughts [...] when the priest inquired into the bad thoughts you didn’t divulge” (*ibidem*). In other words, by oppressing her ‘I’ness and voice, the voice of “thou shalt not” becomes a self-invited arbitrator that attempts to retract the girl from the generic duality of personal and social formation, and to refashion her selfhood to fit the voice’s particular duality of instrument / marionette, the subject and the object.

Surrendering to the parochial authoritarianism of the voice provides the unnamed female protagonist with the opportunity to establish a defense mechanism against Society’s “internal colonial” efforts, and as a result survive the dogmatic anti-feminism of the 1930s, especially 1937 and beyond (Kiberd 2005, 163). By becoming the physical vessel for the voice, O’Brien’s unnamed female protagonist emerges as a subset of the conservative Irish Society in the 1930s, exemplifying its realm of containment and control. In other words, the protagonist becomes identifiable inasmuch as the masculine voice of “thou shalt not” permits, and forms “the thing”, as Adorno claims¹⁵, “against which it is conceived” (Adorno 1981, 147). Its relationship with the voice’s

masculine macrocosm is subordinative and non-reciprocal, forming a non-identarian contradictory puppet that has submitted to the voice's patriarchal dominance in fear of being lost in the oblivion of the without, namely, Society. She, in other words, has surrendered to the voice in the subliminal fear of castration, namely isolation from the leading Society, dominated by phallic personas, such as attractive priests, athletic policemen, and artists because of her association with the sub-society of her female companions and family and following her sisters' shameful sexual activism. Her final decision to become a nun, and "be[ing] the spouse of Jesus" – hence uniting with the ultimate phallic authority which makes the other side of the polarity of sexual formation – provides her at once with confidence and a clear sense of identity, though objectively religious: "she said in his time only male disciples were allowed to follow him but that too had changed and women could take up the cudgel on his behalf" (O'Brien 1971, 192). Her surrender, in addition, reflects the marginalized women's desire for "wholeness", or as Jeanne Schroeder identifies, the protagonist's endeavor to exit marginality, "because we nostalgically long for this lost sense of wholeness which we locate in the real, we want to reverse this process and collapse the three orders of the psyche" (Schroeder 1998, 81).

To achieve wholeness and social recognition, the unnamed protagonist not only reverses the order of formation, namely, sexual development, falling in love and experiencing sex through marriage, but also prioritizes her perception of reality, as in Society and other sub-societies, hence classifying her friends and family secondary to Society. As the novel progresses, we are only presented with fragmented relationships between parents and children, and broken non-communicative dialogues among children: "he said, how was [Emma] [...] Your mother said she was her willful, capricious and wayward self" (O'Brien 1971, 158); or when "Your mother said another candidate for the lunatic asylum" referencing her daughter (108); or "they were a blaspheme" when addressing her other daughters (154); or "he said a fine asset you were to any family or to any serious enterprise, with your scatter head and your scatter brain" as her father talks to the unnamed protagonist (136). By detaching herself from her emotional sub-society of family, and embracing the voice and Society as the psychologically dominant colonizing register, the protagonist although a "zero" in the voice's colonial macrocosm, seeks a much larger benefit, namely, to (re-) gain her lost "I"ness (Schroeder 1998, 81).

According to Schroeder the female protagonist (or voice) in the male-dominated reality, simply is a lost microcosm, a "zero" which doesn't *count*, and is just present "because it is signified" in their narrative of masculine formation (*ibidem*). She is a zero whose presence "[does] not Count"¹⁶, when it comes for the State to recognize the roles they have played in the formation of not just the Republic but also the general definition of free State and Constitution; and "Neither Shall they be Counted" as anything but angels of the house or faithful wives and mothers (Liddington, Crawford 2011, 98).

She, in other words, is an identarian female nothingness that exerts towards a fruitful, non-identarian becoming in an Oedipal Society¹⁷.

