

# New Domesticity, New Poetic Tradition and New History: Eavan Boland

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## Abstract

Eavan Boland is a female poet representing the emerging Irish nation, as well as giving voice to everyday Irish woman rather than presenting an idealized woman voicing her womanly experience. Boland was successful in creating new spaces for women by celebrating their feminist poetics. Irish women have been traditionally presented as lovely, homely and docile and consequently they were subordinated and marginalized by both Irish nationalism and English colonization. The current article observes that Boland is deconstructing and reconstructing the dominant male literary tradition and consequently paves the way for many other female poets to assert their voices, including Nuala Ni Dhomhnaill, Medbh McGuckian and Paula Meehan. Besides, the article sheds light on the plight of Irish women and Boland's efforts to unsettle the male poetic tradition. For centuries, the Irish poetic tradition had been dominated by male voices including Jonathan Swift, Thomas Moore, W.B. Yeats, Patrick Kavanagh, Derek Mahon and Seamus Heaney. In her poetry, Boland is rewriting her ideas of nationhood, literary tradition and the place of the poet and in particular female poets in the literary tradition. In her poetry, Boland is rewriting her ideas of nationhood, literary tradition and the place of the poet and in particular female poets in the literary tradition. Mother Ireland is often present in Boland's poems and is given the chance to talk freely. Suburban area of Dublin and the everyday life of the suburban mother are recurring in her poems.

**Keywords:** Eavan Boland, Domesticity, Poetic Tradition, Womanhood, History, Ireland, Female Poet and Feminine Experiences.

## 1. Introduction

I know now that I began writing in a country where the word woman and the word poet were almost magnetically opposed

-Object Lessons

Eavan Boland is a female poet representing the emerging Irish nation, as well as giving voice to everyday Irish woman rather than presenting an idealized woman voicing her womanly experience. Boland was successful in creating new spaces for women by celebrating their feminist poetics. Irish women have been traditionally presented as lovely, homely and docile and consequently they were subordinated and marginalized by both Irish nationalism and English colonization. The current article observes that Boland is deconstructing and reconstructing the

dominant male literary tradition and consequently paves the way for many other female poets to assert their voices, including Nuala Ni Dhomhnaill, Medbh McGuckian and Paula Meehan. Besides, the article sheds light on the plight of Irish women and Boland's efforts to unsettle the male poetic tradition. For centuries, the Irish poetic tradition had been dominated by male voices including Jonathan Swift, Thomas Moore, W.B. Yeats, Patrick Kavanagh, Derek Mahon and Seamus Heaney. In her poetry, Boland is rewriting her ideas of nationhood, literary tradition and the place of the poet and in particular female poets in the literary tradition. Mother Ireland is often present in Boland's poems and is given the chance to talk freely. Suburban area of Dublin and the everyday life of the suburban mother are recurring in her poems. In her poetry, the past and the future, and the mythical and realistic are infused together to create new literary and historical possibilities. Boland asserts that "the idea of a defeated nation's being reborn as a triumphant woman was central to a certain kind of Irish poem. Dark Rosaleen. Cathleen ni Houlihan. The Irish nation was a woman; the woman as national muse." (Boland, 1995: 136)

Boland's point of departure is domesticity to communicate her new literary tradition, new history and new nation. Domesticity stands between the poet and the outside world connecting both past and present. In "Letter to a Young Woman Poet," she states that "the woman poet must change the past" which she calls "the site of our exclusion for if we do not change the past, it will change us." (Boland, 1997: 24) Boland explores a range of experiences of the Irish women that include sufferings of departure, looking back to Ireland, cultural uneasiness at host communities and reconnecting with home by memory or by return, collective memory, and myth. Instead of confining herself the dominant literary tradition, Boland finds poetic freedom in the present history and her own domestic and personal life. For the first time, a woman's life turns to be a source for poetry that value both men and women alike. Eventually, she subverts the established literary tradition by rewriting it and repositioning its references in a broader Irish tradition of poetry. The marginalization of the woman writer is a direct indictment against the male literary tradition that excludes 'the Other' and the voiceless. Boland presents in her writings a female speaker who is actively engaged in writing at the end of the day after finishing household chores. This particular time gives voice to the voiceless to become a separate and autonomous element in the literary tradition. Boland tries "to strengthen by subversion how Ireland and Irishness is written, and to open a window on those silences, those false pastorals, those ornamental reductions that have confined us." (Boland, 1995: 9) She believes that Irish women poets "are "subverting and destabilizing a conventionally accepted fusion of the feminine and the national." (Boland, 1995: 9) This stereotyped fusion between the feminine and national is achieved through the challenge of dislocation and establishing a dialogue between the mythical and the real in the lived experiences of Irish women, as well as, the fusion between art and life. Until recent times, Ireland is a text written by men and thus was perceived in colonial and postcolonial discourses as a vulnerable feminine and Boland believes that her role as a poetess is to illustrate the so called 'chasmic dichotomy' of male and female cultural representations of Ireland that will hopefully provide a space and a voice for the marginalized, the silences and 'the Other'.

