

# *Matrophobia or Matrocompliance?: Motherhood as “Experience and Institution” in the Poetry of Eavan Boland and Paula Meehan*

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**Abstract:** *This article traces and examines representations of motherhood and mother-daughter relationships in contemporary Irish women’s poetry in the light of Adrienne Rich’s theories in *Of Woman Born*. I particularly focus on Eavan Boland and Paula Meehan, whose work poses a direct challenge to the traditional values of motherhood, a metaphor that, in the Irish context, has been intrinsically connected with national identity. In their dealings with topics as diverse as pregnancy, childbirth, infertility, infanticide, miscarriage, abortion and mother-daughter relationships, both writers offer alternative perspectives to the myth of the benevolent and abnegated Mother, a social and cultural ideal recurrently manipulated in Ireland by nationalism and Catholicism.*

## **1. Introduction: Irish Motherhood as an “Institution”**

Motherhood has been a crucial feminist concern since the end of the 1970s, particularly since the publication of Adrienne Rich’s landmark and controversial study *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution* (1976).<sup>1</sup> Together with other feminist voices like Nancy Chodorow, Rich (1986. 14). argues for a revision of mothering “as defined and restricted under patriarchy”, in order to discredit the traditional assumption that motherhood is an essential and indispensable part of female experience, and to describe the mixed and ambivalent feelings a mother can usually experience.

Drawing on history, anthropology, psychoanalysis, literature and personal materials – as a woman, a poet, a feminist and a mother – Rich explains how patriarchy has tended to idealise women as mothers, transforming motherhood into a social, not merely physical, function. She distinguishes between two meanings of motherhood: biological motherhood or “the *potential relationship* of any woman to her powers of reproduction and to children”, and motherhood as an “*institution*, which aims at ensuring that that potential – and all women – shall remain under male control” (13). The latter

she claims has been manipulated to serve the interests of patriarchy, as observed in the economic dominance of fathers in families or the usurpation of the birth process by a male medical establishment (34). Furthermore, Rich explains, by drawing on historical sources, how this patriarchal conceptualisation of motherhood “revives and renews all other institutions”, by reifying mothers as icons who “exemplif[y] in one person religion, social conscience and nationalism” (45).

This institutionalised version of motherhood as well as the use of the female body for patriarchal and nationalist aims are clearly evident in the case of Ireland, a country in which the ancient connection of women to fertility and the land has been recurrently manipulated as a tool of nationalism. The ideology of the new Irish Republic was founded on the sanctification of the family as the basic social unit, the construction of a highly conservative Catholic community and the revival of the old representation of Ireland as Mother-land. Articles 41 and 45 of the 1937 Constitution immediately associated Irish women with motherhood and domesticity. Women were expected to carry their lives of service and self-sacrifice in the sanctified realm of the domestic sphere: their model to follow was the Virgin Mary, an ideal of virtue, abnegation and submissive suffering. The lives of women were further limited through legislation: laws prohibiting contraception and divorce were introduced, and later, a constitutional amendment was passed, banning the practice of abortion.

Not surprisingly, motherhood is an essential concern for some contemporary women poets in Ireland, as Boyle Haberstroh (23) notices when analysing the poetry of Eavan Boland, Medbh McGuckian, Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill and Eithne Strong. These writers offer a vast majority of literary and visual images of motherhood that both explore the effects of the colonial and nationalist inheritance, and aim to change prevailing icons of femininity in Ireland. In this sense, their project involves a dual process of “recovery” and “re-vision”, to borrow Adrienne Rich’s (1979. 35) now-classic term, a way of re-reading conventionalised images of women from a new critical perspective. Rather than invoking a singular, gender-based identity of woman/mother, their work unleashes a plurality of voices who perceive maternity as an ambiguous experience, simultaneously enriching (as a privileged condition which allows female self-fulfilment) and/or utterly repressive (as literally the root of women’s degradation and enclosure within a domestic sphere which limits their artistic potential).

This plurality of voices becomes particularly evident in the poetry of Eavan Boland and Paula Meehan, for whom the theme of motherhood has proven extraordinarily intense. Like Adrienne Rich in *Of Woman Born*, these two writers see motherhood in much broader terms than just physiological reproduction. Their images of maternity not only refer to the physiological labour of woman as mother, but they also have a variety of meanings involved with creativity, nurturing and women’s societal expectations. In this sense, their work gives a complicated view of what motherhood in Ireland means in relation to experience and tradition.

The first section of this paper examines depictions of uncaring, “unmotherly” and “childless” mothers in Boland’s and Meehan’s poetry, with a view to highlighting how both writers fiercely challenge conventional idealisations of Irish women as holy mothers and nationalist female muses. The poems analysed in this section set the idea of motherhood in a socio-cultural perspective, as an “institution” which oppresses and hampers the personal development of fictional poetic identities. The last two sections concentrate on autobiographical poems by Boland and Meehan. Both writers explore, often within the same collection, the relationship of mother and daughter from very different perspectives, exposing the complexity of female experience and dismantling reductive ideals of motherhood.