Oedipal Society in its Irish context, I argue, emerges as a dichotomous concept which introduced the binary of a neoconservative, essentially masculine de Valeran State and their efforts to preserve, hence protect the feminized image of their motherland after the wars of independence. Having emerged as a socio-cultural struggle charged by the State's political drive to preserve and strengthen its relation with its Celtic origin, an Oedipalized Irish Society can be read as the contradictory dualism of modernity, led by its radical definition of socio-sexual (trans-) formations and the State's masculine conservative protectiveness, defending their nativist trio of Church, Family, and what O'Brien called *Mother Ireland*. The State's emphasis on preserving their socio-cultural heritage, puritanical chastity, and valorizing the mother land through a retrospective perception of present and future, and by denying radical changes – such as freedom of using contraceptives, surrogate motherhood, sexual orientations, and legitimization of abortion – is in fact an Oedipal effort that ends in the binary of power-relation and republicanism. The former leads to an Orwellian Society, while the latter was devised not only to transcend the Empire's social subjugation but also to end the State's draconian ethos of control and identarianism. In addition, the colonial feminization of Ireland (compare with Germany as the "fatherland"), which needs the assistance of the Empire, and the subsequent masculinization of movements such as 1916 Rising, revolution and later the State as the very means to salvage the mother Ireland from the colonial enmity of the Empire, at once highlights the State's masculine intentions and further complicates the mother(land) / son (of Éire) relationship between the State and the island¹⁸. This is the relationship which led the State to describe Ireland as "our sweet, sad mother" (de Valera 1980, 131). The result of such overprotectiveness manifested itself in isolating women from taking part in social and political activities.

To deconstruct the conservative, Oedipal Society from within, and continue to form an independent 'I'ness, O'Brien's unnamed female protagonist accepts a perfunctory masculinization of her existence and further indulges in its politics of dominance. As Bolton argues, the Irish "social life, [was] oriented around the male groups, which led to a kind of immature attitude toward women reinforced by male dominance in the home" (Bolton 2010, 140). To break such a rigid social structure, the female narrator possessed by the masculinized voice of the State engages in exercising a series of deconstructive activities, such as seeking sexual companionships with male and female characters, critiquing the Constitution in its microcosmic sense, namely, her patriarchal family, and highlighting her lost basic rights under the State's rule. O'Brien's *A Pagan Place*, as a result, at once emerges as the embodiment of a radical, albeit immature, feminist voice obscured by the masculine voice of "thou shalt not"; and her unvoiced, second-person narrative becomes a sub-

jective language of “Signification – that is, the symbolic order of language”, as Schroeder argues, which brings her narrative of resistance and formation “into [...] making zero count as one” (Schroeder 1998, 81).

The protagonist's prioritization of Society over her family as a form of sub-society, endows her with not only the confidence to rebel against the parochial Society and her patriarchal family, – “you raged against captivity” – but also an independent identity to finally express herself through the first person voice in the very last page of her narrative: “I will go now, was what you said” (O'Brien 1971, 202). The confidence, I argue, is rooted in the masculine voice that had initially taken control of her formation, yet finally helps the protagonist deconstruct the sexual boundaries of the voice and manifests itself through her feminine rebelliousness. As Articles 41.1 and 41.2 of the Constitution have enabled the State to have a purely subjective recognition of family and women, especially regarding women as politically beneficial commodities, and at the same time allowed the State to freely intervene and contain parental shortcomings, the voice, being a rhetorical representation of the State and Constitution, initially empowers the protagonist to detach herself from her family and its microcosmic society and make radical decisions. The result is an eventual sense of ‘I’ness and independence which paves the path for the emergence of a generation of antiauthoritarian feminists, who defy not only religion initially though their path of formation as the first step towards socio-sexual independence but also the structural limits of Society.

By classifying sexuality and sexual formation under the “domain of moral experience” (Foucault 1987, 24), the Oedipal Society in *A Pagan Place* leads the unnamed female protagonist to embody the suppressed sexual desires or in O'Brien's terms the “guilt-ridden” desires which will cause “Our Lady” to “blush whenever a woman does such an indecent thing”, while the masculine voice symbolizes the source of authority and normalization (O'Brien 1999, 39, 52). The female protagonist representing modern Irish women, in this respect, is introduced by the voice of “thou shalt not” as the incarnation of the Foucauldian duality of “justice and the criminal” (Foucault 1980). As a result of her dichotomous formation, the narrator's desires for a proper sexual *Bildung* were sidelined by the mesmerizing ventriloquism of the Constitution, Society, her limiting parents, and the corrupt Church. The narrator, in this respect, perceives identity as a dichotomy which holds the State's authoritarian voice on the one hand, and an oppressed conception of personal formation on the other, resulting in an indefinite binary opposition that underscores her structureless identity. While she longs for love, “free will” and surrendering to the priest's sexual caress, she simultaneously censures her lack of determination and weak will, and labels love and sex as passing maladies, or “a condition of the heart, a malady” (O'Brien 1971, 149, 157). For the voice, exemplifying the Irish women in the 1930s, the State's parochial conservatism, the male-dominated Society and families are the same, namely, constituents of a socio-cultural binary op-

position that further complicates her dichotomous condition, strengthening her role as both the criminal and the justice, and leading her to believe that “everything you did was the opposite to what you wanted to do” (197).