Boland raises her womanly voice against the literary mainstream. She unleashes the unfavorable position of female writers, providing her readers with new nationalism, history and literary tradition by, "re-aligning women's history and national history." (Clutterbuck, 2011: 98) In her poem "Heroic," the poet speaker stares at the statue of male patriot and her invisibility is

underlined in this poem, “I looked at him again. /He stared past me without recognition.” (Boland, 2007: 269) In her poetry, Boland foregrounds the female figure that is “transforming the lyric poem so that it can accommodate woman’s experience.” (Interview with Alice Quinn, *New Yorker*, October 29, 2001) In “Woman in Kitchen,” Boland refers to women’s impotency in nationalism and literature as the female speaker is isolated and helpless as she stands in her kitchen after breakfast confused with the house-shaking sounds of vehicles driven by men passing the outside road. The title suggests that women are confined to domestic chores with little contact with the outside world. The woman is doomed to be an observer, an outsider rather than a participant. Once domestic chores are finished, women’s life becomes “silent, dead and buried in white papers.” (Boland, 2005: 109) Such domestic life that is imposed upon women by patriarchal society is charged with limitation, impotence, and loss. In *Object Lessons: The Life of the Woman and the Poet in Our Time*, Boland perceives how women are excluded from Irish history and the same theme has been reflected in her poem ‘Outside history,’ “thousands of years before/our pain did: they are, they have always been/outside history. (Boland: 2005: 188)

Similarly, in her collection of poems *Domestic Violence*, Boland articulates in “Indoors” how women are struggling to create a world of their own creation cut from the outside world. Irish legendry is loaded with masculine heroism and women sadly are excluded from the Irish mythology. The female speaker in “Indoors” strives to establish her world without any male intrusion. Masculine heroism is connected with nationalism that is unfavorable towards female. In *Object Lessons*, Boland complains:

If I wanted to be in those back streets, to speak in those conspiracies, I would have to be male. The male, after all, was an active principle, inviting admiration. And I was a teenager girl, looking not just to admire but to belong. Yet how could I belong to these actions. Dreamed up by men and carried out by them? The fact is that teenage and heroism are filled with exciting and impossible transpositions of sexuality. (Boland, 1995: 65)

In the poetry of Boland, there is a significant change in the image of women and their actual lives. Boland strives to assert her speaking voice by celebrating her womanly experience. She writes:

The more I thought about it, the more it seemed to me that in Ireland the political poem and the public poem should not always be one and the same. On the contrary, given the force of the national tradition and the claim it had made on Irish literature, the political poem stood in urgent need of a subversive private experience to lend it true perspective and authority. An authority which, in my view, could be guaranteed only by an identity- and this included a sexual identity- which the poetic tradition, and the structure of the Irish poem, had almost stifled. (Boland, 1995: 185)

In contrast to the male literary tradition that celebrates heroism, Boland honors the private and the personal experiences in her poetry that will empower women, their voices and rendering more feminine depth. In “The Woman Turns Herself into a Fish,” the female protagonist changes her body into a fish to relish freedom of her body and the sexless pleasure. Women gain self-realization once this dichotomy between man/woman is bridged. Shara McCallum contends that “Coupled with Boland’s desire to etch out a space for women within Irish history and poetry as

subjects rather than objects, her poems are often acts of not only reimagining myths but also of reinventing them.” (MaCallum, 2004: 39) Declan Kiberd writes that Boland has moved “from being ‘the poet’ to becoming ‘the woman poet’.” (Kiberd, 2017: 319) Such statement underlines the close connection between woman and poet, a unique place the Boland achieves in Irish literature. The typical image of Ireland as a woman controlled by men is rejected by the poetess herself who is actively engaged with the world that surrounds her. The confinement of the woman figure to the daily household duties does not appear in the Irish male literary tradition as a topic that worth merit.

