

**Revitalizing and Exalting the Domesticity: A
Suburban Celebration in Eavan Boland's "Woman in
Kitchen" and "Nocturne"**

By

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Abstract

Female writers struggle to get recognition. The Irish literature has always been dominated by men. Irish poetry ignored the role of women and did not address their experiences and daily lives. As a result, the women's role was entirely passive. After finishing her second book, *The War Horse*, and having spent more time in the suburbs, Boland saw the suburbs in a different light. Her perspective on the suburbs shifted radically. Boland had depicted the suburbs as a dark place restricting women's freedom in her early collections, but she later realized that she could use the suburbs as a fertile ground to produce a new feature in her writings represented by conveying the voices of ordinary women.

Keywords: daily experiences, passivity, suburbs, ordinary women, freedom.

المستخلص

سعت الكاتبات النسويات للحصول على تقدير المرأة التي همشها الشعر الايرلندي بسبب الهيمنة الذكورية. فقد اهمل الشعر الايرلندي دور المرأة وتجربتها اليومية. بعد الانتهاء من كتابها (الحصان

الحربي)، و بعد ان مكثت مدة وجيزة في الضواحي، تغيرت نظرة الشاعرة ايفان بولاند للضواحي ايجابيا. ففي اعمالها الاولى اعتبرت الشاعرة الضواحي مكانا مقيد لحرية المرأة و لكن ادركت لاحقا ان الضواحي هي ارض خصبة لأبداعها و من خلالها استطاعت ان توصل صوت المرأة الايرلندية.

الكلمات المفتاحية: التجارب اليومية، السلبية، الضواحي، المرأة العادية، الحرية .

1. Introduction

Ireland was unjust to its women. For many years, Irish women were marginalized, their voices were silenced, and they were absent from history, culture, and even literary works (Stevens et al., 2000, p. 405). Gender and nationality are inextricably linked with the concept of "other" in colonized countries. England colonized Ireland in the 12th century, and this colonization ended with the civil war in the early 1920s. Ireland, like most colonized countries, including Africa and India, is portrayed by its colonizers as "other", "objects of study", "bodies of knowledge", and an entity shaped by men. The colonizers see Ireland as a weak woman in this configuration. The colonizers consider Ireland a useless, ineffectual woman who needs to be controlled by men (Stevens et al., 2000, p. 408).

Ireland is viewed as a woman not only by colonialists, but also by the Irish themselves. They also helped to give Ireland a famine identity. Ireland, through its history, traditions, culture, myths, and even literary works, marginalizes the role of women. Women are associated with the Virgin Mary and Mother in the Irish tradition. Women are portrayed as idealized icons. This visualization explores the concepts of subservience and submissiveness. It also implies that women's only role in life is to give

birth, and their only job is motherhood and domesticity, regardless of their feelings, hopes, opinions, or needs (Karremann, 2004, p. 120). Ireland has become feminized and is referred to as "Mother Ireland". According to Catherine Nash, a professor of Human Geography at the University of London, depicting the Irish woman as Virgin Mary and connecting her to the concepts of perfection, idealism, and motherhood implies that women's lives are limited to their homes, husbands, and children. It also implies that women are submissive beings who are subject to humiliation (Chang, 2016, p. 3).

The Irish culture and tradition have been innately patriarchal since ancient times. Several examples from Irish mythology back up this claim. In short, patriarchy rules Irish politics, religion, and culture (Chang, 2016, p. 4). Female writers struggle to get recognition. The Irish literature has always been dominated by men. For centuries, the literary world revolved around male voices such as W.B. Yeats, Thomas Moor, Jonathan Swift, Seamus Heaney, and others. As a result, women's writings were overshadowed (Chang, 2016, pp. 1–2).