Emboldened by her non-identarian rebellious potential, the protagonist-narrator leads her narrative by challenging the conservative Society, introducing sex and sexual formation as inseparable parts of one’s development, and demythologizing extra marital relationships as anomalous possibilities. In addition, Irish manliness is demythologized as the source of socio-cultural anachronism and tardiness in a modern agrarian Ireland of the 1930s, as she depicts her absentee, alcoholic father who wastes family resources on his hobby of betting on horses or in public houses. According to her, it is the parochial conservatism that would “gawk at you, to discern your sex and your features”, and misconstrues feminine formation as obdurate sexuality, for “everything meant more than one thing” (28). Sexual formation as described by O’Brien, in this respect, not only is beyond social tolerance but also means questioning the unquestionable “ancient political issues” of formation and the moral boundaries of the conservative State (21). Through her conscious socio-sexual critique of Society, for the first time in her narrative the narrator finds fault in the voice’s puritanical Society, detaches herself from it, and assaults the authoritarian traditionalism of Irish Society. To her, sexually active religious authorities, emotionally and sexually disintegrated families, and restrictive Society are as reproachable as her sister’s promiscuity. As a result, she emerges as an independent voice who has separated her pattern of formation from what Society requires her to become, dictates her role to the voice of “thou shalt not”, and presents herself as an Irish young girl, interested in sex and sexuality. Her independence is a new role that, albeit often challenged and subverted by the authoritarianism of the masculine voice, has been overshadowed along her identity as a narrator, a member of family and society, and a marionette in her childish sex games with Della by a submissive selfhood that Society had imposed on her.

By finding her sense of ‘I’ness in her narrative of formation, the initially unnamed protagonist emerges as an independent individual and narratorial voice, and takes control of her dramatized novel of sexual formation. “You raged against captivity. You declaimed Robert Emmet’s epitaph. You stamped and recited verses in a paddock”, the radical, now matured narrator reveals to her audience. By so doing, the narrator-protagonist further highlights maturation of the principles set by the first wave of feminist activism in Ireland, which however was an unregistered movement in the 1930s (185). Through her “rage”, not only did she rebel against the essentially subordinative perception of Irish women, which was a common misconception among Dubliners such as her sister Emma, intensifying the binary of rural and urban Irish women, but by “reciting” Robert Emmet’s epitaph, the nineteenth-century radical republican legend, she also voices her libertarian concerns with respect to women’s emancipation and de-masculinization of Irish Society.

Such radical awakenings in the 1930s in Ireland can be read as counter-responses to the anti-feminist Constitution of 1937 and in light of what the Stirnerist Nietzschean feminist Federica Montseny regarded as the impetus to discard the conservative, man-centric ethos of formation, which had envisaged women's formation only minimalistically and found social reformation possible without including women. "Emancipation of women would lead to a quicker realization of the social revolution", argues Montseny, encouraging women to seek self-formation and liberation through art and literature (Kern 1978, 327). This self-recognition and socio-cultural realization through art and education, as I noted earlier, is what Cixous regards as the epistemic agent for women's liberation; or a concept which places women on their conscious path of formation. However, to find this path, the Irish women first needed to break their inflexible cast, legitimized by the Constitution, which limited them only to housewives who were to accept to be shouted at if "the table [was not] laid", or being fired upon for not "serving him another drink" (O'Brien 1971, 101, 23).