Boland ascertains the centrality of gendered history in writing literature and the creation of the woman poet who is the agent of canonical change. She asserts that “Irish women ... became part of a corrupt transaction between nationalism and literature which feminized the national and nationalized the feminine... their place in the poem was prescribed; it was both silent and passive.” (Boland, 1995: 7) Walter De La Mare asserts that “the female tropes of Irish nationalism as a potent site for revising traditional concepts of femininity, maternity and cultural identity in Boland’s case aligned with women’s lived experience.” (Walter, 1979: 313) As a female poet herself, Boland writes about nationalism and suburban lifestyle and goes against the old tradition of Mother Ireland giving birth. This poetic endeavor is clear in her poem ‘The Journey’ that presents transformation at nightfall when the female speaker is in- between existence and is gifted with vision of Sappho:

And I was listening out but in my head was  
A loosening and sweetening heaviness,  
Not sleep, but nearly sleep, not dreaming really  
But as ready to believe and still  
Unfevered, calm and unsurprised  
When she came and stood beside me  
And I would have know her anywhere  
And I would have gone with her anywhere  
And she same wordlessly  
And without a word I went with her. (Boland, 2008: 148)

In the poet’s mind, the ancient poet is alive and becomes the guide for the speaker poet during her journey in the underworld that is inhabited by women and children. The poet is urged to see these figures as purely women and through their womanly experiences and lenses. Another dichotomy that Boland is determined to resolve is the split between myth and history that is related to Ireland-woman identification. Myth, in contrast to the stereotyped history of pain and loss offers a comforting and consolatory experience to women as it offers an imaginative element and a revision of the literary tradition that is intended by Boland herself. In her poem ‘Story,’ Boland asserts the self-reflexive woman poet who revisits the Irish myth of lovers hiding from the angry king. The poem opens with introducing the myth itself and then there is a quick shift

as the poem unfolds the experiences of other characters and their conditions. The poet relates the experiences of the women to her own life and poetic career and consequently the poem moves from the legend to the conditions of its composition. The revision is made clear at the end of the poem “I am writing/ a woman out of legend.” (Boland, 2008: 237) The woman is both written out by myth and simultaneously she is part of the speaker’s poet project.

The publication of *Field Day Anthology of Irish Writing* in 1991 affirms existing flaws in the Irish literary tradition. Boland criticizes the unrepresentative contribution of Irish women in contemporary poetry section although she was included among the three female poets whose work has been included in the anthology and she criticizes the lack of any woman editor. Boland’s objection is that the editors are critiquing postcolonialism but male editors are still excluding female poets. Kim McMullen shares the same criticism by affirming that “Persistently throughout *The Field Day Anthology* gender and sexuality are exiled from the political center to the margins of the private or personal.” (McMullen, 1996:36) Boland believes that the failure to recognize female voices is deeply rooted in the challenge of Irish women in defining Irish nationalism:

The *Field Day Anthology* indicates the fact that those who put together canons which confuse power with authority do so at their peril... In this instance –and this is instructive of other current ideas on Irish literature- a nationalist interpretation of literature has ended up putting forward- not surprisingly- a theory of a national literature. It is disruptive to that theory- with all its carefully balanced premises if retrieval and nostalgia- that women are new voices. That they are writing poems which upset conventional ideas of possession and identity. That they are disrupting an old assumption of Ireland and its writing. And so the statistics in *The Field Day Anthology* may be ethically indefensible; but they are not I believe coincidental. (*The Field Day Anthology of Irish Writing*. eds. Angela Bourke et al., 2002: 78)

For Boland, this exclusion, loss, displacement and challenge triggers new issues of gender, representation, literary tradition and creativity. In her poem ‘The Science of Cartography is Limited,’ Boland redefines the national poet by investigating the role of the woman poet. The poem starts initially one evening in February. In the background is the ongoing debate on national violence and resolution while in the foreground is the sound of her daughters talking in a nearby room. Boland states that “But these are surfaces and once the poem was finished I could follow it back to another narrative: to a crisscrossing of memory and decision and private history.” (Boland, 1995: 67) Later Boland states that the form of the poem is different from her own lyric project:

In this poem, the form is relatively open. My background was in the lyric, and in the closed lyric at that. The Dublin of the early sixties where I first thought about poetry, first argued about it, first published it, was a powerful and closed world. The poem in the air, in the ethos, was a well-made lyric: stanzaic, rhyming, symmetrical in argument. This was the poem I had labored to write in my late teens and at the start of my twenties- someone else’s poem, not mine ... [But] I was, now, in my forties, I had long ago grown restive with the closed models of Irish lyric poems- and British as well. My feeling was that they privileged the music and the marginalized the voice... [Now, as a more mature poet], I had painfully and determinedly come to a more fractured

and open-ended line and stanza. Where the acoustics for the voice were better. (Boland: 2000: 28)

