

# *Mothers and Daughters in Conflict in the Motherland, in Edna O'Brien's The Light of Evening*

María Isabel Arriaga

**Abstract:** *The Light of Evening explores the difficult relationship between two Irish mothers and their daughters: Dilly Macready and Eleanora, a writer whose life shares many common features with that of Edna O'Brien's, on the one hand, and young Dilly's previous relationship with her own mother, Bridget, on the other hand. Both relationships are depicted through a succession of daily letters, usually not sent. These conflictive bonds resemble those of Irish people with their motherland throughout the twentieth century. This tension emerges, in all cases, when expected roles assigned to women by a patriarchal culture clash with the desire of emancipation and self-development. The purpose of this article is to explore mother-daughter representations in O'Brien's novel in order to analyse the author's own conflictive relationship with Ireland in her early development as a creative writer. Immigration, tradition, memory and fragmented identity, all constitutive elements of Irish history, are present in this paper.*

**Keywords:** *Mothers; conflict; exile; tradition; motherland.*

Edna O'Brien is arguably an innovative creative writer, a pioneer within the current generation of Irish women writing about Irish women's struggles in the context of mid-twentieth century patriarchal Motherland<sup>1</sup>, her beloved country but, at the same time, the fiercest enemy in her path to become an accomplished creative writer. This article analyses two conflictive mother-daughter relationships surrounding the author's life, both of which mirror the tense relationship between O'Brien and Ireland at the beginning of her literary career, as well as between the author and her own mother. Certainly, becoming a widely recognised literary figure was a hard challenge for young Edna O'Brien, not only because she was a woman but also for being an Irish woman in 1960s Ireland.

O'Brien's *The Light of Evening* deals with two complex mother-daughter relationships that can be read as a metaphor of the author's own conflictive relationship with her motherland in her attempt to get freedom and develop an artistic career in a still very strict patriarchal society, with strong stereotyped ideas about gender roles. On the one hand, young Dilly's relationship with her mother Bridget, who tries to undermine her daughter's dreams of liberty and her desire of emigrating to the USA in search of a better future. On the other hand, adult Dilly's relationship with her own daughter Eleanora, a writer who lives in London and whose sentimental life has never been approved by her mother. The novel is populated with Dilly's voice and remembrances. As the book opens, Dilly is travelling up to a healer with the hope of being cured of her shingles, but the man advises her to see the specialists in Dublin, so she is taken to a Dublin hospital run by Catholic nuns, where she will accidentally find death after being diagnosed with cancer.

From her sickbed and in a state of reverie caused by the pills she is being administered at hospital, she first remembers the most significant moments of her life, starting

with the time she emigrated to America during the 1920s and fell in love. She recalls a number of humiliations and mistreatment as a maid in America until deception, a family tragedy and homesickness make her eventually go back home. There, she marries Cornelius, the owner of a fine house (*Rusheen*) on the verge of collapse, and together they follow a farming life and have two children: Eleanora and Terence. Dilly also recalls her relationship with her mother in her teen years as well as her tense relationship with Eleanora. The Macreadys are portrayed as a dysfunctional family, divided by ambition, selfishness, incommunication and intolerance. The father drinks, runs horses and gambles; the daughter has an unconventional life in England, sometimes morally unacceptable for her catholic mother (Eleanora has a number of lovers after her divorce); and the son, an optician in Dublin, plots with his wife to deprive his sister of her inheritance and claims his right to inherit *Rusheen*. The only thing that remains throughout the novel is the constant love Dilly has for her daughter, expressed in the way in which she longs for Eleanora's visit all along her stay in hospital. Their relationship is marked by an exchange of failed gifts and daily life news that is revealed to readers in letters, which not always reach their addressee. Finally, after her mother's insistence to see her again while in hospital, Eleanora pays a quick visit to Dilly as she has to leave to meet a lover, and forgets a diary. When Dilly reads it and discovers all the sorrow Eleanora has undergone with her cruel ex-husband, she decides to change her will but as she tries to unsuccessfully escape hospital, her son appears. As he attempts to stop her from going to the solicitor, she accidentally slips on the stairs and dies.

The oppressive socio-cultural context in which this novel is set clearly shows that Irish patriarchalism worked as an institutionalized system, as sustained by the 1937 Irish Constitution, effective until the early 1990s. It proclaimed that the State guarantees "to protect the Family in its constitution and authority, as the necessary basis of social order and as indispensable to the welfare of the Nation and the State" (Article 41, Paragraph 1). In order to achieve this aim, both the Catholic Church and the Irish State played a key role in confining women to a passive domestic position that excluded them from the public sphere. Thus, according to Eamon Mahon (1994), the Catholic Church formed part of the cultural superstructure with normative views on gender that led it to see women as complementary rather than equal to men, and best suited by nature for work in the home (Mahon 1279). So the fact that the Church controlled the educational system "facilitated both social integration and socialisation into Catholic norms and values" (*Ibid.* 1278). Furthermore, patriarchal hegemony was legally reinforced with a prohibition on the employment of married women on teaching (later removed), civil service, local authorities and health boards, which lasted until 1973. In this way, both Church and State forced married women to home duties and the ban on divorce promoted the legal maintenance of this private patriarchy.

