

**Inhabiting and Writing from the 'Third Space':
Hybrid Feminism in Eavan Boland's Outside History**

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Abstract

This paper argues that Homi Bhabha's theory of the "Third Space" offers an apt theoretical framework to critically attempt to define the feminist stance Boland adopts in *Outside History*. The initial argument of the paper is that Boland's foray into feminism is entirely distinguished from the 'separatists'; it resembles the hybrid model Bhabha devised for what he calls the post-colonial 'strategic intellectual'. Similarities between the parameters of both postcolonial and feminist discourses are pointed out at the beginning of the paper, and certain passages from Boland's views on feminism are juxtaposed with the basic concepts of Bhabha's theory in an attempt to show that Boland's views are almost a feminist recasting of Bhabha's theory of the 'Third Space'. As the paper proceeds in discussing some of poems from *outside History*, the hybridity of Boland's feminism is illustrated in a variety of ways. A feminist reading of poems such as "The Making of an Irish Goddess", "The Achill Woman" and "What we Lost" provides ample instances of what I define as 'Boland's hybrid feminism'. A revisionist reading of other poems such as the title poem "Outside History" is also provided in an attempt to further demarcate Boland's feminism from the conventions adopted by the 'separatists'. The paper concludes by redefining Boland's feminism as a stance that attempts to modify woman's status within the limits and demands of the patriarchal/nationalist society while at the same time managing to create an independent female identity and voice.

المحيا والكتابة من خلال "الفضاء الثالث":
الأنثوية المهجنة في ديوان "خارج التاريخ" لإيفان بولند

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ملخص

يتبنى هذا البحث نظرية "الفضاء الثالث" لهومي بهابا كإطار نظري لقراءة ديوان "خارج التاريخ" لإيفان بولند. يبدأ البحث باستعراض أوجه التشابه بين الآراء التي تبنتها إيفان بولند لتعريف المنهج الأنثوي وتلك العناصر التي حددها هومي بهابا لما يسمى بنظرية "الفضاء الثالث" في مجال النقد الأدبي لمرحلة ما بعد الاستعمار. يلخص البحث في مقدمته بأن معظم آراء إيفان بولند للنهج الأنثوي في الكتابة الأدبية ما هي إلا إعادة صياغة للنظرية "الفضاء الثالث" من منظور أنثوي. ينتقل الباحث بعد ذلك للتدليل على ما سماه بالأنثوية المهجنة عند إيفان بولند وذلك بالاستشهاد بعدد من القصائد من ديوان "خارج التاريخ" يخلص الباحث بان المنهج الأنثوي الذي تبنته إيفان بولند يختلف تماما عن ما يسمى بالمنهج الأنثوي الانفصالي حيث أنها تدعو إلى النظر في تعديل وضع المرأة وذلك في حدود متطلبات المجتمع الذي تعيش فيه، وأيضاً من خلال متطلبات الهوية القومية دون الأخلال بحق المرأة في ان يكون لها هوية مستقلة وصوت مسموع وأن لا ينكر دورها في بناء الوطن.

I know now that I began writing in a country where the word woman and the word poet were almost magnetically opposed.... It became part of my working life, part of my discourse, to see these lives evade and simplify each other. I became used to the flawed space between them. In a sense, I found my poetic voice by shouting across that distance.

(Eavan Boland, *Object Lesson*, xi)

Separatist thinking is a persuasive and dangerous influence on any woman poet writing today. It tempts her to disregard the whole poetic past as patriarchal betrayal. It pleads with her to disregard the complexities of true feeling for the relative simplicity of anger.

(Eavan Boland, *Object Lesson*, 245)

On coming across statements like these in the above epigraphs, we intuitively perceive that if we are to read Eavan Boland's poetry, we are expecting to read a new and distinct type of feminist poetry. And while we might be tempted to hastily chalk this feeling up to the acknowledged influence of Adrienne Rich, the feeling of difference extends beyond Boland's attempt to highlight the singularity and cultural/historical peculiarities of the Irish woman-poet's experience, silenced by dominant patriarchal nationalist discourses. For one thing, unlike Rich whose body of work is arguably characterized by an attempt to enact a female experience undefined by men and male paradigms, Boland's critique of 'separatist thinking' indicates that for her the woman-poet's identity can not be developed from a monolithic

designation, but from junctures and spaces where differences collide and intermingle. Implied in this critique, moreover, is the assumption that feminists must reconsider the 'poetic past', not as a 'patriarchal betrayal', but as a possible means offering a larger platform of resistance. By calling attention to the complex relationship between the feminist poet and the peculiarities of her cultural tradition, Boland addresses her own example as someone who finds her poetic voice in the 'flawed space' – that interstitial space which implies, as Rachel Galvin argues, a refusal "to be constrained by socially determined boundaries" and allows Boland "to shift between identities and navigate between spheres in her poetry" (n. page). The 'flawed space' as a spatial metaphor suggests the sense of dislocation, of inhabiting that interface zone which empowers the feminine self to be reconceived not in terms of a binary opposition between a presupposed strong masculine centre and weak feminine margin, but rather in terms of a third or non-aligned space between and an unsettling to binarisms.

