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Edna O'Brien's *Girl* and the Representation of the African Female Psyche

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Abstract:

The debates on the authenticity of representing the Black psyche by non-black writers has been a matter of negotiations ever since the inception of Black studies. Edna O'Brien's *Girl* (first published in 2019) was shortlisted in many European Literary Awards and was applauded by major reviewers for its unflinching storytelling despite its flaws. Many Black and ethnic writers criticised her de-historicising project which appropriated the black female suffering. Thus, the aim of this paper is threefold- to study the gender in *Girl*, to scrutinise O'Brien's representational politics and to situate it as a response to the representation of African identities in the New Irish Literature. If the former query resonates within the feminist ethos, the latter part of my analyses would situate the novel/writer's crucial role in echoing the racist agendas of the mainstream literary politics. My paper therefore offers an interdisciplinary approach to the narratives of violence and gender in the novel and it also creates a dialogue with the ideology of nation and the representation of the African identity in the contemporary European literature.

Keywords: Boko Haram, appropriation, representation, African.

Edna O'Brien, one of the major Irish feminist writers, exemplifies her mastery in articulating the trials and tribulations of the quintessential displaced, fragmented and repressed Irish womanhood in her writings. Her works such as *The Country Girls Trilogy* (1987) embodies the "girls" on the run; epitomising her own public persona, who had to seek asylum in the UK when her unflinching writings caused political unrest in the patriarchal and misogynistic Irish society. In her last two novels, *The Little Red Chairs* (2015) and *Girl* (2019), O'Brien deviated towards a postmodern aspect of storytelling - tracing global socio-historical backgrounds and character traits for her narratives.

In *Girl*, O'Brien moves to the African continent for her trope, an action which was equally applauded and denounced by the critics. Many ethnic writers and scholars have

challenged her insensitive appropriation of African female endurance. O'Brien's narrative is a testimonial to the abduction and gruesome enslavement of the Chibok school girls of Nigeria in April 2014 by the Boko Haram. Taking O'Brien's stature in the European literary scenario into account, her venture has resulted in globalising the authentic ethnic women's experience and creating a triple jeopardy in terms of gender, race and cultural production. Thus, O'Brien's narrative can be contested for the politics of representation of gender, national history, race and collective trauma.

I

The unsettling opening of the novel,

"I was a girl once, but not anymore. I smell. Blood dried and crusted all over me, and my wrapper in shreds. My insides, a morass. Hurlled through this forest that I saw, that first awful night, when I and my friends were snatched from the school..." (9),

Promptly sets the destructive mood of the narrative. The readers are slowly put into the shoes of Maryam, the protagonist, who is escaping the militant camp with her baby, soaked in blood. Maryam recollects the day when the militants or the Jihadists attacks the dormitories of the girls and as they couldn't secure boys or provisions, they decide "Girls will do" (9), before abducting them away in trucks to their camps deep in the forests, "too far to be traced" (10).

On the periphery, the novel is the story of 'one girl's struggle and survival' but her struggle can rightly be attributed as a collective consciousness and thus a cultural memory. According to Astrid Erll, "Cultural memory entails remembering and forgetting. It has an individual and a collective side, which are, however, closely interrelated." (1) The plight of the Chibok girls at the hands of the Boko Haram is a dark episode in contemporary Nigerian politics. More than a thousand girls are still missing. Hence the grave plight of Maryam in the novel triggers a national trauma and is an immensely sensitive subject matter to be dealt by any writer.

O'Brien's prowess in rendering the tenderness of femininity such as motherhood, female bonding and camaraderie is explicit in the novel. O'Brien's depiction of motherhood stimulates the mental conflicts that a child- mother has to endure in an antagonistic environment.

"There is only Babby and me now. She cries from the pit of her empty belly, hoarse savage cries... Sometimes I want to kill her. My breasts are the size of egg cups and she is tugging at the nipples, as if she too wants to kill me." (11)

Maryam's motherhood is at the cost of her own childhood. She becomes a *Jihadi* bride and births her daughter when she is a mere child herself. However, Maryam and her mother's reunion is anything but emotional outpouring. Maryam yearns for her mother's bosom while her mother considers her daughter responsible for their family's misery. Her mother blames Maryam for the death of her father and brother Yusuf at the hands of the 'Jas Boys' or the *jihadis*. Their meeting after her return is characterised by a 'deathly silence', indifference and a displaced Maryam's frequent pleading "to talk to me".

