

**Critiquing the polarisation of Irish women as ‘Madonna vis-a-vis whore’ in the nationalist texts  
of W.B. Yeats’s poem ‘Easter 1916’ and Neil Jordan’s film *Michael Collins***

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**Abstract**

The narrative of Irish history has been perceived from a masculine outlook, relegating the women to the conventionally feminine space of domesticity. The women who resisted submission to masculine norms were labelled as ‘wild Irish girl’ – seductive, promiscuous independent ‘whore’. Pitted against them was the idealised archetype of ‘suffering mother’ – whose role was to nurture her children ultimately to sacrifice them for the nation, parallel to Virgin Mary’s sacrifice of Jesus Christ. The critique of such compartmentalised representation of Irish women, and the erasure of their contribution to Ireland’s freedom, is analysed with respect to W.B. Yeats’s poem ‘Easter 1916’ and Neil Jordan’s film *Michael Collins*. The reason for such polarised depiction is traced to the Irish stereotype of the sacrificial old Mother Ireland figure of Cathleen ni Houlihan – who rejuvenates into a lively young maid once the young blood of the country is shed for her sake. Both Yeats and Jordan choose to celebrate the masculine narrative of Irish freedom struggle, making the women marginal characters in their texts. The paper attempts to establish that Yeats’s criticism of Constance Markievicz; and Jordan’s portrayal of Kitty Kiernan as the seductive Irishwoman who becomes a site of conquest for Harry Boland and Michel Collins, is an implication that women have always been passive receptacles of male action and the dominant narrative of Irish history, as portrayed in nationalist literature and films, through the conflicted perception of Cathleen ni Houlihan, would never acknowledge their participation in gaining sovereignty.

**Keywords:** *Irish female, Madonna, Cathleen ni Houilhan, sacrificial, seductress, nationalism.*