

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 Irish woman 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 I argue that 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.

William Butler Yeats's criticism of Constance Markievicz's rebellion in 'Easter 1916' is encapsulated in the following lines:

That woman's days were spent
In ignorant good-will
Her nights in argument
Until her voice grew shrill.
What voice sweeter than hers
When young and beautiful she rode to the harriers?¹

It is interesting to note that Yeats's narrator in the poem is critical of Markievicz, not for her ideology, but for railing against the British Empire. The narrator seems concerned that her voice does not seem as sweet to him anymore due to shrillness caused by the constant debates and rousing speeches for women's suffrage and empowerment in other spheres of life. Constance Markievicz had the honour of being the first woman to be elected as a minister of Labour to the Dail Eireann in April 1919 ('The Rebel Countess').² However, her staunch support for women's emancipation was evident from a speech to National Students Literary Society in 1909, where she unequivocally asked the modern Irishwoman to abandon her traditional role as 'a beautiful houri holding dominion by her careful manipulation of her sex and her good looks' as propagated by male poets like Tommy Moore and to take up weapons to fight for the cause of the Irish nation.³ However, such a rousing speech could not move even Yeats, who, calling Markievicz's political stance naive and uninformed, comments that he prefers the woman in her youth and beauty, when she sounded the most mellifluous, spending her time riding 'to the harriers'.⁴ To the harriers, that is, riding a horse to the harriers implies that she hunted rabbits while being seated on the horseback. In contrast, he praises the men, like Pearse, Connolly, MacDonaugh or even the 'vainglorious lout' MacBride he so despised, for sacrificing their dreams and aspirations to achieve the Irish dream of freedom.⁵ 'That woman' is accorded no acknowledgement for her contribution.⁶ The final stanza, which celebrates

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the patriots who 'dreamed and are dead' ironically erases the presence of Constance Markievicz from the text.⁷ For her, there is no redemption or honourable tribute accorded by Yeats for her contribution to the Easter Rising-only criticism for trying to take her place among the masculine patriotic freedom fighters of the uprising of Easter 1916. She had composed 'A Battle Hymn' the song that she dedicated to the Irish Citizen Army, rousing the spirits of the Irish revolutionaries and was even awarded a death penalty for her role in the rebellion; however, Yeats harps on her immaturity of political statements and not-so-feminine behaviour.⁸ The poet's uncompromising stance against Constance Markievicz, therefore raises the question: what role did Yeats expect women to play in the Irish nationalist resistance against the British? In the light of Terry Eagleton's theory of sexual ambivalence in Yeats's poetry in general, as postulated in the essay, 'Politics and Sexuality in W.B. Yeats', I will analyse in this paper the dominant strand of portrayal of Irish women in nationalist Irish literature and films, with respect to Yeats's 'Easter 1916' and Neil Jordan's *Michael Collins*. I will attempt individual analyses of these two texts followed by a comparison to assess their respective merits and drawbacks in the portrayal of women.

Eagleton, in his essay, 'Politics and Sexuality in W.B. Yeats', argued that the refrain of 'a terrible beauty is born' reveals the contradictory existence of women as the 'angel[s]' embodying the 'beast', the devil lurking underneath the saint and the 'whore' who is concealed by the innocence and chastity of the 'madonna'.⁹ Therefore, when confronted with women, the male writer has to hit an impasse in his phallogocentric thoughts, since the woman both reassures his status as the patriarch but also threatens to castrate him symbolically, usurping the hegemonic power he wields in society. In the vein of Eagleton's argument, we can then discern Yeats's anxiety about the revolutionary women of Ireland-who were a force powerful enough to destabilise the heroic masculine tradition of Irish nationalism. Unable to categorise them into any of the either polarisation between the 'chaste' and submissive Madonna and the 'promiscuous' and sexually voracious 'whores' who defied male monopoly over gender relations, Yeats was conflicted over portraying women revolutionaries in his works. While some might cite the Crazy Jane poems by Yeats as a contradiction to the aforementioned opinion, it must be remembered that

he cannot transcend his own conception of Jane as a prostitute figure, and her femininity is defined by him in terms of her sexual decadence. He focuses on her loss of youth and how it has affected her appearance by causing 'breasts that are flat and fallen' and veins to get dried up soon, hence, despite trying to portray Jane as an outspoken woman, he cannot help but fixate on her appearance, hinting at how her sexual promiscuity has led to her downfall.¹⁰

Similar anxiety about the sexuality of Irish women revolutionaries of the Irish War of Independence is evinced in the work of Neil Jordan, particularly in his film *Michael Collins* which centres around the life of a male freedom fighter of the War, but almost relegates the primary woman figure, Kitty Kiernan to the background, making her seem like a prop who only serves to highlight the homosocial bonding of Collins and his friend, and fellow comrade, Harry Boland.