Sounding very much like Homi Bhabha's theory of the 'Third Space' which argues for a new discursive strategy to negotiate the issue of 'hybrid identity' away and against the rigid binary of dominance and subjugation under post-colonial conditions, Boland's articulation of the 'flawed space' as a site of resistance seems to allow transformative potentials for the marginalized Irish woman-poet to intervene in the process of domination. What Boland presents both in her critique of the 'separatists' and in her concept of the 'flawed space', I would suggest, is in fact a feminist recasting of Bhabha's model of the post-colonial "strategic intellectual" who "attempts to track the processes of displacement and realignment that are already at work, constructing something different and hybrid, a third space that does not simply revise or invert the dualities, but *revalues* the ideological bases of division and difference" ("Postcolonial Authority", 58 [emphasis original]).¹ Similarly, the 'flawed space' which Boland figuratively and literary inhabits is in itself a strategic attempt to maintain a constantly self-reflexive positionality with respect to the culture in which the 'woman-poet' suffers a double-bind produced by what Boland has called the tendency in Irish literature

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and tradition to fuse the national and the feminine, “where the nation became a woman, and the woman took on a national posture” (*Object Lessons*, 135). Aware of the fact that Irish nationalism(s) not only reinforces Irish women in their position of passivity, but also that literature in this project has often been androcentric, monolithic in its representation of the nation in the image of the female body, Boland deploys a subversive poetics in her textual flawed/third space in an attempt to challenge the dual hegemonic discourse of patriarchy and nationalism.

Consequently, the question that the reader of Boland’s poetry will ultimately ask is: If Boland has distanced herself from the separatists whom, she maintains, are endorsing a dangerous ideology, how different then is her feminist poetics from the patriarchal-nationalist ‘poetic past’ she simultaneously engages with and appropriates but nevertheless aims to subvert? Here it can be argued that even though Boland leans towards this ‘poetic past’, her primary task is to unearth its dissymetries and contradictions. In doing so, however, she does not collude with patriarchal nationalist discourse, but endeavours to stage its figuring of the nation as female body as one of the main obstacles that hinders Irish women’s articulation of their own material subjectivity. As Boland has declared, “Rather than accept the nation as it appeared in Irish poetry, with its queens and muses, I felt the time had come to rework those images by exploring the emblematic relation between my own feminine experience and a national past” (*Object Lessons*, 148). For Boland, engagement with the patriarchal- nationalist discourse is a necessary step to reconfigure Irish nationality and to redeem women as integral to the construction of Irish nationhood. It is, then, a process of renovation, making new spaces beyond the residual semantics of dualism, that enables Boland to create a feminist poetics that is, to use Bhabha’s terms, “neither the One [the separatists] nor the Other [the patriarchal poetic past] but something *else besides*, which contests the terms and territories of both” (*Location*, 41 [emphasis original]).

Those in Bhabha’s ‘Third Space’ take on an ambivalent and in-between identity, opposing the expected way in which they should

be represented. The consequence of this stance, Bhabha maintains, is an ambiguity that resulted from a struggle to enunciate a new self-identity (*Location*, 56). These two features are embedded in Boland's *Outside History*.² Replete with allusions to other female mythical and real figures perhaps more than any other collection by Boland, *Outside History* offers a comprehensive response to the representation of Irish nation in the emblematic figure of Irish woman. What is particularly interesting about the history of female figures in *Outside History* is how the gap between the past and the present is bridged by merging the female poet-speaker with the other female figures into one voice. More interesting still, the poetic persona's palpable presence in both the recalled past and the exposed present, while affirming the dual and 'in-between' identity of the female poet-speaker, makes it also difficult to ascertain whether the events reinterpreted are really about the female figure from the past or the poet-speaker in the present. Structurally, then, the poetic persona's position in virtually all poems in *Outside History* creates two fundamental tensions similar to those Bhabha assigned to the subject who inhabits the 'Third Space'.

Nowhere in the three sections of *Outside History* is this more evident than in "The Making of an Irish Goddess". Most Boland scholars have read the poem as a protest against the traditional conception of Irish femininity. Jeannette E. Riley, for instance, argues that it illustrates Boland's "growing concern with the emblematic space women occupy in Ireland and her desire to ensure that Irish poetry should not defeat women twice: once by Irish male writers, and once by Irish written history" (25). The classical female mythical figures that serve as an antidote are Ceres and her daughter Persephone whose story recurs frequently in Boland's poetry. Kidnapped by Hades, god of the underworld, who is instructed by Aphrodite to abduct Persephone in order to deflower her, Persephone was separated from her mother Ceres (goddess of all growing things and seasons) and forced to marry Hades. Raged by the absence of her daughter, Ceres cursed the earth which became infertile until Zeus, king of Gods, is forced to comply with Ceres' request of a reunion with her daughter, under the condition that Persephone must return to

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her husband in the underworld for a certain portion of the year during which Ceres will again prevent the fertility of the earth for that same portion of time.³

“The Making of an Irish Goddess” opens with an enumeration of Ceres’ suffering:

Ceres went to hell
With no sense of time.

