



**Mothers for the Nation.  
Representing Women in Marina  
Carr's *The Mai***

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**ABSTRACT:**

Carr mirrors Irish women who are aware of their agony. Women have a strong self-knowledge yet they do not act. Carr urges the Irish to take a step forward to change and achieve the individual and collective identity. Carr reflects the status of the Irish women through her characters. Living by their rules, her female characters challenge the disintegrating status of the Irish tinkers as well as Irish women in general. They become the image of motherland that empowers women.

**KEYWORDS:** Marina Carr, Women, Mother, identity,

Marina Carr was born in (1964) in the midland of Ireland known as Country Offaly which is a "very beautiful place, full of lakes and rivers and mountains and it was surrounded by the Bog of Allen"<sup>1</sup> This place had a significant impact upon her works, and when she was asked about the place of her childhood she replied:

I grew up in a place called Gorthnamona, which means "field of the bog" for the first 11 years, and then moved a half mile down the road to a place called Pallas Lake. Our house was on the shore of the lake. There were swans, there were bulls, there were dragonflies, there were fishermen. My sister and I spent long summer evenings sitting on an old oak tree looking out at the lake, laughing our heads off at anything, everything, nothing. The winter were cold, sometimes the lake froze... when the weather was fine, she [Marina's mother] would let us play for hours outside... it was a good childhood, free and fairly wild.<sup>2</sup>

Carr's early works were influenced by Samuel Beckett and the Absurd theatre. Colin Chambers commented on her works saying that it "revealed a highly

original talent waiting to be released from Beckettian thrall".<sup>3</sup> Her official profession started with *Low in the Dark* (1989) which carried a feminist schema. Catherine Rees in her article 'Marina Carr' said:

The play rejects traditional characterisation and instead uses characters who are largely representative of various gender attitudes. What is interesting is that these categorisations are carried forward to her later plays, where women are largely concerned with the emotional aspects of their existence, while men principally aim to cultivate and maintain the physical and monetary parts of their lives.<sup>4</sup>

Her writings came out during the Celtic Tiger, which was a time that witnessed social and cultural confidence "giving reactionary portraits of the nation in a time of social and economic changes."<sup>5</sup> During that period, women unlike men, suffered from low salary, little job protection and lack of union security.<sup>6</sup>

Carr's plays could be described as neo-Gothic, a term used to designate the restoration of the gothic into a contemporary framework which "signalled a hundred or traumatised Irish society and deep-seated disturbances in the national psyche."<sup>7</sup> Carr tried through her female heroines to criticise these conditions in Irish society by echoing the circumstances of women during and after the Celtic tiger. She "focuses on those who are marginalised from the success obsessed climate of the Celtic Tiger, and confronts us with female differences and deviance."<sup>8</sup> Her plays depicted themes of land and gender. The land became the sanctuary where women could escape restricted and limited domestic roles and became in control and an integral part of the world. Carr wanted the Irish to see their land that way. Her female characters could be mothers for the nation and represent the land as McClintock asserted, "Women are typically constructed as the symbolic bearers of the nation, but are denied any direct relation to national agency."<sup>9</sup> Thus the land (bog)/women relationship could be taken as a nationalistic symbol. The bog was the embodiment of

Ireland's past which was destroyed by the Celtic Tiger. Although her plays were not political in the deep sense of the word, yet her themes were rooted in the political marsh of Ireland's struggle.

Carr enhanced her sense of tragedy by blending it with the Greek and Shakespearian elements, combing the old and the new. Marianne McDonald believed that Irish playwrights used Irish-Greek tragedy as "an act of making visible the invisible, of speaking the unspeakable."<sup>10</sup> Wilmer emphasises that, "the original versions of Greek drama provides an unusual respect for the power of women to rebel and to subvert the power relations to which they are subjected."<sup>11</sup> Carr used the folkloric structure to be able to stay away from the "prison o reality"<sup>12</sup> and to historicise the fight of the Irish women to establish their distinctive identity in a male dominated society. The heroine's power resides in "the vehemence of their resistance, their will to freedom and fulfilment."<sup>13</sup> They protested against the fragmented modernity by finding refuge in myths which were "larger than life."<sup>14</sup> Carr was concerned with women's oppression and how they were exiled and restrained historically and culturally.

