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# A Female Odyssey of Romantic Illusion: Abject Women in Edna O'Brien's Five Love Stories

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*Abstract:*

The essay proposes to study a recurring theme of love and loss in Edna O'Brien's love stories in which women in a state of abjection become obsessive and hysterical in pursuit of a love which is ultimately unattainable within the sexually colonised cultural environment in which the stories are set. The study analyses the factors underlying the apparent emotional desolation of the heroines in five stories by Edna O'Brien – "The Love Object" (1967), "Paradise" (1968), "Number 10" (1976), "Mrs. Reinhardt" (1978) and "The Doll" (1979). Women's despair in these stories is manifested symptomatically through hysterical responses such as vomiting, insomnia, or sleepwalking and the ultimately self-destructive consequences of these symptoms. O'Brien tends to intertwine religious symbolism and metaphors with issues of sensuality and sexuality which have traditionally been taboo within a conservative traditional Irish context, in the process creating dark and twisted tales appearing to parody the biblical "paradise lost". O'Brien's heroines are often tragically attracted to a doomed love or gain a kind of gratification from the obsessive reliving of their personal afflictions. Rarely presenting any rosy fairy-tale prospect for women in her love stories as outcome of romantic encounters, Edna O'Brien seeks to demonstrate how women's ongoing struggle and difficulties are manifested through physical neurosis and unrest within a culture in which women are colonised.

*Keywords*: Abject, Colonised, Hysteria, Obsession, Paradise lost

## *1. Introduction*

Edna O'Brien, now seen a doyenne of her profession, is one of Ireland's most internationally famous, prolific, and also controversial, contemporary writers. O'Brien dares to lift the veil on buried, painful memories from the

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past and explores honestly and in depth the social taboo surrounding sexuality in post-Éamon de Valera Ireland. The primary and recurring theme of Edna O'Brien's works is love. Ironically, these stories are strikingly "so little" about love (O'Hara 1993, 317; Summers-Bremner 2010). Many of her stories, set within the cultural context of conservative rural Ireland, unveil the unattainability of the kind of love to which her heroines aspire. Typically, O'Brien's women are either hopelessly trapped in problematic and abusive relationships with men, or traumatised by a male-dominated culture which incubates within them a sense of emptiness in the absence of female agency. These women tend to plunge into a hysterical behaviour of revulsion, repulsion or self-destruction. The self-loathing or annihilation depicted in O'Brien's stories can be illuminated through reference to the post-colonial approaches of Franz Fanon, which focus on and analyse the phenomenon of psychological breakdown in the post-colonial phase of a state. Building on the works of Fanon, Irene Boada-Montagut and Anne Owen Weekes have identified the post-colonial state of mind as a viable metaphor to explore how Irish women as colonised beings cease to exist in a meaningful way in their own right and, in consequence, may enter into a downward emotional spiral of oblivion and depression. This mental state of self-hatred and depression commonly seen in O'Brien's women can also be associated with abjection, a concept proposed by Julia Kristeva as a means to examine how a woman's sense of female identification may be affected within the social context of western patriarchy. In O'Brien's stories, this existential psychological crisis may manifest itself through symptoms such as obsessive or hysterical behaviour or physical reactions such as vomiting or sleepwalking. This essay approaches these broad themes and issues through a closer study of five Edna O'Brien's stories – "The Love Object" (1967), "Paradise" (1968), "Number 10" (1976), "Mrs. Reinhardt" (1978) and "The Doll" (1979)[1].

Apart from the preoccupation with love, in Edna O'Brian's works religious symbolism plays a role in shaping the cultural context in which she sets her characters. O'Brien admitted in one of her interviews that she had been searching for love in her life as a means to replace lost faith. The impact of her Catholic upbringing in Ireland, however negative, influences her depictions of the oppressive and suppressive community pressures on women which are recurrent themes in her stories (Roth 1984). Apparently ironic references to the biblical tale of Adam's and Eve's expulsion from the Garden of Eden recur especially in those stories which address the taboo territory of female sensuality and sexuality. The "fall from grace" metaphor is perhaps connected to what O'Brien has revealed about her own loss of faith and utilised as a narrative tool to express the traumatic grief generated by loss of or failure to achieve a great love.

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[1] The publication date is the original date of release of the relevant stories to the public before being published subsequently as part of story collections. The stories "Cords", "A Rose in the Heart" (later under a modified name "A Rose in the Heart of New York"), "The Love Object", "Number 10" first appeared in *The New Yorker*; "Doll" first appeared in the *Redbook*. The stories discussed in this essay are selected from two comprehensive collections – *A Rose in the Heart* (1979) and *A Fanatic Heart* (1984). These two collections comprise a representative survey of O'Brien's stories from her earliest period to the present, exemplifying a continuity of focus on women's life in Ireland.