In addition, Irish poetry ignored the role of women and did not address their experiences and daily lives (Burns, 2001, p. 217). As a result, the women's role was entirely passive. Women are regarded as a source of inspiration for male poets. They serve as a muse to inspire men. This configuration corresponds to the literary Irish genre known as *aisling*. According to this genre, Ireland appears in a poet's vision as a weak woman unable to defend herself and in need of a man's protection (Belanger, 2000, p. 3). This genre personifies the image of "Mother Ireland".

All of these negative perceptions of Irish women have weakened their social standing. One could argue that such literature has failed to represent ordinary women. Representing women in this way benefited nationalists, who used women as a tool for national propaganda and their call to reclaim their land from colonizers (Chang, 2016, p. 3). All of these false images seek to disempower Irish women and exclude them from participation in all aspects of life (Poloczek, 2000, p. 77). The Irish woman is colonized twice because of her gender (Stevens et al., 2000, p. 407), once by British colonialists and once by her own nation. Ireland has been portrayed by both groups as a weak woman, and thus as a dependable, subordinate, and ineffective entity (Chang, 2016, p. 3).

Ireland gained independence at the end of the civil war in the 1920s. Colonialism came to an end, and postcolonialism took its place. Postcolonialism, like feminism, is concerned with highlighting marginalized people. It aims to give voice to the voiceless, the other. The arrival of nationalists provided a ray of hope for Irish women. Unfortunately, they continued on the colonial path. They marginalized women and ignored their daily experiences. Following independence, the first Irish president declared that Irish women were shackled to their domestic lives. As a result, women are still described as "other". Though their country is liberated, nationalists' minds are never liberated (Stevens et al., 2000, pp. 405, 407, 409–410).

Irish Women are not allowed to express their opinions or feelings. They are not allowed to think and certainly not to write poetry. Writing poetry falls on the shoulders of men only. There are several complex reasons for this discrimination. In addition to the passive role of women in the ancient

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culture and tradition of Ireland and their position as "other" in the colonial and postcolonial periods, religion also contributes to silencing women and weakening their personalities. According to the church's opinion, a woman's mission in life is to bear children, give birth, and take care of her children and her husband. Thus, religion also wants women to be submissive beings whose lives are bound to domestic life. However, in the 1940s, women began to break their chains and set themselves free from the cage of a male-centered society (Terente, 1992, pp. 132–134).

In this period, female poets began to introduce a new poetry that is based on rationality, not emotion. They considered women as an important pillar in life and had an active role, not a passive one. Women are no longer considered a muse to inspire male poets. These female poets liberated Irish women from the double colonialism. They broke the silence of women who had been silenced by history. They wrote poetry that was truthful and focused on the daily lives and experiences of women. They transformed women from objects to subjects, from static to dynamic entities capable of change and expression. Those female poets make the concept of the search for identity a central theme in their work (Terente, 1992, pp. 132–134).

Eavan Boland, an outstanding Irish poet, offers hope to Irish women. She exposes the dual colonialism to which Irish women were subjected in her poetry. She investigates the suppression of women's identities and works to restore them. Irish women have historically been marginalized. They are revered as a muse, the Virgin Mary, and Mother Ireland. Boland's writings are centered on real-life experiences of women. She rejects the stereotypical images introduced by male poets and claims that Irish

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women should not be used as motifs or stylistic elements (Chang, 2016, p. 2). Boland also criticizes her own history for ignoring women's roles, and she attempts to rewrite history by introducing a new image of Irish women. Furthermore, she introduces a new history that does not dismiss the role of women, a history that recognizes women as real human beings. Boland herself affirms that "I have never felt I owned Irish history; I have never entitled to the Irish experience" (Boland, 1995, p. 489 as cited in Burns, 2001, p. 217).

Women all over the world have long faced oppression and injustice in all aspects of life. This long history of prejudices against women resulted in the emergence of the feminist movement in the Western world in the 1960s and 1970s. Feminists began re-examining the concepts of sex and gender, as well as their incorporation into cultural, social, and literary discourses. In short, feminism seeks to end unequal power dynamics by answering the following questions: why are women treated as inferior entities? why are men in charge of women? why are women oppressed? why don't women have the same opportunities as men? Thus, feminism advocates for gender equality in all aspects of life (Mishra, 2013, p.130).