When she looked back
All that she could see was

The arteries of silver in the rock,
The diligence of rivers always at one level,
Wheat at one height,
Leaves of a single colour,
The same distance in the usual light;

A seasonless, unscarred earth. (*OH*, 31)

These lines point directly to the consequences of Hades’ violent intervention in the relationship between Persephone and Ceres, a relationship that generates and nurtures the grain which sustains the human inhabitants and ensures the survival of future generation. Hades’ violent disruption of such a partnership results in a curtailment of fertility, so “The diligence of rivers always at one level / Wheat at one height, / Leaves of a single colour”. As such, Ceres’ story proves of particular relevance for Boland since it not only serves as an emblem of the situation of contemporary Irish women, but furnishes a prototype of her favourite theme: the need to unsettle the nationalists’

idea of woman as an (passive) icon of Irishness. The correlation here is between the male mythical god who regards the Other as an object to be conquered and possessed, and Irish male authors whose iconization of Ireland in the image of woman has turned Irish women from subjects to objects, therefore, regarding them also as an Other who must be dominated and possessed.

In the second half of the poem Boland conflates the boundaries between the past and the present, the signified and the signifier, or the self and its mythical counterpart. Boland achieves these connotations by invoking what might be called 'mythic dualism'. This results primarily from the presence of two distinct temporal realms: the recalled past of the embedded myth and the narrative present of the poetic persona, both of which feature the female-poet speaker as participant in events.

In this second part, the temporal abyss between pre-historic past and present is bridged. The sufferings of both the modern female speaker and her archetypal counterpart are also matched:

But I need time –
my flesh and that history –
to make the same descent.

In my body,
Neither young now nor fertile,
And with the marks of childbirth
Still on it,

in my gestures –
the way I pin my hair to hide
the stitched, healed blemish of a scar –
must be

an accurate inscription
of that agony: (*OH*, 31)

Thus, Boland uses mythological thematic texture, ambiguously merging past and present, herself as a dark Ceres, ageing and no longer a fertile who yearns not for a reunion with her daughter but for a *similar descent* to the underworld. This yearning provides a number of interpretive variants. First, a reading of this yearning in relation to other poems by Boland that also utilizes the myth of Ceres and Persephone might suggest that Boland here proposes a ‘descent’ that would prelude an ascent back to a new life, part of a transformative process. In her discussion of Boland’s “The Pomegranate”, for instance, Pilar Villar-Argáiz argues that:

Boland finds the Ceres and Persephone legend both an appropriate representation of the complexity of mother daughter relation and a suitable site to reflect her insight, and transformation. The underworld becomes for Boland, just as for Persephone, a ‘dark’ but ‘fertile’ space in her life. It is a psychological space where one can experience death, the potential for transformation, and rebirth. (155)

Second, Persephone’s ‘descent’ to the underworld promoted her companions to work collaboratively with Ceres to find her. Moreover, Persephone’s enigmatic disappearance forced them to seek help from all members of the community, either male or female, in their efforts to find the lost girl. Consequently, Persephone’s ‘descent’ promoted dialogue rather than monologue, cooperation and negotiation rather than coercion and submission. One of the essential features associated with the myth of Ceres and which seems to particularly appeal to Irish female poets is that it promotes the need for establishing an egalitarian community as a viable alternative to the patriarchy (Karen Bennett, 19). In this context, the yearning for a ‘similar descent’ in Boland’s poem suggests a reworking of the standard nationalist trope of Mother Ireland appealing to her sons to die for her, since it connotes a

figurative willingness to perform an act of sacrifice for the greater good. Third, both the poem's title and the mythic subtext provide an implicit parallel between Persephone and Irish goddesses whose image figures prominently in nationalist discourse and to whom annual human sacrifice must be made to ensure the fertility of the earth. As such, Boland's yearning for a 'similar descent' can be read alongside the tradition of Irish nationalists who have always envisioned themselves to be responsible for the at-risk female body which symbolizes autonomy and self-rule - for instance, the famous Cathleen Ni Houlihan in Yeats poetry and drama, and 'the bog queen' in Heaney's poetry. It is from these last two perspectives that the longing of the female-poet speaker for a similar 'descent' to the underworld in the poem must be understood, for what Boland is suggesting here is that her retrogression into the myth of Ceres and Persephone is of a double and 'in-between' gesture: it is both an act of resistance to and act of validation of the iconic feminization of the nation in the nationalist discourse. It validates the aspirations of Irish political and cultural nationalists to sustain a national identity through the iconography of Irish woman as long as these aspirations maintain an investment of Irish women in the making of nationhood. At the same time, Boland also appropriates the myth of Ceres and Persephone as a politicized counter-myth in that it contests the reduction of Irish women to a metaphorical role in the nationalist discourse by positing the female figure as repository of potential power. Briefly stated then, in "The Making of an Irish Goddess" Boland melded feminism and nationalism, and yielded an innovative, hybridized poetics which characterizes those writing from the 'Third Space'.