Thus, in the search of female independence, O'Brien also portrays the transgressions of the female artist in her struggle for her individual, female and artistic Independence. According to Declan Kiberd (1995), this search for the self and the conquest of a life of one's own has been marked along the twentieth century, in many cases, by departure and displacement of Irish artists because, far from solving these tensions, independence exacerbated them: "censorship, ostracism and emigration became the lot of the more accomplished artists" (580). For female Irish writers like Edna O'Brien, the path has not been easy at all. Having suffered censorship in her own country as a young writer, she felt forced to emigrate in order to make a career in writing, to find her place in history, a place she was denied

in patriarchal 1960s Ireland.

According to Ellen McWilliams (2013), the term “exile” is charged with a wide range of significant meanings that apply to the Irish woman writer, since it can not only be a meaningful metaphorical construct to define the Irish artist but also a vehicle for imagining the hardships and the isolation undergone by them. And, at the same time, this term denotes the opportunities they can take advantage of in this experience. McWilliams (7) associates this situation to “the dilemma of the Irish woman writer that finds herself ‘outside history’, to borrow Irish poet and professor Eavan Boland’s phrase (1995, p. 123)”, who gives account of the way in which Irish women have traditionally been excluded from, but used as literary muses in the creative process of Irish literary culture. For this reason, McWilliams (49) recovers the contemporary feminist concept of “looking again”, previously taken on in Adrienne Rich’s 1971 manifesto that called for “a politics of revision” as the art of looking back, of entering an old text from a new critical perspective, as an act of survival, which also finds support in more recent critical studies, such as Ridout (2011) or Sellers (2001), to mention some. This tendency could reveal that one of the main projects of the Irish women liberation movement would be to challenge and resist the traditional woman-nation relationship that is deeply present in the Irish literary canon.

The central theme of mother-daughter relationship in many of O’Brien’s works has also been explored by a number of academics and researchers worldwide. In “(M)Others from the Motherland in Edna O’Brien’s *The Light of Evening* and Colm Tóibín’s *Brooklyn*” (2013), Marisol Morales Ladrón also analyses the bond to the land as a metaphor of the bond to the mother as well as these two remarkable contemporary authors’ discourses on emigration through the conflictive family relationships involved in them. In addition, in “Transcending the Patriarchal Border and Re-claiming the Self in Edna O’Brien’s *The Light of Evening*” (2018), Sara Fadla and Yousef Awad offer a postmodern feminist Reading of O’Brien’s 2007 novel, contextualising it within theories of performativity and mestiza consciousness. The authors aim to answer questions of identity and agency, pointing out different strategies used by O’Brien’s character to resist patriarchal schemes and develop her artistic self. The main argument of Fadia and Awad is that in that process, Eleanora emerges as the “New Mestiza” (Anzaldúa 1987) who has to develop a hybrid identity to live between these two worlds. Finally, In her article entitled “Rereading the Mother in Edna O’Brien’s *Saints and Sinners*” (2014), Elke D’hoker explores O’Brien’s central theme of mother-daughter relations comparatively, not only in her 2011 collection of short stories but also in several novels by the same author. Besides, she goes beyond O’Brien’s works to analyse the ambivalent feeling of fear and anger mothers seem to have inspired in many contemporary Western writers, the common lack of communication between mothers and daughters, the powerlessness and idealisation of mothers in patriarchal societies like the Irish one and the consequent rebellion and escape on the part of adult daughters. The different readings of the figure of the mother in O’Brien, Keegan and Enright’s is approached through a varied theoretical framework, which includes authors like Patricia Coughlan, Ellen McWilliams, Adrienne Rich, Marianne Hirsch and Anne Fogarty.

Edna O’Brien is indeed a pioneer in the field of contemporary Irish female writing, who was forced to exile in order to resist patriarchal female stereotypes in her native country that found her artistic creation sinful. McWilliams (65) depicts the author’s reality through Maureen Beebe’s words from *Ivory Towers and Sacred Founts: The Artist as Hero in Fiction from*

Narrative development in the typical artist- novel requires that the hero test and reject the claims of love and life, of God, home and country, until nothing is left of his true self and his consecration as artist. Quest for self is the dominant theme of the artist- novel, and because the self is almost always in conflict with society, a closely related theme is the opposition of art to life. The artist- as- hero is usually therefore the artist- as-exile (Beebe 1964: 6).