Feminism is a broad discourse that penetrates the world quickly to end the bias against women. However, it is wrong to think that this movement is fair to all women, especially women in once colonized countries or third- world women. These women have experiences, lives, and circumstances that are different from those of white Western women. So, it is necessary to have a new discipline to study and evaluate these unique experiences; thus, postcolonial feminism is considered (Mishra, 2013, p. 129). Western feminism erred when it followed the hegemonic approach

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and assumed that all women in the world shared the same experiences and the same conditions. Those feminists had assumed that their suggested solutions to end gender discrimination in the West were applicable to all women (Riyal, 201, p. 84).

The concept of "differences" is where postcolonial feminism, also known as anti-racism, originates. According to this notion, women have different lives, experiences, and circumstances. No two women have the same thoughts or behaviors. This movement is, therefore, a reaction to Western feminism's failure, which has universalized and homogenized all women throughout the world. The essentialism advocated by white Western feminism has been questioned by the theory of postcolonial feminism. White feminism has made the assumption that the problems faced by white educated middle-class women are the same problems faced by all women worldwide. As a result, it silences the voices of certain groups, particularly black women and women from developing countries. Furthermore, it creates a distinction between women from the first world and those from the third world (Lewis & Mills, 2003, p. 4).

Postcolonial feminism; in this case, has replaced monolithicity with diversity and seen differences as its primary characteristic (Gamble, pp. 41–42). This novel discipline represents a ray of hope for non-white women. It refutes all of Western feminism's fabricated beliefs that universalize all women. It also rejects the concept of eurocentrism advocated by Western feminists. As a result, postcolonial feminists study and evaluate all women's issues around the world. Furthermore, they associate the concept of gender with class and race. Thus, this new

movement protects the rights of all women and does not favor one group over another (Mishra, 2013, p. 129).

The Irish women have faced difficulties and problems. They are muted by virtue of their gender and history. Historically, Irish women have been portrayed as a helpless queen in need of rescue. Similarly, Ireland is portrayed as a maiden who cannot defend herself. However, women's situations have changed over time. They manage to break free from the confines of history, traditions, and patriarchal society (Terente, 1992, pp.132–133). Irish women are no longer stereotyped as passive or used as symbolic images in literary works. Women's issues, such as maternity, are no longer avoided. Women poets resist these constraints and begin to evaluate women's unique experiences. One of these poets who manages to break the stereotypical image of Irish women is Eavan Boland. She reaches the women's voices and breaks their muteness. Boland struggles to make female poets write and express what is inside them freely and without any restrictions (Rodriguez, 2006, pp.89–90).

What distinguishes Boland's writing is that it focuses on two main fields: Postcolonialism and feminism. In her poetry and prose, she exposes the difficulties of Irish people, specifically women, with British colonialists. Also, she expresses her discontent with Irish poetry and traditions that are dominated by male poets. She disapproves of the depiction of Irish women as emblematic, passive entities. In her essays, like "Object Lessons", she attempts to create a special space for Irish women. She tries to rectify Irish poetry that was, for a long time, male-dominated (Cory, 2015, p. 960).

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In her essay "Outside History", Boland states that Irish poetry is male-centered. Such a kind of poetry tries, in every way, to despise women. It uses women as "motifs" and as elements of style. Women are depicted as "often passive, decorative, raised to emblematic status". Boland considers such a depiction as an insult to Irish women. Thus, she tries to correct these old-fashioned thoughts in her writings. Having "moved from being the objects of Irish poems to being the authors of them", Irish women take their rightful place (Craps, 2009, pp. 165–166). Boland also focuses on the theme of lost identity. If a person loses his/her identity, he or she will be invisible and almost non-existent. There is a tone of colonialism and postcolonialism in her writings. She shows how colonialists repress people's identities, then she tries to restore that identity. Moreover, she explains that Irish women are doubly colonized by virtue of their sex and their nation (Atfield, 2008, pp.168, 171).