## 2. “Unmotherly” Women and “Childless” Mothers

In *Of Woman Born*, Rich narrates her problems, as a white middle-class educated woman in the late 1950s, when adjusting to a stereotypical life of wifedom and motherhood: “My husband spoke eagerly of the children we would have; my parents-in-law awaited the birth of their grandchild. I had no idea of what *I* wanted” (Rich 1979. xi). After the birth of her third child, Rich decided to be sterilised. This was followed by a series of landmark events in her life: her marriage was terminated, her husband committed suicide and she came out as a lesbian in 1976. Ever since then, she has been trying to *give birth to herself*, a phrase by which we can interpret the thought-provoking title of her book.

Adrienne Rich’s struggle in her life to discover her own self and identity outside the constraints established by “the power of the fathers” (57) parallels the endeavour of contemporary women writers in Ireland to break away and find their own ways outside imposed feminine standards. In 1980, Eavan Boland published *In Her Own Image*, a volume which meant a breakthrough in contemporary Irish poetry, in its exploration of diverse images of women, from witches to mad creatures, from sinful Eves to submissive victims of male standards. Several critics have singled Rich out as a significant influence on Boland’s feminist volume (Allen-Randolph 1995; Luftig 1993; Gelpi 1999). Indeed, Boland read “When We Dead Awaken: Writing as Re-Vision” in the final 1970s, before she began writing *In Her Own Image*, and this meant, as she claimed in an interview, “an enormous rush of oxygen” (Allen-Randolph 1999. 300).

It is easy to understand why Boland was so fascinated with this essay. Adrienne Rich’s own life (as described in her essay) coincides in more than one way with Boland’s life at that time. Like Rich, Boland began as a conservative young formalist, but, at the time of reading Rich’s essay, she had a similar change of life that radically transformed her as a poet. At the end of the 1970s, she moved from the University culture in Dublin to the suburbs, where she began to raise her two daughters. Gradually, she came to the realisation that the traditional Irish canonical poem could not account for the ordinary life she had started to live. They were poems where “you could have a political murder but not a baby. Or the Dublin hills and not the suburbs under them” (Boland 1996. 119). As her

life as a woman in a Dublin suburb with small children was not part of Irish poetry, Boland felt the need to subvert the poetic tradition she had inherited. In this sense, her change of lifestyle meant for her the sort of “awakening [of] consciousness” Rich (1979. 35) talks about in her essay. According to Rich, women have to *wake up* to the fact that they have been culturally oppressed in a male-dominated society. The challenge for women writers, she thought, was to rebel against this repressive reality, an action which would simultaneously imply an unleashing of anger and a liberating act of self-creation:

The awakening of consciousness is not like the crossing of a frontier – one step and then you are in another country. Much of woman’s poetry has been of the nature of the blues song: a cry of pain, of victimisation, or a lyric of seduction. And today, much poetry by women [...] is charged with anger. I think we need to go through that anger [...] if not we will betray our reality. (Rich 1979. 48).

By reading Rich, one understands how Boland’s rage in *In Her Own Image* is a necessary step in her radical defence of those womanly aspects that have been denigrated by religion and nationalism. In the title poem “In Her Own Image”, Boland rebels with anger against her cultural oppression and puts the reader inside a woman’s mind who kills her own child. As Rich (1979. 34) notes, woman’s “awakening of consciousness” can be “confusing, disorienting and painful”, for confronting oppression is not at all pleasant. The woman in “In Her Own Image” similarly feels confused and disconcerted at her awakening to the oppression she has been suffering. Her inability to define herself leads her to an act of self-negation:

She is not myself  
anymore, she is not  
even in my sky  
anymore and I  
am not myself. (Boland 1980. 13)

These lines show a fragmented self, which, as Allen-Randolph (1991. 51) explains, only defines itself in negative terms, by “what-she-is-not”. She cannot perceive herself as a stable and fixed subject. Unable to disentangle her sense of herself from her loyalty to her daughter, she ends up confusing her own body with that of her child. But, instead of self-destruction, she ends up killing her own daughter:

I will not disfigure  
her pretty face.  
Let her wear amethyst thumbprints,  
a family heirloom,  
a sort of burial necklace (Boland 1980. 13)

The end of the poem portrays a dead daughter who wears a “family heirloom” of “amethyst thumbprints”. Family is understood as a socially and culturally sanctioned structure which perpetuates the oppression of women. Unable to escape from this destructive heritage, killing her own child and liberating herself from a possible offspring are the only means of asserting her own identity. In her analysis of the history of maternal violence, particularly infanticide, Rich (1986. 263) argues that, if we do not listen to the particular story of mothers who kill their children, if we simply regard them as “psychopathological”, we will never understand the specific socio-historical conditions that drive mothers to commit such acts of violence: rape, poverty, ignorance, lack of emotional support, sanctions against abortion and birth control, and fear of male theological doctrine. In Boland’s poem, the narrator’s rejection of motherhood results from her uneasiness with the social conventions regarding women as mothers, and her desire to escape from the traditional role of mothering that Irish women have been subjected to. The death of her child effectively emancipates the speaker from the constraints of mothering. Furthermore, by killing her own daughter, the mother avoids her experiencing the same victimisation that she has suffered from, and subsequently, the perpetuation of male stereotypes of women. The poem ends with the persona burying her “second nature” and adopting a “compromise” to “bloom” *in her own image*. The victorious rebirth of this new self at the end of the poem allegorises the advent of the new, revolutionary woman Adrienne Rich (1971. 98) talks about, a woman who after “coming awake” to her own oppression, “is becoming her own midwife, creating herself anew”.<sup>2</sup>