O'Brien's work appears to be "afflicted and blessed" with the ghosts of the past from which Irish women seem to find it so hard to separate themselves (Eckley 1974, 79). Even some critics such as Maureen Grogan, Grace Eckley or Amanda Greenwood also remark a "personal odyssey" in O'Brien's "obviously autobiographical" earlier works (Greenwood 2003, 5, 11). Nevertheless, as Greenwood argues, O'Brien's texts are actually quite radical as they propose "deconstructions of 'femininity', 'Irishness' and contemporary sexual ideologies [in Ireland]" (21). O'Brien's stories become narratives of anti-romance reflecting both the cultural baggage of her heroines and also their limitations, both of which impact on their capacity to envisage "love" as other than a kind of escape or refuge which these women desperately turn to on their quest for love.

## *2. Irish women and the post-colonial metaphor*

Modern Irish women's writings are often studied by critics as a post-colonial metaphor in which Irish women implicitly or explicitly try to "find a place [and a voice] for themselves" (Ingman 2007, 1). Anne Owen Weekes once pointed out that Irish women, having been colonised, have had to "repress their desires" and had to "encode their concerns in a muted voice" (Weekes 1990, 218). Echoing Weekes' perspective, Irene Boada-Montagut argues that some of those once colonised become themselves the colonisers who "[reproduce] the politics of centralization and exclusion", and consequently, relegate women to "the margin of the margins" (Boada-Montagut 2003, 160; Graham 1994, 39). Boada-Montagut, on the basis of Franz Fanon's theories, goes further to hypothesise a close connection between women's mental issues and the victimisation commonly represented in much of Irish women's writings on love and marriage:

> Enduring that kind of violence and even accepting a rationale for it may be a psychological disorder which is common among housewives […] This kind of violence in which women find themselves is probably the extreme result of having lost their personal sense of identity after compulsory marriage. Wives believe themselves to be mere objects, mere appendages of their lords and masters. It also shows how human beings can come to accept, and treat as normal extreme forms of abuse and degradation. (Boada-Montagut 2003, 69-70)

Writing in the 1960s, Fanon theorised a juxtaposition between the political and the mental state of people in a post-colonial context. Examining the post-colonial state of some recently independent nations, Fanon notes that independence does not eliminate inequality and colonialism in these nations, but instead merely alters the identity of the colonists and the colonized (Fanon 1963). The people of such nations, as Blake T. Hilton observes in respect of Fanon's model, will eventually turn inward and commit destructive acts towards themselves with personal consequences for those traumatised by such acts manifested in diverse emotional disorders or suicide attempts (Hilton 2011, 45-59). As observed by Fanon, such behaviour results from the fact that the subject/object "without means of existing is broken in the very depth of [one's] substance. The desire to live, to continue, becomes more and more indecisive, more and more phantom-like" (Fanon 1964, 35). The implication is that individuals under such circumstances are psychologically blocked from refocusing on their lives in a positive way, and hence trapped in an emotional vacuum of self-loathing.

On the one hand, Irish women can be seen as, in this respect, colonised beings; on the other hand, Fanon's concept of a kind of post-traumatic syndrome amongst such people in the post-colonial state may help plausibly to decipher how and why women characters are routinely represented as those who suffer from hysteria or psychological turbulence in Irish women's stories. While Boada-Montagut has observed the impact of a controlling patriarchal culture and system on Irish women, her connection of this impact to the post-colonial theories of Fanon and others would also have significant relevance to Edna O'Brien's stories about love and relationships in which the heroines are, typically, psychologically wounded women who exist in a sexually colonised environment. Boada-Montagut's description of a socially and culturally colonised Irish woman is reflected in the writings of Edna O'Brien, which often show the woman confined and defined by her role as a dependent, wife or mother, within an abusive relationship or marriage.

Edna O'Brien's hollow women, in their desperate attempts to attain emotional or financial security in their lives, are in effect disempowered in the absence of female agency. For such women, there also is a fundamental crisis of identity. A manifestation of this lack of identity is the way in which some of the heroines of the stories reviewed in this essay remain nameless. The name of the heroine in "The Love Object" is only used once at the beginning of the story and never mentioned again. The name of the woman in "Paradise" and "The Doll" is completely suppressed, while in stories "Number 10" or "Mrs. Reinhardt", the personal name is either mentioned only once or she is only referred to by her husband's surname as "Mrs. So and So" throughout. Such a phenomenon in which women have no names in modern literature was once identified and critised by the feminist scholar Betty Friedan as a major issue contributing to women's identity crisis. In Friedan's perspective, such women with identity crisis are seen only as sexual objects living "finally in a world of objects, unable to touch in others the individual identity [they] lack [themselves]" (Friedan 1965, 68; quoted in Greenwood 2003, 22). Nevertheless, O'Brien's deliberate strategy of suppressing the identity of her lead female characters in her stories unveils an unromantic exploration of power dynamics between men and women in relationships. If a character is not mentioned anywhere by name (that is, not personalised), this character perhaps identifies with someone else (a powerful, domineering figure or a love object) and inevitably substitutes the extraneous self for one's own, as Balzano argues, which is like "a doubling, dividing and interchanging of the self" (2006, 105). Schrank and Farquharson observe that O'Brien's reluctance to name her female characters creates a "porous feminine consciousness that subverts the notion of an individual identity and an individual story line" (1996, 22). O'Brien's seemingly systematic omission of her female character's names within her exploration of love and relationships in stories can be seen as a reflection of the collective impact of mental colonisation, loss or lack of female identity.