"The ifs of accusation hung in the air like the dying cries of the mating frogs. I wanted to make up...I was home, or almost. I put my hand out yet again to reach her, but she tore further with her braids like some crazed goddess, flung them around as if they were evil." (101)

Her mother was excessively immersed in her own sea of troubles having lost "both of her men" after her daughter's disappearance. Her indifference to her daughter's plight unveils the dilemma of exhaustive trauma that an individual can sustain at the detrimental hands of fate. Maryam loses her sanity;

"Everything inside me is breaking up. I want to hurt her (mother) and wipe her face in each grotesque and horrifying thing done to me. I fear her. I hate her. Except I no longer know what hate is, or fear, or love. I have a baby, I miss her. I want her heartbeat next to mine". (101)

Maryam's vehemence of displeasure of being unwelcomed by her own mother in turn makes her miss her own baby. The fear of being abandoned by her own mother makes her more emotionally connected to her Babby. This complexity in the characterisation of female bonding, especially a mother-daughter relationship, reminds the reader of Toni Morrison's female characters in *Sula* (1973) and *Beloved* (1987). Elsewhere, especially in the portrayal of violence committed on the female body, the reader can find semblances to Morrisonian rendering of the Black African identities.

O'Brien's mastery in recounting the physical tortures on the female body in her writings is exceptional and has been applauded by her critics. The description of frequent episodes of rape run riots in the novel and is often visceral and violent. The first time Maryam was raped she confides,

“It felt like being stabbed and re-stabbed and then a fierce yelling after he had broken into me. I said goodbye to my parents and everyone I knew...we just had our operation now” (17)

The novelist employs multitude of presentist assessment of the girls' experiences in her narrative, not compromising its credibility. The prominent being the rape scene where Maryam is overpowered by a man and was sexually assaulted while his friends filmed it with their smart phones. This aspect commands the immediacy of the events narrated in the novel. Maryam's recollection of her gang rape evoked a collective trauma that the girls had to face at the hands of the jihadists “who were not like men with human traits” (29). Maryam's resistance and her helplessness at the hands of these men can be universally attributed to all women in general and the sexualised African women in particular.

“...My hands, of their own accord, go up to scratch him, to fight him and he erupts, still yoked to me, yelling at them to come. They knew what to do.

‘Hold her down.’

‘Subdue her.’

‘Open her legs..... I both died and did not die. A butchery is being performed on me. I will not wake from this, I will die with my scream unfinished.’

“...others came, singly or in pairs, guffawing, feeding and foraging and emptying themselves into me. There was an urgency” (28)

The dimensions of torture she had to endure is detrimental but not disorienting on her psyche. She further proclaims,

“I went in and out of reasoning but I was not dead. They made sure of that. They slapped life back into me with savage swipes....The last to come was alone, outraged at having been kept waiting, and indignant at the mess that met him. He decided that only my mouth was clean enough for his ‘soldier’ and he levered the muscles of my jaws with a mercilessness.” (29)

Maryam's deliberate effort to stay awake symbolises her resistance against the men's heinous actions and her resistance against being silenced. Her assurance to the readers such as “I was not dead” and that “she did not die” is in turn an assertion that a sexual power over her

psyche is insufficient for her entrapment. This subverts the very ‘power’ her rapists had over her.