That Boland is consciously involved in this hybridized project of self-representation becomes increasingly apparent in other poems such as "The Achill Woman". Here, however, Boland manages to foreground a direct and explicit image of herself as an outsider, writing from the margin, struggling to bring out the silent voices of Irish women's experiences - of violation, starvation and migration - that are still relegated to the edges of canonical nationalist texts. In her article "Outside History", Boland describes the initial motivation

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and source material that led her to write “The Achill Woman”. It was during an Easter vacation in the suburb when Boland was a college student that she encountered an old Irish woman who used to bring water up to Boland’s cottage. One night, the old woman narrated some episodes from her town’s struggle during the Famine. As Boland recalled, her encounter with the Achill woman is of personal significance since it was the first time she heard apparently authentic but unofficial stories about the Famine:

She was the first person to speak to me with any force about the terrible parish and survival and death which the event had been in these regions. She kept repeating to me that they were great people, the people in the famine. *Great people*. I had never heard that before. She pointed out the beauties of the place. But they themselves, I see now, were a subtext.... And here was Keel itself,.... where the villagers in the famine, she told me, had moved closer to the seashore, the better to eat seaweed. (*Object Lessons*, 124 [emphasis original])

The point to be made here is the distinction Boland made between the official accounts she read before the Achill vacation and her new grasp of the reality of the Famine after her encounter with the Achill woman. In other words, the statements above reflect the coexistence of two opposite claims in pursuit of historical knowledge – ‘History’ as the past and ‘history’ as the narrative of the past. The first of these is an ‘objective’ account of the past that takes empirical data as truth, while the latter points toward an epistemological subjectivism that assumes history as a textualized construct. When applied to the Irish Famine, the distinction Boland made points to the fact that the stories of what happened to the mutilated and starved people are largely lost in the welter of statistics upon which the Grand Narrative of history is based, while the exact details of what actually happened to those people can be reclaimed only from the little narratives of those who experienced the Famine first-hand.

As Christy Burns has noted, critics of Boland have often

addressed “The Achill Woman” as an instance of Boland’s failure to introduce a “new piety” to replace the “Rosaleens and Cathleens” who “have stood as emblematic of Ireland” (223). Oblivious to Boland’s hybrid feminism, those critics are approaching her poetry from what might be called an essentialist angle, expecting Boland to display a radical feminist stance that refuses to compromise with the patriarchal/nationalist norms while also blatantly challenging the conventions and restrictions of the discourses emanated from these norms. As this paper argues, however, Boland’s feminism is of a different kind. It is what I define as hybrid – a feminist stance that attempts to modify woman’s status within the limits and demands of the patriarchal/nationalist society while at the same time managing to create an independent female identity and voice. “The Achill Woman” illustrates this point poignantly. The poem is charged with sentiments indicative of Boland’s ability to negotiate between conflicting demands, as in the opening stanzas:

She came up the hill carrying water.

She wore a half-buttoned, wool cardigan,
a tea-towel round her waist.

She pushed the hair out of her eyes with
her free hand and put the bucked down.

The zinc-music of the handle on the rim
tuned the evening. An Easter moon rose.

In the next-door field a stream was
a fluid sunset; and then, stars.

I remember the cold rosiness of her hands.

She bent down and blew on them like broth.

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And around her waist, on a white background,
In coarse, woven letters, the words 'glass cloth'.

(OH, 27)

Villar-Argazi is perhaps missing the point when she claims that there is nothing "extraordinary" in Boland's description of the Achill woman. Her importance for Boland is confined within the fact that the Achill woman knows too much "about the catastrophic event which affected the villagers of the region" (212). A plausible interpretation of the above stanzas from a feminist perspective would, however, argue that Boland pays particular attention to the subordinate position allocated to Irish suburban women whom the Achill woman personifies. Simultaneously lamenting while praising the hardship of the type of work the Achill woman performs, Boland's speaker displays an act of resistance by showing us a figure who not only refuses to stay in her private place (home), but also transgresses the role assigned to her in the traditional Irish culture by entering the male space of hard labour. In this sense, Boland manages not only to unsettle the authenticity and naturalization of masculine power over the female, but also to destabilize the binary connection of men with public spaces and women with domestic enclosure. Boland also highlights the marginal traits of the Achill woman both geographically and socially, thus questioning the position of the subaltern woman within the mainstream.

While Villar-Argazi is surely right in her argument that for Boland, the Achill woman represents a figure who "can bear witness to the sufferings and anguishes of all those men and women in the past, and whose reality has been widely ignored in the official historical accounts" (212), the ultimate problem with her reading stems from failure to recognize that during Boland's encounter, a fissure opens up within 'official historical accounts' from which new ideas of history emerge and previous points of reference are unseated. As Boland herself has written about the imputes of writing *Outside History*:

I think a good few poems are anchored in the

conflict between *the received version and the unofficial one* So much that matters, so much that is powerful and frail in human affairs seems to me, increasingly, to happen outside history: *away from the texts and symmetries of an accepted expression*. And, for that very reason, at great risk of being edited out of the final account. (quoted in Atfield, 177)

Juxtaposing Boland's above remarks with another passage from Bhabha in which he describes the dynamics and functions of the discourse emerging from those who inhabit and write from the 'Third Space' would be more than sufficient to reveal how Boland's foray into feminist writing corresponds precisely to the theory of the 'Third Space':

Third Space displaces the histories that constitute it, and sets up new structures of authority, new political narratives, which are inadequately understood through received wisdom. ... The process of cultural hybridity gives rise to something different, something new and unrecognizable, a new era of negotiation of meaning and representation. (Third Space, 211)

In light of Bhabha's insights, the impulse behind *Outside History* springs out of a demand not only to write a counter discourse, but also to pinpoint the unmapped territory that opens up through a creative rewriting of what Bhabha calls 'the received wisdom', to challenge static understanding and to describe the complex and the emergent space that evolves from the breaking down of the boundaries between what Boland also calls 'the received version' of history and 'the unofficial' one.