In “Witching”, Boland (1980. 28-30) also rejects motherhood as a suitable experience for women, distancing herself from the idealised role of the mother encouraged by the Church and the State in Ireland. The speaker in this poem is a witch, a liberating symbol of opposition towards an oppressive masculine culture. Rather than being desired, motherhood is connected here with those women who repeat the male standards for their sex, and also with the image of Mother Ireland:

these my enemies ...

who breed  
and breed,  
who talk and talk –

birth  
and bleeding,  
the bacteria of feeds. (Boland 1980. 28)

By connecting childbirth and bleeding, the speaker links motherhood with that nationalist speech that advocates blood sacrifice in the fight for the mother country. The “nursery lights” signify, as Kelly (1993. 53) puts it, those “national-muses [who provide] nurturing milk for the male oral tradition”. These apparently harmless lights are

constraining images of womanhood that “shine”, “multiply” and “douse” the witch’s own light. Only by burning her own body, can she create her own light, a light which is not the reflection of any “nursery light”:

I will ...  
make  
a pyre  
of my haunch

and so  
the last thing  
they know  
will be  
the stench  
of my crotch. (Boland 1980. 29-30)

By burning the *haunch* (a metonymy of motherhood), the witch destroys not only her potential to be pregnant, but also those traditionally Irish icons of female domesticity. Addressing the “nursery lights”, or the Irish nationalist literary tradition, she concludes: “smell/ how well/ a woman’s/ flesh/ can burn” (30). In this sense, destruction and creation are intrinsically linked. By destroying the mythical mother of the Irish tradition, the woman in the poem creates her own distinct identity. The “unmotherly” attitude displayed by this speaker runs counter to Boland’s depiction of maternity in her subsequent volume *Night Feed* (1982), in which, as we will see, she blesses motherhood as an enriching female experience.<sup>3</sup>

Boland’s scathing rejection of motherhood as a social institution in *In Her Own Image* is also observed in Paula Meehan’s work. Her poem “The Statue of the Virgin at Granard Speaks” illustrates the cultural effect that the unattainable model of the Virgin Mary - an entrenched ideal of virginity and maternity - has exerted on contemporary Irish women (Meehan 1994. 40-42). The poem makes explicit reference to the Anne Lovett case in 1984, when a fifteen-year-old girl died while giving birth in the town of Granard, county Longford. The deaths of this girl and her baby took place in a grotto to the Virgin, where Anne decided to labour in solitude after nine months of secret pregnancy (McCafferty 99-100). In Meehan’s poem, the Virgin does not identify herself with the passive role she has been assigned by Catholic iconography. After complaining of the bad weather and the isolation she experiences “stuck up here in this grotto”, this religious icon expresses her desire for contact and sexual intimacy with a “mortal man”. Furthermore, she records her failure when fulfilling the role of motherhood that she supposedly symbolises:

On a night like this I remember the child  
who came with fifteen summers to her name,  
and she lay down alone at my feet

without a midwife or doctor or friend to hold her hand  
and she pushed her secret out into the night,  
...  
and though she cried to me in extremis  
I did not move,  
I didn't lift a finger to help her,  
I didn't intercede with heaven,  
nor whisper the charmed word in God's ear. (Meehan 1994. 40-41)

The Virgin overtly refuses to fulfil the nurturing, selfless and self-sacrificing functions she apparently embodies. The attitude displayed by the speaker in Meehan's poem reflects women's tendency, as explained by Rich (1986. 235), to set their own selves against an archetypal mother-woman, a psychological process she explains by means of the term "matrophobia". Meehan destabilises the symbolic significance of motherhood in Irish political, cultural and social life, by portraying the inability of this religious icon to help the girl and highlighting her sense of detachment from the maternal and protective role she has been assigned. This subversion is also carried out in a more recent poem by Meehan (2000. 32), "Ectopic", which deals with the controversial topic of abortion:

I must summon up the will to kill  
you soon before you get too strong a grip  
on the black hole that occupies the void that was my heart.

By capturing the loneliness and despair of a woman with an unwanted pregnancy, Meehan advocates, like Rich (1986. 184), women's right to "choose both the forms of our sexuality and the terms of our motherhood or nonmotherhood freely", in order to "achieve genuine sexual autonomy". In a country where a nationalist tradition has often returned to the symbolic identification between Ireland and the Mother, and where the precepts of the 1937 Constitution have relegated women to the exclusive roles of mothers and housewives, feminist counter-statements such as these are quite revolutionary.

