

Ní Dhomhnaill's Poetry as a Challenge to Patriarchy in the Irish Literary Tradition

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Abstract: *This article aims at reading Dhomhnaill's poem, Mother, as a transgressive voice that tries, hardly, to break the silence over female literary production in Ireland. This reading aims to focus on Irish women's attempts and transgression to negotiate their relation in Irish culture. Emphasis will be given to the lyric I who transgresses the traditional form of the literary hero, escaping from the nets of Mother Ireland through her anger. Thus, the myth of Mother becomes the big metaphor for our historical deconstructing purpose of mother as an image of controversy in feminist urge for new readings of patriarchies.*

"[...] you have to make something against the whole patriarchal thing. I think it's the language of the Mothers and Irish par excellence is the language of the Mothers".
(Ní Dhomhnaill 1986, 5)

To write about Ní Dhomhnaill's poetry is a great challenge for me because, among other difficulties, she is quite unknown in the Brazilian academy and consequently neither her literary production, nor her criticism is published here, mainly, in the Northeast of Brazil, my home place. Due to this fact, one might ask how I was introduced to Ní Dhomhnaill's writings. Well, it's a love story. Everything started around 1999, when Dr. Margaret Kelleher came to the State University of São Paulo, Brazil, to take part in a big conference. After that conference, Dr. Kelleher went through a tiring academic agenda visiting and lecturing at some Brazilian Universities and ours was included in her schedule, for a week's Seminar. In her Seminar about Irish culture and contemporary Irish writers efficiently, Dr. Kelleher she included Ní Dhomhnaill's poetry was one name, among others. And it was love at first sight. I was completely overwhelmed by the power of her language, and the strength of her discourse. She writes to create impact, as she herself acknowledges

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in her interview to Michael Cronin: ‘[...] part of creativity is the need to make an impact. You can’t say ‘I don’t care!’” (Ni Dhomhnaill 1986, 5) Her discourse and her language not only threaten the Irish cliffs, but they are crossing boundaries and her voice starts to be heard on the other side of the Atlantic. It’s needless to say that Dr. Kelleher’s Seminar was an event for teachers and students at the Federal University of Paraiba.

Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill was born in 1952 in Lancashire, England, and grew up in west Kerry Gaeltacht. She was educated in University College, Cork, and has lived in Turkey and Holland. Now she lives in Dublin. According to her own words, her poetry is politically committed to minorities, women and children, and poverty as well: “Somebody whose feet never touched ground, who never had a baby [...] a woman who was never hungry, who never went and did something. It’s the poetry of non-lived experience.” (Ni Dhomhnaill 1986, 5) And she keeps moving consciously embracing the commitment to her literary creation, while placing herself as a writer whose poetry has a double duty: “I feel that I have a double bout [...] because, of being a woman and writing in Irish it’s almost impossible.” (Ni Dhomhnaill 1986, 5) For her, literature has a social function, it’s not only the creation of beauty, it’s much more, it’s a social, historical and cultural engagement.

In my article I plan to analyse one of Ní Dhomhnaill’s poems, *Mother*. It was originally written in Gaelic, then published and translated into English in 1986 by Michael Hartnett, in the collection double entitled, *Selected Poems / Rogha Dánta*. In my reading, the focus of the argument will be the image of the mother in close connection with the idea of motherhood as institution and experience, according to Adrienne Rich’s investigation in her book *Of Woman Born*, 1986.