The girls’ camaraderie in spite of the traumatic experiences evokes the vital facet of the African womanhood- of female bonding and nurturing. Maryam seems to diminish her suffering when she recounts that the same monstrous act was being committed to her friends and yet they were “Quiet as corpses”. Her experience is collective and hence accounts for a collective trauma. This empowers them as they are dependent and reassures each other to face the abuse. She recounts,

“..My friends, like me, are sitting on their beds, waiting to see if they can stand, then face one another, and appear to be brave. There was nothing we would say, there was nothing we would ever say to one another.” (29)

Elizabeth Abel addresses the importance of female friendships in framing the identities of women. She exhorts,

“In developing a theory of female friendship, I seek to represent the world as women imagine it could be, and as many women have created it. Feminist theory must take into account the forces maintaining the survival of women as well as those that maintain the subordination of women. A theory of female friendship is meant to give form, expression, and reality to the ways in which women have been for our Selves and each other.” (434)

The emotional support that Maryam and her friends bestows on each other during their ‘subordination’ is invaluable as this relationship subverts the hegemony exerted by the oppressors. Another female friendship in the novel is that of the Maryam and Buki. They together escapes the camp with Babby. The innocence of their friendship is truncated when Maryam herself had to bury Buki- her only true friend- who had died of snakebite.

O’Brien’s shock - tactics is manifested in her delineation on the inscription of violence on the female body. One such incident is the graphic two-page description of the Emir’s wife being stoned to death for adultery.

“The excitement was mounting. Men jostling and pleading to be given the honour of throwing the first stone...The first stone struck, then bounced off the nape of her neck and she staggered within the confined place where she was held...The stones were coming pell-mell, falling monstrously on what was once the most legendary face in the

enclave.... Strips of the other side of her jaw came hanging off and when she screamed, those screams transformed in the victorious yells of her executioners. I wanted her to die, instantly, to be dead before they could deface any moreshe did not die yet, and her eyes flinched violently... .She was like some ghoul now, a mimicry of who she once had been, bleeding on one side and shredded on the other. The men roared in triumph. It was evident that she was almost gone and her eyes, which she had shut tight in a clench, opened to a knowing, aghast goggle, before the neck hung off, heavy and harmless (34)

The performativity of the repugnant violence portrayed in the novel exudes duality. It acts as an agency of oppression to keep the patriarchal and misogynistic system of the narrative intact on one hand, and on the other hand, the agency of violence compels the readers to scorn the Islamist extremists. It is not an understatement that in her depiction of the stoning scene, O'Brien reiterates her Islamophobia thereby confirming to the European stereotyping of the representation of Islamist extremists. The animalistic attributes to the character traits of the *Jihadis* throughout the novel exemplifies Afrobia and Islamophobia in the readers comprising of a European majority.

O'Brien condemns the savagery treatment of the women yet she seems to be at the initiating end of a cultural production of violence against the African women in her ghastly depiction of the torture scenes. It seems that she 'depends' on these episodes to create a ripple in the readers minds, repeatedly evoking a racist and colonial focal lens. Moreover, O'Brien hardly challenges the mainstream depiction of the exploitation of the African women but confirms to it in a denigrating manner.

II

The paramount criticism Edna O'Brien had to face were the debates on the authenticity and the right to the cultural re-production of a black national history, that too by an elite white writer. O'Brien's retelling often decentralise and decontextualize the socio-political struggles and the African sense of belonging. Edna O'Brien has manoeuvred her readers into maudlinism in the portrayal of the 'return' of Maryam. Maryam was reduced into the status of a mere "bush wife" who invited contempt and mockery from her own people. "I knew they were thinking, *Jihadi wife, with the Sambisa filth still clinging to her*" (112).

It should be noted that unlike any other war survivors the African community shared their collective trauma and were tremendously instrumental in the rehabilitation of the Chibok

girls upon their return. Many studies bear witness to this fact. It could be argued that a novelist enjoys the supreme rights to the total disposition of the fate of her characters. But I would like to disagree. As a reader, we should take the national and cultural history into consideration when sympathising with the African plight. Although minor, such contortions could become fatal when the narrative is performed by an outsider that too through the ‘gaze’ of a much privileged and renowned white female writer.