Meehan's work also questions motherhood as a universal experience supposedly accessible to all women, by portraying women who, in different ways, lack the biological capacity to procreate. As Fogarty (110) explains in her analysis of contemporary Irish women's fiction, conventional "matrilinear plots have recently been expanded in a new direction to make space for the story of the mother without child". This theme of "thwarted motherhood" is evoked in Meehan's poetry. Poems such as "Child Burial" and "Elegy for a Child" focus on a mother's affliction by the death of her child and foetus respectively (Meehan 1994. 27-28, 29-30). This sense of defeat is also observed in "Childless", where the poet takes the reader inside the mind of a "sterile" woman who, unable to have children, expresses her will to give up literary creation for the sake of biological creation (González Arias 206). Meehan highlights the dilemma of living

as a mother or living as a writer by emphasising the narrator's wish to choose her child over her art:

I would trade all my poems,  
My stores of words, my hoarded tunes,  
To have a child suck on my breast.  
Cruel fate, you must despise me  
To give me two good eyes to see with  
All around me young blood pulsing,  
While in cap and gown I am sterile. (Meehan 1984. 55)

According to patriarchal standards, adjectives such as “unchilded” or “childless” simply define women “in terms of lack” (as an *unwomanly* woman) or in terms of “failure” (as a *failed* woman) (Rich 1986. 240, 251). It is this conventional assumption that Meehan ironically portrays in her representation of women whose sense of self-worth is framed around motherhood. The “sterile” speaker in “Childless” feels useless and worthless in “the face of all creation/ Seeding, springing, taking root” (Meehan 1984. 55). She perceives herself not for what she *is* but for what she *is not*; in other words, she is caught within a patriarchal system that highlights her “lack”. In this sense, poems such as “Childless” explore the tragic consequences when women accept imposed patriarchal systems of representation, by reflecting the internal confusion of a woman who has internalised the male belief that “Mothers are more real than other women” (Rich 1986. 216).

### 3. “Matrophobic” daughters

Until very recently, the mother-daughter relationship has occupied a marginal position in criticism.<sup>4</sup> As Rich (1986. 225) notes, the “cathexis between mother and daughter – essential, distorted, misused – is the great unwritten story”. In an attempt to overcome this cultural gap, Rich explains, from a simultaneous psychoanalytical and personal experience, the complex network of emotions that characterise this relationship. According to this critic, the daughter is assailed by two contradictory instincts which operate simultaneously: the urge to claim the mother and the struggle to escape from or reject her. On the one hand, as she explains, “the first knowledge any woman has of warmth [and] nourishment ... comes from her mother” (218). On the other hand, the daughter sees her mother as a rival and threatening figure. Challenging Freud's contention that the daughter's rage at the mother originates from her “resentment for not having been given a penis”, Rich (1986. 244) claims that her anger arises from her “mother's powerlessness or luck of struggle” when trying to escape from the roles imposed on her. Rich explains this alternation between desire and rage by means of the concept “matrophobia”, a term she borrows from the poet Lynn Sukenick and which signals



“the fear not of one’s mother or of motherhood but of *becoming one’s mothe*” (235).<sup>5</sup>  
As she later contends:

Matrophobia can be seen as a womanly splitting of the self, in the desire to become purged once and for all of our mother’s bondage ... Our personalities seem to blur and overlap dangerously with our mothers’; and, in a desperate attempt to know where mother ends and daughter begins, we perform radical surgery. (Rich 1986. 236)

This friction between mother and daughter seems to be the dominant plot in the matrilinear narratives of contemporary Irish women writers, as Fogarty (86-113) claims in her analysis of Irish women’s fiction from 1950 to the present. The work of Mary Lavin, Julia O’Faoláin and Edna O’Brien, among others, display a prevailing matrophobic focus, because the emphasis is almost invariably laid on “the desperate struggle of the daughter to avoid the trap of female subjugation and the calamity of duplicating maternal experience” (113). Because of this, Fogarty claims, “the links between mothers and daughters in Irish society” are usually depicted “as tempestuous, problem-laden, and fraught with multiple tensions”. (86)

One of the most significant writers in Ireland to address this issue in terms of its psychological implications is Paula Meehan. As McKenna (81) notes, Meehan’s “poetry speaks of the power and language of a community of the feminine and speaks in detail of its rupture in the face of masculinist-dominated society”. This schism among women provoked by patriarchal standards is observed in “The Pattern” (Meehan 1994. 17-20), a biographical poem which explores the author’s relationship with her mother in a therapeutic exercise to understand and accept this figure, and to suture her emotional wounds. As the speaker claims, their relationship has been influenced by the generic labels which limited their roles to those of “mother”, “daughter” and “wife”, which prevent them from communicating successfully:

I wish now she’d lasted till after  
I’d grown up. We might have made a new start

as women without tags like *mother, wife,*  
*sister, daughter,* taken our changes from there.  
At forty-two she headed for god knows where.  
I’ve never gone to visit her grave. (Meehan 1994. 17)

Although Meehan’s “fate”, as “the eldest daughter”, is to inherit and perpetuate her mother’s role, she yearns to construct her identity outside societal and conventional demands. As she argues in an interview with Dorgan (265):

At crucial times in my life there would have been an expected role for me to play – these would have been mostly the models assigned to a woman .... And I suppose I had watched my mother fall victim to those roles. And while I mightn't have known what I wanted, I sure as hell knew what I didn't want.

