

## Exceeding the Monotony: A Feminist Reading in Eavan Boland's "Anorexic" and "Menses"

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### Abstract:

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. Ireland is viewed as a woman not only by colonialists, but also by the Irish themselves. Female writers struggle to get recognition. The Irish literature has always been dominated by men. For centuries, the literary world revolved around male voices. In addition, 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. Boland attempts to create a special space for Irish women. She tries to rectify Irish poetry that was, for a long time, male-dominated. Boland opposes the stereotypical images of Irish women presented by male poets in their writings. Those men have portrayed the Irish women as static entities who play no active role in life or society. In her "Anorexic" and "Menses", Boland addresses sensitive issues concerning the Irish women. Such subjects have always been overlooked in Irish poetry. Male poets have never addressed feminist themes or daily experiences that express the reality of the ordinary Irish women.

**Keywords:** marginalization, passivity, daily experiences, male-dominated, sensitiveness, feminism.

## الخروج عن المألوف: دراسة نسوية في قصائد إيفان بولاند "فقدان الشهية" و "حيض"

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### الملخص:

لم تكن إيرلندا عادلة مع نساها. لعدة قرون المرأة الأيرلندية كانت مهمشه وصوتها مكتوم ولم يكن لها ذكر في التاريخ والثقافة وحتى الأعمال الأدبية. تم تصوير إيرلندا على انها امرأة ضعيفة ليس من قبل المحتل فحسب بل من قبل الشعب الأيرلندي كذلك. لمدة طويلة كان الأدب الأيرلندي يتمحور حول أصوات ذكورية استبعدت دور النساء وتجاريهن اليومية لذلك صارت الكاتبات النسوية من أجل الحصول على التقدير والاحترام. بولاند حاول تكسر هذه الصور النمطية من خلال تناول مواضيع نسوية حساسة لم يسبق مخاطبتها من قبل الشعراء الذكور.

**الكلمات المفتاحية:** تهميش، سلبية، تجار بيومي، سيطرة ذكورية، حساس، نسوية.

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## 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). England colonized Ireland in the 12<sup>th</sup> century, and this colonization ended with the civil war in the early 1920s. Ireland, like most colonized countries, is portrayed by its colonizers as "other". The colonizers see Ireland as a weak woman in this configuration. They 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.

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). This is ironic because Ireland, which has always been conceived as a woman, did not do justice to its women, leaving them on the sidelines with no significant active role (Chang, 2016, pp. 2–3).

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).

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).

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. 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 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 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).

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).

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.In Her Own Image***

*In Her Own Image*, Boland's third book, was published in 1980 (Gonzalez, 2006, p. 28). This book marks the beginning of Boland's departure from her previous works' style and subject matter. She takes on a new subject, the revolution against the exploitation and marginalization

of Irish women (Allen-Randolph, 1991, pp. 48-49). Matter of fact, beginning with her third book, the poet embarks a critical investigation to end women's oppression in Irish poetry, classical mythology, history, society, and culture (Villar-Argáiz, 2009, p. 355).

This third major book, as the title suggests, emphasizes the significance of the identity of the Irish women, who have always been erased and excluded from Ireland's traditions and literature. Boland opposes the stereotypical images of Irish women presented by male poets in their writings. Those men have portrayed the Irish women as static entities who play no active role in life or society. Women are portrayed as if they are supernatural beings who should not have the wrinkles of aging or any signs of life's fatigue (Reisman, 2012, p. 37). Boland rejects this negative visualization that belittles the Irish women. She explains that the Irish women are the basic pillar of life. The Irish women have real experiences, hopes, and aspirations. They, like any other human being, are subject to life's difficulties, and they should not exhaust themselves in order to appear beautiful and ideal in the eyes of men who exploit and use them as a tool of servitude. As a result, this book portrays women in a less romantic and more realistic light (Reisman, 2012, p. 37).

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).