The representation of female protagonists enabled Carr to refer to what was known as Mother Ireland. She stressed the idea of belonging. In Irish mythology, goddesses were supposed to marry men who would eventually become kings and owners of the land. If the goddesses did not marry them, they would be weak, futile and unproductive, thus women were tied to land as wives and mothers. Such figures could be found in the Irish culture like Medhbh, who "would not permit a king in Tara unless he had her for his wife."<sup>15</sup> Deirdre and Graine, represented women who ran away for the sake of love. The image of Mother Ireland could also be found in the woks after colonisation like Hibernia, a weak young female who was on need of protection

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from the powerful Britannia.<sup>16</sup> Carr's female characters are in return stood for Ireland that urges people to see it as their mother.

The land/bog was a representative of the gendered landscape representing femininity in a new colonised world. The social changes that took place in Ireland concerning politics, nationalism, and poverty affected the psychology of Carr's characters. They were scattered and broken from the inside. Her characters were connected to the land not out of an economic need, but rather they had spiritual ties to it. Land had always been a key element when it comes to shaping identity. It became part of the Irish mental map and ending up shaping their identity. They were drawn to the land reflecting the spiritual bonding between the Irish people and their land. The characters were tied up to the land but they often end up dying in it for they are unable to cope with the danger of change which reflected the changing identity of Ireland. The changing era of the Celtic Tiger showed the changing perspective of considering the land the key to identity materially to a symbol of identity.

*The Mai* (1994) was written during a period of changes concerning women's issues in Ireland. Changes were like the establishment of the First Committee on the Status of Women in (1970), and the formation of the Council of the Status of Women in (1982).<sup>17</sup> In addition, the approval of the referendum on divorce was declared in (1995). *The Mai* "engages with concerns over the control of women's bodies by national patriarchal discourse, and with the ways in which social norms inform and perpetuate acceptable identities and bodies and exclude those deemed improper."<sup>18</sup>

The play is set in the rural midlands of Ireland, near the supernatural Owl Lake. It is about four generations of females in one family. Grandma Fraochlán, one hundred years of age, represents the old generation. She is a drug-smoking old woman, amuses the family with her colourful stories about her grandfather.

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He is a Moroccan descent who was a sailor. Her daughters Julie and Agnes stand for the conservative generation that represented Ireland during the 20's and 30's.<sup>19</sup> The Mai and her sisters, Connie and beck, represent the third generation caught between their eagerness to achieve their independence and their attachment to the "mores and expectations of the previous generation."<sup>20</sup> Finally, the fourth generation is represented by Millie the sixteen year old young girl who stands for modern Irish generation that seeks its individual identity.

The Mai evokes the Greek goddess Maia who is recognized with the nymph and thus linked to water. She is also associated to goddess Maia's isolation due to her living alone in a cave away from the other gods and goddesses.<sup>21</sup> Throughout the whole play, Millie tells the stories straight to the audience. The play opens with Robert, the husband, coming back home playing his cello the way he plays with The Mai's life. She later asks him, "Where were you?"<sup>22</sup> (*The Mai*, 109) He does not care to give an explanation to his wife about his absence. Her husband, Robert, who had deserted his family and even when he was home he isolated himself and played with his cello. The cello stands for the female body.<sup>23</sup> became a representative of the Mai. Her husband used to exploits her.

As the storyteller, Millie moves between different roles in the play. She plays the roles of the thirty years old storyteller and the sixteen year old young character. She is The Mai's eldest daughter who mirrors her mother's side of the story. Ni Dhuibhne describes The Mai's story as Millie's story, "the story of a parent or parents is the legacy to their daughters: Millie is a wronged or damaged child."<sup>24</sup>

The play provides mythical elements from different sources beside the Irish myths, as Hill Shonagh explains, "The play opens with the return of The

Mai's Husband Robert, for whom she has been waiting several years, echoing both the defiant Electra waiting for the return of her brother and the reversal of the Odysseus legend viewed from the perspective of Penelope."<sup>25</sup> Carr's characters resemble the folkloric archetypes found in myths and legends. Millie recites the legend of Owl Lack which foretells their coming tragic situation. Ni Dhuibhne illustrates that, "I am not quite sure what Millie's interpretation of the story is: that Owl Lake is a dangerous place, that The Mai should learn a lesson in patience from Coillte and not make her mistakes, or that The Mai should leave Robert."<sup>26</sup>

Grandma Fraochlán says, "We can't help repeatin', Robert, we repeat and repeat, the orchestration may be different but the tune is always the same". (*The Mai*, 123). Millie enhances the same idea when she describes the characters who know the legend of Owl Lake yet they are unable to listen to its warning message as 'sleepwalkers',