Meehan's fear of the patriarchal legacy and her attempt to follow a different path from her mother's is precisely recorded in the final stanzas of "The Pattern":

Sometimes I'd have to kneel  
an hour before her by the fire,  
a skein around my outstretched hands,  
while she rolled wool into balls.  
If I swam like a kite too high  
amongst the shadows on the ceiling  
or flew like a fish in the pools  
of pulsing light, she'd reel me firmly  
home, she'd land me at her knees.

Tongues of flame in her dark eyes,  
She'd say: "One of these days I must  
teach you to follow a pattern". (Meehan 1994. 20)

These lines record the tension experienced by a girl caught between the old tradition embodied in the mother and her dreams of a new tradition. Meehan uses the design that her mother weaves with knitting wools of different colours ("Moss Green, Mustard, Beige") as a metaphor of "the pattern" that she is expected to follow in the future. Nevertheless, the societal conventions that she wants to transmit to her daughter are not totally acceptable for the speaker. Her mother's knitting symbolises some values which oppress her and hamper her personal development as a writer: in contrast to this omnipresent mother, she "is a different kind of pattern maker: the pattern is the poem, the knitting together of words" (Boyle Haberstroh 223). The last lines of "The Pattern" illustrate Rich's theories about fearing the mother's role, and hold her mother responsible for her acceptance of certain conventional attitudes (González Arias 224). As Meehan argues in an interview: "I suppose my abiding fear is that I will become my mother" (304).<sup>6</sup>

This need to escape from the feminine "patterns" inherited by her mother, under the fear that she might reproduce them entirely, is continued in poems such as "Binding in the Wash in March", where Meehan (1986. 28) focuses on her mother's inflexible authority when she forced her to do all those tasks once considered feminine:

My mother would start to panic  
At the first spits of spring rain  
And herd me down to the yard. 'Drop

A single thing and I'll swing for you  
Paula.'

"The View from Under the Table" similarly portrays Meehan's mother as an oppressive and overwhelming force, who threatens to slap her if she doesn't fulfil her domestic duties. Going back into her past, the speaker wonders: "Who did she think she was with her big words/ and her belt and her beatings? Who do I think I am to write her (Meehan 2000. 12).

In other poems such "The Ghost of My Mother Comforts Me", Meehan (1997. 38-39) continues struggling with the spectre of her mother. Nevertheless, rather than seeing her as a figure who threatens to inculcate a mode of behaviour from which she desires to escape, the mother in this poem is presented as a protective figure with clearly divine attributes, providing comfort, tenderness, protection and creative energy for her child: "For you, daughter, there is no blame,/ for you no portion of guilt", "I will stroke your forehead till you sleep", "Because I am your mother I will protect you/ as I promised you in childhood" (38). These memories of warmth and tenderness are also captured in "Ard Fheis", where Meehan (1994. 21-22) counteracts the harsh memories of her working-class environment with the consoling remembrance of her mother:

And somewhere there is a vestige  
of my mother nursing me to sleep,  
when all my world was touch,  
and possibly was peace.

Therefore, Meehan's mother is a central figure in her work. Poems such as these are testimony to the passion of the daughter for the mother, her need above all to understand this woman, to seek intimacy with her and to comprehend the forces acting upon her.<sup>7</sup> In this sense, the two instincts analysed by Rich operate simultaneously in Meehan's work: while she urges to reclaim her mother, she also struggles to win free of her influence on her life.

#### **4. "Matrocompliant" mothers**

Meehan's poems about her mother, predominantly autobiographical in character, might be set beside Boland's 1982 collection *Night Feed* to enlarge our vision of the complexity of mother and daughter relationships and the effect that canonical systems of representation still have for contemporary Irish women. In this semi-autobiographical volume, Boland also explores the connection and disruption between mother and daughter, and like Meehan, she describes this relationship as especially vulnerable. Whereas Meehan more frequently adopts a "daughterly" perspective, Boland reflects on her experiences of mothering when raising her two children in the Dublin suburb of Dundrum.

In contrast to Meehan, this poet describes in a highly transcendental way the union between mother and child, blessing and sanctifying motherhood as an enriching and fulfilling female experience. In “Hymn”, for instance, Boland (1982. 8) establishes a contrast between an undisturbed and peaceful domestic interior and a violent public landscape, making explicit her own ideological position:

The cutlery glitter  
of that sky  
has nothing in it  
I want to follow.