Irish Nationalism and the Conventional Representation of Female Revolutionaries

Indeed, if we probe into the history of twentieth-century Ireland prior to independence, Constance Markievicz, née Gore-Booth emerges as a revolutionary no less heroic than her male compatriots. Before the uprising, she had been a member of the National Union of Women's Suffrage Societies (NUWSS), the consolidated union that spearheaded the suffragette movement in the United Kingdom. Furthermore, her interest in radical politics was manifested in her activities for training young boys in firearms by forming the para-military group of Na Fianna Éireann. At the time of the uprising, she had acquired the post of a qualified officer in the regiment of the Irish Citizen Army. Due to her active participation in the battle of St. Stephen's Green, she was given the same death sentence as her fellow imprisoned fighters but was spared for her sex,¹¹ as the court verdict was 'Guilty. Death by being shot. The court recommends the prisoner to mercy solely and only on account of her sex'. And yet, all that is reserved for her is some castigation for her political activity, her rousing protests ('Her nights in argument'), and her championing of a free Ireland founded in accordance with the principles of Socialism.¹² In another poem, 'On a Political Prisoner', Yeats is more scathing about the female nationalist activist in his reflection on Markievicz in the poem, almost as if he is chastising her for not being patient, for being single-mindedly dedicated to

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the cause of nationalism. In the lines, 'Did she in touching that lone wing/Recall the years before her mind/Became a bitter, an abstract thing,' it seems he is ruefully lamenting her condition as a prisoner in solitary confinement, and wishes if Markievicz could be transported back to the days of her youth when she was not a grey, despondent seagull, but, 'With all youth's lonely wildness stirred/ She seemed to have grown clean and sweet/ Like any rock-bred, sea-borne bird'.¹³ The usage of the transferred epithet in 'youth's lonely wildness' is a powerful evocation of the 'wild Irish girl' trope that originated from Lady Morgan's eponymous novel and came to embody 'sex and violence', 'difficult to possess heroine' and 'rebelliousness' in general perception.¹⁴ The poem is a clear advocacy of the gender dichotomy that was prevalent in Yeats's Ireland, where women were expected to revel in the insouciance of tender age, and to perform their duties as the loyal pillar of support to the usually aggressive man who is more forthcoming, and prone to die at the battlefield. Elizabeth Cullingford conjectures that Yeats viewed the dichotomy of assigned gender roles to men and women as a given legal code which was to be obeyed and not modified men could indulge in multifarious pursuits while women dedicated their lives to the service of others.¹⁵ In 'A Prayer for My Daughter', therefore, Yeats's model of flawless Irish female constitutes women devoid of any opinions as such, and they protect those principles which are based on respite and the prioritisation of familial and conventional norms over the individual's needs and requirements.¹⁶ In other words, a woman's beauty for Yeats possesses enough threat to castrate him symbolically and to subjugate him to their power, just like he was enchanted by Maud Gonne's personality. Such urge for containment of female sexuality and beauty finds its reverberations in Yeats's play *Cathleen ni Houlihan* where Mother Ireland seduces young men to their death with her charm and pleas. Norman Jeffares and A.S. Knowland in their commentary on Yeats's play note that the last line of the play, where Michael's younger brother Patrick informs that the young girl he saw had the gait of a queen, reminded Yeats of the memories of his first encounter with Maud Gonne.¹⁷ They cite a portion of Yeats's *Memoirs* to support this claim: 'Her movements were worthy of her form, and I understood at last that why the poet of antiquity, where we would but speak of face and form, sings, loving some lady, that she paces like a goddess.'¹⁸ Hence, it can be

deduced that Yeats's choice of Maud Gonne to play the titular character of his play *Cathleen ni Houlihan* has more to do with his personal admiration of the woman, who acted as his muse, and inspired him with her charms.