## 3. *The abject women*

Edna O'Brien's stories are often set in a claustrophobic setting, such as a rural village or a convent, symbols of an isolated and depressed environment in rural Ireland. Even in a modern urban environment, O'Brien's women tend to be trapped in their own mental confinement signified by an alienated and suffocating relationship (Balzano 2006, 93). O'Brien's main characters are invariably women characterised by a sense of self-exile, hysterical compulsion or abjection. Their vulnerability and self-disgust, at times, result in obsessions and hysteria manifested by recurring physical symptoms such as vomiting, haunting nightmares, insomnia or sleepwalking. Hysteria and obsessive compulsive disorders can be manifestations of extreme emotional breakdown.

Historically, hysteria has frequently been associated with women and femininity. The etymology of the word hysteria originates from Greek *hysteria*, uterus, associated in the past with a neurotic condition considered peculiar to women and thought to be caused by a dysfunction of womb. This allegedly uniquely female condition led women who manifested certain social neuroses or alienation symptoms to be classified as "hysterics", sometimes as potentially wanton women with "wandering wombs", and during the Middle Ages potentially as demonically possessed. In modern times, hysteria has been researched in a more systematic way by iconic psychologists such as Freud and Lacan who argued that those who display obsession through hysteria are "speak[ing] in bodily symptoms a larger dissatisfaction with social structures – including sexual relations – by insisting on what those structures profess to have left behind" (Evans 1991, 167-168). In other words, the hysteric tends to obtain satisfaction through an obsessive focus on personal afflictions which prevents them from moving on from their particular emotional trauma. O'Brien's women's obsessive behavioural patterns categorise them as those who are "preoccupied with uncontrollable patterns of thoughts and action" of which the "symptoms may cause extreme distress and interfere with a person's occupational and social functioning" (Davis 2008, 8). These women relive and revisit their pain again and again, and it seems that they experience a sense of being alive only through enduring painful memories.

During the second-wave feminism era in the 1970s, scholars such as Sandra M. Gilbert, Hélène Cixous or Catherine Clément reassessed the condition of female hysteria once misread by people as wantonness or demonic possession. Feminists argue for the interpretation of female hysteria as distorted jouissance. The underlying drive for hysteria is "to escape hierarchical bonds and thereby come closer to what Cixous calls 'jouissance', which can be defined as a virtually metaphysical fulfillment of desire that goes far beyond [mere] satisfaction ... [It is a] fusion of the erotic, the mystical, and the political" (Cixous 1975, xvii; Daniels 2013, 39). From this feminist perspective, hysteria can be viewed as a way to review the deprived female agency in patriarchal culture (Bronfen 1998, xi). It is likely that Edna O'Brien, a contemporary of the second-wave feminism period, may have consciously or unconsciously integrated hysteria into her stories dealing with female reaction towards repression within the sexual politics of personal relationships.

The heroines in "Number 10", "Mrs. Reinhardt" or "The Love Object" are all shown to have to live within a framework constructed by their husband or lover. These women such as Martha in "The Love Object" or Mrs. Reinhardt in "Number 10" and "Mrs. Reinhardt" may initially not appear to be traumatised like those domestic abuse victims in "Cords" (1968), "The Rose in the Heart of New York" (1978) or "Paradise". Nevertheless, these women's hysterical obsession with a never-fulfilled desire and tragic craving for a doomed love suggests otherwise. They tend to relive their suffering and fear of loss again and again because "if [they] did (let go of the man), all [their] happiness and [...] subsequent pain [...] with all have been nothing, and nothing is a dreadful thing to hold on to" ("The Love Object", O'Brien 1984, 172). Women in such relationships become either oblivious "phantom-like" sleepwalkers (in "Number 10" and "Mrs. Reinhardt") or are suffocated emotionally (resulting almost in a physical drowning in "Paradise") or haunted (by a phantom figure in nightmares in "The Love Object").

O'Brien's women may also exhibit some traces of what Julia Kristeva calls a deject, referring to one who can only exist in a state of abjection, or one of those "borderline personalities" featuring a strong sense of self-loathing (Kristeva 1982, 8; Coughlan 2006, 190). These psychologically abject characters ultimately express self-revulsion through self-destructive actions, which, ironically, also define their existence and sense of self as a person (Coughlan 2006, 178). Kristeva observes abjection as one of the developmental stages of female identification which a woman inevitably undergoes in order to be a "proper woman" in a patriarchal society[2].