Here is the star  
of my nativity:  
a nursery lamp  
in a suburb window

behind which  
is boiled glass, a bottle  
and a baby all  
hisses like a kettle.

According to the Bible, when Jesus Christ was born, three wise men set out on a journey following a nativity star that would eventually lead them to the crib where the Lamb of God was born. Boland, in the contemporary context of Ireland, has a different nativity star to follow: the nursery lamp in her suburb window. The sparkling light in the sky is only superficially attractive: its “glitter” is not real, but man-made, “cutlery.” On the other hand, its brightness is a reflection of the metallic weapons and bladed swords used in combat. Boland implies that the solution to human problems is not found in the distant stars (by invoking unreal or illusionary emblems), but in this suburban setting, in the speaker’s everyday world. It is here where a promising and happier future lies. The baby is portrayed as a contained source of energy: within the child lies the future, what the world will be. This theme is reinforced in the final lines of “Hymn”, which as Gelpi (1999. 218) explains, reinterpret the opening lines of John’s Gospel (“The Word made flesh”) in order to signify the first appearance of daylight in the morning:

And in the dark  
as we slept  
the world  
was made flesh. (Boland 1982. 8)

In her revision of the Gospel, the speaker enhances the idea that holiness resides in the everyday “world” and more specifically in a nursery, and not only in the orthodox (patriarchal) “Word.” Human salvation is here, in the room where a baby is being fed. A

better future can be achieved, the poet implies, by the mother's nurturing of the child, in other words, by the child's proper education.

Boland's poem advocates the kind of premises defended by philosopher Sara Ruddick. According to Ruddick (120-122), it is necessary to bring the capacity for nurturing life into the public realm from which it has been excluded from centuries. This is what she calls "attentive love" or "maternal thinking", a kind of loving which is directly opposed to the abuse of others by "let[ting] difference emerge without searching for comforting commonalities, dwell[ing] upon the *other*, and also let[ting] otherness be" (122). As Daly explains, Ruddick is speaking of a maternal thought which is founded on respect and on an appreciation of difference, a way of thinking concerned with "the preservation of children and [with] fostering their growth and acceptability" (244). This way of thinking, according to Ruddick, is "necessary in the promotion and maintenance of a 'politics of peace'" (quoted in Arcana 207). Boland's reappraisal of the maternal figure as a source of positive values validates Ruddick's perception of maternal thinking as a resource for peace.

Part of the difficulty with Boland's approach to motherhood is that the qualities which she values most in her role as a mother (connectedness and caring) are also the products of women's social subordination. In her analysis of maternal deprivation in female fiction, Bennett claims that, particularly since the 1980s, "there has been a tendency among white middle-class American feminists to romanticise women's so-called connectedness to others and to treat it as an essential and positive quality differentiating women from men" (134). Such "essentialist tendency", she argues, refuels "the fantasy of the ideal mother, which feminism originally sought to challenge: the mother who puts herself, her needs, and therefore, her boundaries last" (134-5).<sup>8</sup> The risks of sentimentalising the experience of mothering has also been identified by Adrienne Rich (1986), who attacks that form of "women's movement" which conceptualises motherhood "as a potential healing of men's pain by women" (214).

Indeed, Boland's "Hymn" depicts the figure of the mother as "more morally credible or more morally capable than any other woman", as someone who has "a real stake in the future of humanity" (Rich 1986. xvi). In contrast to the hostile domestic atmosphere that Meehan portrays in "The Pattern", for instance, Boland idealises the nursery room as a space invested with power. Rich would not share this view of maternal power, because, as she claims, "it can be dangerously simplistic to fix upon "nurturance" as a special strength of women" (283). By romanticising her own experience as a mother, Boland seems to align herself with the Virgin Mary or the idealised role of the mother, encouraged by the Church and the State in Ireland. In this sense, even though Boland deconstructs the long-held separation between the domestic and the public/political spheres by infusing her private ordinary world with external significance, she seems to rely ultimately on the (patriarchal) institutionalised concept of the "Mother" that Rich (1986) analyses in her work, a numinous nurturer or morally superior being that has become,

for men as well as women, a dangerous archetype; the Mother, source of angelic love and forgiveness in a world increasingly ruthless and impersonal; ... the symbol and residue of moral values and tenderness in a world of wars, brutal competition and contempt for human weakness.

The speaker in “Hymn” – in her maternal function of gestating, bearing and nurturing her child – proclaims herself as a perfect counteract for a society ruled by male logic, encapsulating all those attributes of the mystical Mother that Rich criticises in *Of Woman Born*.

In this sense, whereas Meehan yearns to create a new relationship with her mother free from imposed tags and societal expectations, Boland seems at first to find no problem when accepting traditional depictions of women as holy mothers and caregivers. Her acceptance of these conventional roles runs counter to Meehan’s overt *matrophobia* and reveals what could be labelled, by subverting Rich’s term, as a covert *matrocompliance*.