The emergence of women as active agents of their will in the larger socio-political sphere of Ireland, especially with rousing demands for suffrage had posed a considerable threat to the traditional heteronormative monopoly of Irishmen in the nationalist discourse, both in the parliament and in direct combat with the British. Two years after the uprising of Easter 1916, Irish women had won the adult franchise rights. Yeats, who was of the view that women's dedication to a singular opinion ultimately stripped them of their human essence, as evinced in the poem 'A Prayer for my Daughter', had strongly advocated against the intermingling of political with the sexual, and even sent a prayer to the Almighty to save his daughter from developing an intellectual frame of mind, one that will lead her to form informed opinions 'An intellectual hatred is the worst/So let her think opinions are accursed'.¹⁹ In all probability, Yeats is expressing his anxiety about women who venture out from the private domain of the sacred to the public domain of the profane, thus making themselves available for public scrutiny and consumption, like the conventionally despised harlot or the 'Fallen Woman' in general consciousness. Equating the revolutionary intellectual women's sexual identity with that of dehumanisation and disintegration might also indicate a far gruesome perception of a prostitute figure in common impression one who fritters away her youth too soon, and serves others with no hope for redemption from misery. In all the poems of the poet discussed here, the lamentation for loss of the women's youthfulness is an ever-recurring image. Such threnodic strains have a deeper connotation in their striking similarity to Yeats's perception of Ireland as a woman. In *Cathleen ni Houlihan*, he paints a picture of Ireland as the dilapidated sacrificial mother, whose youth has been lost due to the ravages caused by political struggles and foreign invasion.

A product of the collaboration of Lady Augusta Gregory and William Butler Yeats, *Cathleen ni Houlihan* is a play that draws upon Irish folk mythology to instil patriotic fervour in the hearts of the Irish masses. The titular character's personality is an allusion to the mythical figure of Kathleen Ni Houlihan, implying, 'Kathleen, daughter of Houlihan'. The character of Kathleen had been frequently invoked in the discourse of Irish

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cultural nationalism, as an old woman personified who can regain her youth and glory only when her Irish sons will shed their blood for her against the enemy, the British. As Richard Kearney theorises, the 1916 Proclamation of the 'Provisional Government of Irish Republic' was largely influenced by the mythic representation of Ireland in the general population's cognisance as a wronged woman, which was invoked deliberately in the rallying call of 'Ireland, through us, summons her children to her flag and strikes for freedom'.²⁰ The stimulation of the nationalist spirit was made possible by channelizing the appeal for independence through the image of Ireland as mother. The perennial trope of Ireland being identified as the mother-nation, who has been rousing and offering her children to the altar of freedom by invoking the name of God, found its full development in the Gaelic legend of 'Caitlín ní Houlihán'.²¹ Yeats and Lady Gregory dramatised the myth in their one-act play and consolidated its impact as an inspiration for future generations of Irish revolutionaries. The old Cathleen ni Houlihan's call to Michael Gillane to act in her service, as well as her promise of bounty remembrance as patriots in national history had inspired many of Yeats's contemporaries, including Constance Markievicz, who revered it as a 'sort of gospel' in a letter to her sister, Eva Gore-Booth:²²

'OLD WOMAN: It is a hard service they take that help me. [...] many a child will be born and there will be no father at its christening to give it a name. They that have red cheeks will have pale cheeks for my sake, and for all that, they will think they are well paid.

[She goes out; her voice is heard outside singing

They shall be remembered for ever,

They shall be alive for ever,

They shall be speaking for ever,

The people shall hear them for ever.²³

Ironically, what Constance failed to see was the relegation of women to domesticity in the text of the play. Yeats could afford to let Maud Gonne dress up as Mother Ireland and bring her to life, but he did not advocate that women could also respond to the call in a manner that involves them participating in frontal combats or direct action. Indeed, the old woman in the play addresses her plea only to Michael, the eldest son, in the prime of

his youth, and not any of the women, not even Delia, Michael's fiancée. Furthermore, the depiction of Cathleen as an old woman making frequent allusions to pastoral landscape and activities in her speeches could be seen as an attempt to juxtapose Ireland as the anti-industrialist, primieval land against the heartland of Industrial-Revolution-England, which had exploited the resources of the former to augment their empire: 'The hope of getting my beautiful fields back again; the hope of putting strangers out of my house'.²⁴ Thus, the image of the passive, pastoral femininity constructed through the persona of Cathleen ni Houlihan was massively propagated in the twentieth-century discourse of nationhood. The formation of women's radical political organisations such as the Inghinidhe nah Éireann (1900), and the Cumannnam Ban (1914) had been a menacing presence for the political hierarchy of their traditionally male-dominated counterparts. While the question might arise in this regard as to how could Yeats let Maud Gonne and her peers participate in the staging of Cathleen ni Houlihan, the answer lies in Yeats's own comment on Maud Gonne's depiction of Cathleen: 'Miss Maud Gonne played very finely and her great height made Cathleen seem a divine being fallen into our mortal infirmity'.²⁵ Having Maud Gonne portray Cathleen ni Houlihan served dual purposes for Yeats: one, it consolidated his perception of women as being the passive inspirations behind the aggressive acts of patriotic valour of Irishmen. Secondly, his idealisation of Maud Gonne as a muse conflated with the image of Cathleen as a muse for Michael Gillane. Given the emergence of the Irish suffragette movement around this time, the idealisation of Cathleen ni Houlihan as the national mother figure would only help to strengthen the male monopoly in the freedom struggle. Hence, we can sense Yeats's adverse response to the militant nationalism of Constance Markievicz. He tried to endorse a trope of Irish female which was signified by sexual chastity, passivity, and closeness with nature as opposed to the largely urban, sexually ambiguous, and politically powerful English seductress. As Elizabeth Cullingford affirms, 'Yeats's treatment of women reveals a very striking split between theory and practice. Despite his poetic advocacy of the woman "who gives up all her mind"²⁶ [...] and concentrates on the culture of the body, many of the women he admired and loved were of a very different stamp'.²⁷ Cullingford notes how the women Yeats loved, such as Maud Gonne and Constance Markievicz were emancipated women, although, theoretically, Yeats detested emancipated