Predomination of obsessive and compulsive psychological urges as well as anxiety and depression in O'Brien's women's lives can be symptomatically triggered by women's susceptibility in their search for unattainable love, typically, due to the unequal terms in a man-woman relationship. These abject women illustrate and connect with the behavioural characteristics associated by Fanon and Boada-Montagut with an individual who is, or feels, colonised and whose inner sense of self has been fragmented by trauma. There is a theme of regret, loss or betrayal running through O'Brien's stories. All too often women's self-destructive tendencies scar them and the outcome is more regrets and tragedies. This recalls once again the sense of victimhood identified by Fanon which results *in* the subject existing in a state of symbolic oblivion leading to self-denial, self-hatred or self-annihilation.

## *4. The fall of love*

The motif of love in O'Brien's stories is sometimes represented through extensive depiction of zealous sex. In this respect, O'Brien's heroines are sometimes criticised by reviewers for their insistence on constructing their identities as women through explicit exploration of sexuality. The language adopted by O'Brien to explore love and sex is one often commonly associated with religious revelation and mysticism in respect of bliss, suffering, sacrifice and passion. Sensuality and sexuality, especially oral sex, play some significant role in both "The Love Object" and "Paradise". The satanic seduction of the forbidden fruit and the subsequent expulsion from paradise (great "love") are underlying, almost archetypal motifs running through "The Love Object" and "Paradise" (Shrank and Farquharson 1996, 26).

The figs, round in shape with blood-red flesh and abundant seeds, appear to be sexualised metaphors associated with female sexuality and symbolising sexual organs, such as ovary or uterus, as were "pomegranates" in the legend of Persephone (Agha-Jaffar 2002, 68). The consumption of figs, also a symbol of the forbidden fruit, with respect to transgressing a taboo of sexuality and adultery in O'Brien's stories, serves not only as an inducement to seduction and subsequent degradation but also as false redemption for the heroine. Martha in "The Love Object" tastes her first fig at a pleasant meal with her lover shortly after this forbidden extramarital romance had started. In "Paradise" the four fields cultivated with fig trees are the backdrop against which the narrative unfolds. This story is a modern twist of the garden of Eden motif except that this garden is ruled by a demon lover. Whenever the heroine in "Paradise" feels helplessly alone waking up from a nightmare in the middle of the night, she always reaches for some comfort through the consumption of figs, an aspect of the story suggesting her ultimate submission to his desires as means to her redemption. She loses her "paradise", his to be exact, by attempting to move away from subservience to this man, in a parody of how the biblical Eve is expelled for disobeying God. Martha in "The Love Object" experiences an even darker version of such an Eden-paradise scenario, a hell indeed, in which in a way she is almost like one imprisoned by this demon lover with "red hair" who sexually consumes the woman on a "goatskin rug" ("The Love Object", O'Brien 1984, 54, 152)[3]. A vivid sex scene on a goatskin rug in the heroine's recollections appears graphically associated with hell, characterised by "a confusion of body parts and excremental possibilities" (Shrank and Farquharson 1996, 27). This scene is one charged with ritual-like eroticism and primitive animality, which reminds one of an association with horned beasts in Satanic worship[4].

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[2] The terms "abject" and "abjection" are used to describe a state of women's alienation (or rejection) within a culture which suppresses the primordial feminine as the "other" and sets the boundary between "self" (the "I") and "other" (the "Not-I"), either of which paradoxically might reflect one another for a woman. This concept is not only confined to the personal development but it also contains powerful social-structural implications. The social classification of objects, or designation of parts of the physical body, into filthy or clean, proper or improper, orderly or chaotic, is one laden with some cultural significance inscribing cultural values. Abjection, as argued by Georges Bataille, is considered to be a physical state to which the poor are consigned by those in power. The privileged groups in society use their power to "draw boundaries" between themselves and others, with the latter coded as unclean, improper or disorderly which elicits in turn a sense of repulsion (Bataille 1970, 219). For more see Bataille (1970), Kristeva (1982), Coughlan (2006).

In "Paradise", the heroine is not only sexually colonised by her lover in his personal empire, but by the overall male-dominated culture which defines women as passive and subservient. She breaks a taboo by daring to display what she really wants, and this transgression leads directly to the ending of the relationship. There is not much detail about the unnamed heroine's background or family in the story but a couple of lines may suggest an underlying trauma about her own family with a tyrannical father back in Ireland: "[h]er father vanished one night after supper, said he was going to count the cattle, brought a flashlamp, never came back. [...] but she and her mother were secretly relieved" ("Paradise", O'Brien 1984, 222). Ironically, she escapes from one tyrannical father figure only to find another domineering patriarch as her lover (Coughlan 2006, 189). O'Brien's women are frequently depicted as those fatally drawn to older, powerful, father-figure-types, or married men. In such a tyrannical love affair with an older powerful man, the heroine seeks a sense of security, and yet, for which she must pay a big price.