In her "Anorexic", Boland addresses specific issues concerning the Irish women. Such subjects have always been overlooked in Irish poetry. Male poets have never addressed feminist themes or daily experiences that express the reality of the ordinary Irish women. This poem expresses self-loathing as a result of patriarchal pressures imposed on women. The speaker is a woman who despises her body and regards it as a separate entity from her soul (Belanger, 2000, p. 244).

The loss of identity is a difficult issue for Irish women during the colonial, postcolonial, and even nationalist periods. The female speaker

referrers to her body as "other," using derogatory slang terms like "bitch" to describe it. This is what Irish traditions have planted. Such traditions deny women's voices, entities, bodies, and daily realities (Belanger, 2000, pp. 244-245). The female speaker regards her body as a "heretic" whose sexual needs must be destroyed (Karremann, 2004, p. 121). She thinks of her body as a separate entity by describing it as "it," "a bitch," and "a witch." Starving herself and depriving her of food is another metaphor for denying the identity of the Irish women and their existence (Allen-Randolph, 1991, p. 52):

Flesh is heretic.  
My body is a witch.  
I am burning it.

Yes I am torching  
Her curves and paps and wiles.  
They scorch in my self-denials.

How she meshed my head  
in the half-truths  
of her fevers till I renounced  
milk and honey  
and the taste of lunch.

I vomited  
her hungers.

Now the bitch is burning. (Boland, 1996, p. 91)

If the poem is examined in the Irish context, the anorexic woman that is employed in this poem by Boland represents the Irish woman and her struggle to permeate the Irish traditions that rejected her daily realities and asked her to be an ideal icon at beauty and perfection as well as submission. This literary tradition detests the process of aging, the appearance of the wrinkles, and the signs of fatigue on women's faces and bodies (Belanger, 2000, p. 245).

According to religious beliefs, the cause of Adam's fall was Eve. Also, according to the Irish beliefs and traditions, their first occupation by the Normans was due to the immorality and lack of chastity of women. So, the history of Ireland as a colonized nation was due to the sexual desires of Irish women. Therefore, the female speaker detests her body and deprives it of food to quench the desires of her body. To appease the demands of the Irish masculine traditions, she aspires to be pure enough. However, inside herself, she wishes to return to pre-fall where she is not exposed to such social and cultural pressures (Belanger, 2000, p. 246). In this poem, Boland suggests that the Irish women can break free from the shackles of the patriarchal society only by starving themselves and then burning their bodies. This is the most extreme form of self-hatred caused by patriarchal conventions that shaped Irish society (Gonzalez, 2006, p. 28).

The spokeswoman believes that by starving herself, she will reach the highest level of purification and become "sinless," washing away all the sins that were born as a result of her sexual body (Belanger, 2000, p. 245). Religiously, she regards her body as distinct from her soul, and according to Christian beliefs, the body is distinct from the soul. Furthermore, the body is the source of sins, and in order to save the soul, the body must be tortured and punished. Based on these beliefs, the speaker tortured her body by starving it in order to reach a state of sanctity and purity in which no sins exist. Actually, she curses the fact that she was born as a female and wishes she could return to her mother's womb and be born as a male rather than a female (Reisman, 2012, p. 39):

Only a little more,  
only a few more days  
sinless, foodless.

I will slip  
back into him again  
as if I have never been away. (Boland, 1996, p.92)

The poet continues using religious references when the speaker wishes to go back to the period before Adam and Eve fell to earth; a time when

her own worldly desires did not exist. These are the desires that led to her sins, and she wishes to be free of them. The poet criticizes the fact that Eve was blamed for eating from the forbidden tree, and that since then, females have been pressured, blamed, and denied their voices (Belanger, 2000, p. 245):

Caged so  
I will grow  
angular and holy  
Past pain  
keeping his heart  
such company  
as will make me forget  
in a small space  
the fall. (Boland, 1996, p. 92)

All of these pressures cause the female speaker to starve herself to the point of being "thin as a rib." She wishes to return to the first process of creation and inhabit the body of a male rather than a female. She desires to be the rib from which Eve was created rather than the other way around. All of this demonstrates patriarchal conventions that suppress women's self-control and cause them to despise themselves (Belanger, 2000, p. 245). Boland criticizes both men's concept of female perfection and their vile view of the female body as a whore whose features must be concealed. She wishes to return to a pre-fall state in which there are no sins (Karremann 2004, p. 121).