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women.²⁸ Through Cathleen, he also propagated the role of the mother's sacrifice as the ideal for Irish women. However, the ambivalence regarding women's sexuality is also evident in the transformation of old Cathleen to a young woman at the end of the play 'a young girl, and she had the walk of a queen'.²⁹ The fact that Cathleen's youth is restored by the bloodshed and the consequent sacrifice of the lives of young men for her sake can pose her as a dangerous seductress whose intentions are fatalistic for others. Cathleen, therefore, and by extension, Constance Markievicz in 'Easter 1916', is an epitome of the 'terrible beauty' they embody both the Madonna and the seductress, and have the power to both stabilise and threaten masculinity. The assertion of the feminine will, or the woman's voice and wish over the man is viewed as an attempt to symbolically castrate the heterosexual male. Both sexual seduction and radical aggression in the female can destabilise the heteronormative structure of society, and consequently, the conventional politics. Eagleton explains that 'the psychoanalytic mechanisms of that famous oxymoron 'terrible beauty' are thus particularly complex. As an image, it condenses together anxiety, sadistic aggression, idealisation and defence'.³⁰ By employing this trope within the larger locale of 'Easter 1916', Yeats both idealised and criticised the uprising. Through the invocation of the myth of Cathleen ni Houlihan, he tried to contain its disruption of the existing socio-political order. Indeed, Yeats's anxiety regarding the characterisation of Cathleen ni Houlihan, and its effect on the general populace was openly expressed in 'Man and the Echo', a poem Yeats wrote in 1930: 'Did that play of mine send out/ Certain men the English shot?'³¹ The popularity of a mythical mother-seductress figure in the national consciousness was threatening enough for Yeats's heteronormative ideals. Such antinomy surrounding the representation of women in Irish nationalism is also present in Neil Jordan's film, *Michael Collins*, which hagiographises the life of Michael Collins, one of the key figures of the Irish struggle for independence from the British Empire.

After the expository scene, the film transports the audience back to the time of the Easter Rising, when the key rebels who took part in Easter Rising are defeated in the gunfire, and they surrender to the British army.³² The audience gets the first glimpse of Michael Collins in person, putting down his firearms, and retreating along with his friend Harry Boland.

Ironically, it is a scene that involves all-male rebels, and no women are visible on sight. The G Division of the section of Dublin Metropolitan Police identify the main leaders of the uprising, calling out the last names of Padraic Pearse, James Connolly, Thomas MacDonagh and Tom Clarke; however, they do not spot or mention any of the female revolutionaries like Constance Markievicz.³³ Like in the commemorative last stanza of Yeats's poem, her presence too is erased from Jordan's depiction of Easter 1916. However, it was not only Markievicz, whose presence was 'airbrushed from history', but another notable member of the Cumann na mBan, Elizabeth O'Farrell. She had been instrumental in setting the terms of the surrender of the rebels to Brigadier General and bringing an end to the Easter 1916 week. The re-examination of a popular photo depicting Pearse's surrender to O'Lowe reveals that O'Farrell was present by his side, negotiating the terms of the surrender, but in the earlier publications of the photo, her feet were concealed with an airbrush.³⁴ Neither Yeats nor Jordan accords a space to mention the contributions of O'Farrell, who dispatched necessary items like food and ammunition for the other rebels and nursed them. It must be remembered that Yeats wrote 'Easter 1916' as a commemorative elegy for he 'wanted to praise those rebels' bravery, their love of Ireland, and for a Republic that did not yet exist'.³⁵ Hence, his omission of an important woman figure in the history of the uprising of Easter 1916 cannot be simply dismissed by citing poetic license, especially when he meticulously reminisces about the specific rebels and their characteristic traits. Neither can it be regarded as a harmless omission on part of Jordan, but a significant one considering the fact that in the scene of the defeat of the freedom fighters of Easter 1916, he deliberately omits all women figures. It is ironical, furthermore, on his part that he can include a minor female character that helped Collins by smuggling letters, but omits important women personalities like Constance de Markievicz and Elizabeth O'Farrell women who did not act as passive contributors, but shunned the enclosures of the privacy of domesticity and participated in the struggle. Similarly, in *Michael Collins*, the status of the national hero is accorded in both reproductions of Easter 1916 to the hypermasculine leaders of the rebellion, and Eamon de Valera, who advocates a more moderate line of action, is portrayed in a negative light, as a person more concerned in jeopardising Michael Collins's rise to fame than seeking the

