

Mother Ireland... The Myth

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What does it mean to have the identity of our country embodied in the feminine Ideal of Mother and how does this impact on our discourse?

In the words of Eavan Boland:

“The heroine, was utterly passive. She was Ireland or Hibernia. She was stamped, as a rubbed-away mark, on silver or gold; Or she was a nineteenth-century image of girlhood, She was invoked, addressed, remembered, loved, regretted. And, most importantly, died for. She was a mother or a virgin ... Her identity was as an image. Or was it a fiction?”¹

The identification of Ireland as a woman, variously personified as My Dark Rosaleen (Roisin Dubh), Kathleen Ni Houlihan, Mother Eire and so on, presents an imaginary romantic vision of Ireland as a woman, namely Mother. In the years preceding independence, this view of Mother Ireland in need of protection became a hallmark of nationalism but also one requiring male intervention to fully establish her rights as a Sovereign Power. Some commentators have argued that Ireland depicted as Mother has been so effective that it is entrenched in the idea of woman in stereotypical roles and created a state structure and culture in Ireland whereby men occupy the political role of fighting for the rights of Ireland and as such on women’s behalf.

Elizabeth Cullingford argues that the representation of the land as female is a function of what she terms the patriarchal opposition between male symbolic ‘Culture’ and female Real ‘Nature’. This defines Mother/ woman as “passive and silent embodiments of matter”. Politically, ‘Nature’ the female land is then seen as an object to be possessed. Gendered as female, confirms and reproduces the social arrangements which frame women as material possessions and “not as speaking subjects”.²

Following independence, Ireland still retained the representation of submissive female by the Irish. Freed from colonial domination we instated a renewed set of colonisers in the form of the political elite. Those who wanted to create a society that was patriarchal and traditional. It was now up to Mother Ireland to earn her keep as wife and mother.

¹ Boland, E. (1995). Object Lessons, The Life of The Woman and the Poet in Our Time. New York. Norton. 66.

² Butler, Cullingford, Elizabeth. Thinking of Her as Ireland, Yeats, Pearse & Heaney. 1.

Between the establishment of the Irish Free State of 1922 and the 1937 Constitution, measures were taken in the form of restrictions and bars to protect and limit women. For example the restriction of women's employment in the civil service (1925), whereby they had to leave upon marriage, the restriction of industrial employment (1935), which limited the employment of women in a given industry. The Juries Bill of 1927 which exempted women from Jury service ensuring only one gender's voice is heard in the legal process and the Criminal Law Amendment Bill of 1934 banning the sale and importation of contraceptives, just to name a few. These acts in the name of protection had the effect of excluding women from having a voice in shaping policy on economics, health and welfare. Woman had limits imposed on her once she assumed the title of wife and then mother given that there was no contraception available. She was excluded from the class of subjects who are male.

Yet despite opposition by many women's groups³ to the values exemplified above, these traditional values became part of public policy through legislation, in the form of the De Valera's 1937 Constitution. This Constitution founded on the family unit while claiming equality to all citizens, singled out 'woman' for special attention.

Article 41.1

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

Article 41.2

In particular the State recognizes that by her life with in the home, woman gives to the State a support without which the common good cannot be achieved.

The State shall therefore endeavour to ensure that mothers shall not be obliged by economic necessity to engage in labour to the neglect of their duties in the home.

Thus the cultural notion of woman as (m)other, informed the way woman as (m)other is perceived in constitutional discourse.⁴

It is also interesting to note the slippage between 'woman' and 'mother' implying that the two are synonymous which they are not. One has to find ones subjective position within those nominations. However, once Mother transgressed the Law of the Father, outside the institution of marriage, she

³ Such as Irish Women's Citizens & Local Government Association, the National Council of Women and others.

⁴ Garrett, Paul Michael. *Social Work and Irish People in Britain: Historical and Contemporary*. (2004). Policy Press. London. 22-23.

bore the weight of symbolic law and was criminalised under the constitution. The report on the Commission on the Relief of the Sick and the Destitute Poor of 1927, presents two classes of unmarried mothers, those who were “amenable to reform” and those who were termed “less hopeful cases”. The language and tone of the report indicates a shift towards the criminalisation of these women as borne out by their categorisation into two groups, “first time offenders” and those women “who had fallen more than once”. The treatment advocated for the former by our symbolic systems, that is the State in collusion with the Catholic Church was by way of improved moral upbringing, this was achieved through firmness, discipline, charity and sympathy. Those in the “less hopeful” category were considered less susceptible to good influence and so confined for a period of detention, incarcerated in what we most commonly recognise as the mother and baby homes, and other institutions such the Magdalen Laundries. ⁵

In a country where Mothers quite definitely have a place, they evidently do not have a position in the constitution. This is borne out by the huge number of reported cases of child and identity theft at the hands of the church and state; thousands of mothers whose children were illegally taken from them and sold by the state have been continuously denied access to information regarding their children. In the eyes of the state these mothers do not exist, as they operated outside the law of the father and transgressed the sexual taboo. The forced secrecy, sense of shame, guilt and sin reinforced the patriarchal power inherent in the discourse at that time.