Having not experienced the Famine first-hand, Boland acknowledges that the process of writing about it involves negotiation between 'official accounts' and the 'unofficial' one which incorporates revision and creativity. Therefore, the process of writing the poem lends itself to the historiographical tradition which requires a participation in the telling not only of what happened, but how we

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have come to interpret that event in the present. This might explain the shift that occurs in the second half of the poem as the perspective changes from the Achill woman to the female-poet speaker herself who acknowledges her sense of frustration in falling to

to comprehend

the harmonies of servitude,
the grace music gives to flattery
and language borrows from ambition –

and how I fell asleep
oblivious to

the planets clouding over in the skies,
the slow decline of the Spring moon,
the songs crying out their ironies. (*OH*, 28)

Caught up in, or rather, forced to express herself in a ‘language’ that borrowed ‘from ambition’, Boland’s poetic persona instantly realizes the limits of her comprehension within the epistemological model she has inherited. The language referred to here is, of course, that of the colonizer, which doubly detaches Boland from both the Irish cultural heritage written in Gaelic and from the Achill Woman who, if not presumably one of the few Irish who can speak Gaelic, is definitely a bearer of the values and morality of that culture. Current historiography makes it abundantly clear that one of the biggest losses from the Famine and which has had a drastic impact is the widespread loss of Irish language. Terry Eagleton, for instance, describes the after-effects of “the cataclysm” as one fostering “the sharp decline of [Irish] language” (279). In “My Famine”, Ray Yeates has also

observed that it:

The Irish Famine was the chief cause of the decline of the Irish language. Early Irish literature seems to indicate that Irish people then were different, openly sensual, wise and proud. With the decline of this language and culture, only strains of these qualities remain, often in conflict with other imported way of morality. [With the loss of Irish language] Irish people have surely lost the key to another way of thinking. (197)

It is within such a context that we can understand the significance the Achill woman bears for Boland. She is not only the source of knowledge, stories and resistance, but above all, an instigator to uncovering the silent voices of the past, an ancestor who occupies a position 'in-between' past and present, the link with Irish language and moral values. Moreover, the loss of Irish language consequently hinders the expression of what 'actually happened', for how can a traumatic event be validated when it is expressed in a language other than that through which it was felt and experienced.⁴ What the Achill woman provides Boland with, then, is not only a means to inhabit the 'Third Space' from which she can write a narrative that, in Bhabha's terms, 'displaces the histories that constitute' the Famine, but also a compensation for the multiple cultural and social losses resulted it. The Achill woman becomes, therefore, not a passive national symbol as the dominant poetic tradition has portrayed other Irish women, but an authentic emblem, a female iconography that not only contests but in fact deserves to occupy the place reserved for the mythic "Rosaleens and Cathleens" in Irish nationalist discourse.

The poem "What we Lost" similarly demonstrates another notable preoccupation on Boland's part towards Ireland's losses, especially the loss of Irish oral tradition. In the first part, Boland plants the seeds of these losses that will unfold before our eyes in the second, as when she frames her version of the events:

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It is a winter afternoon.
The hills are frozen. Light is falling.
The distance is a crystal earshot.
A woman is mending linen in her kitchen.

She is a countrywoman.
Behind her cupboard doors she hangs sprigged,
stove-dried lavender in muslin.
Her letters and mementoes and memories

are packeted in satin at the back with
gabardine and worsted and
the cambric she has made into bodices;
the good tobacco silk for Sunday Mass.

She is sewing in the kitchen.
The sugar-feel of flax is in her hands.
Dusk. And the candles brought in then.
One by one. And the quiet sweat of wax.

(*OH*, 43)

In terms of the poetic language, the above stanzas appear to be transparent because they are colloquial whittled down to the basic vocabulary and grammar. But even though they seem to be quiet simple, the above stanzas nevertheless invite multiple levels of reading. On one, the isolated, prison-like and the mind-numbing nature of domesticity are clearly illustrated with the various activities the 'countrywoman' is performing. From a feminist perspective, then, it can be argued that because the 'countrywoman' is materialized as an