I knew that story as a child, so did The Mai and Robert.  
But we were unaffected by it and in our blindness moved  
along with it like sleepwalkers along a precipice and all  
around gods and mortals called out for us to change our  
course and, not listening, walking on and on. (*The Mai*,  
148)

The title of the play is taken from an Irish myth about a woman who destroys her youth for the sake of love. After five years of their marriage, her unfaithful husband "got into his car with his cello and drove away." (*The Mai*, 110) The Mai believes that her husband loves her, "he loves me on his own high damaged way. Maybe it's just a phase he's going through and in a few years he'll come back to me." (*The Mai*, 185) Millie has the same experience of her mother, as her husband abandons her and her son. She recites how her father deserts them with "No explanations, no goodbyes." (*The Mai*, 110). She painfully describes the scene where her mother, The Mai, tries to calm her



daughter saying "Don't worry about a thing, Millie, your dad'll come back and we will have the best of lives." (*The Mai*, 110) She found the only consolation in the Owl Lake. They both agree about the effect of the cursed Owl Lake.

The Mai sat in front of this big window here, her chin moonward, a frown in her forehead, as if she were pulsing messages to some remote star which would ricochet and lance Robert wherever he was, her eyes closed tightly, her lips forming two words noiselessly. Come home – come home. (*The Mai*, 111)

The myth of the Owl Lake is about Coillte. the daughter of the mountain god who falls in love with Bláth, Lord of the flowers. They spend summer and spring together, but he tells her that he has to leave her to spend winter and autumn with the 'dark witch of the bog'. She decides to follow him. One night, the witch pushes her into the lake of tears. She releases Bláth from the spell and he looks for Coillte. The villagers inform him that she is 'dissolved'. (*The Mai*, 147)

The depressing story of the past is interrupted by The Mai's grandmother, Grandma Fraochlán. She came to stay with The Mai in the Owl Lake. The Mai's mother is not seen in the play as she died when The Mai was a baby. She chooses her children over her husband, however, having the right to choose is a privilege that the Irish women didn't have over history. She has strange points of views,

Grandma Fraochlán: there's two types of woman in this world from what I can make out: them that puts their children first and them that puts their lover first. And for what it is worth, the nine-fingered fisherman belongs to the latter of these. I would gladly have hurled all seven of ypu down the slopes of hell for one more night with the nine-fingered fisherman and I may rot eternally for such un motherly feeling. (*The Mai*, 182)

Her daughters come to the Owl Lake and end up in hell. Their past haunts them like ghosts. They never learn from it. Grandma Fraochlán tells Robert that "I only think you came back because ya couldn't find anythin' better elsewhere and you'll be gone as soon as ya think you've found soethin' better." (*The Mai*, 122). She continues telling him that he is repeating the deeds of his father. People cannot run away from their inevitable history, "People don't change, Robert, they don't change" (*The Mai*, 122). His return to the Owl Lake is not out of his regret or love. He does not have any passion towards her. He tells The Mai about a dream he had:

I dreamt that you were dead and my cello case was your coffin and a carriage drawn by two black swans takes you away from me over a dark expanse of water and I ran after this strange hearse shouting, "Mai, Mai," and it seemed as if you could hear my voice on the moon, and I'm running, running, running over water, trees, mountains, though I've long lost sight of the carriage and of you — and I wake, pack my bags, takes the next plane home. (*The Mai*, 125)

The same experience that grandma Fraochlán and the Mai share affects the following generation. Julie and Agnes, grandma Fraochlán's daughters, come to Owl Lake to help their sister Beck. These women suffer due to their mother's experience. "she doesn't realise the influence she has over us, I'm seventy-five years of age, mai, and I'm still not over my childhood." (*The Mai*, 146) The Mai and her sisters try to change their fate by being educated and independent. Still, they are abandoned by their lovers. This echoes the Women's words in *Electra* about the influence of the past saying that "The curse is a living thing."<sup>27</sup> Millie is detached throughout the whole play. The sadness of her mother is transferred to her. She illustrates:

None of The Mai and Robert's children are very strong. We teeter along the fringe of the world with halting gait, reeking of Owl Lake at every turn. I dream of water all the time. I'm

floundering off the shore, or bursting toward the surface for air, or wrestling with a lake swan trying to drag me under. I have not yet emerged triumphant from those lakes of the night... and on a confident day when I'm considering a first shaky step towards something within my grasp, the caul constricts and I'm back to Owl Lake again. (*The Mai*, 184)