Boland’s *matrocompliant* attitude is also observed in “Night Feed”, a poem that describes in complex terms the bond between mother and child. The title gives us an indication of what is going to be the double concern of the poem. First, it predicts a night feeding, in which the mother supplies nourishment to her child by giving her a bottle of milk. Secondly, it anticipates that this mother not only gives the newborn food, but is also “provided with [this] sustenance” (Kupillas 14). In other words, the woman’s sense of worth and value is enhanced by her nurturing of the child:

I crook the bottle.  
How you suckle!  
This is the best I can be,  
Housewife  
To this nursery  
Where you hold on,  
Dear life. (Boland 1982. 7)

As a mother, guardian and keeper, the poetic voice feels at the zenith of her self-fulfillment. The speaker finds her role of “Housewife/ To this nursery” essential for her female identity. The emphasis on the importance of motherhood as a source of identity for the female subject is criticised by Rich (1986. 11), who claims that, although motherhood is an important part of female experience, it is not, as patriarchy would want us to believe, an essential aspect of women’s identities. This feminist critic discredits the traditional assumption that to be a mother is an essential prerequisite to be a “real” woman, a belief also challenged by scholars such as Davis (2003. 353), Donaldson (138) and Rajan (1-2), who contend that homogenising generalisations such as these might obliterate more heterogeneous women’s experiences. From this perspective, Boland

might be accused of ignoring the different experiences of all those women who do not find in motherhood their source of identity.

Nevertheless, to read Boland's poems on maternity only from this perspective would be incomplete. Her representations of mother and daughter relationships have different imperatives. First of all, it is important to note that Boland's work distinctively pays homage to women's roles as mothers in order to reassess an experience which has been for long neglected in a national tradition almost exclusively concerned with public events, such as Ireland's political history. Secondly, as we have seen, Boland's reliance on her personal experiences of motherhood allows her to blur the conventional boundaries established between the public (political) sphere, reserved to men, and the private (domestic) sphere, assigned to women. Boland emphasises how the nurturing affection between mother and child is a possible refuge from a world of violence and destruction, although in the process, she runs the risk of reiterating the traditional idealisations of motherhood that Irish Catholic and nationalist discourses have encouraged. Thirdly, Boland challenges the notion that motherhood and writing are incompatible activities, by reaffirming the continuities between her life of a mother and her life of a writer. She blurs the division between mothering and art, that is assumed in the patriarchal culture, by asserting the value of both procreation and artistic creation. Finally, mother imagery is employed in Boland's poetry in order to portray the complexity of a woman's life and experiences. The mother finds relief in bearing her child, but she also feels a strong sense of loss, in the anticipation of this child growing old. In most of her maternity poems, Boland emphasises the inevitable disunion between mother and daughter, and the mother's subsequent fears that her influence will fade with the passage of time, as the child enters into adulthood.<sup>9</sup> Thus, motherhood is charged with a sacramental value, but most of the time, it causes pain and despair in the mother.

This complex and multi-layered depiction of motherhood is made explicit in "Endings" (Boland 1982), where Boland considers her own death in the light of birth and the beginning of life: "A child/ shifts in the cot./ No matter what happens now/ I'll never fill one again" (19). This mother-speaker is not only realizing that her child-bearing years are now over, but also that the older she grows, the more distant her child will be from her:

If I lean  
I can see  
what it is the branches end in:  
The leaf.  
The reach.  
The blossom.  
The abandon.

Boland's images of branches and flowers coming to fruition are suggestive of her child's innocence and also of the inevitable process of life unfolding and perishing.

Boland's attempt to "reach" her child is counteracted by the noun "abandon". Motherhood is in this sense characterised by moments of closeness and also by defeat.

In this sense, Boland deconstructs the stereotype of the mother as "a single-minded identity" (Rich 1986. 23). One of Rich's concerns in *Of Woman Born* is to dismantle the institutionalised belief that maternal love is in itself continuous, selfless and unconditional. The mother and child interaction, as explained by Rich, is one dominated by ambivalent and contradictory feelings, such as "love and hate, jealousy even of the child's childhood; hope and fear for its maturity" (22). These complex feelings, "this interpenetration of pain and pleasure, frustration and fulfilment" (33), are clearly exposed in Boland's work. Like Rich, Boland openly challenges the patriarchal view of motherhood, which dictates what mothers should feel towards their children and subsequently what their reaction should and should not be. By portraying a mother's multiple fears and her sense of loss, this poet expresses the multidimensional nature of the female, as against monolithic representations of women.

Whereas Boland's poetry portrays mothers who are traumatized by their separation from their daughters and therefore yearn to be united with their offspring, Meehan's work, as we have seen, focuses on daughters who earnestly attempt to escape from their mothers' example and establish a new relationship unconstrained by patriarchal standards. Boland's stance is as subversive as Meehan's. By focusing on the ordinary but significant details of maternal love and fear, Boland expresses the often confusing and conflicting emotions a mother generally experiences, and disrupts the view of motherhood encouraged by the Irish national tradition. Her mothers are realistic figures that experience multiple fears and are affected by the passing of time and the loss of beauty.