embodiment of the cult of domesticity, such portrayal suggests that a culturally-imposed hierarchy of gender roles can be easily maintained through domination and routine. This might explain why Boland refrains, at least in the first part of the poem, from romanticizing or engaging in nostalgic glorification of domesticity whose boundaries are dwindling. On another level, when read within the context of the whole poem in which the female-poet speaker displays an acute sensitivity to the limits placed between Irish women and their attainment of full agency, the above stanzas seem also to be delivered by a female speaker who is confined to domestic activities but wishing for access to the poetic and public world. In her reading of the poem, Catriona Clutterbuck persuasively argues that “Boland is an indoors poet, (or more probably,...a threshold poet located between inside and outside) in more ways than one” (76). On a third level, then, with the ‘threshold’ being a recurrent motif in Boland’s poetry, the stanzas can also be read as an attempt to challenge the official version of Irish history that writes (subaltern) woman out of existence, while simultaneously attempting to create a new female ‘third space’ in which the boundary between ‘inside’ and ‘outside’ is problematized and where different interests intersect. Clutterbuck’s use of the ‘threshold’, as a motif that describes the place from which Boland writes, reverberates with Bhabha’s conception of liminality which affords a marginalized subject the opportunity to create a ‘Third Space’ through which he can inhabit two diverse worlds at once while belonging to neither.

In its second part, the poem expands upon the issue of presenting the individual not as a personal self, but rather as a carrier of the individual culture. The manner in which Boland develops this theme is intimately related to her position as a feminist of a different temperament. While the first part of the poem constructs domesticity as negative and isolating, the second part underscores how it can help form subjectivity through alternative discourse:

There is a child at her side.

The tea is poured, the stitching put down.

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The child grows still, sensing something of importance.

The woman settles and begins her story.

Believe it, what we lost is here in this room

on this veiled evening.

The woman finishes. The story ends.

The child, who is my mother, gets up, moves away.

In the winter air, unheard, unshared,

the moment happens, hangs fire, leads nowhere.

The light will fail and the room darken,

the child fall asleep and the story be forgotten.

The fields are dark already.

The frail connections have been made and are broken.

The dumb-show of legend has become language,

is becoming silence and who will know that once

words were possibilities and disappointments,

were scented closets filled with love-letters

and memories and lavender hemmed into muslin,

shored in sachets, aired in bed-linen... (*OH*, 43-44)

While each of these stanzas offers important cultural information in its own right, the way in which the second part of the poem constructs domesticity offers implicitly political statements about what it is being lost “in this room / on this veiled evening”. Here, Boland begins by portraying the ‘natural’ or familiar state of Irish domestic life as one

of surfeit: of emotion conveyed through the atmosphere of storytelling. The conditions of that storytelling – with the ‘child’ sitting beside her mother who spent a long day in labour and with ‘tea’ being poured – are dwelt upon as hallmarks of Irish domesticity. It is with this very act of storytelling that domesticity has been turned from merely oppressive to a potentially libertarian one, as it communicates complex ideas and carries the listeners into the realm of intuition, creativity, empathy and reverence. Of greater importance for Boland, however, is the centrality of Irish suburban woman; her crucial status not only as a giver of life and nurturer of children, but as a preserver of a culture. Like “The Achill Woman”, the Irish suburban woman is portrayed as the individual who bears and passes down the stories that protect cultural identity. It is little wonder then that what Boland fears most in the third stanza is that the story being told to the child, who is implicitly portrayed as the recipient of Irish oral tradition, will be forgotten and the past will be lost. Perhaps one of the most poignant images of this loss is when Boland describes the connection between mother and daughter as ‘frail’ and ‘broken’. Jennette E. Riley contends that in her sleep, the child

forgets the story and fails to comprehend the importance of the past. Language, instead of passing on meaning and allowing the people of the past to live, has become legend and silence. The language of Ireland was once ‘possibilities and disappointments’ – meaning that women’s lives were once real, treasured and preserved as love-letters are treasured and preserved. (26-27)

Again, as a form of oral tradition, stories transmitted from mother to child are of crucial importance to the development of any nation because the perception of past events contained in them help shape the nation’s perception of present realities. The act of transmitting also helps form what might be called the communal stories in which the lauded qualities of a given nation are internalized, providing subsequent generations with markers that assist in defining their own national identity. With the connection between mother and daughter

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being 'broken', Boland seems to be anticipating a grim future awaiting Ireland, one permeated by the loss of both the sense of community and belonging. Boland's personal solution is to retreat in to her memory that, in the last two lines of the poem, reconnects her to the physical environment of her childhood, to these "rooms of childhood with their griefless peace, / their hands and whispers, their candles weeping brightly?" (*OH*, 44). What Boland mourns is the loss of oral tradition that gives Irish culture its source of strength, the meta-narrative for its continuation and propagation.

While it might be argued that "What we Lost" criticizes the current Irish nationalist discourse within which the contributions of women in both the make-up and the preservation of Irish culture have been either diluted or obscured, several other endeavours Boland seems to be attempting in the poem are worth pointing out. First, she attempts to foreground the voices of marginalized women not only as essential component in the construction of cultural heritage but also as bearers and survivors of the Irish oral tradition. Second, one of the most ironic lines is when we are told that 'The woman finishes' and 'The story ends'. It is ironic because just as the reader is expecting to hear 'something of importance', he is immediately disappointed as the tale itself has not been told. The connotation here is that passing on of cultural information from one generation to the next is more important than the tale itself. Read in such a context, the 'broken' relationship between mother and daughter seems as a symbol of the disconnection of present-day Irish nationalists from the oral tradition of the Irish past. It also refers, albeit indirectly, to the discounting of the value of oral tradition within Irish nationalist discourse. Third, it is necessary here to reiterate that Boland's feminist foray is not separatist in form in order to understand how in "What we Lost" she struggles to find the most sustaining and integral parts of the Irish past that would allow her to create a hybrid feminist space that does not completely discount it as 'patriarchal betrayal', but uses it as a spur to re-examine the role of anonymous Irish women as cultural contributors. In other words, the key point of *Outside History* is to re-write the image of Irish women as emblem of the nation by altering and subverting this iconography in order to represent Irish women, not as static symbols,

but as active participants in the make-up and preservation of Irish culture.