Furthermore, Boland criticizes Western feminism's false principles, which undervalue the rights of third-world women. Western feminists have a tendency to speak for these women; thus, they mute them. They ignore their experiences and thus contribute to their colonization. As a result, Boland's poetry and prose center on the unique daily experiences of oppressed women (Fogarty, 1999, p.256).

2. Revitalizing and Exalting the Domesticity: "Woman in Kitchen" and "Nocturne"

After finishing her second book, *The War Horse*, and having spent more time in the suburbs, Boland saw the suburbs in a different light. Her perspective on the suburbs shifted radically. Boland had depicted the suburbs as a dark place restricting women's freedom in her early

collections, but she later realized that she could use the suburbs as a fertile ground to produce a new feature in her writings represented by conveying the voices of ordinary women (Reus & Usandizaga, 2008, pp. 340-341).

When Boland moved to the suburbs, she realized that there was no place for female poets in Irish poetry, and that there was no mention of the ordinary women's domestic lives. Therefore, the poet attempts to alter the Irish poem to include the daily experiences of Irish women (Quinn, 2008, p. 163).

She, therefore, tries to connect the private and public domains by incorporating domestic life into the Irish literature. In this way, she is able to highlight the everyday experiences of ordinary women who have previously been excluded from the masculine Irish literary discourse. As a result, her poetry can be described as transformative, with the goal of transforming ordinary women's private spheres into public ones (Reus & Usandizaga, 2008, p. 335).

In 1982, Boland published her fourth book, *Night Feed*, in which she focuses on the experiences of ordinary women, as she did in *In Her Own Image*. However, in this book, she goes into greater detail to describe taboo topics concerning Irish women. It focuses on the routine experiences of the suburban housewives, particularly those related to the Irish mothers, such as feeding babies, changing diapers, singing lullabies, and so on (Reisman, 2012, p. 35; Allen-Randolph, 1993, p. 13). The poet in this book used autobiographical information to celebrate her motherhood and the sacred relationship she had with her infants, as well

as to address the difficulties of being a mother and a poet raising two children in the suburbs (Villar-Argáiz, 2009, p. 137).

In *Night Feed*, Boland also uses an anti-lyric manner and style. This is reflected in her use of short lines and a mix of melancholy and celebratory tones to express her dissatisfaction with the Irish literary traditions and their treatment and exclusion of the ordinary women (Allen-Randolph, 1993, pp. 13-14). Boland sings about being a mother, and she celebrates motherhood in general. Such subjects have always been absent from the Irish poetry (Gonzalez, 2006, p. 28).

In fact, Boland is able to develop a personal voice and convey the echoes of women to wider areas in Irish poetry with this book, which marks a clear development in her ideas. She also makes the suburbs a fertile ground for her creativity after it had previously been neglected and excluded from Irish masculine poetry (Allen-Randolph, 1993, p. 16). While her previous book, *In Her Own Image*, focuses on the restoration of women's identity and ability to express themselves, *Night Feed* focuses on her role as a life maker, love giver, and the foundation of society (Andrews, 1992, p. 1).

The poet directs her attention on the domestic lives of wives, mothers, and housewives. Her writings include household chores such as cooking food, cleaning the house, washing dishes and clothes, changing diapers, nursing the baby, and other domestic functions that women perform (Kosta, 2015, p. 2). She also uses a suitable setting for these works, such as the kitchen, bathroom, garden, and so on. These topics are considered trivial and far from poetic language by male poets, so they are excluded from Irish poetry, which deals with traditional topics related to women as

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muse or objects suitable for their writing (Kosta, 2015, p. 2). In her poem "Woman in Kitchen", the speaker is a suburban housewife who, like any other housewife, spends the majority of her time in the kitchen doing her daily housework. The poet writes in short lines to keep up with her speed (Kosta, 2015, p. 3):