Thus, the idea of emigration and dislocation from home, either temporal or permanent, is a main theme in O'Brien's 2006 novel, since it not only represents a common state for the female protagonists of *The Light of Evening* in search for their true self, but also reflects the artist's own struggle for achieving her artistic dreams and developing an identity of her own. Mother (Dilly) and daughter (Eleanora) think of themselves as exiles (or self-exiles), instead of as mere emigrants, as they feel they have been pushed outside their mother country due to economic or cultural circumstances in Ireland, although their departures were the result of a personal choice.

### **The construction of the Motherland and women in patriarchal Ireland**

Richard Kearney (1997) argues that most contemporary nations invoke indigenous myths that provide a sense of origin to its people, whose function is to heal the fractures of the present through the ritualistic reiteration of some foundational events of the past, in order to develop a feeling of timeless unity. For Kearney, such myths of origin are related to figures of motherland (or fatherland) - "potent figures for reanimating the power of 'dead generations' and restoring a conviction of unbroken continuity with one's tradition" (108). These myths of tradition are particularly important because they reveal the laws underlying an unconscious collective imagination that become very influential in the creation of an ideal society and in the establishment of the national institutions. In other words, "myths can serve as an ideological strategy for inventing symbolic solutions to problems of sovereignty which remain irresolvable at a socio-political level" (*Id.*109). Thus, myths of origin give meaning to and serve as a justification for all human actions in a concrete national context.

In her article "La iconografía femenina de Irlanda. Creación y re/construcción de una nación en femenino"<sup>2</sup> (2008), Aída Rosende Pérez argues that nationalism, Catholicism and patriarchalism intertwine in a particular way in the cultural and political Irish context, creating myths and reductionist metaphors that support their ideologies and, consequently, relegate women to a secondary position within society (252). According to Rosende Pérez, from its colonial period, Ireland has been considered an inferior "Other" by the British Crown, being this the main argument to justify the necessity of governing a nation that was unable to "self-govern". This representation presupposes the feminization<sup>3</sup> of the Irish nation, which was reinforced during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries through the allegoric form of Hibernia<sup>4</sup>, a figure used with political intentions in literature and literary criticism, as well as by the British Mass Media (mainly in the satirical magazine *Punch*) or in popular culture. Thus, Hibernia is represented as a young Victorian woman, weak in appearance and in need of the protection provided by England, in its masculine allegoric form. Throughout history, and

taking into account the fact that the original name of Ireland (*Éire*) comes from the name of a Celtic goddess, the metaphorical representation of Ireland acquired the shape of a woman, the Mother-Nation or the Motherland. Therefore, the colonial construction of Ireland as a woman becomes the first great simplification of both the Irish woman and the political, of the social and historical reality of the nation.

In this process, real women disappear from representational systems to become a passive icon created from patriarchal structures and stereotypes that justify the oppression of the colonial-women and favour the persistence of masculine colonial power (Rosende Pérez 254). By the early twentieth century, Irish nationalism would make use of patriarchal mechanisms of oppression over women to sustain its hegemony, by using the feminine body to symbolise the nation.

This representation of women as passive subjects has not only been present in the construction of Irish nationalism and the 1937 Irish Constitution but also in Irish literature, given that the political and the literary discourses are almost inseparable in Ireland. By appropriating the former colonial metaphor of the woman-nation -originated in the Irish cultural imaginary- Irish nationalism contributed to perpetuate and legitimate the patriarchal ideology. Marisol Morales Ladrón (2007) agrees with Rosende Pérez and claims that women in Ireland have been subjected to “a double colonization” (231): the imperialist and the patriarchal: “women in Ireland have been marginalised within a culture which has itself been situated on the margins of History, colonial or not” (232). Within this panorama, many Irish women had little possibility of independence or professional achievement before the 1990s and its consequent modern political culture introduced by Mary Robinson, the first Irish woman president.

Fortunately, this cultural representation of the Irish woman that prevailed until the early 1980s is being strongly resisted by contemporary Irish women writers but also by male ones. The contemporary Irish novel occupies, according to Linden Peach (2004), an “especially complex cultural and intellectual space where there is a strong sense of both continuity and disruption” (Peach 1) and focuses on the interconnected themes of the Irish nuclear family, history, memory and belonging, “all fiercely contested categories in Irish cultural discourse” today (Harte 2014). Harte highlights the contribution of contemporary Irish novelists to the “unsettling and remaking of the national imagination that has accompanied Ireland’s own reinvention since the 1980s” (2-3) and, at the same time, he praises their diversity, a characteristic that Praga Terente (2005) also finds in the Irish novel of the twentieth century produced after Joyce. As Harte claims, along the last three decades, contemporary Irish writers have been renegotiating meanings of a received nationality and opening spaces for a revised rhetoric of *Irishness* (*Id.* 2).