Another particularly pertinent instance is the title poem "Outside History" which directs attention to the particular fate of women, precluded, over the centuries, from full access to the collective Irish subjectivity. The poem bursts into a critique of an ambiguous power structure held responsible for the disintegration of Irish women's personal autonomy, keeping them always 'outside history':

There are outsiders, always. These stars –
these iron inkling of an Irish January,
whose light happened

thousands of years before
our pain did: they are, they have always been
outside history.

They keep their distance. Under them remains
a place where you found
you are human, and

a landscape in which you know you are mortal.
And a time to choose between them. (*OH*, 45)

Quite obviously, the phrase that catches most attention in the whole poem is 'outside history' which Boland, in *Object Lesson*, used recurrently in order to underscore how Irish women have been denied cultural efficacy. More importantly to note, however, is the conceptual shift in the first two stanzas from a world filled with 'These stars' whose 'light' sparkled for 'thousands of years' to

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another world when the light of these stars are eclipsed and the ‘pain’ started. At the heart of this shift are issues involving a (pre-) colonial Irish past and a nascent post-colonial Irish present. This time-space disruption elaborates a specific engagement with the nation: it textures the matrix upon which the fraught histories of the relationship between Irish women and nationalism can be traced. It also foregrounds a linear paradigm of history in which ‘thousands of years’ prior to British colonialism are lumped with the era of colonialization, together as a pre-colonial Ireland that is different from the nascent post-colonial state. This might seem to be a crude distinction, but one that is necessary as it points to the parallelism between two different axes of oppression and to the perpetuation of power differential at two different discursive-historical moments. Hence, the main point of the first part of the poem: Irish women are not recognized either by (pre-)colonial or anti-colonial patriarchal forces; both of them conspired to circumscribe women within demarcated roles and to keep them always ‘outside history’. Within the framework of the debate between feminism and nationalism in Ireland, the crux of the above stanzas can be construed: while it might have been understandable for Irish women to willingly accept their marginalization and inferior status as a passive symbol of the nation during the period of colonization in favour of nationalist mobilization, it seems entirely implausible, in the nascent post-colonial state, that this masculine nationalist movement continues to suspend Irish women’s agency in ahistorical and apolitical realms. The above stanzas, therefore, are a discursive negation of this negation, a subtle de-centring of the dominant nationalist paradigm in which Irish women are not considered to be human and ‘mortal’, but rather connected by Irish male authors with the natural world.

If the first part of the poem provides us with a dense historical demonstration of the profound erasure of women from Irish literary tradition and history, the second part continues Boland’s effort to revise the metadiscourse of Irish nationalism through reworking the binary between Irish women as sign of the nation and as subjects of history. Perhaps the most sustained de-centring of the iniquitous power structure of Irish nationalism is the choice Boland’s poetic

persona has made in the second part of the poem. Instead of a poetic of radical transgression, the speaker realizes that the only way she could break through the arduous experience of being 'outside history' is to participate in the public sphere, to write herself into the textual fabrics of Ireland's cultural production. Therefore, she has decided to leap

out of myth into history I move to be
part of that ordeal
whose darkness is

only now reaching me from those fields,
those rivers, those roads clotted as
firmaments with the dead.

How slowly they die
as we kneel beside them, whisper in their ears.
And we are too late. We are always too late.

(OH, 45)

The first of the above stanzas indicates how the confrontation between 'myth' and 'history' becomes the ground upon which nationalism and feminism confront one another in the definition of both nationhood and womanhood. The disparity between 'myth' and 'history' also indicates what Irish woman's role was to Irish literature and tradition and what she aspires to be beyond this stereotypically limiting role. She was, as Boland argues in *Object Lesson*, "Ireland or Hiberina. She was stamped, as a rubbed-away mark, on silver or gold; a compromised regal figure on a throne. Or she was nineteenth-century image of girlhood, on frontispiece or in a book of engravings" (66). Evidently, an articulation of woman's identity through mythological models foregrounds her symbolic identity rather than, and often at the

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cost of, woman's material lives. Opposing such patriarchal/nationalist norms, the female-poet speaker voices her protest by a leap from 'myth' into 'history' as a mean to vitalize her existence as 'part' of the Irish 'ordeal'. Implicit in this figurative leap, therefore, is the contention that while the attribution of mythical qualities to Irish women and their elevation to the status of goddess or motherland was a mean of placing them 'outside history', Irish women's venturing into the public sphere is an alternative means to their self-realization, a progressive potential that would ultimately bring them inside history.

