

Transcending the Patriarchal Border and Re-claiming the Self in Edna O'Brien's *The Light of Evening**

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Abstract

The article offers a new postmodern feminist reading of Edna O'Brien's *The Light of Evening* (2007), contextualizing it within theories of performativity and mestiza consciousness. It aims at answering questions of identity and agency in the novel and suggests a different reading of the text. In specific, the study points out the different strategies that O'Brien's character employs to shake the boundaries of patriarchy and adopt a respective self as a woman artist. Eleonora refuses to abide by gender roles assigned to her. Subsequently, she grows to be the New Mestiza who no longer accepts to be confined to the category of the "feminine." O'Brien's Eleonora develops a mestiza consciousness that is borderless and uncategorical.

Keywords: Patriarchy, Performativity, Subversion, Mestiza, Subjectivity.

Introduction

Edna O'Brien is an Irish novelist and short-story writer. Born in Ireland, she has lived most of her adult years outside her motherland. Her writings were scandalous in Ireland due to her depiction of sexuality in her first novel *The Country Girls* (1960). Although popular outside of Ireland, she grew to be a hated figure among her people. It is no surprise to find that her protagonist in *The Light of Evening* is a writer herself who leads a scandalous life of artistry. Although O'Brien's works imperceptibly nest the condition of women in Ireland and the injustices practiced upon them, *The Light* has received little attention as far as patriarchy and female agency are concerned. Consequently, this study significantly brings to the surface the subjugation of women within the institution of patriarchy through highlighting the protagonist's domesticity, her husband's discourse of hysteria and superiority, and the gendered art. Moreover, the article aims at zooming in on the mechanisms of subversion of the woman-subject. It emphasizes the undoing of the masculinist discourses of hysteria and artistic superiority. Eleonora refuses to abide by the gender roles assigned to her. Subsequently, she grows to be the New Mestiza who no longer accepts to be confined to the category of the "feminine." O'Brien's Eleonora develops a mestiza consciousness that is borderless and uncategorical.

In the early years of her writings, the oeuvres of Edna O'Brien have been largely ignored by critics and reviewers. O'Brien is a name that has been often overlooked in the discussion of Irish literature. Yet, earlier criticism of O'Brien has dwelled mostly into debating her public persona. In other words, critical responses to Edna O'Brien have focused on her public appearance and thus, dismissing her literary production. Rebecca Pelan's article "Edna O'Brien's 'Stage-Irish' persona: An 'Act' of Resistance"

* The article is extracted from the first author's Ph.D. dissertation

explains how O'Brien's past reception has been aligned with her public persona (67). It is her good looks that kept her name alive. Such a response, Pelan (1993) argues, has devalued the literary and political assessment of her literary works. In this same vein, Heather Ingman (2010) argues that the readings of O'Brien's works as autobiography and romance have dismissed the possibility of identifying O'Brien as "a political writer, concerned to challenge her nation's particular brand of gendered nationalism" (253). Yet, recent critical studies of O'Brien's fiction have been more interested in addressing questions of identity, narrativity and the woman question. Lorna Rooks-Hughes "The Family and the Female Body in the Novels of Edna O'Brien and Julia O'Faolain" addresses the representation of the female body in the works of O'Brien and O'Faolain. Rooks-Hughes (1996) demonstrates the challenges these women face in their attempt "to transcend or circumvent culturally sanctioned images, encodings and meanings of the feminine" in the Irish culture (83). Similarly, James M. Cahalan's article discusses gender issues in O'Brien's Trilogy *The Country Girls* (1960), *The Lonely Girls* (1962), and *Girls in their Married Bliss* (1964) along with John McGahern's and Brian Moore's novels. A last example is Shahriyar Mansouri's article "Against the Oedipal Politics of Formation in Edna O'Brien's *A Pagan Place*: 'Women do not Count, Neither Shall they be Counted'" in which the author grounds his study on the Deleuzian definition of the Oedipal Society in exploring the boundaries and limitations of the feminine formation in Ireland in the 1930s and the 1940s (335).