As a column in *Irish Independent* summarized Irish women's blighted formation under such masculinization of Constitution and Society: "the death knell of the working woman is sounded in the new Constitution which Mr. de Valera is shortly to put before the country" (Gaffney 1937). It was the death knell that, as Paseta notes through "introducing specific clauses about gender roles", not only became the most notorious legislative measure in limiting women's social participation but also transformed Irish women's narratives of formation into a severely descriptive pattern of apolitical, anti-sexual development (Paseta 2004, 215). The result, I argue, is a mechanical development that in O'Brien's *A Pagan Place*, for instance, is manifested as the authoritarian voice of the State and Society, which not only polices the narrator's most personal thoughts but also warns the audience of the same possible fate should they try to break norms and have babies, like Emma's, who are born out of wedlock, as "it was arranged that [...] baby would be handed over to the State a few seconds after it was born" (O'Brien, 1971, 133-134). In another instance, to comply with the masculine voice, echoing Articles 45.2 and 45.4 of the Constitution, the narrator's mother must do "her best to keep your father in at night"; the agent or the concept which could keep fathers in was not simply the warmth or happiness of their family; rather, mothers could keep them in by "[keeping a roaring fire, prais[ing] the programs on the wireless, rub[ing] his head" in spite of "the smell of his scalp [which] got under her nails, that and the scurf" (27). Women as mothers, thus, not only lose their sense of 'I'ness but also transform into mere mechanical agents, or as her husband puts it: a parenthetic "Mud, short for mother", who should smile for their husband even though their smile "was getting old" and uninviting (*ibidem*).

Although the narrator's eventual decision, of giving up pleasure and the exotic life in large cities to join the convent, contradicts the Joycean non-identarian dictum of formation, and favors the conservatism of Society, it still

resonates with one of the most notable principles of the first wave of feminism: to enable women, especially in rural areas, to take a more active role in their educational formation by attending schools, colleges, and even convent schools. In other words, the “university question”, as Paseta claims, becomes the most leading impetus behind feminists’ perception of female formation (Paseta 2004, 215). While Stephen Dedalus rejects priesthood and religious formation, and despite his modern radical inclinations finally emerges as a non-identarian manifestation of Goethean Bildung¹⁹, the unnamed protagonist’s decision in O’Brien’s *A Pagan Place* is intrinsically non-identarian despite her plainly identarian, seemingly submissive façade. Her non-identarianism, namely, her intrinsic and natural interest in sex and sexuality, in other words, lies in her decision to give up city life and, as she reveals, pursue “*the desire to serve Jesus, [...] to be the spouse of Jesus*”, to marry God, and to be closer to him (and his son) (O’Brien 1971, 192). However, as the narrative unfolds she is neither tempted to “bring pagans the happiness” they may deserve nor interested to engage in warfare with those who shed Jesus’ blood; rather, she simply joins other nuns out of purely sexual interests, out of a cathexis of her sexual drives towards a subjective union with the masculine voice of authority, be it God or Jesus or a man: “it was a marriage to God, she admitted that most girls wished for a marriage to someone but in that union of God and woman there was something no earthly ceremony could compare with, there was constancy” (*ibidem*).

The narrator’s decision, though seemingly apostatical, resonates with Joyce’s illustration of Stephen’s religious tribulations and dilemmas in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (1916). Arbitrating between a life dedicated to submissive parochial formation or spent pursuing his Goethean Bildung led to what I flag as a modern form of Irish formation: a hybrid which sets the Irish youth to rebel against parochial patriarchy by dismantling the State’s architecture of normalized formation. O’Brien’s narrator too, therefore, emerges as a hybrid who has utilized the Joycean antiauthoritarianism and rages against patriarchal captivity and her identitylessness, pursues a sublimated form of sexual pleasure, and at the same time seeks formation by indulging in the traditionalist sense of formation, namely, joining the Convent, and rejecting the magnetic allure of large cities. Her determination to pursue education, in other words, is twofold: seeking socially unattainable pleasures, and achieving educational perfection. The result is the eventual emergence of her rebellious feminist “I” in a narrative dominated by parochial dualities and male-oriented “inertia” (40).

Education for the non-conformist Irish women in the 1930s was not just a pattern of intellectual formation, or a byproduct of modernity; rather, it was a complex means, having roots in the 1916 Constitution, the contradictoriness of the revolution and feminist rebels, the 1918 Representation of People Act, a nationwide post-revolution stasis and the concomitant second phase of feminist awakening. In other words, it is a concept which enabled

women to defend their rite of passage in the 1920s and 1930s, to advocate union among feminist groups, and to overcome the State's gendered politics of marginalization most prevalent in the Constitution²⁰. "Educational reform", notes Paseta, finally emerged as the notable achievement of such a politically hegemonic chaos late in the 1920s (Paseta 2004, 215). While the early 1920s saw major improvements in women's educational and personal life, the latter half of the 1920s and 1930s were divided into years of post-revolution stasis dominated by the State's conservative politics of containment, and the onset of the second phase of feminist awakening which formed the latter part of the 1930s. The educated Irish women were either pushed back to kitchens or were serving their time in institutions such as Magdalene Laundries²¹. The State's politics of isolation did not affect the Irish woman's life just in terms of limited social interactions; rather it threatened their very presence in community. The concept of women's citizenship, that I call social "I"ness, was the notion that was attacked by the State's re-establishment of Constitution in 1937.