## **Mothers that mirror the Motherland**

Conflictive mother-daughter relationships are at the core of *The Light of Evening*, a novel O’Brien herself has described as “umbilical”<sup>5</sup>, since it was inspired by her mother and the deep effect she had on the author. Mothers in this novel are portrayed as strong-willed, possessive, demanding and little tolerant to their daughters’ dreams and desires of starting a new independent life abroad. They seem to be too narrow-minded in their limited ways to

understand their daughter's needs when they go beyond their own expectations. Also, neither of them really enables communication with their respective daughters and end up pushing them to emigrate. In addition, the impossibility of approaching their daughters with tenderness and to clearly express their feelings, to support them in the essential decisions they make for their lives, make Dilly's and Eleanora's mothers start writing to their daughters almost intuitively- once they are abroad -, in a stream of consciousness-like style, unrestrained, which reveals their true selves and the main points of conflict with their young adult girls. However, in the case of Dilly, most of those letters are written never to be sent.

The same happens to Eleanora. When she realises life is not what she had expected and her relationship with her husband turns conflictive and sometimes violent, she feels she needs her mother though she does not attempt to reestablish contact with her at first, due to her mother's stubbornness and strictness that results in her sometimes detached relationship. In many senses, this inability on the part of the mothers in this novel echoes Ireland's tense relationship with her children, mainly artists, who were forced outside the Motherland for more than a century since they were not able to find a place of their own there, due to economic, cultural or political reasons. Thus, as an adult Dilly ends up behaving exactly like her mother: "back in Ireland and not capable to break with the behavioural pattern that she had somehow interiorized from her own mother's reproachful nature, she [Dilly] finds herself reproducing the same domeneering attitude in the way she brings up her own daughter Eleanora, securing, once again, her daughter's immigration to England, in order to keep away from her mother and motherland" (Morales Ladrón 182).

The first complex mother-daughter relationship portrayed in the story is that of young Dilly and her mother, Bridget. In the second of the eight parts that compose *The Light of Evening*, O'Brien gives an exhaustive account of Dilly's youth, mainly in America, through Dilly's voice as a narrator. One day, after seeing some ships, Dilly starts hoping to go to America since there were little employment opportunities for young people in Ireland, although she does not talk about it openly to her family. Dilly's mother, a symbolic representation of Mother Ireland's repressive politics, discovers Dilly's dreams and tries to discourage her from fulfilling it by encouraging her to be a good student.

Like in Ireland's hegemonic patriarchal system, Bridget tries to silence Dilly's inner voice and desires so that she can comply with the social role an Irish girl was expected to perform. Furthermore, Dilly's mother's unwillingness to let her daughter live a free life evokes Ireland's jealousy for losing her people through migration: "Why should America claim Ireland's sons and daughters, Ireland needing them, so many that had died on the scaffold and many more to die including, though she did not know it then, her own son" (O'Brien 28-29).

In addition, the demanding and reproachful tone Bridget always uses in her letters to Dilly does not seem to contribute to the improvement of their mother-daughter relationship. First, she expresses her anger and disapproval at Dilly's lack of consideration to her people at home with phrases like: "I have not heard from you for two weeks" (*Id.*49) and "Write to me", in God's name, write to me" (*Id.* 82). Second, as Michael's (Dilly's brother) involvement with guerrilla groups becomes known, Bridget writes to her daughter: "A reign of terror has started up . . . Searches are all over . . . All this and you not here to help us" (*Id.*56). Third, Bridget usually signs her letters with lamenting expressions such as: "Your poor mother" (*Id.* 56), "Your worried mother" (*Id.* 64), "Your loving mother" (*Id.* 90) or "Your broken mother (*Id.*90). All of

Bridget's letters are a series of daily life accounts written from a strong first person's voice that let little or no space at all for Dilly to tell her mother how sad she feels while abroad.

The second estranged relationship in this novel is that of middle-aged Dilly and her grown-up daughter Eleanora. This fragmented relationship goes parallel to the structure of the novel, in which past and present overlap without following any clear pattern. In the half narrative, half epistolary style that pervades this work, Dilly's narrative voice prevails, whereas her monologues are occasionally intertwined with Eleanora's voice, which just appears from part IV onwards. Sometimes, Eleanora writes to her mother "out of loneliness" (*Id.* 139). In many of those letters both mother and daughter write -never to be sent-, they are able to open their heart and express themselves freely. On other occasions, the voice of the daughter emerges implicitly through Dilly's reflections on Eleanora's life.