Breakfast over, islanded by noise,
she watches the matching go fast and slow.
She stands among them as they shake the house.
They move. Their destination is specific.
She has nowhere definite to go:
she might be a pedestrian in traffic. (Boland, 1996, p. 112)

This woman is isolated from the outside world and preoccupied with her assigned tasks. Her work and the cleaning machines "islanded by noise" are the only sounds she hears. The poet then refers to a white painting that differs from the one assigned to this woman in the second stanza, where the housewife's painting described in the first stanza is transformed into another painting where she can draw different landmarks (Kosta, 2015, p. 3):

White surfaces retract. White
sideboards light the white of walls.
Cups wink white in their saucers.
The light of day bleaches as it falls
on cups and sideboards. She could use
the room to tap with it she lost her sight. (Boland, 1996, p. 112)

In fact, the poet inserts the metaphor of the new painting to escape from her bleak reality, which forces her to carry out home duties despite

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her goals and ambitions, as well as to avoid the kitchen and its repetitive noises. The painting serves as an escape from her depressing reality to a fantastical setting far from her own where she is not alone or miserable. Boland's persona "locates herself as an artist within a domestic interior, Boland's persona is simultaneously the subject and the creator of the scene" according to reviewer Boyle-Haberstroh (Haberstroh, 1993 as cited in Kosta, 2015, p. 4). To put it another way, Boland's persona has the capacity to go out from her machine-filled domestic reality and enter a fictional one where she would feel less lonely (Kosta, 2015, p. 4). In this instance, the woman changes from being the poem's subject—as is normally done through masculine representation—to being the poem's author (Haberstroh, 1993, p. 72). However, after she has done cleaning the house, there remains a strange silence that the poet likens to death (Kosta, 2015, p. 4):

The wash done, the kettle boiled, she sheets
spun and clean, the dryer stops dead.
The silence is death. It starts to bury
the room in white spaces. She turns to spread
a cloth on the board and irons sheets
in a room white and quiet as a mortuary. (Boland, 1996, p. 112)

This is the woman's daily job, and when it ends, the silence is terrifying. The poet also uses the color white as a metaphor for her isolation from the outside world and her daily routine in the poem lines. As a result, the poem begins and ends with the woman's isolation from the rest of the world. The woman is isolated in the kitchen and surrounded by the sounds of working machines at the beginning of the poem, and she remains isolated and surrounded by a gloomy silence at the end (Kosta, 2015, p.

4). The woman is portrayed as a creature imprisoned in a social cage that compels her to Irish society that is unjust to women in every way, including religion, nationality, politics, and traditions (Chang, 2016, p. 5).

This system is geared toward men. In every way, men are at the top and play an active role, while women are on the periphery and play a passive role. In her poem "Woman in Kitchen", the poet emphasizes this gender inequality (Chang, 2016, p. 5). As the title suggests, the woman is chained and imprisoned in the kitchen, busy with household chores and isolated from the outside world to perform her daily duties. The only sounds she hears are those of cleaning machines. These voices, though dead, play a more active role than women; they perform domestic duties while isolating her from the outside world (Kosta, 2015, p. 4). These instruments are metaphorically similar to men. While women spend the majority of their time in the kitchen, busy with their daily household chores, they hear the sound of machines coming from outside, possibly cars or trains, as if lost in the hustle and bustle of life, wandering aimlessly. These machines, unlike women, have specific goals, as mentioned by the poet (Chang, 1996, p. 5):

They move. Their destination is specific.

She has nowhere to go:

She might be a pedestrian in traffic. (Boland, 1996, p. 112)

These machines could also refer to armed forces and war machines that are outside her house. Politically speaking, this shows that the woman is preoccupied in the kitchen and has never taken part in Ireland's independence or defense, but men are the ones who protected Ireland, who won martyrdom on the battlefield, and who should be remembered

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in poetry and myths. Women are only distant observers as men actively participate in the emancipation of Ireland (Chang, 2016, pp. 5-6).