I will try to move away from the common knowledge in Ireland that sexual identity and national identity are mutually dependent. Because my analysis does not want to reduce the image of the mother to a national symbol, on the contrary, it will struggle very hard to escape from this image of woman as nation which, according to my understanding, not only represents the power of patriarchy in the country, but it has been reinforcing woman’s invisibility to edit the reality of womanhood. That is, the images of the self-sacrificing Irish mother are difficult to separate, both seek to perpetuate an image of woman far from the experience, expectations and ideals of contemporary women. The extent to which women only exist as a function of their maternity in the dominant ideology of southern Ireland became quite revealing during the participation of women in the so-called ‘pro-life’ movement during the referendum on the 8th amendment to the constitution. Those women seek to perpetuate the idealized virgin/mother figure of woman so that they can be that figure. Such identification offers women one of the few roles of power available to them in patriarchy, and the struggle for political and economic power and equality can not yet compete with those consolations for many women, who are unable to accept themselves as thinking, choosing, sexual, intellectual and complex ordinary mortals and instead cling to a fantasy of women as simple handmaids of the Lord.

Because our objective is to use the mother myth as a big metaphor to deconstruct the idealized and romantic vision of mother, and politicize woman's role in society, I will follow Rich's analyses, which sees motherhood as experience and institution. For her there are two meanings of motherhood, one superimposed on the other: the potential relationship of any woman to her powers of reproduction and to children; and the institution, which aims at ensuring that the potential – and all women – shall remain under male control. According to Rich this institution has been:

[...] a keystone of the most diverse social and political systems. It has withheld over one-half the human species from the decisions affecting their lives; it exonerates man from fatherhood in any authentic sense; it creates the dangerous schism between private and public life; it calcifies human choices and potentialities. In the most fundamental and bewildering of contradictions, it has alienated women from our bodies by incarcerating us in them. (Rich 1996, 13)

However, for most of what we know as the mainstream of recorded history, motherhood as an institution has ghettoized and degraded female potentialities.

The power of the mother has two aspects: the biological potential or the capacity to bear and nourish human life, and the magical power invested in women by men, whether in the form of Goddess-worship or the fear of being controlled and overwhelmed by women. We do not actually know much about what power may have meant in the hands of strong, prepatriarchal women. We do have guesses, longings, fantasies, and analogues. We know far more about how, under patriarchy, female possibility has been literally massacred on the site of motherhood. Most women in history have become mothers without choice, and even greater number have lost their lives bringing life into the world. On the light of these facts one can assume that motherhood has been penal servitude, not the romantic fate, not the idealized duty or mission that our patriarchal western culture/society leads us to believe unquestionably.

After presenting those brief considerations about what be motherhood is meant to be as experience and institution, let us discuss the poem:

Mother

You gave me a dress
and then you took it back from me.
You gave me a horse
which you sold in my absence.
You gave me a harp
and then asked me back for it.
And you gave me life.

At the miser's dinner-party
every bite is counted.

What would you say
if I tore the dress
if I drowned the horse
if I broke the harp
if I choked the strings
the strings of life?
Even if
I walked off a cliff?
I know your answer.

With your medieval mind
you'd announce me dead
and on the medical reports
you'd write the words
"ingrate, schizophrenic".

When we read this poem we are shocked because it shows a mother that in any way matches with what is supposed to be a mother in our idealized patriarchal imagination. The mother image shown in this poem corresponds much more to a witch, a vampire, a dehumanized being, than to the docile, lovable, nurturing, passive and self-sacrificing picture represented by our Madonna as an example to be followed. This mother is a transgressor. She contradicts her role as a Giver, because she gives and then she takes back: "you gave me a dress/ [...] a horse [...] /a harp [...] / and then you took [them] back." (L.,1-6) However, on line 7, we are informed, by the daughter's voice, that life is the only given thing that her mother did not ask her back: "And you gave me life." (L., 7) This statement closes the first verses in an abrupt way and it functions as a break in terms of language flow and construction of the sequential rhythm followed by the poem so far. I mean, poetics construction and melody are interrupted, broken, due to the lack of a line matching with this last stanza. Until here, from lines 1 to 6, the verses are articulated as a dichotomous construction and this device raises a perfect balance between the game of giving and taking. However, the introduction of line 7 with the conjunction 'and' replaces the subject 'You', addressing to the mother, which has been recurrent in the verses so far, creating a pause. This pause has a purpose, it is not only an invitation to share feelings and to smooth the growing tension of the text but it's much more. It expands the tone of the discourse contaminating the whole atmosphere of the poem. Indeed, this technique leads the reader to go beyond an individual female experience and it functions universalizing a woman's story, that is: what starts as an isolated individual experience becomes universal, transcends the personal and becomes political.