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ultimate good of his country. Jordan upholds the radical form of nationalism in his film, inextricably linked with the display of aggressive masculinity, one that was proclaimed by Pearse himself, 'bloodshed is a cleansing and sanctifying thing, and the nation which regards it as the final horror has lost its manhood'.³⁶ The loss of masculine identity or the adoption of feminine or womanly traits is therefore conceived as undesirable in the nationalist struggle, for women are relegated to the roles of the sacrificing relatives of the male martyrs or the seductive supporters of the movement who encourage the men to shed blood for their motherland, perpetuating the role that has been set by the mythical figure of Cathleen ni Houlihan. Jordan's deliberate shift of Kitty Kiernan to a background character, who only serves as a plot device to drive apart Collins and Boland is typical of the male-dominated patriarchal narratives of nationalism where women's voices are suppressed, and demonised to make them appear as the main culprit in thwarting the unity of the nationalist leaders.

The first encounter between Kitty and Michael on-screen happens in an idyllic pastoral setting, where she nurses his wounds. To Collins's enquiry, if she's a nurse, she retorts that she has no identity except being the daughter of her father.³⁷ It is probably an accusation, an indictment of the standard rhetoric propagated by the historiographers, chroniclers of heteronormative nationalism that women are meant to embody the private sphere, the realm of domesticity, nurturance and care of the sons of Ireland, the ones who will grow up to sacrifice their lives for their country. David Fitzpatrick writes:

Despite the plethora of biographies of Maud Gonne and Constance Markievicz, and Margaret Ward's study of nationalist women's organisations entitled *Unmanageable revolutionaries: women and Irish nationalism* (London 1983), we lack systematic analysis of the manner in which women were mobilised as either nationalists or unionists.³⁸

The countryside setting of Kitty's father's inn, where she is seen catering to tenants and entertaining them with songs, in the homely atmosphere of a family gathering, maps the image of the ideal Irish woman as intimately connected to nature and familial bonds, one who is sharply contrasted with the vocal, urbanised, suffragette rebels who prioritised their rights and

aspirations. We can sense an evocation of the Cathleen ni Houlihan trope here, by drawing a parallel to the setting of Kitty and Michael's first meet to that of the first encounter between Kathleen and Michael Gillane. Not only are the names almost identical (Kitty Kiernan's real name was Catherine) but the fact that both Michael and Harry Boland are enticed by her shows that they are willing to sacrifice their friendship for her sake. The love triangle that ensues once both friends are acquainted with Kitty, carries the premonition that the conclusion will not be too amicable for any of the three. At Dublin, Michael playfully professes to 'wrestle with' Boland for her affection, although his feelings were not as playful as he tries to make them appear. When Harry leaves Ireland with De Valera, keeping Kitty in Michael's custody, the two bond leading to Kitty ultimately rejecting Boland's marriage proposal and getting engaged to Collins. The feeling of betrayal that Boland experiences irrevocably changes the dynamics of his relationship with Michael Collins, and in a scene in the Vaughn Hotel, after the De Valera and his supporters walk out on the popular support for the Dali vote of Peace Treaty, Boland says that he is trying to be happy over the news of their engagement and that he misses the old days. Collins too wistfully reiterates Boland's wish. The personal becomes the political as we see the macro-rift of the political line of action that is caused by De Valera between Collins and Boland being mirrored in the micro-rift of the gender dynamics caused by Kitty's decision. Kitty is portrayed in somewhat of an unfavourable light here, making her the dangerous seductress or the modern Irish femme fatale whose sexuality can be a threat to the homosocial bonding between two hypermasculine men. Ironically, Eamon De Valera, who, in the movie, pits Boland against Collins for his ulterior motives of preventing Michael Collins from overshadowing him, is clad in the dress of a prostitute when escaping from Lincoln Jail with the help of the two comrades and is referred to as 'Kathleen' who 'whored for Ireland'.³⁹ His stature, unlike the physically sturdy Collins and Boland, makes him more suited to dress up as a woman. In both cases, the cynosure of conflict is two persons who are typically aligned with the moderate course of politics one, a woman, the other, dressed like one. Furthermore, a parallel can be drawn showing how Collins and Boland try to ensure both Kitty and De Valera's safety, in potentially fatal situations, thus hinting at Kiernan and De Valera being the representations of the seductive side of Mother Ireland, who lures the young Irish men into protecting her and