Millie explains how those memories are engraved in her mind affecting her life:

The Mai at the window, grandma Fraochlán's oar, The Mai at the window again. The Mai at the window again, and it goes on and on till I succumb and linger among them there in the dead silent world that tore our hearts out for a song. (*The Mai*, 184)

Portraying Irish women is a challenge as it defies the norms. Throughout history, they were idealised like their Mother Ireland. As illustrated by Brecken Hancock, "the tradition of portraying Ireland as a woman has meant that: the very act of writing challenges patriarchal practices of the state precisely by representing national identity... as other than male"<sup>28</sup> Carr portrays women outside the norm as she criticises the male dominated life and creates new identities that are ignored. Creating her characters within storytelling framework, she praises the.

The four generations of women are like the living dead and the Owl Lake is their graveyard. When Robert betrays The Mai with a locale woman, the former drowns herself in the Owl Lake. The myth of the Owl Lake haunts all the female character, and even though Carr does not give Millie a happy ending yet she gives her a different history that may create a different attitude towards the present. Carr presents women's suffering and suppressed. Del Mar suggests that:

The inside suffering causes heroic female resistance in the Irish play, and intra-familial bloodshed together with

acts of revenge, are evoked to respond to the playwright's strategy to adapt the Greek idea of chaos to a modern Ireland, where dysfunctional families have not disappeared from society and where political troubles still echo on people's mind.<sup>29</sup>

Carr urges Irish women to treasure their identity through *The Mai*'s choice to drown herself in the Owl Lake and nowhere else. The play "suggests an alternative creation for women and enables the exploration of identity."<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Georgina Brown, "Marina Carr's new play delivered in a Dublin maternity ward, Georgina Brown talks to the author about her herione's mixed parentage – part Beckett, part Bog of Allen", *The Independent*, (7 May, 1996), <http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/marina-carrs-new-play-was-delivered-in-a-dublin-maternity-ward-georgina-brown-talks-to-the-author-1346179.html>. Retrieved in 4 December, 2017.

<sup>2</sup> Patricia Norvillo- corvalán, "The Theatre of Marina Carr: A latin American Reading, Interview, and Translation", *Irish Migration Studies in Latin America*, 2009, 145.

<sup>3</sup> Colin Chambers, *The Continuum Companion to Twentieth Century Theatre*, (London: Continuum, 2005), 169.

<sup>4</sup> Catherine Rees, "Marina Carr" *The Literary Encyclopedia*, first published 02 November. 2004. [www.litencyc.com/php/speople.php?rec=true&UID=5854](http://www.litencyc.com/php/speople.php?rec=true&UID=5854). Accessed at 27 November. 2017.

<sup>5</sup> Victor Merriman, *Because We Are Poor Irish Theatre in the 1990's*, (Dublin: Carysfort Press, 2011), 305.

- <sup>6</sup> Patricia Coulghan, "Irish Literature and Feminism in Postmodernity", *Hungarian Journal of English and American Studies*, 1. 2, (Spring/ Fall, 2004), MLA. International Bibliography, 178.
- <sup>7</sup> Eve Patten, "Contemporary Irish Fiction", in *The Contemporary Companion to the Irish Novel*, ed. John Wilson Foster, (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2006), 259.
- <sup>8</sup> Kim McMullen, "Decolonising Risallen: Some Feminist, Nationalist, and Postcolonialist Discourses in Irish Studies", *Journal of the Midwest Language Association*, 29. 1. (Spring 1996), 81.
- <sup>9</sup> Anne McClintock, "Family Feuds: Gender, Nationalism and the Family", *Feminist Review*, 44, (Summer 1993), Jstore, 62.
- <sup>10</sup> Marianne McDonald, "Rebel Women: Brenden Kennelly's Versions of Irish Tragedy", *New Hibernia Review*, 2005, 38.
- <sup>11</sup> Steve Wilmer, "Women in Greek Tragedy Today: A Reappraisal", *International Federation for Theatre Research*, 32. 2. (2007), 114.
- <sup>12</sup> Sue-Ellen Case, *Feminism and Theatre*, (London: McMillan, 1998), 124.
- <sup>13</sup> Cathy Leeney, 'Ireland's "Exiled" Women Playwrights: Teresa Deevy and Marina Carr', in Shaun Richards, ed. *The Cambridge Companion to Twentieth-Century Irish Drama*, (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2004), 150.
- <sup>14</sup> Cathy Leeney and Anna McMullan, *The Theatre of Marina Carr: "Before Rules Was Made"*, (Dublin: Carysfort Press, 2003), xvi.
- <sup>15</sup> Proinsias Mac Cana, "Women in Irish Mythology", *The Crane Bag*, 4. 1. (1980), 8.
- <sup>16</sup> Aida Rosende Pérez, "La iconografía femenina de Irlanda. Creación y re/construcción de una nación en femenino", *Lectora*, 14 (2008), 253.
- <sup>17</sup> Shonagh Hill, "Articulating the Subject: Metamorphosis in Marina Carr's *The Mai*", *Platform*, 4. 1. Staging Gender(s), (Spring 2009), 45.
- <sup>18</sup> Hill, Shonagh. "Articulating the Subject: Metamorphosis in Marina Carr's *The Mai*". *Platform*. Vol. 4. No. 1. Staging Gender(s). Spring 2009. 44-59.