Furthermore, O’Brien’s narrative chronicles the torture and torment the Chibok girls endured, she politically shies away from going beyond just merely ‘reporting’ it and vocally representing their collective trauma and reconciliation. It is to be noted that the rescued Chibok girls are now the cultural messengers of the African subcontinent as most of them pursue their education from prominent US and UK universities. They aspire to be lawyers, professors and medical practitioners and become beacons of hope to their community. The novel’s limitations are exemplified in presenting these elements. The reader finds a void in the text. Maryam recuperates from the mental and physical violence inflicted on her. But the novelist’s scanty portrayal of her trauma is thought provoking. The novel ends with the church giving her a ‘home’ and recruiting Maryam as a teacher.

Girl abounds in physical as well as literary transgressions. For O’Brien, the writing of the novel itself is a transgression as she deals with a subject beyond her own self/national identity. The novel follows the customs of a first-person narrative and whose identity is slowly revealed as that of a ten- or eleven-year-old girl Maryam. By employing an essay prize winner in English as her narrator and her mouthpiece, O’Brien justifies the novel’s rich prose and the use of English as the medium of narration. Nonetheless, the reader immediately feels that the flavour of the language, affluence of the narration etc. is beyond the vocabulary and cognizance of a little girl. Identifying her own eighty-five-year-old self with that of a ten-year-old African girl is transgressive of that unspoken but undebated literary and cultural code for representation.

Ngugi wa Thiong’o in “African Literature ... Says Who?” come forth with the idea of “literary identity theft”. In his conversation with Cantulopo he postulates, “Europhone African literature has stolen the identity of African literature; it wears the mask of African literature.” (7) He contempts the non-native writers who steal the identity of Africans while representing them and calls it a “serious” affair made possible by the burgeoning technologies. O’Brien thus

falls into this category of “thieves” who have exploited the African ethos for their own benefit. Her entitled position in the mainstream Anglophone Literature has made this “theft” effortless.

Further O'Brien's depiction of the Islamist *Jihadis* as a counterpoise to the institution of the church should be deliberated as a form of neo colonial intervention. Soon after their enslavement, Maryam recollects that she was “unable to pray in my old tongue, as they bombarded us with their prayers, their edicts, their ideology, their hatred, their Godliness.” (11) The portrayal of the Chief Emir giving his sermon reminds the readers of a church. The Emir is a messiah, venerated by everyone, including the girls. He proclaims “The disease is ignorance. There is no deity except Allah. Ask forgiveness”. (14) Moreover, the messiah castigated and reprimanded others and assured the girls that,

“Infidels. Thieves. Our president, our vice presidents, our governors, our police were all rotten...Even Muslims among these people were contaminated, drawn into that miasma of corruption. We would soon realise that the education we had received was all wrong... you are being recruited into the vast, invincible army of Allah. You are warriors. This land that is called Nigeria must be rid of the infidels and the unbelievers. You will play your part in the fight.” (14-15)

On the other hand, the institution of church is portrayed as ‘saviour’. The church harbours and provides sanctuary to Maryam and Babby when her own people wanted to kill Babby. The seemingly Irish woman in the consulting room branded Maryam as “resilient”, “a survivor”, “brave” etc. (85). O'Brien couldn't refrain herself from celebrating the magnificence of St Patrick and his benevolence on the Irish people through the portrayal of the woman. The Irish woman enlightens Maryam how St Patrick, the patron Saint of Ireland, “banished all snakes, human and reptile from her country” and that “he might be resurrected, to “stop the carnage and abominations that were happening all around”. (85). The novelist, deploying her mouthpiece, sermonises here and ironically degenerates her own persona down to that of the Chief Emir, whom she scorned for his extremist views. O'Brien herself indulges in the glorification of church in the later part of the novel and portray it as the sole saviour of Maryam. This ploy could also be because most of her readers are from Ireland and are Europeans. The political spectacle that was organised to welcome Maryam back to the society is portrayed with a tinge of sarcasm and a bowlful of stereotype. O'Brien's outlook is characteristic of the third world portrayal of the African continent. Maryam is constantly reminded to “put a smile” and speak “Nothing negative...nothing negative”. The cavalcade of ministers, their wives and the

army accompanied the President who gave a powerful speech on how they will defeat their enemies but Maryam was not allowed to utter a single word. Did O'Brien deliberately silence her protagonist to mock the political system of its indifference and callousness?