The literary character of Eleanora takes many autobiographical elements from O'Brien's own life to fictionally recreate the same tense atmosphere in which she lived for ages. In the same way as the author did, Eleanora decides to leave her "tedious work in a pharmacy and bicycling to lectures at night" (O'Brien 131) by the 1950s to develop a career in writing. Dilly never accepted her daughter's decision of moving abroad to have the life she wanted after her first novel provoked a public scandal in Dublin. However, Eleanora is determined to continue the search of her inner self she had initiated with literature, a life far from her mother, out of her reach and, to a great extent, against her expectations.

As regards the impossibility to communicate their true feelings, mother and daughter are alike. In fact, two issues make mother and daughter become poles apart: writing and religion. Dilly fears that it was Eleanora's passion for literature what leads her to a life of sin, that her loved books and myths may have been a negative influence on her daughter, the spark that ignited her rebellion: "Eleanora herself thought that perhaps literature had had its vertiginous effect upon her. Literature was either a route out of life or into life and she could never be certain which, except that she had succumbed to it" (*Id.* 129). However, it is the man Eleanora thinks she loves what Dilly really resents most about her daughter's unconventional life, a life that would not have been acceptable in 1960s Ireland. As for Eleanora, the spiritual connection with her mother is mutual, although a long time goes by before she makes it explicit that she wants to see her mother. Part of this distance is the result of the fact that leaving Ireland had meant for Eleanora not only a search for freedom, one she was denied in her oppressive homeland but also, a way of cutting off the oppressive bond with her mother. Thus, she dreams of her mother more than once (*Id.*137), usually before receiving a letter or a parcel from Dilly: and "as the weeks and months went by she began to write. Nothings or next to nothings. Nettles, hens laying out, or the cackle of geese", but always, "her mother came into everything she wrote and she remembered." (*Id.*141). In fact, O'Brien herself recognises in a 2002 interview for *The Guardian*<sup>6</sup>, "my work is influenced by my religion, by my parents, particularly my mother. She influences me a great deal. But also, the place. My books are a part of County Clare, the place is as strong in the books as the characters of the story" (McCrum, 2002). Besides, she has credited her mother as a major influence on her writing.

The main source of separation between Dilly and Eleanora is undoubtedly Hermann, a Jewish-Czech writer and a Communist twenty years older than her, who was married before and had a son. As Eleanora begins to know him better, she starts having second thoughts about him: his frequent bad moods, his fierce argument with Dilly and her husband, and his threats to

Eleanora make her realise she does not know him at all. Little by little Eleanora questions herself about her relationship with Hermann though she decides to try to rebuild their relationship. Later, as Eleanora becomes pregnant she writes to her mother knowing she would not send it since she feels the need of re-establishing contact with her beloved mother: “Dear Mother, when my child is born, you may perhaps forgive me and we will be close again. Or is that wishful thinking. Between you and I, I am scared. Your labour pains have got mixed up with mine” (O’Brien 143). These words and the fact that Eleanora receives a letter from Dilly after that, outlining the many months that had gone by since she had eloped, her parents’ tears and her mother’s collapse in the yard because the entire parish was reeling from the shock denote the caring nature of the bond that exists between these two women. In spite of their temporal detachment, both mother and daughter think of each other and write to each other letters that reveal their feelings, though they are seldom sent.

The second cause of disagreement between mother and daughter is religion. In fact, much of the misunderstanding between both women has its origin in Dilly’s moral principles, which clearly clash against those more liberal ones professed by Eleanora. From the days Eleanora still lived in Dublin, mother and daughter differed in their Catholic beliefs and devotion. The role of religion in Dilly’s life can be traced from very early in the novel when she is in hospital waiting for a diagnosis and treatment, since the hospital in Dublin where elderly Dilly is admitted. One of the nuns who runs it, named Sister Consolata, becomes Dilly’s best friend, a confidant and spiritual guide. Also, when Dilly leaves Ireland in her youth, the presence of Catholicism is also important in her life abroad: she hides in a church when she gets lost in New York, she attends Sunday Mass with her cousin and gets her first job with a wealthy Catholic family through a priest. Since her daughter is beyond her control, Dilly is worried about Eleanora’s spiritual life. Dilly usually argues “how she prayed that her daughter would not die in mortal sin, her soul eternally damned, lost, the way *Rusheen* was almost lost” (5-6). Although Eleanora and Hermann resent being told what to do, they get married in the sacristy of a Catholic church. Eleanora does not seem to profess a faith as deep as her mother’s when she grows up. However, the influence of a Catholic and patriarchal education haunts her a few days before having her first child: “... she confessed to her husband that she was afraid the child would be deformed because of her many macabre thoughts and the fact that of its being conceived out of wedlock” (*Id.*146). As time passes and Dilly visits her daughter and her two grandsons once the family moves to London, she hands Eleanora “a bottle of holy water to sprinkle on the unbaptized children” (*Id.*161). Dilly also regrets the fact that since Eleanora’s husband is Jewish, her grandsons are being educated in their father’s religion as well as the fact that they attend a Quaker’s school.