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[3] The name Martha in Syriac language means "master" or "lord". Martha in biblical stories was associated with selfless devotion to looking after Jesus, someone who cared for him and sat at his feet to learn from the "lord". In an ironic sense, Edna O'Brien may even have deliberately adopted the use of the name in a religious parody referring to the biblical associations of devotional Martha and Christ in juxtaposition with this obsessional Martha and her devotion (or obsession) to her lover. For more on biblical names and women, see Lockyer (1988).

[4] For more about satanic cults, please refer to Nichols, Mather, Schmidt (2010).

In "Paradise", what appears at first sight to be a luxury holiday resort is in fact a prison for the heroine located on desolate terrain where only "jungle laws" apply ("Paradise", O'Brien 1984, 230). She is an awkward, alienated outsider on this isolated island in a foreign location. Her reassurance and superficial appearance of being at peace with herself unveil an underlying fear and anxiety resulting from her lack of self-esteem in this relationship:

> She had done the right thing in coming. She need not have feared; he needed her, his expression and their clasped hands already confirmed that […] She knew she ought to speak. She wanted to. Both for his sake and for her own. Her mind would give a little leap and be still and would leap again […] They would know her predecessors. They would compare her minutely, her appearance, her accent, the way he behaved with her. They would know better than she how important the ways to him, if it were serious or just a passing notion. […] Each time as she left him she expected not to see him again; each parting promised to be final. ("Paradise", O'Brien 1984, 208, 211)

She is forced by him in a patronising manner to experience his world, as if she were just one more trophy amongst the possessions he had collected during his life. For example, she is forced to learn horse-riding and swimming, both of which turn out to be traumatic experiences for her. In a way, the heroine loses control of her life. Nevertheless, she must please him through submission: "[s]he thought, I should be honest, say I do not like the sea, say I am an inland person […] and that for me the sea is dark as the shells of mussels, and signifies catastrophe. But she couldn't. 'It must be wonderful' was what she said" ("Paradise", O'Brien 1984, 209).

Ironically, instead of closeness and hope in the relationship, aloofness and alienation pervade throughout the story, revealing the heroine and her lover inhabiting two separate worlds. The backdrop of an isolated location prefigures the realisation by the heroine of her alienation within this relationship. The distance is not only physical but also emotional, exemplified by the way in which the heroine is shut down and pushed away by her lover when he is displeased by her transgression, an attempt considered as a threat challenging him in his territory: " 'Tell me,' she said, 'what interests you?' It was the first blunt question she had ever put to him. 'Why, everything,' he said. 'But deep down,' she said. 'Discovery,' he said, and walked away. But not self-discovery, she thought, not that" ("Paradise", O'Brien 1984, 231).

Water and swimming in this story serve as metaphors for suffocation and difficulties the heroine has to struggle with within the boundaries in which she is confined. Perhaps she is like the hero trapped on Calypso's island in *The Odyssey*. Her only way out, like Odysseus, is to break through the water barrier so as to avoid being kept in a zombie-like state of spiritual death. O'Brien uses the motif of drowning, just as Kate Chopin did in *The Awakening* (1899), as a way to express female desperation. Rooks-Hughes has commented on the significance of "[t]he prevalence alone of drowning – the undifferentiated space of water, which O'Brien alludes to in 'drowning in the abyss' " (Rooks-Hughes 1996, 91). In the context of O'Brien's stories, the "abyss" can be the desperation felt by a woman confronted by what she perceives as her unavoidable destiny in a male-dominated society. O'Brien tends to delineate a woman's victimisation with an overtone of subversion. Despite the O'Brien heroine's inability to break through the patriarchal confinement, O'Brien exposes women's underlying doubt and demonstration of unrest through their emotional breakdown and acts of abjection. Women's suppression of the primordial "I" often resurfaces in acts of emotional confusion and an implicit statement of discontent. Such repulsion in the "Paradise" story is manifested clearly in the heroine's vomiting after she was rescued and brought back to life from drowning in the pool. Her act of vomiting symbolises her frustration and perhaps also self-loathing and revulsion through the pursuit of unattainable love at the expense of surrendering her true self.