An example of this can be heard in the recently released film ‘Philomena’ which depicts the story of Philomena Lee who gave birth to a baby boy at eighteen years of age. When her pregnancy became obvious her family “put her away” with the nuns. When her son Anthony was born, the mother superior threatened Philomena with damnation if she ever breathed a word about her guilty secret. She was made sign a renunciation document agreeing to give up her three year old son forever.

We might say that it is different now, in that bars and restrictions have been lifted and it is no longer socially unacceptable to have a child outside of marriage. What remains of that patriarchal discourse no longer operates under the same guide lines, however, I suggest the same ethos persists, a repetition. The law, the symbolic, has incorporated the changes but yet there is no desire to follow the letter of the law. For example recently, TD Clare Daly told the Dail about a woman who spent 30 years seeking help from the authorities and religious orders in trying to trace her adopted daughter. Her demand was not heard. Through contacting The Adoption Right Alliance this woman’s daughter was traced within 10 days. She could have found her sooner if available records had been

⁵ Garrett, Paul Michael. *Social Work and Irish People in Britain: Historical and Contemporary*. (2004). Policy Press. London. 24.

made accessible to which she was denied. The law through the Minister for Children, confirmed that a system was in place to help people get their records. However, two years on the system does not work unfortunately.

So what is Mother's position today? A year has passed since the untimely death of Savita Halappanavar and her child. A tragedy which capitulated Ireland into the gaze of the Other, the rest of the world, a position where we are no longer just answerable to ourselves. Three reports later, the HSE inquiry, the Coroner's Inquest and the Hiqa report, we learn that the lessons of another widely publicised case, that of Tania McCabe (2007) have not been learned. Only five of the country's 19 maternity hospitals were able to provide Hiqa with a detailed status update on the recommendations from the Tania McCabe report.⁶ The Health Information and Quality Authority identified 13 missed opportunities, mistakes/error, which, had they been acted upon, might have potentially changed the outcome of Savita's care. Unfortunately, this is the reality for Real mothers. So, what is this? Is it something of the "uncaring" that leads to this repetition, the failure to hear what is asked for in relation to Mother (and her children) and if so how are we as a nation implicated?

French philosopher Louis Althusser suggests that we do not notice the forms in which our lives are constructed. Society functions as something obvious, something given, almost natural. In order for us to understand what he calls "the hidden imperatives, the codes of being, the secret requirements". We must remove the veil of obviousness and given-ness. Only then he says do we notice the "bizarre but highly ordered logic that we obey, unthinkingly, in our everyday lives".⁷

It is with this in mind that I think of Praveen Halappanavar and his particular response. He has continuously demanded "all the answers and all the truth". Truth in psychoanalysis always refers to the truth about desire. To articulate this subjective truth is not a straightforward endeavour as truth is intimately linked with deception and errors. Deception often reveals the truth about desire and the truth about desire is often revealed in errors or mistakes.⁸ In his tenacious pursuit of "all the answers and all the truth" which has provoked such a response in our symbolic, I wonder if Praveen has managed to lift the veil of this nation's obviousness and given-ness. He has rejected the notion of Mother as an object and in doing so has allowed the subject to emerge. A voice, speaking of a suffering, a loss, a wound, an injustice, not only inflicted on his wife, a mother, but on many Irish women throughout our history. Has Praveen's position of otherness (the uncanny), the stranger in the nation, not of this history, this culture, this discourse confronted us with something which up

⁶ The Irish Times, October 10, 2013. 6.

⁷ Salecl, R. Tyranny of Choice. (2011). Profile Books. London.

⁸ Evans, Dylan. Dictionary of Lacanian Psychoanalysis. (1996). Routledge. London.215-216.

until now we could not bear to see, our vulnerability, our lack, our truth .⁹ Has he allowed a certain lifting of repression? What is certain is that he had made the voice of the singular Mother be heard. Mother Ireland may be a myth our particular fiction, but it is one that has most definitely left its mark.

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⁹ Ingman, Heather. *Twentieth-century Fiction by Irish Women: Nation & Gender*. (2007). Ashgate Publishing. UK. 26.