Besides, although Eleanora has not adhered to Catholic norms in the way Dilly has done along her life, the pressures of a strict moral education are still a burden for her in her search of her inner self and her creative self. The traditional female representations of Ireland as a maid or a mother are reshaped by Irish nationalism in its alliance with Catholicism to project the new idea of Republican Ireland and sustain its hegemony. But far from being a myth, such an ideology lies in the foundation of the 1937 Constitution, restricting the professional or public development of Irish women favouring a female passive and domestic until the last few decades. *The Light of Evening* portrays Eleanora’s struggle to break with those patriarchal conceptions about women in Ireland and, therefore, ends up breaking bonds with



her mother, first, and with the Motherland afterwards. Through the years, as Dilly becomes the embodiment of Catholic Mother Ireland, she seems to have inherited her own mother's distant nature to her daughter, though she has truly forgiven her as they meet for the first time after her elopement when Eleanora was pregnant.

Probably, the main difference between Dilly and Eleanora lays in the lack of agency of the former and the excess of it in the latter, according to the parameters of patriarchal Ireland. Although the news of Eleanora's divorce reached Dilly as a terrible blow, she tells her daughter she will accept it if Eleanora promises to leave alcohol and men (O'Brien 185). Nevertheless, Dilly reproaches her daughter about her failed relationship with Hermann: "You chose your own marriage and we made the best of it so do not go on blaming us for your misfortune, as I believe you secretly do". At the same time, she preaches Eleanora about her unconventional life: "You conquer writing rather than letting it conquer you. It is no good living in the escapism that has been your wont. Look for the faith that you have lost, that you have thrown away. Go back to it. Religion and a belief in the hereafter is what counts and without that life is a sad place" (*Id.*186). Drawing a parallel between fact and fiction, undoubtedly, physical separation from her mother does not break the close bond between O'Brien and her mother, who remains as a vivid presence along this novel.

By the end of her life, and aware of how many letters she had exchanged with Eleanora over the last years, Dilly recognises two things. Firstly, that in her daughter's life there was no place for her: "Eleanora with a different lifestyle, men and Shakespeare and God knows what else, oh yes, a fine firmament in which there was no chair saved for her mother" (O'Brien 191). Secondly, in the same way as she usually wrote mostly ignored or perhaps burned letters on Sunday nights after Cornelius had gone to bed, Eleanora's epistles were full of trivial things, they were "not the letters a mother would have wished for, not an opening or rather a reopening of hearts, such as had once been" (*Id.*191). Similarly, on one of the occasions in which Dilly visits her and her children in London, Eleanora realises "how much was left unsaid, how she had held her mother at a distance for the very simple reason that she feared she would break down completely if she confessed to how unhappy she was" (*Id.*161).

From her hospital bed, Dilly often asks Eleanora "when do you come?" (*Id.*17). The constant thought along her letters is her fervent wish to see Eleanora. However, Eleanora's visit is not the great reunion Dilly has prayed for. In her hasty departure to meet a lover in Scandinavia, Eleanora leaves behind a secret journal of their stormy relationship. The content of this journal changes Dilly's perception of her daughter's life and so she decides to go to the solicitor to change her will so that Eleanora inherits Rusheen. However, she abruptly ends her life by falling from the hospital stairs as her son Terence tries to stop her from leaving hospital. Thus, Dilly's death puts an end to Eleanora's dreams of reconciling with her Motherland, though she has indirectly made peace with her mother through her letters, which acted as a bridge through which both mother and daughter transcended cultural, mental, affective and geographical boundaries. Thus, the frustration of mother and daughter's ability to communicate openly and sincerely mirrors O'Brien's frustrated attempts to reconcile with her homeland though, similarly to her mother, both remain as the wellspring of her writing.

## Female migrants in search of freedom

Fortunately, female writers have been able to overcome the patriarchal discourse and gender stratification they had been socially and culturally subjected to, as well as to start a process of self-definition and identity reconstruction so long denied. Like most of Edna O'Brien's novels, *The Light of Evening* portrays the lifestory of strong-willed women who try to live life in their own terms, yet often paying high prices for their decisions and choices. These women love and hate passionately, but are sometimes forced to live outside familiar environments in order to follow their dreams and satisfy their desire of emancipation, which clearly clashes with the values of patriarchal Ireland that prevailed along most decades of the twentieth century.

