

REPRESENTATIONS OF FEMININITY AND MASCULINITY IN THE HIGH ROAD AND OTHER NOVELS OF EDNA O'BRIEN

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Abstract:

In literature representations of women in general and their bodies in particular has generated huge interest in both feminist and postmodernist critics. It is pointed out that representations of women and by extension that of men can never be apolitical, their analysis invariably leads to the construction of gendered subjects. In *The High Road*, Edna O'Brien represents women as obsessed with youth, slimness, beauty and desirability hence emphasizing the construction of women on patriarchal ideal of what a woman should be. And the departure from the set patriarchal standards leads only to disgrace and difficulties. O'Brien's representation of male characters also emphasizes their construction on the prescribed rules of masculinity.

Key Words: Construction, Gendered Subject, Intertextuality, Patriarchy & Representation

According to Linda Hutcheon, one common element in both feminism and postmodernism is the interest in representation. She writes, "this is one of the sites of the conjunction of interest of both postmodernism and feminisms as they both zero in on the representation of and reference to that body and its subject positions" [1].

Postmodernism is concerned with representations of any kind; it may be that of women, female bodies, food or images, in order to illustrate how various representations in literature or in any other art form contribute to the construction of societal trends, values and ideologies. We can read O'Brien's works in the framework of how she represents women and their bodies and how their attitudes about themselves are constructed through the forces of society which are patriarchal in nature. Her focus on representation points to how the gendered subject is constructed, so that this "neutral process ... is ... deconstructed in terms of ideology" and shows women to be "socially and historically constructed through representation" [2].

In *The High Road*, Anna looks at a picture of a girl hanging on the wall, which she describes as being afraid of something, "somewhere in her limbs and the recess of her frightened being she was trying to find the pluck". Here a woman is presented in a photograph (which is one of the most influential mediums of visual representation) as "frightened" and "apprehensive before sitting up" [3]. This is a critique of the way women are represented. They are represented as timid and passive, these representations in turn construct women subjects, who firstly get impressed by such projections of women and want to emulate them, secondly they unconsciously internalize them, internalize the idea of women as "frightened", timid and passive. Incidentally when Anna is photographed by a magazine group in a hotel, the photographer tells her that she "need not smile" and he wanted her "to look sad" (24).

This kind of representation of women is damaging to them as they try to imbibe the message that these images convey. This is best exemplified by Iris, whom Anna meets in a hotel. Iris is "no longer young, she is extremely slender and to emphasize her slendernessshe keeps tightening a snake belt which she is wearing around her waist". Iris has attained this slenderness, in order to be approved by the male standards of the female body and get approval from the male chauvinistic society. Iris is one of the constructions of patriarchal society, and nothing is more important to her than to be good looking and she is constantly endeavouring to make herself pretty. If she finds other women's bodies beside the mark, she despises them. So when she is sun-bathing and looking around she is embarrassed by the women around, by "their awful bellies, their hideous bikinis, their bags with trade names plastered all over them" (53).

This desire to be liked by men and to be young is so installed in women that if they deviate from the standard of sweet sixteen, they feel very miserable. At one point Anna says:

At that moment, standing in that world of lambent light I would have given anything to have my youth back again, for a year, a month, a week, an instant. (9)

In *The High Road* women are shown generally to rate and view each other only in terms of figure, beauty and youth. As Anna passes through various women near a swimming pool in a hotel, the things that she notices in them are the things of physical aspects:

One with beauty spots, another with a mat of hair under the armpits, a hip that curved so gracefully, it was like the handle of a salt-spoon. On one woman's stomach birthmarks had formed little blue veins, inroads. (50)

Moving back to Iris, she is influenced by and constructed on capitalist and patriarchal model. She is like one of the inhabitants of *The Waste Land*, she goes to "Biarritz in August ... Milano in September ... New York in the late fall ... Paris when she felt absolutely homesick or wanted her hair done" (54). Once she is seen by Anna wearing "Very high-heeled suede, mauve shoes, with an ankle strap", Anna wonders "how she was going to navigate in them" (88). Moreover Iris boasted that "She could eat anything, she could stuff herself and not put weight on" (91). Other women are also worried about their appearance and desire to make themselves very thin. One dress maker who was fat was always found "complaining that her stomach was not like her clients' stomachs and wonder(ed) why this was so" (108). Catalina is also figure conscious, when she offers Anna a local cake, she assures Anna "that it was not fattening" (141).