Subsequently, though recently published, O'Brien's *The Light of Evening* has received scarce criticism. One of the few articles that have been written about this story is Tony Murray's "Edna O'Brien and Narrative Diaspora Space" in which he explores questions of diaspora and narrativity in the novel. Using Avtar Brah and Paul Ricoeur's theories, Murray (2013) highlights the role of narrative within the concept of diaspora in O'Brien's novel. The novel can be regarded as a form of narrative diaspora where the three generations of women are mainly linked to the narrativity of their experiences of migration. He also spotlights the importance of the mother-daughter relationship to the concept of the diaspora space. Slightly similar, in her "(M)Others from the Motherland in Edna O'Brien's *The Light of Evening* and Colm Tóibín's *Brooklyn*," Marisol MoralesLadrón (2013) argues that *The Light* is a predecessor of Tóibín's *Brooklyn* and links the common threads between the two texts. By comparing the two novels, Londrón highlights the shared interest of the two authors to unveil the complexity and diversity of the diasporic female identity. Both articles address questions of diaspora, motherhood, and narratology, yet they evade the issue of performativity of gender and the workings of patriarchy within the novel. As such, the present study aims at highlighting the metaphorical and genderized border and how the novel's protagonist moves from performativity to transformability. Suggesting a different reading of the novel, the present study comes to fill a large gap in the available body of criticism in the way it situates the novel within the postmodern feminist theories on woman's agency and becomingness. The study concentrates on the patriarchal constructs of 'femininity' and the protagonist's self-empowerment within these androcentric borders.

The Light of Evening is about the nostalgia and the attachment of a mother to her daughter. Though the novel's mood is set in the 1920s, the narrative recounts past and present events of the lives of Dilly and Eleonora. Dilly, the mother, empowers her memory to mend her present. In the time of her sickness,

she goes back in time to her immigration to America to recall her first meeting with the love of her life. Unfortunately returning to Ireland brokenhearted, she “spends the rest of her life revisiting, in her imagination, the places that had been inhabited by both” (Ladrón 2013, 282). Her daughter Eleonora, living away from conventional Irish society, is the artist-hero who writes books against the grain. In writing unconventional books, she resists and refuses the social life that her motherland offers. In doing so, she finds freedom within the borders of exile. Her mother warns her that “[p]eople [there] say they’ll take an action against [her] for putting them in books and the dead people would take an action if they were alive” (O’Brien, 328). Accordingly, the novel is about the transgression of the female artist in pursuing an independent self.

Subsequently, the study is placed within a theoretical framework that addresses woman subjugation and empowerment. The analysis draws on some postmodern feminist theories of gender performativity, discourse of hysteria, becomingness, and the epistolary genre. O’Brien’s text is examined through the critical lenses of theorists, such as: Judith Butler, Simone de Beauvoir, Elaine Showalter, Félix Guattari and Gilles Deleuze, Gloria Anzaldúa, Elizabeth Campbell, and finally Rebecca Hogan. Accordingly, highlighting gender performativity, the text is read as a critique of the female’s performance of gender roles. In her *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, Judith Butler (1999) re-visits and re-evaluates the construction of gender and subjectivity. She answers the question of “[h]ow and where does the construction of gender take place” by mapping a theory of performativity (11). To Butler, gender “is not a noun, but neither is it a set of free-floating attributes, for we have seen that the substantive effect of gender is performativity by the regulatory practices of gender” (33). Gender is chiefly shaped in and through the repetitive constructed acts and words. Accordingly, identity is the “doing” rather than the “being.” It is the performance of the designed social role that defines and validates one’s being-ness. In this respect, identity becomes the product of the gendered discourses. The subject is hailed to perform an identity that is already designed for him/her. Putting it within the context of the female subject, Butler considerably theorizes against the normativity of the category of “woman.” She contests the notion that “only men are ‘persons,’ and there is no gender but the feminine” (26). Society’s understanding of feminine behavior is never “the product of a particular, settled identity; . . . [but] produced, within signification, through the repeated performance of words and actions which one codes as ‘feminine’” (327).