Contemporary Irish literary figures like Colm Tóibín, John McGahern, Anne Enright and Edna O'Brien have challenged the status quo that has prevailed in Ireland for the last seven decades. They usually portray traditional Irish families as dysfunctional, as sites of patriarchal oppression for many of their members -mainly women- but they also deal with women's struggle over the last century to gain a place of their own within Irish society and outside it. Besides, after the mid-twentieth century, literary and research works on Irish emigration began to focus on the female experience of migration, probably because of the increasing number of Irish women who decided to start a new life abroad (McWilliams, 2013). Therefore, the image of the female migrant is cleverly used by O'Brien not only to explore the misfortunes and dangers young Irish women were exposed to in a foreign country by the early and mid-20th century, but also to portray conflictive mother-daughter relationships along her work, which resemble O'Brien's tense relationship with her own homeland, as well as with her own mother.

"Exile is strangely compelling to think about but terrible to experience", claims Edward Said (Said 173-181). Cultural estrangement, the feeling of having lost something left behind forever and the necessity of creating a new world in a foreign context of isolation and dislocation are among the main drawbacks exiles are faced to. However, Said also understands exile as an "alternative" to the mass institutions that dominate modern life. In *The Light of Evening*, both Dilly and Eleanora are well aware of this state of ambivalence created by displacement as they feel torn between the desire to escape imposed constraints in their country and the need to keep bonds with their family environment.

Dilly is an old and sick woman at hospital at the beginning of O'Brien's novel, she remembers her adolescence and how the idea of emigration had entered her mind, how furious her mother Bridget had become and how, in the end, she gets her family support to leave for America in the 1920s, an experience full of discrimination, humiliation and disillusionment for Dilly, which O'Brien's portrays in a very realistic way. As regards Eleanora, after obtaining her degree in Science and working in Dublin, she began to experiment with literature, a subject area that Dilly finds pernicious for her daughter: "books and mythologies her daughter's whole life, putting her on the wrong track from the outset" (O'Brien 4). So, when her sensuous first novel caused a local scandal, she fled for London. Some years later she married Hermann, after a short affair. But unlike her mother, and despite the fact that life is not easy for Eleanora in England with an abusive husband who even takes their two children away from her after a dramatic divorce, she does not come back to Ireland because she does not feel it is home either: "sometimes, too, she longed to be back in a street in Dublin . . . while also having to admit that

when she was there, those branched fairy lights and swooning love songs did not satisfy her at all” (*Id.* 138). Thus, either because of its patriarchal and moralistic strictness or because the nation had not been built to give women a space for exercising a creative agency in its history, Ireland certainly was successful in sending her children outside home until the late twentieth century, at least temporarily, as portrayed by O’Brien.

Although for the protagonists of *The Light of Evening* emigration is certainly a choice, this experience also gives these two women the chance to develop a female subjectivity free from social constraints that emerge from a patriarchal upbringing in a national state built on the basis of gender stereotypes, but also from their reproachful and intolerant mothers. Although neither Dilly nor Eleanora undergo the freedom and happiness they had expected while abroad, Dilly and Eleanora’s attitude towards the frustration of emigration is different. Dilly abruptly returns home short after her mother tells her about her brother’s murder in Ireland and due to a sentimental disillusion, putting an end to her once vivid dreams of independence. Soon after coming back home, Dilly marries a wealthy man called Cornelius after a six-week engagement, settles at their family state Rusheen and has two children, fulfilling the traditional patriarchal role expected for an Irish woman, the one her mother had dreamed for her. In contrast, Eleanora resembles her mother both in her desire to emigrate and in her loveless marriage. However, she moves apart from Dilly’s model in her determination to construct a home abroad when her artistic potential is denied in the Motherland and, especially, in her resistance to surrender herself to stereotyped constructions about women, femininity and sexuality.

Fortunately, this situation of marginalisation and oppression Irish women have historically suffered that O’Brien portrays is both being criticised and subverted by contemporary Irish writers. Among them, Edna O’Brien has certainly struggled all her life not to remain “outside history”, in Boland’s terms.

## Final thoughts

No doubt, the embattled mother-daughter bond with all its possible cracks is the main topic discussed/raised in O’Brien’s *The Light of Evening*, as it has been the case in many of her previous novels and collections of short stories, including *Saint and Sinners* (2011). No doubt mother and daughter share a deep emotional bond in spite of their long separation and estrangement. It is a story about women and for women, where men are hardly mentioned or shown as passive figures. They are usually portrayed as individuals who are unable to really understand women or make them happy because they are trapped in the male stereotypes craved by a truly patriarchal and selfish society, a tradition Eleanora has been able to defy, becoming the “New Irish woman”<sup>7</sup> who succeeds in subverting twentieth century Irish masculine discourses.