In *A Pagan Place* O'Brien revisits Gertrude Gaffney's criticism of the new Constitution through her unnamed, female narrator, and accuses Society for changing into a descriptive, largely masculine definition of Irishness, in which women such as her minor female narrator appear as selfless pseudo-citizens, possessed by the idiosyncratic voice of "thou shalt not". Although the narrator, as I discussed earlier, finally discards the ventriloquist voice and finds her own rebellious "Id-entity", the concept of women's marginalized citizenship remains as a radical notion which consumes the narrator's novelistic rite of passage. It is the concept which legitimized women's citizenship as only a submissive domestic identity, the sort which also appears when the narrator engages in playing homoerotic games with her friend Dala: "the kiss was on the lips and very passionate. You knew it was passionate because you were Clark Gable and Robert Donat and Dorothy Lamour and all of those characters" (O'Brien 1971, 59). Submissiveness, in this respect, emerges as a feature that has been willingly internalized by the narrator to suit her role, as a selfless marionette; a role, albeit secondary and static, which will allow her to experience sexual maturity in a bohemian fashion, satisfying her non-identarian formation as a result.

The concept of women's submissive citizenship in *A Pagan Place* also appears in O'Brien's radical treatment of women's rite of passage. Where the clichéd departure towards city and the eventual return have been introduced as the protagonist's first steps towards her socio-sexual quest and formation, in *A Pagan Place* O'Brien introduces Dublin as a pagan place, dominated by men as sexual predators, whose companionship ends in prenuptial pregnancies, wild sexual affairs and further marginalization of women, or catastrophic deformation. The never-ending duality of rural and urban Irish identity²², in this respect, fosters the other Irish duality of rural womanliness and urban manliness, in which women emerge as expendable commodities, whose formation is twofold: contributing to men's proper formation or transmuting into

wayward, deformed individuals who dominate O'Brien's other novels, especially *The Country Girls* trilogy, *The Love Object*, and *Some Irish Loving* (1979).

For the young, unnamed narrator, manliness and sexual adventurousness only produces "willful, capricious and wayward self", or in other words an oblivion that has engulfed her teenage and pregnant sister, Emma (O'Brien 1971, 158). According to the voice, by going to the city, and growing interest in "modern things", as did Emma, you either embrace promiscuity and immoral formation, or as the doctor reveals to the narrator's mother, suddenly become "a woman", which "mean[s] a whole series of personal things; being lonesome et cetera, thing you shied away from" (86). In *The Myth of Manliness in Irish National Culture*, Joseph Valente historicizes urban manliness in the Irish context of pre-/post- revolution. As Valente argues, manliness in an Irish context means the ability to be aggressive and filled with "thumos, the animal passion (2011, 46); to be able to defend your identity regardless of the means and methods it requires; and to be able to release such psychophysical masculine drives through reversed sublimation, namely sexual activities or war²³. Self-control, in this respect, emerges as feminization of such a heritage, and "women's strength", therefore, emerges as "a genre serving manly ends", or contributing to their formation (154). To O'Brien's suddenly self-conscious protagonist, avoiding the traditional move towards city and its male dominated, pagan environment, in this regard, means accomplishing her Bildung without experiencing common sexual tragedies of city life, and completing a rite of passage that was coveted, never begun, yet led to similar results namely self-realization and socio-sexual awareness.

By criticizing her sister's modern formation, which ended in a lost child born out of wedlock, and refraining from repeating her path of deformation by not following her to pagan places such as Dublin, the unvoiced protagonist at once submits to the State's dichotomous identity politics that had surrounded Irish women in the 1930s: a Bildung which reflects the Constitution and deems women to be politically marginal, socially submissive and can best develop by not moving to big cities²⁴. By choosing not to pursue her ideal Bildung in big cities, and instead joining the convent, she embodies the parochial patriarchal politics of formation which had taught her that "only men should whistle. The blessed Virgin blushed when women whistled and likewise when women crossed their legs", and had encouraged women to either join such religious schools and give up sexual Bildung (O'Brien 1971, 99). Her decision, namely to reconsider her interests in men, love, and the masculine modern society of Dublin, and instead investing in her independent female identity, allowed her not only to transcend such internal psycho-sexual colonial imperatives, which relegated women to sexualized toys, but to emerge defending her social right by echoing her mother's critique of the de Valeran anti-feminist 1937 Constitution: "She said she had rights too, in law. She mentioned the dowry that her parents had sacrificed to give him" (61). While her mother's claims over her constitutional

rights unwittingly ridicules the State's commodification of women's presence, limiting it to their properties and dowry, the narrator dramatizes the traumatic condition of Irish women such as her mother who have done their part in forming the State and yet suffered the most under its sexist laws.