Similarly, in *The Second Sex*, Simone de Beauvoir (1956) explores the social injustices inflicted upon women and how these conventional codes shape women’s subjectivities. She argues that women interiorize their own inferiority and subjugation. They, therefore, take part in their own victimhood. In order to please the patriarchal order, the woman “opposes her cult of self; she wants to be seen, to be attractive” (645). She is secure as far as she perfectly performs her gender role. She comes to falsely believe that she is fragile and needs assistance and protection. She “lets herself come to count on the protection, love, assistance, and supervision of others, she lets herself be fascinated with the hope of self-realization without *doing* anything” (italics in original, 677). In an androcentric community, women are brainwashed to believe in their passivity. Correspondingly, what normalizes the subordination of women

is the image presented by the society. It makes the husband, and more generally the male, “a demigod endowed with virile prestige and destined to replace her father: protector, provider, teacher, guide; the wife’s existence is to unfold in his shadow” (447). He is her mentor and guide. Beauvoir affirms that in a conventional society, a woman “must renounce her claims as sovereign subject” and accept her domesticity (643). As a matter of fact, a woman is always objectified and confined to her performativity of gender.

The Light’s world is one that is known for its rigidity and conventionality. O’Brien boldly criticizes the institution of marriage as it is wholly shaped and defined by male-oriented discourse. The novel describes how women are encouraged to perform the role of “the angel in the house” within the borders of marriage (Gilbert and Gubar 2000, 22). O’Brien dedicates the fourth part of the novel to castigate the gendered reality of marriage. This part tells the story of Eleonora’s marriage and its failure. Her marriage to Hermann was secretive at the beginning. She quickly decided to marry him after a spontaneous meeting. After the secret of her “abominable life” has been disclosed to her family, they tried to bring her back. Her soon-to-be-husband favored confrontation instead (O’Brien 2007, 157). But after he was bitten and wounded, he “held [her] responsible for their barbarities” (158). Nursing his wounds, he mockingly criticizes her and blames her, not only for bringing the stream too close, but also for his wounds. He “asked if she was so stupid that she could not even tell the difference between near and far, their stupidity having infected her also” (as in 157).

Feeling humiliated, he decides to write a letter “full of contempt, outlining their ignorance, their quasi-medieval habits” that he intends to force her into signing (O’Brien 158). Surprisingly, she throws it back at him refusing to sign and asking him to pour all his anger on her. Instead, he infuriatedly confines her to sign blank sheets of paper. By doing as he wishes, she believes that she “had become a Judas, sold herself for that mess of pottage . . . she thought, *I don’t know him at all . . . don’t know how stern, tormented and unforgiving he is*” (italics in original, 159). She betrays her own family. She comes to the realization that he is a stranger to her and she has become a captive of his. Already playing the role of the wife, she is later on upgraded to play the role of the mother. Her two kids “were being daily sucked into the emotional incubator of mother, which rhymed with smother” (181). As a woman, she is the nurturer and the care-giver. In his house, she feels to be “more interloper than wife” (161). She feels unwanted and does not belong there.

Hermann, her abusive husband, is the voice of patriarchy who is blinded by his supposed-superiority. He continuously states that she is an abuser who uses people for her benefit. He surmises that she married him “under the guise of love to better her ambitions” (151). Hermann remarks that Eleonora’s whole life “has been the crooked using of others. She uses [him] and no doubt she will use [his] children in time to come” (O’Brien, 200). Eleonora’s mother, Dilly, had known him to be a madman and an infidel person. She “writhes at the mere mention of him, a man so odd, so godless, an autocrat, a man . . . from whom his wife . . . had to borrow her own earnings back from him, to buy shoes and clothing for her children” (147). Uncritically, Hermann’s identity is fashioned through the gendered discourses of his society. As performing the role of the husband and the bread-winner, his identity is modelled to be also the ruler, the guide, and the head of the family.

Critically, the male identity is not solely his own construction, but it heavily depends on the “Other” performance of her role as feminine to reassert his own selfhood. Being a prestigious man, he believes in his superiority and authority over his wife and children. Honored to be accepted as his wife, Eleonora is expected to “belong[...] to his religion, his class, his circle, she joins his family, she becomes his ‘half’” (Beauvoir 1953, 418-19). After her marriage, Eleonora seems to perform the role of the feminine. She learns how to cook by looking for recipes from two cookbooks that his former wife left. Yet, she fails to be a good cook for her family because of her inexperience. Later on, Eleonora reflects on his authorial rules-like. She tells her mother how she strives hard to please him, she “make[s] jam when the medlar trees and the damson trees bear fruit. He likes it when [she] makes jam . . . there are things that he doesn’t approve of. High heels, for instance. He says they are bad for the feet later on. Many things about him are solicitous” (O’Brien, 164). By voicing his performative identity, Hermann bottles up his wife into performing her role as the feminine. Subsequently, his subjecthood is constructed due to the repeated performances of his masculinity.