Boland is rewriting the relationship between women and nation. Her poem 'Mise Eire' is an example that describes Ireland as an ordinary woman especially when she states twice "I am the woman." (Boland, 1995: 128). The poem expresses a distrust of history and male literature:

The songs

That bandage up the history,

The word

That make a rhythm of the crime

Where time is time past. (Boland, 1995: 128)

The above lines of 'Mise Eire' foregrounds the victimization of women in twentieth-century Ireland. Traditional poets have glorified women through woman figures who misrepresent real women. Separation and femininity are connected in the poem as the poem starts with "I won't go back to it" (Boland, 1995: 128) and is heavily charged with immigration: the allegory of a woman leaving the country. The poem moves towards a promising prospect with "a new language" that is "kind of scar that will be healed later." (Boland, 1995: 129) The scar is connected to femininity and the damages that Irish woman suffer from and it also refers to the loss of Irish language. There is a parallelism between national disturbances and the female oppression. The new language suggests new opportunities for Ireland to move on and a new opportunity for women to talk about their historic and everyday experiences. Irish women become the speaking subjects of poetry instead of being presented by their male counterparts and eventually Ireland in the new allegory is presented as one of these emerging women.

'Anna Liffey' is concerned with defining and voicing the Irish national identity. The feminine voice is allowed to step out of its confinement and personified to become a figure that is capable of speaking and rising. The opening line "I did not see". / I was seen" (Boland, 2008: 261) is being replaced with a figure who declares that "Now I could tell my story." (Boland: 2008: 63) The poem flows like a river covering all aspects of Boland's poetry including maternity, literary career and separation. The poem shows Boland's journey from the Gaelic myth through Dublin to the Irish Sea and how she finds her poetic voice changing the past and old traditions. In 'Ireland,' every line narrates the story of Mother Ireland and its transformation from helpless object into a confident subject and the physical rising of Mother Ireland, remembering her name and correcting history:

I was seen,

Night and day

Words fell on me. (Boland, 1995: 261)

Then:

"I rose up. I remembered it." (Boland, 1995:261)

Boland's poem 'The Emigrant Irish' calls for collective remembering of the history of Irish emigration. She believes this history has been forgotten, "Like oil lamps we put them out the back of our houses, of our minds." (Boland, 1995: 129) This poem is inspired by the former President Mary Robinson's 1995 address to the Houses of Irish Senate and its cherishing of the Irish diaspora in which she draws special attention to the importance of "our love and remembrance on this island for those who leave it behind. (Robinson, 1995:129).

Boland in *Object Lessons: the Life of the Women and the Poet in Our Own Time* narrates the ways in which women have been excluded from literary canons, the nature of exile, poetic vocation and history and asserts that this exclusion serves the creative processes of the Irish literary culture. In her prose memoir *Object Lessons*, Boland identifies the failures she is concerned to avoid including the tendency toward control and ornamental writing. She places these deficiencies in her life as a young poet and she perceives them as present perils:

There is a defining moment which comes early in a poet's life. A moment full of danger. It happens at the very edge of becoming a poet, when behind there is nothing but the mute terrain where, until then, a life has been lived and felt without finding its formalization. ... The moment of danger for me, as for other poets, came when it looked at last that silence would yield to expression. At that split second- although of course it takes longer and is more gradual than that- all the rough surfaces give way to the polish and slip of language. Then it can easily seem that the force is in the language, not in the awakened experience it voices. (Boland, 1995: 132)

*Object Lessons* is a revised essay published in Ireland in 1987 as 'The Woman Poet in a National tradition' and later in 1989 she submitted the revised work to *The American Poetry Review* together with other poems from *Outside History* and five years later it was published in *Object Lessons* under the title 'Outside History.' This poetic collection affirms Boland's literary practice of giving her prose and poetry the same title. In "Outside History," Boland affirms that the female Irish poets are used as motifs that are "often passive, decorative, raised to emblematic status" (Boland, 1995: 134) and in particular such simplified and passive women are "a corruption and distortion of women's real experience, which she hopes to redress in her own work." (Boland: 1995: 135) Boland makes it her mission to recover the silenced voices in her literary and historic works. In her interview with Jody Allen Randolph, Boland confirms that in her writing about the voiceless "she is exploring her relation to them" and that "she was in a different ethical arena from her earlier work, in which her focus had been on artistic experimentation" (Boland, 1993:129) and that in her *Outside History*, she approaches an "area of ethical imagination, where you had to be sure, every step of the way- every word and every line-that it was good faith and good poetry. And it couldn't be one without the other." (Boland, 1993:129)