With either suicidal attempts or self-loathing actions as symptoms of aspirations to break free from emotional desolation, O'Brien's heroines are like robotic phantoms shattered in the very depth of their existence. Typically, an atmosphere of emptiness and pessimism permeates through the stories, which ends in despair. "The Love Object" is such a story about a woman's obsession with, yet again, an older married man – "Elderly. Blue eyes. Khaki hair. The hair was graying on the outside" ("The Love Object", O'Brien 1984, 147). There seems to be not much about closeness, rather more a sense of alienation between the lovers, apart from a focus for their relationship on passionate sex. Paradoxically, the heroine claims that "there [are] no barriers between us" and yet they are "strangers" (*ibidem*). In this story, the heroine's existence is totally defined by her lover and her obsession with this love affair. She feels that "he and [she] [are] two people […] that he face[s] it in one way and that [she] face[s] it – or to be exact, that [she] [shrinks] from it – in another" (157). As the story starts, it is revealed how the heroine suffers from insomnia and remains haunted by a recurrent nightmare in which she is choked to death by a ghostly male figure. Both in her dream and in reality, she appears emotionally paralysed by her lover to the point that she "[has] lost the use of [her] limbs" and "[her] tongue isn't [hers] anymore" (153).

In "The Love Object" the psychological imprisonment of the heroine's self, associated with her lover, who denies her essential being, seems to reflect a religiously inspired sense of self-guilt through which she feels condemned.

An association of a sense of abjection with religion is well observed by Kristeva in *Powers of Horror* (1982), who sees abjection at the base of all religions. Religious rituals, such as purification which ultimately expresses a primal abhorrence of the feminine, are regarded by Kristeva as the source engendering all horror and fears (Kristeva 1982, 58, 64; Crownfield 1992, 10; Beardsworth 2004, 118). O'Brien tends to juxtapose sexual taboo with religious associations in her narrative. The heroine's secret lover in "The Love Object" remains mystical through an ambiguously saintly image manifested by "a very religious smile" and the way he "kept his hands joined all the time as if they were being put to prayer" ("The Love Object", O'Brien 1984, 147). This older married man is by no means a pious, righteous figure but a demon-lover to the heroine who is troubled by a denial of her own existence in which she has to "[face] the self without distraction, without the crutches of other people" (171). This fear is expressed by her likening of her situation to being "boxed into a cell in a convent", another signifier of alienation and abjection resulting from guilt (*ibidem*). The heroine, however, relives the suffering and her guilt is intensified even more by her obsessive involvement in sexual acts with this married man. The heroine's sexual encounter, with an undercurrent of religious guilt, leads her to emphasise that she feels "so sure of the *rightness* of what [she] [is] doing" (154; italics mine). In fact, through this rationalisation the heroine appears to bury a well-founded doubt about the "not-so-rightness" of what she is engaging in with this man (Shrank and Farquharson 1996, 27).

The heroine in "The Love Object" is perhaps one of the examples of representations of those who can only exist in abjection and obsession. By the end of the story the heroine is on the verge of turning psychotic and hysterical as a result of her mental and physical suffering. After an unsuccessful suicide attempt, she then fantasises about a doubling of herself and her lover within her own psychotic cocoon world in which they reunited in a number of scenarios, and her lover eventually turns out to be "the man that [dwells] somewhere within [her]" ("The Love Object", O'Brien 1984, 170-172).

## *5. A nightmare like this*

It is interesting to read and juxtapose the two stories, "Number 10" and "Mrs. Reinhardt", from the 1978 story collection *A Rose in the Heart*, because they appear to depict the same character in a sequel over a timeline spanning several years[5]. The heroine in both stories is like a Stepford-house-wife type who is always elegantly dressed, seemingly content, gentle, obedient, and capable of keeping the house spotless and tidy[6]. Very much like the "Stepford wives", Mrs. Reinhardt is like a doll kept within the enclosure of her husband's empire. She has never experienced life any way other than that initially arranged by her parents, and subsequently by her husband, who defines her role as an obedient wife and mother in his terms.

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[5] It is interesting to see how Edna O'Brien deals with the same characters in different stories. For example, O'Brien depicts the similar theme of a troubled mother-daughter relationship in two stories – "Cords" (1968) and "The Rose in the Heart of New York" (1978) with the daughter in "Cords" reappearing in "The Rose in the Heart of New York". The latter story appears to provide more detailed retrospective depictions of the mother-daughter

The heroine in "Number 10" remains unnamed, referred to throughout only by her married title of Mrs. Reinhardt, except for one single occasion when she is referred to as "Tilly" in the sequel story "Mrs. Reinhardt". In a broader sense, this heroine without a name is one without a face and identity in her own right. She is like one deprived of female agency, with a void, numbing existence under the shadow of her husband. Not surprisingly, the heroine in both "Number 10" and "Mrs. Reinhardt" has suffered from sleepwalking for years. The recurring metaphor, sleepwalking, or hysterical somnambulism in Freudian terms, is believed to be connected to fulfilment of a repressed desire emanating from the subconscious[7]. O'Brien tends to adopt sleeping disorders, such as insomnia, sleepwalking, or nightmares, as a code which holds the key to revealing a woman's repression of her own self. There is apparently something buried in Mrs. Reinhardt's unconscious resurfacing in her dream visions for which she tries to search because, in her dream, she is "inside them. She [is] not an outsider looking in" ("Number 10", O'Brien 1984, 313). In a way, literarily and metaphorically, Mrs. Reinhardt has sleepwalked through her entire life as an individual, that is, in a state of mental and emotional oblivion. This once again recalls what Fanon and Boada-Montagut explain about those who cannot exist beyond the framework of their victimisation and remain in a phantom-like existence.