Moreover, in patriarchal societies, woman represents hysteria. Hermann repeatedly describes Eleonora’s hysteric moods and behaviors. Through this repetitive act, he limits her into performing the role of the madwoman. Hysteria becomes a performative act designed by patriarchal society to reinforce man’s superiority. The term hysteria has been engendered to be identified as a female malady. Consequently, hysteria and femininity has been so connected that the hysterical is always identified as feminine. This conception stems from the idea of the “wandering womb.” Dating back to Greek times, it is the Greek physician and philosopher Galen of Pergamum who first announced that hysteria could refer to all womb diseases. Elaine Showalter (1993) argues that hysteria is traditionally constructed to mean a “‘woman’s disease’, a feminine disorder, or a disturbance of femininity” (286). The probability of a man diagnosed with such an illness makes him less than a man; he is considered “to be unmanly [and] womanish” (289). Respectively, as a dysfunctional illness exclusive to the female subject, hysteria disables the female subject from thinking and behaving properly. Like gender politics, hysteria is a discourse framed in and through the mechanisms of patriarchy. It is institutionalized to normalize women’s subordination and minification. In other words, it is a gender-based system that pushes the subjugation of women. Diagnosed with such a disease, the woman is unable to look after herself, her family, nor house chores. Therefore, she is to be kept out of the borders of society. She becomes “the madwoman”¹ in the attic who forms a threat, not only to herself, but to her family too.

In describing his wife, Hermann identifies her with the hysterical. As newlyweds, he hesitantly inspects her fluctuating moods. He reports that she “began to show periods of *hysterical* jealousy and these states began to take a regular pattern” (O’Brien, our own emphasis, 199). He continues emphasizing her malady saying that he “began to be aware of her personality change, a personality change of *schizophrenic nature*, intense depression and quarrelsomeness, feelings of persecution, periodic outbursts and deciding that her husband was not nice, was not kind, was in fact ‘cruel’” (our emphasis, as in 199). Importantly enough, he believes that his wife has symptoms of a schizophrenic behavior. He animatingly laments her change. To him, noticing her change “from the girl [he] first knew or rather did

not know, to the kind of female monster she has become has been like watching someone slowly [dying] without being able to do anything about it" (199). Revolting against his rules initiated her social death. By shedding her submissive self, he sees her beauty wither and her appearance and looks cheapen. She becomes "Unloved and unlovable" (200). Hermann lists his wife's disapproval of him as one symptom that condemns her to mental sickness. A woman calling her husband "cruel" is a woman losing her mind. As mentioned before, his subjecthood formation is only complete when validated by the Other who is his wife. As Eleonora refuses to identify him in positive terms, Hermann feels his manhood and superiority threatened. Thereof, he resorts to accusing her of madness.

As was believed in ancient times, Hermann considers that it is their marriage that can save her from the "pattern she set up of compulsive deceit and self-interest, of jealousy and paranoia" (O'Brien, 199). In one incident, he criticizes her immaturity and victimhood commenting, "now we revert to our habit of hysterics, we depict ourselves as the wronged one, the one who is hated . . . the little victim" (195). In a letter to her daughter, Dilly reports the fuss that Eleonora's husband has made some years ago. He recounts how his wife disappeared and abandoned her own children. Hermann declares that Eleonora is mentally ill. A few pages later, the reader comes to know that Eleonora indeed consults some psychotherapists in her deceptive belief that they "could reach in and pull out all the tribulation and the mountainous bile" (286). The patriarchal border seems to invade Eleonora's mind. Her husband's masculine discourse pushes Eleonora's internalization of subjugation even deeper. In an alarming act, Hermann cryptically points to a cottage in the far side of the lake where a lonely woman lives. She unconsciously "shivered at the thought of such isolation, as if that would be her destiny one day" (155). Symbolically, he hints at the banishment of women who misbehave. They become the outcasts of society as they threaten the normativity of the system.