The experience of the 'Other' in Boland's poetry is of traumatic nature as she asserts that the canon of the Irish literary tradition "suppresses the human truths of survival and humiliation in its evocation of womanhood." (Boland, 1995: 137) The women of the Irish past were defeated by ignoring their status. The suffering of the Irish women is always linked with the Famine of the 1840s that was a catastrophe in Irish history. Boland's poetry is closely connected to the survivors and witnesses of the terrible Famine. The elusive women in Boland's poetry are the bearers of terrible knowledge and they continue to haunt the young listeners. Her visit to an island off the northwest coast of Ireland, a region that was hit by famine and her encounter with

an old woman gives rise to her poem 'The Achill Woman' that opens "Outside History" collection. Boland narrates her visit to Achill Island when she was a student and the elderly woman's narration to her about the famine. The old woman's narration helps the poet to realize the despair and suffering of the past generations. Boland writes that:

She was the first person to talk to me about the Famine. The first person, in fact, to speak to me with any force about the terrible parish of survival and death which the event had been in those regions. She kept repeating to me that they were great people, the people in the famine. Great People. I had never heard before. She pointed out that the beauties of the place. But they themselves, I see now, were a subtext. On the eastern side of Keel, the cliffs of Menawn rose sheer out of water. And here was Keel itself, with its blond strand and broken stone, where the villagers in the famine, she told me, had moved closer to the shore, the better to eat the seaweed. (Boland:1995: 124)

In 'Outside History' sequence Boland condemns her younger self that excludes the Achill woman and the traumatic history culminating in the decision of the speaker to move out of myth into history. This affirms that Boland rejects the mythologizing tendencies of Irish literature and the inaccessibility of its traumatic history. The poem establishes a contrast between the realm of history and world of myth. The stars in the firmament are always outside history and referred to as outsiders who keep their distance from the world beneath them "a place where you found/ you were human, and /a landscape in which you know you are mortal." (Boland, 1990:8-10) In the middle of the poem, the speaker announces that she has chosen to leave the world of the stars for the finite world of human history "Out of myth into history I move to be/ part of that ordeal/ whose darkness is/ only now reaching me from those fields, /those rivers, those roads clotted as/ firmaments with the dead." (Boland, 1990:13-18) The same theme of loss is presented in 'The Journey' published in 1987 collection of the same title. The poem is rewriting Dante's Divine Comedy and Virgil's Aeneid. The speaker who is a poet, mother and housewife is led by Sappho into an underworld of the dead women and children who died from past plagues. The speaker being unable to reach the women pleads "let me be/let me at least be their witness" and Sappho replies that "what you have seen is beyond speech/ beyond song, only not beyond love." (Boland, 1990:79-80) The speaker at the beginning of the poem blamed her fellow poets for wasting their "sweet uncluttered meters on the obvious/ emblem instead of the real thing" (Boland, 1990: 8-9) now is urging the speaker to remember as they ascend back to the upper world. Sappho tells her adopted daughter:

I have brought you here so you will know for ever

The silences in which are our beginnings,

In which we have an origin like water. (Boland, 1990: 86-88)

The above quotation celebrates the new place and position of women in both history and literary tradition. The poet's mission is to honor, preserve and respect silent voices by listening to them rather than breaking their silences. Boland's poetry confronts both personal and communal silences. A family history is present in 'Fever,' a poem that narrates her grandmother's lonely death of fever in Dublin at the age of 31. Such personal history is narrated by Boland's mother and is similarly recounted in her essay "In Search of a Nation." The women and children of the



Famine are presented as outside history, “My grandmother lived outside history. And she died there.” (Boland, 1995: 98) However, in the second half of the poem, the poet is determined to undo this repression by linguistic means, “Names, shadows, visitations, hints/and a half-sense of half-lives.” (Boland, 1995:22-23) that serves as traces to the remains of her grandmother:

Reconstructs the soaked-through midnights;

Vigils; the histories I never learned

To predict the lyric of; and re-construct

Risk. (Boland, 1995: 25-28)

The poet describes her grandmother’s lost story with a disruptive language rather than neutralized one as narrated by the males in literary stories. She writes that:

What we lost is a contagion

That breaks out in what cannot be

Shaken out from words, or beaten out

From meaning and survives to weaken

What is given, what is certain

And burns away everything but this

Exact moment of delirium when

Someone cries out someone’s name. (Boland, 1995: 29-36)

Boland states “I have written this to probe the virulence and necessity of the idea of a nation. Not on its own and not in a vacuum, but as it intersects with a specific poetic inheritance and as that inheritance, in turn, cut across me as woman and poet.” (Boland, 1986: 1)

In *Object Lessons*, the author offers a fresh impetus to literary autobiography produced by Irish women as she narrates her life in a poem form. She affirms that Irish women “have only recently moved from being the objects of Irish poems to being authors of them.” (Boland, 2005: 146) Achieving her poetic self is a difficult task as she states that “it has been, in some senses, stressful for women poets like myself to make a critique, at the same time having to make the work which the critique is fitted for.” (Boland, 1995: 78) She reveals that ‘the toxic lyric’ of the Irish literary tradition enables to see the extent of national intrusion on the images of Irish female poets. She writes:

The majority of Irish male poets depended on women as motifs in their poetry as objects symbolic of the nation. They moved easily, deftly, as if by right among images of women in which I did not believe and of which I could not approve. The women in their poems were often passive, decorative, raised to emblematic status. This was especially true where the woman and the idea of the nation were mixed: where the nation became a woman and the woman took on a national posture.” (Boland, 1995” 45) similarly, Boland interrogates the disjunctions produced

by “the nationalization of the feminine, the feminization of the national in Irish culture.” (Boland, 1995:448)

Boland parallels the life of her grandmother to her own attempts as a poet to “put the life I lived into the poem I wrote.” (Boland, 1995: 18) In ‘The Lost Land Against Love Poetry,’ gender is both an identity and a deconstructive idea of nationhood, colony and even traditional concepts of genre including the love poem and eventually energizes the poet’s viewpoint of creating a female poet who took several decades to emerge from victimization and to assert her identity. Boland’s poetic self- realization took several decades and it was culminated in *Object Lessons* in which Boland achieves her command of poetic self that integrates her womanhood as a key element. She states “It has given me an insight into the flawed permissions which surround the inherited Irish poem, in which you could have ... a line of hills but not the suburbs under them. (Boland, 1995:, 204) Boland affirms that the new female poet is an imaginative and literary persona rather than a political one but she affirms that infusing the two lives of a woman and a poet is a necessity for the Irish poem. In an interview for the *Irish University Review*, Boland states that:

I really don’t have any doubts that the woman poet is an emblematic figure in poetry now in the same way that the Romantic poet and the modernist poet once were. It took some time to accept that they were emblematic figures as well. But the Romantic and the modernist poet were emblematic not because they were awkward or daring or disruptive. But because they set themselves- the way they approached poetry itself- internalized the stresses and truths of poetry at that moment in time. (Boland, 1993: 78)

Boland stresses that the infusion of the Irish poet and the Irish woman in her lecture ‘The Woman Poet in Ireland: Creativity in Context’ is a necessity that broadens Irish poetry and she concludes her lecture by confirming that “a woman in Ireland who wishes to inscribe her life in a poem has a better chance to move freely around and within that poem, to select its subject and object at will, and to redirect its themes to her purposes.” (Boland, 1995:37)

‘Turning Away’ is Boland’s poetic struggle to locate herself within her own tradition and the title suggests her moving between definition and doubts. In her essay “Outside History”, she proposes an enactment of the older poet who is excluded and evaded meeting the younger one:

I draw up a chair, I sit down opposite her. I begin to talk- no, to harangue her. Why, I say, do you do it? Why do you go back to that attic flat, night after night, to write in forms explored and sealed by English men hundreds of years ago? You are Irish. You are a woman. Why do you keep these things at the periphery of the poem? Why do you not move them to the center, where they belong? But the woman who looks back at me is uncomprehending. If she answers at all it will be with the rhetoric of a callow apprenticeship: that the poem is pure process that the technical encounter is the one which guarantees all others. She will speak about the dissonance of the line and the necessity for the stanza. And so on. And so on.... She is a long way, that young woman... from the full report of anything. In her lack of any sense of implication or complication, she might as well be a scientist in the thirties, bombarding uranium with neutrons. (Boland, 1990: 19)

The imperative necessity of the separation between the national and the feminine in poetry is a direct challenge to the Irish poetic tradition. Boland uses the symbol of a defeated and impoverished Ireland as a female and an independent Ireland as a male to illustrate this dichotomy. In addition, she provides other woman writers with stories about contradictions and constraints she faces as a woman poet in Ireland:

I know now that I began writing in a country where the word woman and the word poet were almost magically opposed. One word was used to invoke collective nurture, the other to sketch out self reflective individualism. Both states were necessary- that much the culture conceded- but they were oil and water and could not be mixed. It became part of my working life, part of my discourse, to see these lives evade and simplify each other. I became used to the flawed space between them. In a certain sense, I found my poetic voice by shouting across the distance. (Boland, 1996: XI)

Boland underlines the woman's poet need for expressive freedom and the importance of her own experience promotes her to provide a series of object lessons for other women poets based on her own subjectivity. What emerges from these lessons is the persistent use of actual and imagined events to represent an inclusive Ireland. In her preface, she introduced a leitmotif of the room, "that room appears often in this book. I can see it now, and I have wanted the reader to see it. It was not too large. [...] And yet for me, as for many other writers in so many other rooms, this particular one remains a place of origin." (1996: XV-VI) Boland's feminized narratives assert that for Irish woman writer, origins are fraught with absence, suppression and elision. In 'Lava Cameo,' Boland interweaves her search for her grandmother's life story with her narrative quest for poetic identity but she was astonished at how she feels "the small, abstract wound of not being able to find her grandmother's grave. Louth graveyard becomes a sign for a wider loss of voice, memory and identity." (Boland, 1995: 42)

Memory is central in Boland's life stories and although memories tend to be individual, they are acquired interactively so that they are both collective and individual. Boland raises new themes of loss, identity and displacement at the public and private levels. In her poem 'Mother Ireland,' she underlines the relation between body and nation. 'The myth of lost origins' that represent the nationalist trope of Mother Ireland is replaced by "the material –self presence of the maternal body." Initially, Mother Ireland is a land that is seen but not seeing:

I lay on my back to be fields

And when I turned

On my side

I was a hill

Under freezing stars. (Boland, 1995: 56)

Mother Ireland is an object on whom words fall all time:

"Seeds. Raindrops. Chips of frost" until from one of them, she learns her name. With language, comes sight and expression: Now I could tell my story." This new Ireland acquires new subjectivity and language, "mine .... [But] I was, by now, in my forties. I had long ago grown

restive with the closed models of Irish lyric poems- and British as well. My feeling was that they privileged the music and marginalized the voice. ... [Now, as a more mature poet], I had painfully and determinedly come to a more fractured and open-ended line and stanza, where the acoustics for the voice were better.” (Boland, 1995: 71-79)

Boland’s *In a Time of Violence* avoids “the polish and slip of language” by making frictional connections. In her talk on Sylvia Plath, Boland observes that:

The voice of a poet is not a direct noise or an available sound. It is all those mysteries of assembly and music and speed and shape which make a poem true or else leave it in a shadow land of rhetoric. I have no doubt that this is Plath’s voice. The poem is a mix of tone and surrealism; an instinctive rush of nursery rhyme cadences heightening the unmusical tirade.” (Boland, 1981:32)

In her poem ‘Anna Liffey’ the poet uses writing as a means of resistance against patriarchal oppression and violence against women. The poem reclaims both the Irish women, as well as the Liffey River into a female literary tradition. The speaker in the poem narrates the genealogy of the river and the Irish people and eventually it establishes the origin of the people as matrilineal:

Life, the story goes, was the daughter of Canaan,

And came to the plain of Kildare.

She loved the flat-hands and the ditches

And the unreachable horizon.

She asked that it be named for her.

The rover took its name from the land.

The land took its name from a woman. (Boland, 1994: 139)

The above poem underlines the idea that woman and the power of her name is the genesis of the nation and that the retelling of the river destabilizes patriarchy and its deferral patrilineal genealogy and naming. The poem situates the woman and the river as dwelling in a liminal space that can be negotiated. The woman and the river are imbued with creativity:

Maker of

Places, remembrances

Narrate such fragments for me:

One body. One spirit.

One place. One name

They city where I was born.

The river that runs through it.

The nation which eludes me. (Boland, 1994:140)

The poem 'Anna Liffey' presents the woman, and the river as one in body, place and spirit. Through the poem, the woman and the river gain linguistic and symbolic power and this force restores to the woman and the river what history and culture have denied in real life. This creative energy surges through the poem. The speaker asks the question, "where is home now?" and the answer is "I was a voice." (Boland, 1994:145) In 'Anna Liffey' a woman is determined to place herself at the centre of her nation and her poetry. The woman's aging body is the text in which the questions of identity, nationhood and poetry are inscribed:

Make of a nation what you will

Make of the past

What you can-

There is now

A woman in a doorway.