The construction of women entraps them in double ways, firstly, they are caught in a web of ideological, cultural and misogynist gendered constructions, within which it is hard to escape. Secondly, even if women succeed to escape from these trenchant constructions they face harsh retaliations, as Catalina and Anna face (in *The High Road*), or they have to pay a heavy price in one way or the other, as Josie (in *House of Splendid Isolation*), Mary (in *Down by the River*) and Bergee (in *Wild Decembers*) do. Although Josie is successful in defying construction of her as potential mother, by resorting to painful abortion, without medication and anesthesia, but at times the patriarchal roots are so deep that a woman feels helpless. Greenwood writes

that, “Josie does attempt briefly to free herself from ‘Mother Ireland’ constructions by making nationalism her own”[4], while escaping from McGreevy Josie “hums loudly, a Fenian song, the only one she knows, about a woman gathering nettles” but “very soon she is winded” as the song turns to praise the men “Glorio... Glorio to the bold Fenian men” (HS 80).

Edna O’Brien’s intertextuality with the name ‘Mary’ is interesting to note. The name of the protagonist in *Down by the River* is Mary, Breege’s nickname is ‘Ivory Mary’ and Josie is once referred to as ‘Virgin Mary’, in this regard we can say that the intertextuality with the name Mary “suggests the servitude of all three women to the Irish maternal ideal”[5]. It shows the “indictment of social and symbolic orders which continue to construct their women as ‘Madonna’ or ‘Witch’” [6]. The binary model of Madonna and witch reinforces the patriarchal ideal of motherhood- passive, self sacrificing, caretaker- as the only role for women to accept. If women are seen to deviate from this ideal even in the slightest, they fall into disgrace. After it is found that Mary had attempted to procure an abortion in England, she is intercepted by police and send back to her homeland. Her attempt to seek abortion, and thus deviate from the compulsory maternity, makes people to seethe with hatred, and they call her Miss slut, on the radio programme.

In O’Brien’s fiction men too are forced to follow the “hypermasculine republican model of masculinity” as it is part of their “national norms of gender”[7]. Men become victims of this pseudo male ideal and they feel forced to do anything in order to uphold this ideal. In order to look masculine, a manqué writer has “cosmetically induced masculine hand” seeing it D’Arcy says in surprise, “Jaysus he sticks the hairs on” (HR 7). Families are the biggest institutions “within which the children learn their gender roles” [8]. When Anna is observing an English couple and their children she notices that, the father considered his daughter, Fiona, a “water nymph” while as “to the proud mother little Ernest had the making of Hercules” (HR 59). So a boy is constructed on the model of Hercules, whereas a girl is referred to as a water nymph. The importance that boys are given right from their childhood is shown when a boy tells his father that if horses would have enough hay they “would never quarrel and would be very happy” on hearing this the father is so overwhelmed “that he stands up and announces to the restaurant at large that his son has a great sense of justice and that the world has much to learn from him” (HR 60), such importance given to boys constructs them as assured beings. In another instance a father teaches his little boy to learn kicking, “baby Michael has got to kick” (HR 52). Whereas “Eily’s son Maddie is shown learning ‘masculinity’ at a children’s party” [9].

they fought, rival gangs, *Bang bang, you’re dead, I’m not dead*, up and down the wobbly stairs, into the garden, up in the trees, peeing on one another, Kevin squirting the girls from his water pistol... [10].

Carlos, Catalina’s little son has already grown to love “weapons, war and killings” (HR 115).

‘Masculinity’ is compulsory and it offers little choice of roles for men, “The limitations of the roles on offer are suggested - as in *House of Splendid Isolation*- by O’Brien’s representations of police and republicans alike” [11]. Men have to indulge in some sort of aggressive violent behaviour. As such, James is fond of hunting, as he hunts, every squeal indicates another kill, after the ninth squeal he goes to collect the “felled hare or the felled rabbit”, and carries them back “as trophies” [12]. Rory also has a passion for “going into the forest and shooting deer” (HS 10), this passion can be compared to the shooting of “young men coming down from up North” and inciting fear “with their guns and their hoods” (HS 9).

In the construction of masculinity, “O’Brien reinforces the co-dependence of ‘myth’ and ‘masculinity’” [13]. McGreevy is thrust with Cuchullain construction. He is trapped in to play it well and even if he does not play it well, his actions will be glorified and exaggerated so that, “there’ll be a poem about [it] soon” (HS 177). Due to this pressure McGreevy “is ably to deny the ‘self’ that longs for peace and ‘wains’, just as Rory is able to subsume his affinity with nature to destruction” [14]. Similarly PJ is compelled to mask his natural self and appear strong and emotionless before his colleagues and officials. When the Attorney General meets him:

Suddenly he is not Jock, or rather he is the other Jock, the one Geraldine [his mistress] recoils from, the one who will not suffer contradiction or tampering with his great office. The smiling blushing gallant put to one side now like one photograph overlaid with another; cold, pugnacious [15].

The ones who fail to adhere to the rules of ‘masculinity’ face strong rejection by the society, as is the case with Luke. He is a poor street musician, who helps Mary by sheltering her in his house out of sympathy. But such men are dismissed as “lice upon the locks of the nation” (DR 195) therefore, “The ‘feminised’ sons of ‘Mother Ireland’ are perceived as parasitic” [16].

References:

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