In "Number 10", the heroine exists just like a phantom, a shadow in a cocoon life dominated by her husband. Despite her aspiration for self-discovery, she eventually fails to prevail and falls back into an abyss of numbness. The heroine does not feel uplifted even by the prospect of walking away from this darkness. She once whispers to a cow in distress and also to herself: "I know what you are feeling – you are feeling lost and muddled, and you have gone astray" ("Number 10", O'Brien 1984, 318). Therefore, the heroine eventually chooses not to step out of her comfort zone for something potentially liberating but unknown and threatening:

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relationship traced as far back as the daughter's birth and her childhood when the bond was first established.

[6] *The Stepford Wives* is a 1972 satirical novel and thriller by Ira Levin which depicts a sci-fi dystopia where husbands control their wives like robots through a remote console in order to turn their wives into idealised subservient women.

[7] For more about hysterical somnambulism see Freud (2001 [1957]).

> She would not intrude, no. It was perfectly clear why Mr. Reinhardt went there. He went by day to keep his tryst with her, be unfaithful with her, just as she went by night […] She […] was pleased that she had not acted rashly, that she had not broken the spell. ("Number 10", O'Brien 1984, 320)

When the heroine, Mrs. Reinhardt, finds out the truth about her husband's infidelity in "Mrs. Reinhardt", she still clings obsessively to a life around which her sense of self and personal identity has been constructed. The heroine wants to leave her husband but stubbornly would not let go of a necklace owned by him, which is "her life insurance, her last link with her husband" ("Mrs. Reinhardt", O'Brien 1984, 427). As the story "Mrs. Reinhardt" starts, the heroine behaves as if she has decided to restart a life in her own terms. However, this proves to be only an illusion as all her confidence and sense of self are no more than the search for an alternative cocoon with another man. The heroine starts to panic and realise that "how sheltered her life [has] been but this [is] no help" and she has "not a friend in the world" (425, 428). The tank lobster mating scene foreshadows the way Mrs. Reinhardt struggles to submit herself to this kind of love without which she would otherwise be lost: "What does one do, what then does a Mrs. Reinhardt do? […] one longs to touch and be reunited with, at least for the duration of a windy night" (432). It appears that all these years the heroine has sleepwalked through a dream, or a nightmare of her life, from which she is almost convinced that she can wake up but, at last, the efforts prove delusional for a woman who can never exist beyond such dreams. What she discovers ultimately is what she needs to or should do in order not to be an outsider in her own life. Eventually the heroine does not rebel in both "Number 10" and "Mrs. Reinhardt" but acquiesces to the status quo as her inevitable destiny. O'Brien's women are often shown confined within a cage inside a male dominated society which they find suffocating but out of which they feel unable to break.

## *6. The collapse of a double*

Another O'Brien story, "The Doll" in her 1981 collection *Returning*, later collected in *A Fanatic Heart* (1984), depicts a much darker motif of an abject woman's lost paradise and exile. The heroine in this story, however, is not victimised by an abusive sexual relationship with a man but by the tyrannical culture of a community. "The Doll" is also a story about the loss of love, and about suppression, obsession and jealousy but it is not about man-woman passion, rather about a damaged sense of self as a female. The story depicts an abject woman with a shattered self, uprooted into exile. The heroine surrenders her primal paradise of "her own self" in her childhood and is later exiled to a faraway boarding school and subsequently to an indifferent, alienated city. This unnamed central character, an outcast in her own community, has to undergo injustice resulting from jealousy from her siblings, peers and an all-powerful tyrannical teacher. This experience of being ousted from a group and from home seems all too familiar to Edna O'Brien who was also exiled as a writer from Ireland to another country where she now spends much of her life.