This terrible mother, according to Jung, is the counter part of Pieta and she represents not only death, but also the cruel side of nature. She is completely indifferent towards human sufferings. And it's not by any chance that the next lines of this poem contemplate the famine experience in the Irish family life: "At the miser's dinner-party/ every bite is counted." (L., 8-9) In this passage, one is invited to think about the penalties imposed upon those mothers who could not feed their children; who despite their efforts to work hard could not produce, according to a Marxist point of view, "surplus value" in a day of washing clothes, cooking food, and caring for children. And, as mothers, we have the right to demonstrate our indignation to the psychoanalysts who are certain that the work of motherhood suits us by nature. We do not think of the power stolen from us and the power withheld from us, in the name of the institution of motherhood. All our energies are directed to fulfill patriarchy's expectations and demands upon us. Of course, we will never be able to accomplish such a pushing performance, precisely because whichever are our deeds they have turned against us.

Before being mothers we are daughters, it means that as females we play a double role. And, when we speak about the mother we are also speaking about the daughter. Going back in time we have to recognize that most of us first know both love and disappointment, power and tenderness, in the person of a woman. And the first knowledge any woman has of warmth, nourishment, security, tenderness and mutuality, comes from her mother. Of course, the male infant also first knows tenderness, security, nourishment and mutuality from a female body as well. But, the heterosexuality and institutionalized motherhood demand that the girl-child transfers those first feelings of dependency, eroticism and mutuality, from her first woman to a man, if she is to become what is defined as a 'normal' woman, that is, a woman whose most intense psychic and physical energies are directed towards man.

Mothers and daughters have always exchanged with each other a knowledge that is subliminal, subversive, and preverbal: the knowledge flowing between two alike bodies, one of which has spent nine months inside the other. This biological condition plus the development of a close identity, supported by years of physical and emotional dependency create such strong bonds between mother and daughter that are very difficult, if not impossible, to split them apart. And this difficulty becomes each other's struggle for their lives.

Consequently, the mother's daughter's battle for emotional distance creates, between them, some deep-burning feelings of love and anger increased by their physical and psychical strong closeness; which most of the time is perceived as invasion, thus contaminating their relationship easily. To acknowledge the existence of such ambiguous feelings as those ones towards the mother and the child are not accepted in the Christian-Jewish tradition which sets the model of the virgin Mary to be followed; and to question the emotional damages of patriarchy upon women requires a constant consciousness raising.

I think the daughter's voice from lines 10 to 18 in this poem, is a manifestation of mother's daughters' rage upon each other. It expresses a violent sentiment of anger

from both, mother and daughter, in a growing speed: “What would you say/if I tore the dress/if I drowned the horse/if I broke the harp/if I choked the strings/the strings of life?”(L.10-18) The questions are posed creating tension and indignation in a society that was taught to worship the mother’s image, and this deconstruction of motherhood breaks not only the romantic idea of mothers, but it also fractures the untouched and sanctified place of the mother in the patriarchal culture, that is, the place of the Madonna.

Who dares to provoke the institution of motherhood? An institution that is supposed to be like Renoir’s blooming women with rosy children at their knees or Rafael’s ecstatic Madonnas? The poem echoes the voices of the silenced women breaking out of the patriarchal mindset. It’s not only a personal rage, it’s a transpersonal rage: it’s my mother’s rage and my mother’s mother’s rage and it goes back for generations. It’s the: “[...] medieval mind [that] /would announce me dead/ and [...] would write the words “ingrate, schizophrenic”. (L. 19-23)

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