Actually, the speaker's urgent desire for perfection and purity does not stem from within her; rather, there are the requirements of her patriarchal society (Karremann, 2004, p. 122). She wishes to get rid of all the beautiful curves on her body and become flat with skin and bone, thus getting rid of the desires of her body (Belanger, 2000, p. 246):

I am starved and curveless.  
I am skin and bone. (Boland, 1996, p. 91)

Ostensibly, anorexia is a well-known disease, but implicitly, Boland uses it as a metaphor to express the pressures of the Irish culture and society on

the Irish women (Allen-Randolph, 1991, p. 52). The Irish women are greatly oppressed by their nation. The anorexic speaker starves herself and denies herself the food as a metaphor for denying her existence and identity (Belanger, 2000, p. 246).

Boland approaches the body of a woman in two ways in this volume: as a subject and as an object. In one sense, she is the champion of the poem, challenging the stereotypical image drawn by men, and in another sense, she is used as a tool through which Boland's subverting ideas are conveyed to the readers. Boland, in other words, depicts the relationship between the oppressed (women) and the oppressors (men). Thus, she uses women's bodies as a powerful means of exposing women's marginalization in traditional Irish poems, while also conveying the real experiences of ordinary women, which have always been overlooked in traditional Irish poetry (Allen-Randolph, 1991, p.58).

In this volume, the poet continues to address sensitive issues concerning women's body experiences. Boland's "Menses" addressed sensitive topics that are never before addressed by masculine literary discourse. Dealing with such issues is considered shameful on a social and cultural level, and it is best avoided (Allen-Randolph, 1991, p. 55). For example, The menstrual cycle is a natural process that every female goes through; there is nothing wrong with it, and there is no need to be kept private from others. The French critic Christine Delphy declares that "this hiding appears to be the expression of the shame which in fact caused it" (Delphy, 1987 as cited in Allen-Randolph, 1991, p. 55).

Boland wishes to convey the idea that women are not only ideal passive icons as mentioned in male poetry, but that they are living beings with their own experiences by addressing such feminine topics. Boland revealed these experiences, which have previously been ignored by traditional Irish poems as they have been regarded as taboo by culture and society (Allen-Randolph, 1991, p. 55). The poem is a feminist rant against society and culture for conspiring to marginalize Irish women (Allen-Randolph, 1991, p.55). According to Julie Kristeva, menstruation has become a societal and cultural "abject" that must be hidden from the public:

Menstrual blood, on the contrary, stands for the danger issuing from within identity (social or sexual); it threatens the relationship between the sexes within a social aggregate and through internalization, the identity of each sex in the face of sexual difference. (Kristeva, 1982 as cited in Park, 2012, p. 73)

These societal and cultural restrictions on menstruation have isolated women and their physical experiences, viewing them as a shameful source. This is no longer the case with Boland. Boland has broken the chains of social prohibition by addressing these sensitive women's issues, transforming a topic like menstruation from a source of shame to a source of reconstruction and strength (Park, 2012, p. 73).

Boland describes the physical and psychological pains that a female experiences during her menstruation in the first stanzas. Then she talks about menstruation as a source of strength for her and all women (Allen-Randolph, 1991, p. 55):

It is dark again,  
I am sick of it  
filled with it,  
dulled by it,  
thick with it. (Boland, 1996, p. 97)

Traditionally, Irish men saw menstruation as a type of pollution that polluted a woman's body. They also believed that this pollution harmed women because they were the cause of Adam's fall to earth and expulsion from paradise (Park, 2012, p. 74):

To be the mere pollution of her wake!  
A water cauled by her light,  
a slick haul,  
a fallen self,  
a violence,  
a daughter. (Boland, 1996, p. 97)

The speaker then expresses her envy and jealousy for some plants in her garden that do not go through physical and sexual changes in order to reproduce (Park, 2012, pp. 75–76):

How I envy them;  
each filament,  
each anther bred  
from its own style,  
its stamen,  
is to itself christening,  
is to itself a marriage bed.