## 5. Conclusion

Like Adrienne Rich, both Meehan and Boland examine motherhood in a social context, as fixed and transformed into an Irish political institution. In a country where motherhood has been associated with traditional symbols of nationhood and the Catholic religion, their poems are not only mere autobiographical explorations – as mothers and daughters – but also poems that are deeply charged with political connotations.

As McCarthy (97) claims, two stereotypes of women which are reproduced, "almost obsessively", in Irish fiction are the idealised "Good Mammy", "dutiful, self-sacrificing paragon, devoted to God and family, provider of selfless love and good dinners" and, on the other hand, "the "Smother Mother", a dominant matriarch who insists on her children's adherence to her principle". The stereotype of the "Good Mammy" is indeed present in Boland's poetry, as we have seen in "Hymn" and "Night Feed", poems where Boland might be accused of adopting the traditional idealisations of motherhood that Irish Catholic and nationalist discourses have encouraged. On the other hand, the cliché of "the Smother Mother" is revived in Meehan's "The Pattern",



where the speaker, instead of romanticising and idealising the mother-daughter relationship, offers a much more problematic connection between both figures, as victims of a patriarchal system which makes them rivals.

In this sense, when recounting their experiences of mothering and being mothered, both writers seem to adopt an opposite stance: Meehan's poems display an overt *matrophobia* in her desire to escape from her mother's patriarchal legacy; Boland's work, by contrast, reveals what I have termed a covert *matrocompliance*, in her attempt to recognize the substantial worth of women as bearers of children. In spite of their different approach to motherhood and mothering, both writers are equally subversive in resisting the passive, idealised and lifeless icon of domesticity, reified in Irish religious and nationalist texts. In their dealing with previous taboo subjects such as abortion, infanticide and infertility, these poets reclaim Irish women's right to control their own sexuality and identify their selves outside social and cultural ideals of femininity. Furthermore, their work denounces the uniqueness of the myth of the Irish mother, by unleashing a plurality of women's voices and experiences, ranging from "unmotherly" women, "childless" mothers and "matrophobic" daughters to "matrocompliant" angels-in-the-house and jealous mothers assailed by contradictory feelings towards their children. The multidimensional nature of these poetic voices dismantles monolithic ideals of femininity and reclaims Irish women's right to adopt a creative role for motherhood.

## Notes

- 1 For the public censorship and the controversy around the book's publication, see Barry (1984. 300-03).
- 2 Rich's reference to women's rebirth is deleted in her 1979 version of "When We Dead Awaken". The original source is Adrienne Rich's 1971 edition of this essay, included in Rich (1975. 98).
- 3 For a comprehensive analysis of Eavan Boland's artistic development through the phases of feminine subordination, feminist protest and female self-discovery, see Villar-Argáiz (2007). Boland's change of perception of motherhood is specifically addressed in pages 116-22 and 183-85, which examine the poet's evolution from an extreme aversion to the actual process of childbirth (as reflected in *In Her Own Image*), to a celebration of motherhood and maternal love (as observed in *Night Feed*).
- 4 Davidson and Broner's 1980 pioneering work, devoted to the study of the mother and daughter relationship in literature, prompted the growing interest in this subject matter among theorists and literary critics. See, for instance, Daly and Reddy (1991), Phillips (1996), Ingman (1998) and Giorgio (2002). These studies cover women writers' revisions of motherhood from different periods and countries, including Irish, English and American examples.
- 5 In poems such as "A Woman Mourned by Daughters", Rich (1993. 159-60) postulates precisely this antagonism between mother and daughter, exemplifying, as Keyes (1984. 36) notes, her "fairly lack of female identification".
- 6 Given her tenacious focus on the silencing of women's voices in the Irish literary and historical past, female legacy is also a prevailing topic which surfaces in Boland's work. Nevertheless, unlike Meehan, the transmission of maternal inheritance is considered to be positive and liberating.

- In poems such as “I Remember”, “The Parcel”, “The Source”, “The Art of Grief” and “The Last Discipline”, Boland (2005. 127, 226-29, 239-41, 271) explains how the presence and tenderness of her dead mother still sustains her life.
- 7 Other poems devoted to exploring her relationship with her mother are “Poem in October for Helena, My Mother” (Meehan 1984. 30), where Meehan, mourning the death of her mother, describes her as a victimised figure, “a bird with a broken wing” who could not “dance in the swirling leaves”; “Autobiography” (Meehan 1997. 40-41), which captures Meehan’s ambivalent feelings towards her mother, and “Mother” (Meehan 2000. 56-57), where the maternal figure is depicted as a “terrorist”, a “devourer” and a “mother keeper” of patriarchal conventions.
  - 8 This re-idealisation has been discussed by Chodorow and Contratto in their essay “The Fantasy of the Perfect Mother” (1982).
  - 9 Boland usually relies on the mythical legend of Ceres and Persephone in order to draw attention to the complexity of mother and daughter relationships. See, for instance, “This Moment”, “The Pomegranate” and “Daughter” (Boland 2005. 213, 215-16, 263-64).

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