- <sup>19</sup> Mary Trotter, *Ireland's National Theaters: Political Performance and the Origins of the Irish Dramatic Movement*, (Syracuse (N.Y.): Syracuse University Press, 2001), 170.
- <sup>20</sup> Ibid, 171.
- <sup>21</sup> Maria Del Mar Gonzalez Chacon, "Myths in Crisis? Marina Carr's Revision of female Myths in Contemporary Irish Theatre, *The Grove Working Papers on English Studies*, 22, (2015), 61.
- <sup>22</sup> Carr, Marina. *Marina Carr: Plays One. The Mai*. London: Faber, 1999. Further quotes to the play appear parenthetically in the text with page number.
- <sup>23</sup> Anthony Roche, "Woman on the Threshold: J. M Synge's *The Shadow of the Glen*, Teresa Deevy's *Katie Roche*, and marina Carr's *The Mai*" in *The Theatre of Marina Carr: "Before Rules Was Made"*, Cathy Leeney and Anna McMullan, eds. (Dublin: Carysfort Press, 2003), 37.
- <sup>24</sup> Eilis Ni Dhuibhne, "Playing the Stage: Narrative Techniques in *The Mai*" in *The Theatre of Marina Carr: "Before Rules Was Made"*, Cathy Leeney and Anna McMullan, eds. (Dublin: Carysfort Press, 2003), 68.
- <sup>25</sup> Shonagh Hill, Articulating the Abject: Metamorphosis in Marina Carr's *The Mai*, *Platform*. 4. 1. Staging Gender(s), (Spring 2009), 47.
- <sup>26</sup> Eilis Ni Dhuibhne, "Playing the Stage: Narrative Techniques in *The Mai*" in *The Theatre of Marina Carr: "Before Rules Was Made"* Cathy Leeney and Anna McMullan, eds. (Dublin: Carysfort Press, 2003), 68.
- <sup>27</sup> Michael J. Walton, *Sophocles Plays II*, translated by Kenneth McLeish, (London: Methuen, 1990), 163.
- <sup>28</sup> Brecken Hancock, "*That house of proud mad women! Diseased Legacy and Myththinking in Marina Carr's The Mai*", (Department of English: University of Brunswick, 2003), Journal, (25. July), 2.
- <sup>29</sup> Del Mar, 63.
- <sup>30</sup> Hill, 56.

## أمهات للأمة تمثيل النساء في الماي لمارينا كار

المدرس: بسمه عبد الحسن علي

حاصل على شهادة الدكتوراه في الادب الانكليزي

جامعة بغداد/ كلية الاداب

### الملخص:

تعكس مارينا كار صورة النساء الأيرلنديات اللواتي يدركن معاناتهن. حيث تتمتع النساء بمعرفة ذاتية قوية ولكنهن لا يتصرفن. تحت كار الأيرلنديين على اتخاذ خطوة إلى الأمام للتغيير وتحقيق الهوية الفردية والجماعية. تعكس كار مكانة المرأة الأيرلندية من خلال شخصياتها المسرحية الذين يعيشون وفقاً لقواعدهم ، تتحدى شخصياتها النسائية الوضع المتفكك للمصلحين الأيرلنديين وكذلك النساء الأيرلنديات بشكل عام. لقد أصبحوا صورة الوطن الأم التي تزيد من قوة المرأة.