Aware of the absurdity of such institution, she brings her marriage to an end. In some letters that she has been writing to her mother but not intending to send, she realizes the rift that has begotten her marriage. She cries to her mother of the unhappiness of her marriage. Eleonora acknowledges that this "husband-to-be is an enigma in many ways" (O'Brien, 163). Accordingly, in an androcentric society, the norm for a married woman is defining herself in relation to her husband. Thus, at the beginning, Eleonora generously gives her selfhood fully into this relationship. Yet, in such a marriage, she feels herself dead "without being dead. Nearly non-existent" (267). Indeed, she is socially dead. Being already swayed into a performativity of her gender, she believes that pregnancy can save her marriage, a shield to reconciliation. Yet, her motherhood fails to meet her wishes. The peace that "she and her husband made was tenuous" (173).

Ironically enough, it is earlier in the novel that Eleonora envisions the failure of this marriage. She "cannot see this liaison continuing" (O'Brien, 164). She and her husband did not match; he, being the authoritative part, and she the submissive one. What she fantasized was "for them to be more equal not to be master and slave, because already she was ceasing to be that slave" (166). Notwithstanding, she no longer accepts to play the role that her husband assigns to her since she feels herself divided due to such a marriage. She reckons that

[t]here was her night self who would come to sin with him, her morning self who would atone for it, her evening self when she laid the table, lit candles – the little geisha, as he called her – and the child self, not fully dead, not fully alive, waiting, through the alchemy of words, to crystallise into life (152).

She seems to be divided between her gendered self, the creation of her husband, and the artist self that is her own creation. Realizing how her gendered-self suffocates her artist-self, she consequently rebels.

Consequently, *The Light* exposes how art is gendered in patriarchies. It questions the masculine stereotypes of the female's artistic potentiality. In such masculine world, "logic is often a form of violence, a sly kind of tyranny: the husband, if older and better educated than his wife, assumes on the basis of this superiority to give no weight at all to her opinions" (Beauvoir 1953, 449). Due to such stereotypes, the superior "He" believes that a woman's art is of "contradictory words, somewhat mad from the standpoint of reason, inaudible for whoever listens to them with ready-made grids" (Irigaray 1985, 29). In an act of masculinity performance, Hermann mockingly belittles Eleonora's artistic potentiality. He believes that there is an incompatibility between being a wife and being an artist. Based on her gender role, he trivializes Eleonora's artistic vocation and criticizes her work. While she enthusiastically accounts for her first day in his house in her diary, disappointedly "years later he would throw [it] back at her as an example of her cretinous attempts at competitions" (O'Brien, 153). Aligned with his friend Johnny, he tells her that Johnny "had christened her a literary Bessie Bunter², on account of her spouting passages from poems and books" (as in 153). Being identified with such character, Eleonora "smarted at the insult, her eyes brimming with scalded tears" (153). She has been humiliated and laughed at by her husband and his friend to announce their superiority.

Hermann would regularly make "caustic notes" affirming his superiority and her dependency. He is the tutor and guide "who knew more about grammar, syntax, style, story than she could muster in a million incarnations" (O'Brien, 195). In questioning her reason behind choosing to still be married, he affirms her devious nature. He certainly considers that, if she is divorced, she "would be nobody. The tosh she writes and is determined to write, there being idiots as gullible as herself who want to read it, this tosh is made bearable only by virtue of that husband's honing of it, making it, so to speak, intelligible" (199-200). Being a writer himself, he is credulous of his artistic superiority. Without his help, she would be nobody. In a similar vein, he criticizes her writing when finding out that she has finished her novel. Savagely, he declares that her piece of writing is "the voice of [her] lamenting race, oh, marvel, oh, deep diabolic crookedness, he [the editor] is deceived into thinking that [she] write[s] like an angel, whereas in fact [she] could not pen a word when [he] met [her]" (195). He feels betrayed and is convinced that she has taken something "which was rightly his" (198). He seems to believe that there would be no important female artists. Yet, Eleonora triumphs in proving him wrong as she asserts her artistic aspirations. Art to Eleonora is the route to undo her performativity.