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ultimately ending their lives. Jordan's subtle implications that the rivalry between the two friends-turned-suitors was sown by the presence of Kitty, and exacerbated by Eamon de Valera indicates that he, too, views non-hypermasculine, non-radical characters as a threat to the existence of patriarchal nationalism that formed the majoritarian narrative of Irish struggle. Towards the end, both Harry and Michael are assassinated by their rival factions, representing two parties to the Civil War; and thus Jordan emphasises that De Valera, and on a minor scale, Kitty Kiernan are the ones responsible for the untimely death of these young men, who are not even married before they meet their ends – another hint at the play *Cathleen ni Houlihan*, where Michael Gillane is dissuaded from getting married to die for the old Cathleen-Mother Ireland figure, the country that lures young patriots to a violent death.

Yeats's ideal role for women partaking in the Irish revolution is reflected in Jordan's depiction of a minor female character, Rosie. She is a washerwoman, and an attendant to Mr. Soames, a British intelligence officer sent to investigate the Irish guerrilla warriors. She gives information to Collins about Soames's daily routine and gives him a few pieces of paper she retrieved from his linen, from which Collins finds valuable information about the British.⁴⁰ Rosie's role is minimal, and her duty is to practically supply information to the Irish freedom fighters, but not participate in the actual fight. Her profession is washing clothes, a domestic chore usually assigned to women. She is passive, and does not question her situation, nor does she show any curiosity about the information she retrieved from Soames. She is also subservient to her partner, who chaperones her meeting with Collins. Hence, Rosie is the ideal Irish female for nationalist writers and filmmakers, who think a woman's active participation in the freedom struggle costs not only her youth, but the lives of others.

Conclusion

Both Yeats and Jordan choose to celebrate the masculine narrative of the Irish freedom struggle, making the women marginal characters in their text. Eagleton writes, 'Woman as daughter, mother, madonna, rose of Ireland, aristocratic matriarch is woman as desexualised, defused, rendered safe, and so an appropriate social symbol of a non-violent, courteous social order'⁴¹ Yeats's disapproval of Constance Markievicz's political stance and

her radical nationalism, and Jordan's portrayal of Kitty Kiernan as the seductive Irishwoman who becomes a site of conquest for Harry Boland and Michel Collins, shows that women have always been passive receptacles of the male action, and the dominant narrative of Irish history, as portrayed in nationalist literature and films would never acknowledge their participation in gaining sovereignty. Gerardine Meaney asserts that such tradition began from the twentieth century, in the 1940s, when 'a series of Irish or Irish American actresses, or actresses who played Irish roles, played this wild Irish girl figure with varying emphasis on her "rebelliousness, seductiveness, tragic potential, moral ambiguity and red, or very dark hair."⁴² Jordan, keeping faithful to that tradition of Irish depiction on screen, and without questioning its impact, portrays Kitty Kiernan, that is, Julia Roberts' character with all the characteristics mentioned above. Kiernan rebels against being dragged by Michael out of Vaughn Hotel or being guarded by Michael, as per the request of Harry, Kitty's former lover and Michael's best friend. She also expresses her indignation at being asked to choose any one of the men in the very beginning of their first encounter in the film. Her moral dilemma, much later, of falling in love with Michael, despite being betrothed to Harry, shows that she values her own happiness. However, Jordan paints her moral confusion in a light of deliberate seduction of both men and then vying for the man who is conventionally more masculine, and therefore, attractive. She is perceived in the film as a symbol of the nationalist women of Ireland, who are depicted either in terms of a lack or absence of physical prowess, which makes them seduce or plead with masculine, valiant men to be their guardians of honour, in accordance with the tradition set by *Cathleen Ni Houlihan*. Even if they do not, the robust Irish man considers it his duty to protect the 'weak' female, who becomes a commodity to be safeguarded or to be transacted in a betting game, as Michael Collins playfully proposes to bet for Kitty's affection with Harry. And for the woman who has adopted the role of a mother, she is perceived as the archetypal Madonna figure who ought to sacrifice her sons for the sake of the country, like old Cathleen. As Meaney points out again, such a woman represents the 'Mother Ireland' figure, who we have seen in Yeats's play *Cathleen ni Houlihan*, as the 'suffering and nurturing mother', who will nourish valiant patriots with her milk only to sacrifice them for the greater cause of freedom. Ireland, in Yeats's play, is the mother who