In this story, the heroine as a young girl receives a new doll from a family friend she scarcely knows every Christmas. She regards the "seventh" doll she receives as her favorite one because, in her view, it is the "living representation of a princess" ("The Doll", O'Brien 1984, 49). The number "seven" may be a symbolic reference to the creation myth in Genesis in which all creatures and lives including the first human are created during the seven-day creation period. This splendid princess doll is somewhat uncanny to the heroine due to its lifelike size and its animate appearance which leads the heroine almost to think of it as if it "had a soul and a sense of us" (*ibidem*)[8]. This doll in the story appears to become a "double" for the heroine reflecting aspirations and her own self. The destiny of the doll is coupled with the mistreatment of the heroine in the story. Prior to the arrival of this doll, the heroine is almost an outcast amongst her own peers and in particular is disliked by an obnoxious teacher who instead favours her sisters. Because of the wonderful doll she owns, the heroine becomes popular with her peers. However, this popularity she enjoys is short-lived, as out of jealousy and malice the teacher confiscates the doll one Christmas. This teacher's monstrous image intimidates the heroine who is then left helpless and desperate:

> Everyone agreed that it was monstrous, but no one talked to the teacher, no one tackled her. The truth is, they were afraid of her. She had a bitter tongue, and also, being superstitious, they felt that she was as if she could give us children brains or take them away, as a witch might. (51)

Their fear can be seen as representing a primal infantile fear, which, in a Freudian sense, is returning to a dark, silent womb-like state associated with abjection and chaos which is personified in this story by this devouring witch-like figure[9].

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[8] The concept of the uncanny was used by Freud to describe something "un-home-like" but strangely familiar. That is, an ordinary object or event is encountered in an unsettling or eerie context, such as a lifelike automaton as discussed by Freud on E.T.A. Hoffmann's story "The Sandman" in his essay "The Uncanny" (1919). See Freud, *The Uncanny* (2003 [1919]).

[9] Kristeva's abjection is coupled with Freud's theory of the uncanny in which the abject, such as in the case of a corpse, can be uncanny in the sense that some aspects are still recognisable despite it's being "foreign" out of the bounty of the symbolic order. See Kristeva (1982).

The heroine loses her childhood innocence through the loss of the doll, uprooting her and casting her out of her own private garden of Eden which she has built for herself. This leads her into exile in a place where nobody is emotionally engaged with one another – "[none] of us ever says where we come from or what haunts us" (52). On the surface the heroine has indeed tasted a different life and freedom that others from her home village might never experience; however, deep down she remains the wounded abject woman, whose individuality and female agency are blocked. On a return visit to the village, she witnesses the crude reality of the wretched doll in a cabinet of the teacher's house, a sight that distresses her enormously. The distant memory of how she has been maltreated and shattered as a young girl returns to her, eliciting a sense of disgust and revulsion: "[a] sickness [has] come over [her], a sort of nausea for having cared so much about the doll, for having let them maltreat [the doll or/and her]" (53). Perhaps, the human-sized doll evoked a similar kind of response to that of a corpse, familiar and yet alien and revulsion-inducing, the uncanny doubling of her own self in another way, reducing the heroine once more to that state of abjection from which long ago she has sought to escape:

> Walking down the street, where I walk in memory, morning noon and night, I could not tell what it was, precisely, that reduced me to such wretchedness. Indeed, it was not death but rather the gnawing conviction of not having yet lived. All I could tell was that the stars were as singular and as wondrous as I remembered them and that they still seemed like a link, an enticement to the great heavens, and that one day I would reach them and be absorbed into their glory, and pass from a world that, at that moment, I found to be rife with cruelty and stupidity, a world that had forgotten how to give. (53-54)

The doll disintegrates as it ages, and dies in a symbolic way, signifying the death of the child within the heroine, deprived of her innocence and her own self. The heroine, now remaining a deject, once again drowns herself in the abyss of emotional death.

## *7. Conclusion*

This paper seeks to analyse the perversion of love within five stories by Edna O'Brien, each describing how women's struggle for an unattainable love within a patriarchal society manifests itself ultimately in self-loathing, revulsion or abjection. O'Brien's love stories tend to depict women as very deeply wounded, colonised beings confined within the terrain of a male-dominated relationship which, in turn, is rooted firmly in the traditions of male-dominated Irish culture. Women as such are doubly dispossessed by having to struggle in both a harsh life and relationship, while also internalising a sense of victimisation through reliving affliction and self-revulsion within a lifeless, phantom-like existence. O'Brien's heroines, reduced to a state of abjection, express their sense of emotional desolation through neurotic symptoms of hysteria which again reveal their inner self-annihilating distress and conflict. Women's psychological traumas in these stories are often caused by a combination of shame and guilt, resulting from their violation of the constraints of a conventionally accepted morality, which is endorsed by religion and deeply embedded in the psyche of Irish community.

O'Brien's stories imply a sceptical questioning of the misogynistic culture and prudish religious ideologies in which social exclusion and taboos impact on personal freedom and choice in respect of women's role and female agency (Coughlan 2006, 180). The frequent depiction of traumatised women in O'Brien's stories reflects the collective post-colonial metaphor proposed by Fanon and Boada-Montagut, in which the continuing impact of afflictions of the past on the colonised individual leads inevitably to a state of void and spiritual death. O'Brien is also concerned with subverting the cliché of a fairy tale romance represented by the Mills-and-Boon type genre through disclosing the sordidness and the uncanniness of leading an existence as an object within the social culture of which Irish women are a part.

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