When the woman's work is finished, the place becomes silent, and the poet employs the metaphor "buried in white spaces" to suggest that a woman's life is trivial, routine, and meaningless (Chang, 2016, p. 6). The poet chastises Irish society for transforming women into rigid icons with only a place in the kitchen (Chang, 2016, p. 6).

In her poem "Nocturne" from *The Journey* (1987), Boland also celebrates the suburban life and uses minute details of the domestic world to show the intimacies of the domestic life (Reus & Usandizaga, 2008, p. 336). The poem describes the beautiful atmosphere of a suburban night that the speaker has spent after her guests have left and her family have gone to sleep, leaving her to contemplate this nocturnal beauty (Kosta, 2015, p. 5). After a long day of housework, the speaker looks around her warm home, where she has finally found comfort and refuge after all of her family members have gone to bed. Domesticity is used by the poet to demonstrate how charming and unique the suburbs are (Reus & Usandizaga, 2008, p. 336):

After a friend has gone I like the feel of it:

The house at night. Everyone asleep.

The way it draws in like atmosphere or evening. (Boland, 1996, p. 171)

Silence reigns supreme in the room, and the speaker relishes the sense of calm, tranquility, and reassurance that only the ticking of the clock can be heard. Then, she notices that the house is untidy, but that does not

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bother her because every little detail in the house has contributed to drawing an integrated picture of the domestic setting (Kosta, 2015, p. 5).

Inside this beautiful painting, the speaker notices a pet, a black cat crawling quietly under the stairs, and the poet describes it with words like "black ambivalence", and an insinuation, that adds a touch of mystery to the setting (Kosta, 2015, p. 5):

One-o'clock. A floral teapot and a raisin scone.

A tray waits to be taken down.

The landing light is off. The clock strikes. The cat

comes into his own, mysterious on the stairs,

a black ambivalence around the legs of button-back

chairs, an insinuation to be set beside (Boland, 1996, p. 171)

To make the image more vivid, the speaker then begins counting the domestic objects that surround her and she considers these simple details as part of a larger painting, which is the beautiful suburban painting, in order to communicate the intimacy of domestic life to the reader and listener (Reus & Usandizaga, 2008, p. 336):

the red spoon and the salt-glazed cup,

the saucer with the thick spill of tea

which scalds off easily under the tap. (Boland, 1996, p. 171)

Even the sounds of the ticking clock are described in great detail. At first, she says "one o'clock", but later, she describes the sound of a suburban clock as sweet, different, and unique, "is a tick, a pure a drop" (Reus & Usandizaga, 2008, p. 336). The poet then moves on to describe another creature that is as calm and peaceful as suburban life. This time, the

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speaker notices a spider on her house's window, and the poet is awestruck by it and its stillness, adding another spiritual dimension to that nocturnal scene (Reus & Usandizaga, 2008, p. 337). At the end of the poem, the poet steps outside to look at her garden, where the light from her kitchen reflects beautifully. The poet finds beauty in the simple things in the domestic life. She makes the suburban life distinct and a source of peace and love (Kosta, 2015, p. 6):

Time

is a tick, a purr, a drop. The spider
on the dining-room window has fallen asleep
among complexities as I will once
the doors are bolted and the keys tested
and the switch turned up of the kitchen light
which made outside in the back garden
an electric room—a domestication
of closed daisies, an architecture
instant and improbable. (Boland, 1996, p. 171)

Conclusion

Boland's poetry is transformative in that it brings to light themes not previously addressed in Irish poetry by adapting private domestic life to the public. The poet's view, in her "Woman in Kitchen" and "Nocturne", of the suburbs shifted positively in her late poetry, as the suburbs are no longer associated with savagery and pessimism, but rather with women's aspirations and hopes. Rather than considering the suburb as removed from myth, history, and art, Boland demonstrates how those elements conspire in a new way in the suburb to create poetic subject matter and to illuminate the public sphere as well as the private.

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