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brought up Michael Gillane on the fruit of her land, and now, she asks the mature son to avenge her plight. Both types or, stereotypes of women are subjected to the antiquated binaries of Madonna/whore irrespective of whichever role they play, and even men, who cannot live up to the ideal of the alpha male, are considered effeminate, and relegated to the aforementioned binary, as in the case of De Valera. Joseph Valente reiterates a similar opinion about the erasure of women from the patriarchal historiography of Ireland:

In a display of what Ashis Nandy called “colonial hypermasculinity”, writers like Pearse, Moran, Griffiths, Gonne, Robinson and Yeats, tended to underwrite vigorously the normative code of gender hierarchy but to contest its customary translation into the register of ethno-colonial difference either by adducing the virility of the Irish warrior tradition, including its latest avatar, their own avowed militancy, or by insisting on the domestic operation of patriarchal law, including its latest avatar, petty-bourgeois familiarism. These figures answer British paternalism by tapping into the history and traditional lore of Ireland to produce the codes and institutions of a native patriarchy.⁴³

Indeed, Yeats's Cathleen ni Houlihan, and Padraic Pearse's 'The Murder Machine' bear testimony to the fact of their resorting to one aspect of patriarchy to counter another form as represented by the British colonialists. Pearse states, 'The education system here is clearly designed by our masters in order to make us willing or at least manageable slaves. It has made some of the Irishmen not slaves merely, but very eunuchs, with the indifference and cruelty of eunuchs; kinless beings, who serve for pay a master that they neither love nor hate'.⁴⁴ While Padraic Pearse correctly identifies the hegemony of colonial supremacy that was perpetuated in Ireland by the British education system, his mode of countering it reeks of transphobia, and perhaps, a fear of castration. As a literary historian obsessed with the so-called danger posed to the masculinity of Irishmen by British education, he is more interested in endorsing the hypermasculinity of the nationalist struggle rather than opting for a gender-inclusive approach towards freedom fighters. And when Yeats, himself an active supporter of a form of nationalism which would be fuelled by a passive but sacrificial mother figure, for whom, 'so many had gone to their death' as he

wrote in a note to Lady Gregory; commemorates Pearse in his poem 'Easter 1916', as a martyr, one cannot help but wonder whether he was really against the heteronormative approach to nationalism.⁴⁵

Hence, the need of the hour is to construct an alternative historiography of Irish women, where their voices would not get stifled by nationalist poets and directors and they would be able to challenge a narrative that forces them into binaries and fetishises them.

Endnotes:

- 1 William Butler Yeats, 'Easter 1916' from *Michael Robertes and the Dancer in The Variorum Edition of the Poems of W.B. Yeats*, eds. Peter Allt and Russell K. Alspach (1920; 5th Reprint. New York: The Macmillan Company, 1971), p.392.
- 2 Mollie Clarke, 'Constance Markievicz: The making of a rebel Countess', *The National Archives* (2 April 2021), <https://blog.nationalarchives.gov.uk/constance-markievicz-the-making-of-a-rebel-countess/>. Accessed 27.07.2021.
- 3 Constance Markievicz, 'Women, Ideals and Nation', *In Their Own Voice: Women and Irish Nationalism* (Cork: Attic Press, 2001), pp. 30-34.
- 4 Yeats, 'Easter 1916', p. 392.
- 5 Yeats, 'Easter 1916', p.393.
- 6 Yeats, 'Easter 1916', p.392.
- 7 Yeats, 'Easter 1916', p.394.
- 8 Constance de Markievicz, 'A Battle Hymn (dedicated to the Irish Citizen Army)', music arranged by Joseph M. Crofts (Dublin: The Art Depot, 1917), *Irish Traditional Music Archive*, <https://www.itma.ie/digital-library/text/battle-hymn>. Accessed 18.09.2021.
- 9 Terry Eagleton, 'Politics and Sexuality in W.B.Yeats', *The Crane Bag* 9.2 (1985): 138-142. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/30059835. Accessed 27.02.2021.
- 10 Yeats, 'Crazy Jane Talks with the Bishop' in *The Winding Star and Other Poems, The Variorum Edition of the Poems of W.B. Yeats*, p.513.
- 11 Michael T. Foy and Brian Baron, 'Suppressions, Courts Martial and Executions', *The Easter Rising* (United Kingdom: History Press, 2011), p.303.
- 12 Yeats, 'Easter 1916', p. 392.
- 13 Yeats, 'On A Political Prisoner', *Michael Robertes and the Dancer*, p.397.