By consciously choosing the convent over Dublin, thus reversing the mechanics of the modern Irish novel of formation, O'Brien's protagonist not only rejects the State's psychological yoke of internal colonialism, finding her independent, rebellious "I" at the end of her narrative, but also introduces an unexperienced variety of feminine modern Irish identity. She becomes a rebel who neither serves the Oedipal Irish Society nor the parochial Constitution; a character whose radical legacy animated later feminists such as Mary Kenny and Nuala O'Faolain²⁵. The protagonist, in this respect, emerges as an outcry of dissident women who opposed the State's Orwellian politics of dominance over women's socio-sexual formation in the 1930s; a marginalized crowd, such as Women's Social and Political League founded by Dorothy Macardle in November 1937, who reminded the State how they fought along with their male fellow revolutionaries for their liberation. Intrinsically sexist statements such as "women [...] shall not be forced by economic necessity to enter avocations unsuited to their sex, age or strength" received replies such as the bold one below by the socio-political critic Yvonne Scannell:

But for the women of Ireland Mr. de Valera would not be in the position he holds today. He was glad enough to make use of them to transport guns and munitions, to carry secret dispatches, and to harbor himself and his colleagues when it was risking life and liberty to do so. If the women had not stood loyally behind the men we might be to-day no further than we were before 1916. It is harsh treatment this in return for all they have done for their country. (Scannell 1988, 123)

What critics such as Scannell and Gaffney claim corresponds with O'Brien's protagonist reciting Emmet's libertarian epitaph: referencing national feminist awakening and asking for equal rights and ending the politics of gender oppression²⁶. While Emmet's epitaph had called for national liberation through anti-colonial self-realization, the protagonist through her non-conformist rage and radical choices adapts a similar anti-colonial path of self-formation which led to the deconstruction of the State's architecture of internal colonialism and politics of gender bifurcation.

Notes

¹ In her comparative reading of James Joyce's Stephen Dedalus and O'Brien's Kate and Baba, H el ene Cixous criticized O'Brien's treatment of women's sexuality and disregarded it as being obsessively established on a "guilt-ridden" sense of sexual formation, in which women's

sexual formation is still to be legitimized by the masculine society. See Cixous 1987; Colletta, O'Connor (eds) 2006, 90-95.

² In his "De Valera's Betrayal of the Women of 1916", Peter Berresford Ellis regards the Constitution established in the 1937 as a masculine instrumentalization of the State's political power for its removing sexual equality from the body of the draft, and limiting women's socio-cultural significance to being mothers and wives. According to Berresford Ellis, such politically-inspired marginalization of women, enraged feminists such as Dorothy Macardle, de Valera's friend and once fervent supporter, who later parted ways and questioned the de Valeran Constitution, calling it a masculine instrument.

³ Hannah Lynch's "The Spaniard at Home", for instance, at once introduced the concept of female social deformation to Irish women and contributed to the radicalization of feminist movements in Ireland, resulting in the formation of radical movements in the latter part of the twentieth century, and led them into forming groups such as the Irish Women's Liberation founded in the 1970s.

⁴ These were the concepts that were accepted neither in their Irish context and under the Constitution, which regards family and mother as the center of Irish formation, nor in their British one, where women were generally envisaged as submissive and neutral.

⁵ Croker complains bitterly about the lack of love and sexual adventurousness for the Irish girl in her *Lismoyle* published in 1914, whereas Lynch heralds social fragmentation and a broken matrix of familial relationship in her serialized works and essays; O'Brien, however, explores radical sexual formations and non-conformist female-voiced characters, and as Frances Wilson regards in her review of O'Brien's *Country Girl: A Memoire*, introduces "sexual intercourse to Ireland". On O'Brien's memoir see Wilson 2012.