They fall to earth,  
so ignorant  
so innocent  
of the sweated waters  
and the watered salts,  
of ecstasy,  
of birth.

They are street-walkers,  
lesbians,  
nuns.

I am not one of them. (Boland, 1996, pp. 97–98)

The speaker is in a state of discomfort due to menstrual pains, to the point where she envies the plants for not experiencing menstruation (Park, 2012, pp. 75–76).

However, by the end of the poem, Boland sees menstruation not as a shameful or "abject" thing, as Kristeva suggests, but as a source of women's empowerment, productivity, and reconstruction (Park, 2012, p. 76):

Another hour  
and she will addle me

till I begin  
to think like her.  
As when I've grown

round and obscene with child,

or when I moan,  
for him between the sheets,  
then I begin to know  
that I am bright and original  
and that my light's my own. (Boland, 1996, pp. 98-99)

The female speaker celebrates menstruation because she cannot become a mother without this natural process. Thus, she celebrates her femininity, motherhood, and selfhood, viewing menstruation as a source of pride that should be exposed rather than hidden or ignored (Park, 2012, pp. 76–77).

In her "Exhibitionist", Boland talks about a painting of a pretty young woman who raises her dress, displaying her charms to the men who watch her with lustful eyes. Boland despises the appearance of men whose sole purpose in life is to look lustfully at women (Reisman, 2012, p. 41):

I wake to dark,  
a window slime of dew.  
Time to start

Working  
from the text,  
making

from this trash  
and gimmickry  
of sex  
my aesthetic:

a hip first,  
a breast,  
a slow  
shadow strip  
out of clothes

that busheled me  
asleep.

What an artist am I! (Boland, 1996, p.103)

Once again, the poet uses the female body as a source of strength rather than a sight to entice men's sexual desires. The female speaker does not cover her body; and instead, she displays it to the public to demonstrate that she, not men, controls her body (Karremann, 2004, p. 119). In addition, the naked woman is used by the poet to demonstrate that the female body is a source of aesthetic and artistic beauty (Shifrer, 2001, p. 340). Thus, she wants to state that it is a woman poet who controls her art after it was long dominated by men, and thus she reclaims her lost identity (Karremann, 2004, p. 119).

## Conclusion

Boland anchors her work on the body of women's experiences and tackled taboo subjects that no one in masculine poetry has dared to address before. The poet attempts to end women's marginalization in Irish poetry. As a result, her poems focus on the real experiences of women rather than the image presented by masculine poetry about them. The poet sees this masculine poetry as unjust to women as it suppresses her investigative experiences. As a poet, she has discovered that she is able to represent and communicate the voice of women through her writing. By using a poetic language related to women's physical experiences, she has discovered new avenues for her writing about women and their lost identity.

The woman is able to transmit her voice or cry through her body in the poems in this volume. Irish women are unable to fulfill their true roles in life. Society, culture, and traditions both limit their freedom and prevent them from expressing themselves; thus, their role is passive, so their presence and absence are the same. Therefore, the poet fights these oppressive parties for women and demonstrates that women have an identity and are capable of expressing themselves. They also have practical daily experiences. The poet uses the woman's body as a raw material and fertile ground for her "Anorexic" and "Menses". She also addresses the

sensitive issues concerning the female body. Menstruation, mastectomy, anorexia, and other topics that are prohibited in Irish poetry and daringly discussed by Boland.

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**Exceeding the Monotony: A Feminist Reading in Eavan Boland's .....(485)**

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