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- 14 Gerardine Meaney, 'Landscapes of desire: Women and Ireland on film', *Women: A Cultural Review*, 9.3 (2008):237-51.
- 15 Elizabeth Butler Cullingford, 'Yeats and Women: *Michael Robartes and the Dancer*', *Yeats and Women*, ed. Deirdre Toomey (2nd ed., United Kingdom: Palgrave Macmillan UK, 1997), p. 224.
- 16 William Butler Yeats, 'A Prayer for my Daughter', *Michael Robertes and the Dancer*, p.405.
- 17 A. Norman Jeffares and A.S. Knowland, *A Commentary on the Collected Plays of W.B. Yeats* (London and Basingstoke: The Macmillan Press, 1975), p.36.
- 18 Yeats, *Memoirs*, ed. Denis Donoghue (Michigan State University: MacMillan, 1973), p. 40.
- 19 Yeats, 'A Prayer for my Daughter', p.405.
- 20 Richard Kearney, 'Ideological Narratives', *Transitions: Narratives in Modern Irish Culture* (Manchester: Manchester UP, 1988), p. 210.
- 21 Richard Kearney, *Transitions: Narratives in Modern Irish Culture*, p. 211.
- 22 Constance Markievicz, *Prison Letters of Countess Markievicz* (Great Britain: Longman's Green and Company, 1934), p.241.
- 23 William Butler Yeats, *Cathleen ni Houlihan, The Variorum Edition of the Plays of W.B. Yeats*, p. 229.
- 24 William Butler Yeats, *Cathleen ni Houlihan*, p.226.
- 25 Yeats, 'Letter to Lady Gregory dated February 1903', *Notes, Cathleen Ni Houlihan, The Variorum Edition of the Plays of W.B. Yeats*, p.233.
- 26 "who gives up all her mind" Cullingford cites this clause from page 345 of the Variorum Edition of Yeats's plays.
- 27 Elizabeth Butler Cullingford, 'Yeats and Women: *Michael Robartes and the Dancer*', *Yeats and Women*, pp. 247-48.
- 28 Elizabeth Butler Cullingford, 'Yeats and Women: *Michael Robartes and the Dancer*', p.248.
- 29 William Butler Yeats, *Cathleen ni Houlihan*, p. 231.
- 30 Terry Eagleton, 'Politics and Sexuality in W.B. Yeats' p. 138.
- 31 William Butler Yeats, 'Man and The Echo', *Last Poems, The Variorum Edition of the Poems of W.B. Yeats*, p. 632.
- 32 Neil Jordan, *Michael Collins*, Direction by Neil Jordan, screenplay and story by Neil Jordan, performances by Aidan Quinn, Alan Rickman, Ian Hart, Julia Roberts, Liam Neeson and Stephen Rea, Warner Bros., 1998, 00:03:12-00:03:28.

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- 33 Jordan, *Michael Collins*, 00:04:21-00:04:45.
- 34 Catherine Cox, 'Elizabeth O'Farrell: The woman airbrushed from history.' *Independent.ie*, 4 Feb.2016, www.independent.ie/irish-news/1916/rank-and-file/elizabeth-ofarrell-the-woman-airbrushed-from-history-34413628.html. Accessed 28.02.2021.
- 35 Helen Vendler, 'Lyric Form in Yeats's Poetry', *Our Secret Discipline: Yeats and Lyric Form* (United Kingdom: Harvard University Press, 2007), p.17.
- 36 Padraic H. Pearse, 'The Coming Revolution'in*The Complete Works of Padraic H. Pearse: Political Writings and Speeches* (Dublin: Phoenix, 1924), p. 99.
- 37 Jordan. *Michael Collins*, 00:11:18-00:11:55.
- 38 David Fitzpatrick. 'Review Article: Women, Gender and the Writing of Irish History', *Irish Historical Studies* 27.107 (1991):267-273. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/30006541. Accessed 26.07.2021.
- 39 Jordan, *Michael Collins*, 00:43:40-00:43:47.
- 40 Jordan, *Michael Collins*, 00:55:52-00:56:51.
- 41 Eagleton, 'Politics and Sexuality in W.B. Yeats', p.140.
- 42 Gerardine Meaney, 'Landscapes of desire: Women and Ireland on film', p.240.
- 43 Joseph Valente, 'The Myth of Sovereignty: Gender in the Literature of Irish Nationalism', *ELH* 61.1 (1994):189-210, *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/2873438. Accessed 26.07.2021.
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- 45 William Butler Yeats, 'Letter to Lady Gregory dated February 1903', *Notes, Cathleen Ni Houlihan*, p.233.