⁶ O'Brien's narratives of sexual maturation and desire rekindled the horror among the generally conservative Irish after similarly radical texts such as Kate O'Brien's *The Land of Spices* (1941) and Eric Cross' *The Tailor and Ansty* (1942); these emerged as narratives that once tasted the State's conservative guillotine of censorship and were regarded as "in general tendency indecent or obscene", The Censorship of Publications Act 1929 Part II, Section 6, quoted in Carlson 1990, 3.

⁷ On Banned books and how The Censorship of Publications Act 1929 influenced later generations of radical authors such as O'Brien, John McGahern, and Brian Moore see Carlson 1990.

⁸ As Gerry Smyth argues socially suppressive institutions such as Magdalene Laundries were places that isolated stories of "women who got pregnant out of wedlock, or those who were even suspected of being sexually active" (2012, 134). Socio-sexually radical narratives by feminists such as O'Brien prepared the frozen conservative Irish Society to hear them out.

⁹ Female sexual formation were the "odd bad egg in the basket" for they remained unnoticed for a long time, and demanded a vast reservoir of socio-cultural energy to be salvaged, requiring the State to restructure its politics of formation, and the male dominated Irish society to transform into a more permissive one; a concept which sounded more impossible than anything else.

¹⁰ Re-searching my copy of Dean's title for finding traces of female writers reconfirms Cahalan's argument made in 1995. Even today, Seamus Deane's *The Short History of Irish Literature* stands as one of the most notable critiques of the State and radical writers who contributed to the formation of an independent Irish literature and literary style. However, it seems female writers as various as Kate O'Brien, Hannah Lynch, Katherine Cecil Thurston, Bithia M. Croker, and even Constance Markievicz's (jail) letters to her sister simply were not significant enough to be noted by notable pundits such as Deane or Jeffares.

¹¹ The Constitution drafted in 1922, which reflected the one established in 1916, had put the emphasis on equal rights and opportunities for every Irishman and woman "without the distinctions of sex"; whereas, the one established in 1937 had been changed to include the aforementioned statement only in 5 various places, with no references to equal rights and opportunities. These 5 instances – articles 9, 16, 45 – only reflect membership to the Irish Parliament,

Dáil, and national Irish identity. See Bunreacht Na hÉireann (Constitution of Ireland): <http://www.taoiseach.gov.ie/eng/Historical_Information/The_Constitution/>.

¹² On a linguistic study of O'Brien's use of "you" see Herman 1994, 378.

¹³ In Edna O'Brien's extensive modern corpus concepts such as autoeroticism, "masturbatory formation", lesbian sexual Bildung, which under the de Valeran rule were labeled as aberrant and un-Irish, have always been given higher priority than betrothal companionships. Where marriage in her novels has been bound to fail or never happen, these modern concepts proved to last longer, and in a less demanding context.

¹⁴ On patriarchal power of the Church in Ireland and its reflection in the modern Irish novel see Bradley, Gialanella Valiulis (eds) 1997. Also see Welch 1991, 190-205.

¹⁵ The "thing against its origin" is the fundamental concept in Adorno's negative dialectics of formation, in which the radicalism of this 'contradictory thing' becomes its integral feature, where the *non-identarian* 'thing' can be formed by indulging in the features that contradict the very essence of the opposite object. In other words, the modernist dialectics of psycho-social development opposes the traditional "mechanisms of socialization" that, according to Franco Moretti, acknowledge social mobility insofar as it "is based on a mere compliance with authority" (2000, 16). Non-identarian identity, moreover, rises against the totalizing norms of self-formation, which limit formation to the accepted boundaries of 'state-sponsored' education, and subordinate the subject to social codes of normality. The modern novel (of formation), as a candid critique of such social codes of normality, sustains this ideological opposition by supplying the subject with the knowledge to think differently, or in Adorno's terms, to "think in contradiction" (1981, 145). In other words, the protagonist finds the conventional perception of identity as "contradiction in itself", namely, an anomalous concept which is formed and normalized by the dominant Society. To overcome these dialectics and deconstruct the aforementioned concept of subordination – of the subject to society – the individual must initially free himself from the conceptual form of identity and strive towards the uniqueness of non-identity, namely, a non-conformist identity which defines itself through its resistance towards codes of normalization. See Adorno 1981, 140-165. Also see Moretti 2000, 10-20.

¹⁶ "Women do not Count, Neither Shall they be Counted" was the political slogan used the 1911 census suffragette boycott, which reversed anti-feminists calculations and resulted in the formation of radical feminist groups. See Liddington, Crawford 2011. Also see MacPherson 2012.