This, in turn, raises the question: if Irish women are to participate in the public/literary sphere, how would that access qualified within the folds of a patriarchal/nationalist society? Here we come full circle back to the initial point of this paper, to Boland's attack on 'separatists' who refuse to negotiate with the 'patriarchal' past, and to her own example as an Irish feminist who advocates compromise, rather than striving for cultural efficacy through direct defiance of accepted norms and cultural ideas. In fact, the last two stanzas of the poem help us to understand Boland's distancing of her self from the ideology of the 'separatists' and her adoption of what I define as hybrid feminism. The invocation of the 'dead' in the last two stanzas, the kneeling beside them and the whispering in 'their ears' are all acts that gesture towards an attempt by the female-poet speaker to articulate her own subjectivity within the boundaries and limits of the 'patriarchal' past. As it stands, again, the reference to the 'dead' with its nostalgic imperatives in the last two stanzas obviously signals acceptance on the female-poet speaker's part that the 'patriarchal' past is a caveat that qualifies and regulates women's venturing into the public sphere. Hence the overarching point: within the paradigms of the 'patriarchal' past, a displacement of male experience by a female one is a venture that might help de-stabilize the chain of the signifier while offering an empowering alternative to Irish women by incorporating themselves as part of the national history. As such, the leap from the domain of 'myth' into that of 'history' can be construed as a 'strategic' attempt to contest the legitimacy of the hegemonic discourse without being locked in an oppositional relationship with it.⁵

In light of the foregoing discussions, the point to be emphasized is that the female-poet speaker's decision to leap from the domain of 'myth' into that of 'history' cannot be considered as a gesture on Boland's part to transform the struggle of Irish women into gender warfare as it is the case of the 'separatists', where the attempts of women to gain cultural efficacy are considered only in terms of a drastic challenge to the prevalent social structure. Rather, it is a moderate and legitimate decision, insofar as she aspires to participate in the public sphere and to be integrated into the patriarchal/nationalist society *in her own terms*. Rephrased, rather than representing womanhood as anomalous to nationhood, Boland's choice of 'history' over 'myth' partakes in a revisionist project on the national past, articulating an alternative way to explore and to write down what she calls 'the emblematic relation between my *own feminine experience* and a national' history.

Boland's main objective in *Outside History* is not to endorse a radical transgression of the mandates of an oppressive patriarchal/nationalist society, but to include a different (feminine) perspective that relies on the acceptance of a shared history and the willingness to accept different versions of the same (hi)story. The poems interpreted in this paper are all instances of how in *Outside History* Boland handles the issue of Irish women's subjectivities in terms of the ethical language of the 'Third Space'. In *Outside History*, Boland displays a simultaneous involvement with two necessities out of which she manages to create a hybrid/third space from which she writes: an oppositional but dialogical negotiation with the norms of the patriarchal/nationalist discourse as well as a conciliatory but dialectical appeal to the shared history of the national past. It is precisely this model of negotiation which Bhabha recommends for the post-colonial 'strategic intellectual' who, while resisting co-option by hegemonic structures, manoeuvres in-between contradictory cultural forces to strategize resistance and to generate counter-narrative practices which allow a recognition of the self in the Other and of Otherness in the self (Third Space, 209).

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- ¹ In this paper, I have used the concept of the “Third Space” in an entirely different way from the perspective adopted by Pilar Villar-Argaiz’s in her reading of Boland’s poetry. While Villar-Argaiz adopts Bhabha’s concept as one of the many “postcolonial strategies proposed by different postcolonial theorists and critics” in an attempt to devise “a postcolonial approach” to the study of Eavan Boland’s poetry, my own use of Bhabha’s concept in this paper relies heavily on its applicability to feminist studies (Pilar Villar-Argaiz, 9). At the core of my endeavour are the following remarks from *The Post-colonial Studies Reader* that delineate the parameters of postcolonial and feminist discourses while outlining their similarities: “In many different societies, women, like colonized subject, have been relegated to the position of ‘Other’, ‘colonized’ by various forms of patriarchal domination. They thus share with colonized races and cultures an intimate experience of the politics of oppression and repression. It is not surprising that the history and concerns of feminist theory have paralleled developments in post-colonial theory.” (249)
- ² For this article, I have used the British edition of *Outside History*, published by Carcanet Press Limited. All subsequent citations of poems from this volume will be included parenthetically in the text as *OH* followed by page number.
- ³ This is a brief but concise account of the famous Eleusinian Mysteries. For a full account of the stories of the two Goddesses and their appeal to Irish poets, including Boland, see, for instance, Karen Bennett.
- ⁴ In the introductory chapter to his *Inventing Ireland*, Declan Kiberd makes a very similar point while discussing the devastated consequences resulting from the loss of Irish language. As he maintains, “life conducted through the medium of English became itself a sort of exile.” (2)
- ⁵ I am too much aware of the many different interpretative readings provided by Boland’s critics of the last two stanzas of the poem, some of which are very simple, rather simplistic indeed. Here, however, it would be negligent of me not to refer to Jody Allen-Randolph’s reading of the last two stanzas as a case in point. 21-22.