It has taken me

All my strength to do this.

Becoming a figure in a poem. (Boland, 1994: 148)

'Anna Liffey' is also considered as a personal poem. Boland states that, 'The poem 'Anna Liffey' is drawn from the center of the life I led, and continued to live. The front door is my front door. The hills I see are the ones I have seen from that doorway for twenty –two years. The Liffey rises there as it always has. All that has changed is that I feel more confident that the private, downright vision is the guarantor of the political poem.' (Boland, 1994: 136)

In *The Lost Land*, Boland examines the convergence between history, silence and gender. Ireland is presented as a land of belonging and not belonging. The opening poem 'Colony' registers the Irish identity that is "a melding of a history that had not been chosen and a present that still could be." (Boland, 1998:32) The opening twelve poems entitled 'Colony' underline the fragmented Irish identity as it includes a history of victimization that has not been chosen and a present that is emerging. Its sequel 'The Lost Land' raised the question of how the colonizer would be if they return to the city they once colonized. The poet recalls a night in Dublin when she walked with her father amid thick fog and she similarly documents the brutalities of colonization that is reflected in the language of the poem:

This is what language is:

A habitable grief. A turn of speech

For the everyday and ordinary abrasion

Of losses such as this:

Which hurts

Just enough to be a scar

And heals just enough to be a nation. (Boland, 1998: 39)

The sequence opens with a Gaelic poet caught between the two lost worlds: the decline of the Gaelic order and the rise of colony. The best shelter for Gaelic chaos is its own language. History in the poem is leading to darkness. The poet is lost because he could not continue with his tradition that is being erased by history and for being the last witness for his tradition and when the poet “shuts his eyes” on his memory of that world, it descends into darkness, “Limerick, the Wild Geese and what went before-/ falters into cadence before he sleeps:/ He shuts his eyes. Darkness falls on it.” (Boland, 1998: 42) But still the poem offers a note of optimism as it is a woman who narrates the story of O Bruadair. Revisiting the past to tell the story is an assertion of woman’s resistance to traditions and therefore Boland implies the necessity of connecting with the past in the creation the female poet. ‘The Colony’ explores the ambiguous relation between the fractures made by colony and the poet writing them. There is a turning point in the collection when the unwelcome daughter of tradition starts her narration. The poet asks what a colony is and the answer is:

If not the brutal truth

That when we speak

The graves open

And the dead walk. (Boland, 1998: 47)

The *Lost Land* supports the unhealed story and it is the mission of the female poet to narrate the unnarrated. ‘Daughters of Colony’ refers to Irish woman leaving Ireland from the earlier part of the poem. The poem is urging Irish immigrants to come back home. This call to come back home is evident in Boland’s essay ‘Letter to a Young Woman Poet’ to go to the past and change it. In ‘The Lost Land’ both gender and history are interrelated. Boland strongly believes that to change history, a site for exclusion of women, both literature and language are powerful tools to ‘eroticize history.’ In ‘City of Shadows,’ a young poet walks with her father in a city covered with fog. The young poet walking beside the car, guiding it to The Irish Sea implies self confidence of the woman poet finding her way out of a lost land. Boland’s term ‘the erotics of history’ refers to new approach to historical background. In her essay ‘Making the Difference: Eroticism and Aging in the Work of the Woman Poet,’ the erotic does not refer to the power of sexuality but to the power of expression and thus ‘the erotic’ in Boland’s poetry does not refer to sexual desire but a power that remains unexpressed.

## 2. Conclusion

To conclude, the writings of Boland offer meditations on the Irish women’s alienation from Irish literature, history culture, and nationalism. Boland spent her literary career creating a space for women in Irish poetry. Her poetry tackles her identity, woman poet, mother, Irish history and myth. Her writings examine the intersections between gender, culture, myth, history and nation. In doing so, Boland at a personal and collective level succeeds in securing a place for her and other Irish women, a place where she can celebrate both her poetic and national identity. The

negative images of Irish women have been used for literary and national revival in Boland's poetry. Her poetry is reconstructing a woman figure into a large narrative of literature, history and nationalism. Boland's understanding of herself has been transformed into understanding her geographical place. She intrudes male gendered spaces and deconstructs them. Boland articulates her grievance against the inferiority of women and the disempowerment of female writing. She is disclosing and unsettling the false image of Irish women in both nationalistic and male-dominated literary tradition.

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