III

When it comes to critically analysing an author's politics of representation, one should consider the elements of cultural production that initiates their enquiry. Edna O'Brien's *The Country Girls* was called "a smear on Irish Womanhood" by then minister Charles Haughey and was banned in Ireland. Her books were burned across Ireland by priests and politicians alike. O'Brien had to leave Ireland for London due to this unrest. Hence, O'Brien is widely acclaimed for having spearheaded the conservative Ireland's literary imaginations by bringing Irish women's sexuality to the global forefront.

O'Brien, now being in her early nineties, has developed a more sympathetic attitude towards the depiction of her homeland. Keeping her concerns of female sexuality and representation intact, O'Brien discerns to acknowledge the current socio-political and cultural milieu of Ireland. Her works - *The Little Red Chairs* (2015) and *Girl* (2019) - both published in the latter part of the last decade bear testimonies to this. Both novels depict characters who are non-Irish. O'Brien establishes a more far-reaching aspect of global humanitarian concerns in her telling of the story of a Balkan war criminal Dr Vlad, who is an immigrant in an Irish community, in *The Little Red Chairs*. Meanwhile *Girl* depicts the story of the Chibok Girls of Nigeria.

Historically charged, these novels also synchronise with Ireland's changing and evolving society of immigrants. During the Celtic Tiger (1990-2000), Ireland became the most sought-after destination for the migrants, refugees and asylum seekers as Ireland became the largest economy with the highest GDP in the world (Kline 188-189). The discourses on migration, racism and racial integration moved from the margins to the center of the Irish consciousness and became one of the major concerns of the post-Celtic socio-economic and political scenario of the multicultural Ireland in the 21 Century. According to *The National Consultative Committee on Racism and Interculturalism* (2005), the top five countries of origin for those seeking asylum in Ireland are Nigeria, Romania, Somalia, China, and Sudan, although Eastern Europeans lead the way in the total number of immigrants, East Asians not far behind (1). It can be rightly advocated that Edna O'Brien's literary persuasions were ignited with the changing milieu of Ireland and its immigrants.

The New Irish Literature, essentially multicultural, that had evolved during the last decade politicises the identity and representation of the immigrants in Ireland. Poetry Ireland defines New Irish Literature as “an opportunity opens to writers who are Irish or resident of Ireland.” (About). This umbrella term visibly includes the immigrant narratives of which the African experiences are the most sought after by the publishers. The African experience on seeking asylum, the ramifications of the hostel system etc. are scrutinised in many writings. Many African characters have started to appear in the native Irish narratives who were, earlier, conspicuous by their absence in the hitherto mainstream Irish popular culture. Edna O'Brien's pursuit of the Chibok girls and her subsequent travel to Nigeria for a field study, must have been inspired by the above socio-cultural aspects.

Notwithstanding the above facets, O'Brien's conscious act of appropriation of the female sufferings of the African women is condemnable. O'Brien, being the classic sensationalist that she is (often exploiting the media to her causes), has sensationalised the plight of the African girls for a wider white consumption. This is best manifested in the graphic descriptions of the rape and torture of the school girls. Further the readers fall to the religious ploy of the novelist's assertion that the church is the answer for all misery and vindication. This is best exemplified in the novel as it begins with Maryam wondering, “Will I ever know the language of love. Will I ever know home again” (37) to Maryam finally discovering home at the church where she is employed to teach. She feels “We were safe. We had found a home... I was filled with an ecstasy such as I had never known.” (148). O'Brien's exposition on how Maryam's 'home' is 'safe' at the hands of the institution of 'church' is dubious.

O'Brien's colonialist trope and stereotyped rendering is a disturbing neo-racist vision of the African continent. Her viewpoint on the dysfunctional and corrupt local government, the structural and physical violence on the female body seldom fails to acknowledge and challenge the conflicts but falls into the category of generalisations on the African national psyche. O'Brien's outlook is rather an artistic approach towards a global humanitarianism. The universalisation of the girls' sufferings results in the globalisation of the African female psyche. This in turn endeavours into a de-historicising project subverting the ethnic identity and representation thereby lacking accountability.

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