¹⁷ In his *Preface* to Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari's *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, a genealogical exploration of capitalism and its socio-cultural impacts on the masses, Michel Foucault defines the conception of Oedipal Society as being a product of normalizing rules set by an authoritarian tower society. To be able to understand this normalized, authority-oriented hegemony in order to defy its foundation, Foucault notes, you are required to obtain certain skills in language; be part of either "the anti-repressive politics" or a libidinal surge "modulated by the class struggle" (1984, xiii); or to relate to the pillars of power in that given society. To resist the dominant authority, Foucault points out, "a war [should be] fought on two fronts: against social exploitation and psychic repression" (*ibidem*). To deconstruct the former, the latter must be traced and eliminated. According to Deleuze and Guattari, psychological suppression, and libidinal radicalism and social marginalization have roots in the modern family, where father's authoritarian presence normalizes, if not suppresses, children's sense of formation. According to Deleuze and Guattari, family's hierarchal mechanism of formation, namely, "daddy, mommy, and [lastly] me" introduces the duality of submissiveness and the (child's) desire to overcome such an authoritarian voice as one of its systematic principles, in which fathers generally emerge as the force that monitors children not to cross their path of formation (1984, 111).

¹⁸ On dialogical differences between feminization and masculinization of nations see Bakhtin 1982, especially his chapter on "Forms of Time and Chronotope in the Novel", 84-258.

¹⁹ Here I meant to highlight the aesthetico-educational sense of Goethean Bildung, which initially prioritizes education and artistic mastery over psycho-social perfection.

²⁰ According to Pasetta, early in the 1910s to late 1920s, feminist movements in Ireland were victimized by radically political divisions: those who found themselves to be more British than Eire-Irish and those who identified with Home Rule Ireland. The result was a constantly widening gap between the two, with feminist ideals becoming expendable concerns. The emergence of the republicanism even further complicated the relationship.

²¹ On State-sponsored institutions of containment such as Magdalene Laundries and industrial schools, built to suppress uninvited voices of unmarried pregnant mothers, children born out of wedlock and other morally aberrant phenomena, see Arnold 2009.

²² O'Brien's radical treatment of the duality of rural and urban Irish formation in her *A Pagan Place* resonates with what Chinua Achebe discussed in his *Home and Exile*, in which the concept of home and homeliness at large have been attacked by the foreignness of an alien or (neo-) colonial home; under such circumstances, Achebe, notes exile and departing from one's deformed home in hope of finding and redefining home appears as the closest perception of home (2003, 1-36). In *A Pagan Place*, the unnamed narrator initially follows the modern pattern of formation and as a result finds her agrarian identity and rural home as a setback, preventing her from experiencing certain unknown experiences, especially sexual initiation and sexual maturation; as her narrative develops, however, disconcerted by the sexually demonizing image of Dublin, where young rural girls such as her sister would get pregnant, she endeavors to redefine homeliness by rejecting city life and seeking her roots in her small county, redefining home and homeliness.

²³ Such manliness and masculine pride were the founding elements in Celtic mythological narratives of Brian Boru in defeating the Danish Vikings, or as Valente notes are manifested in the modern Irish struggles with the British over independence and decolonization. See Valente 2011, 7, 15, 43-46.

²⁴ In his discussion of the Constitution and women's right in Ireland, Peter Berresford Ellis claims that the de Valeran Constitution of 1937 has officially established chauvinism as the foundation of Irish society and identity. See Berresford Ellis 2006.

²⁵ Nuala O'Faolain, Mary Kenny, June Levin, Margaret Gaj, Nell McCafferty were the leading Irish feminists who founded the Irish Women's Liberation Movement, IWLM in 1970, and engaged in advocating women's basic rights. See Levine 2009.

²⁶ Through his libertarian and nationalist rhetoric Robert Emmet besought his fellow Irishmen and women to unite and to question the unknown, and their country being ruled by powers which have marginalized the Irish for centuries: "I have but one request to ask at my departure from this world — it is the charity of its silence! Let no man write my epitaph: for as no man who knows my motives dare now vindicate them. Let not prejudice or ignorance asperse them. Let them and me repose in obscurity and peace, and my tomb remain uninscribed, until other times, and other men, can do justice to my character; when my country takes her place among the nations of the earth, then, and not till then, let my epitaph be written. I have done" (2013).

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