## Notes

1 Motherland is a concept that applies to the place of origin of an individual who was born in that land but who is now living abroad. Since the Irish name of the country—Éire—descends from the name of a national Celtic goddess, Ireland’s personification is always female. An imaginary romantic vision of Ireland as a woman, namely a mother, turned the motherland into a metaphor that has come to embody historical, patriarchal and unbalanced gender relationships.

- 2 My translation. All the quotations from Rosende Pérez in this research work belong to me.
- 3 Usually, the “sexualization” of the nations is made on the basis of stereotypes of passivity/power that are dominant in anypatriarchal society (González Arias, L.M., 2000, 50 in Rosende López, 252).
- 4 Hibernia: name given by the Romans to Ancient Ireland, by the twentieth century.
- 5 “Edna O’Brien: the Mother of invention”. *Independent* 29th September 2006, UK: 1. Web. Retrieved at <https://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/books/features/edna-obrien-the-mother-of-invention-417886.html>
- 6 McCrum, Robert. “Deep down in the woods”. *The Guardian* 28th April 2002, UK: 3. Web. Retrieved at “<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2002/apr/28/fiction.features1>
- 7 The “New woman” is a late nineteenth century concept that represented the tendency of young women at the turn of the century to reject their mothers' ways in favor of new, modern choices. The “New woman” was less constrained by Victorian norms and domesticity than previous generations, since she had greater freedom to pursue public roles. She challenged conventional gender roles, but arose hostility from men and women who objected to women's public presence and supposed decline in morality. Modern women ventured into jobs, politics, and culture outside the domestic realm. However, women remained economically and politically subordinated to men in the early twentieth century.

## Works Cited

- Harte, Liam. *Reading the Contemporary Irish Novel 1987-2007*. Uk: Wiley-Blackwell, 2014.
- D’hoker, Elke. “Rereading the Mother in Edna O’Brien’s *Saints and Sinners*”. *Journal of the Short Story in English* , 63| autumn 2014. Online since 01 Dec 2016 at URL: <http://jsse.revues.org/1511>.
- Fadia, Sandra and Yousef Awad. “Transcending the Patriarchal Border and Re-claiming the Self in O’Brien’s *The Light of Evening*”. *Jordan Journal of Modern Languages and Literature*, Vol. 10, N° 1, pp- 47-62, 2018.
- Kearney, Richard. *Postcolonialist Ireland. Politics, culture, philosophy*. Routledge: London and New York, Ch 7, 108-121, 1997.
- Kiberd, Declan. *Inventing Ireland: the Literature of the Modern Nation*. Great Britain:Vintage, 1995. Print.
- Mahon, Eamon. “Ireland: a private patriarchy?” *Environment and Planning A*. Volume 26, pp. 1277-1296, 1994. February 8, 2016 at <http://citeseerx.ist.psu.edu/viewdoc/download?doi=10.1.1.469.9089&rep=rep1&type=pdf>
- McCrum, Robert. “Deep down in the woods”. *The Guardian*. 28th April 2002, UK: 3. Web. Retrieved at [www.theguardian.com/books/2002/apr/28/fiction.features1](http://www.theguardian.com/books/2002/apr/28/fiction.features1)
- McWilliams, Ellen. *Women and Exile in Contemporary Irish Fiction*. England: Palgrave MacMillan, 2013.
- Morales Ladrón, Marisol. Reseña: “Eavan Boland’s evolution as an Irish woman poet: an outsider within an outsider’s culture. Pilar Villar Argáiz”. *Revista Odisea* N° 8, 231-236, 2007. Retrieved from [http://ual.es/odisea/Odisea\\_08\\_Morales.pdf](http://ual.es/odisea/Odisea_08_Morales.pdf) , April 5, 2012.
- \_\_\_\_\_.“(M)Others from the Motherland in Edna O’Brien’s *The Light of Evening* and Colm Tóibín’s *Brooklyn*”- *Studi irlandesi. A Journal of Irish Studies*, n. 3 pp.279-292, 2013. Access December 28, 2015 at <http://www.fupress.net/index.php/bsfm-sijis/article/view/13807/12918>
- O’Brien, Edna. *The Light of Evening*. Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2006.
- Peach, Linden. *The Contemporary Irish Novel*. Critical Readings. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004.

Praga Terente, Inés. *La Novela Irlandesa del Siglo XX*. Barcelona: PPU S.A., 2005.

Rosende Pérez, Aída. “La iconografía femenina de Irlanda. Creación y re/construcción de una nación en femenino”. *Lectora*, N° 14, 251 -267, 2008.

Said, Edward W. *Reflections on exile and other essays*. The United States, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2000.