Accordingly, the novel underscores the female's subversiveness of a gendered reality. Butler (1999) shortly theorizes her concept of gender subversiveness. She argues that since gender is a repeated act, subversion then is possible. The subversion of all that is repetitive denies gender of its performativity.

Thus, subversiveness is the mechanism of shaking and replacing gender conventions, throwing the numbness of the female subject, and the performative gender which is forced upon her. To shake this fixity of gendered identity, Butler suggests that the female subject needs to accept the belief that her selfhood is not solo but consists of multiple selves. The female subject is “*the subject* which is not one” (our emphasis, 15). Likewise, Irigaray believes that a female’s subversive spirit lies in her multiplicity of selves. She contends that “(Re-) discovering herself, for a woman, thus could only signify the possibility . . . of never being simply one. A sort of expanding universe to which no limits could be fixed . . . Woman always remains several” (our emphasis, 30-31). Consequently, a female subject leads a rhizomatic selfhood and a mestiza consciousness. She is always connected to a variety of points but never being just one. Thus, like a tree with branches springing out, the female subjecthood emphasizes connections and diversity.

Similarly, Anzaldúa (1987) theorizes the mestiza as the independent woman who asserts her selfhood through crossing boundaries. She believes that empowerment starts by undoing victimhood. She asserts “And there in front of us is the crossroads and choice: to feel a victim where someone else is in control and therefore responsible . . . or to feel strong, and, for the most part, in control” (21). Decision-making is imperative in the empowerment of the female subject. To step out of one’s comfort zone and decide to throw away one’s victimhood is an act of victory and triumph. Transforming into a subject-being, a rhizomatic self, and a mestiza, the female is allowed to think, to create, and to have access to decision-making. She develops a mestiza identity that challenges rather than succumbs, that questions rather than obeys, that evolves rather than performs. She “no longer seeks to drag [man] into the realms of immanence but to emerge, herself, into the light of transcendence” (674). The female subject becomes a transcendent, a bridge-maker, and borders-crosser.

Taking these theories of subversion and agency a step further, Guattari and Deleuze (1987) address the issue of agency through theorizing the concept of “becoming-woman.” In their *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, Guattari and Deleuze map different kinds of becomings. Yet, our reading of Guattari and Deleuze focuses on the becomingness mechanism of the female subject. They first dwell into advancing a definition of becomingness as a line that “has neither beginning nor end, departure nor arrival, origin nor destination . . . [it] has only a middle . . . The middle is not an average; it is fast motion; it is the absolute speed of movement. It is the in-between” (293). In this light, becoming is about fluidity rather than fixity and plurality rather than singularity. It is always in motion and progress. Notwithstanding, becomingness is rhizomatic. It links a web of connections and diversity into the making of one’s subjecthood. Like other becomings, becoming-woman advocates process, change, and transformation of a female subject. This becoming subverts the masculine-shaped identity of a woman and reverses the patriarchal codes of femininity and subjectivity. “Becoming a woman” is about finding new routes into being-ness.

Accordingly, O’Brien’s Eleonora is on the quest to “becoming-woman.” She is the “New Mestiza” who subverts the whole discourse of gender and performativity and erases patriarchal borders. Eleonora is the kind of woman who challenges traditional social conventions. She manifests the subjectivity of women as a “subject in process” (Kristeva 1984, ix). Her quest for self-assertion revolves around

initiation into a whole sense of artistry and gender maturity. Eleonora succeeds in subverting the role of the subjugated Irish female. She manages to untie the gender poetics of identity and champions a mestiza identity that no longer accepts to be downsized or to be at the margin. She de-centralizes the male subject and dissolves her objectification and “subjected being.” There are two major stops in her ‘journey in’. In this part, we unravel the mechanisms of Eleonora’s subversive quest for selfhood by concentrating on how she defies and eventually subverts the discourse of hysteria to boost her artistic self. Moreover, we will address the concept of “the narrative mestiza space” and how it promotes form as a self-assertive vehicle for the female’s subjecthood.

Eleonora reverses Hermann’s masculine discourse of hysteria. In this respect, hysteria becomes the subversive tool that resists the oppressive systems of the patriarchy. In feminist thought, the hysterical becomes a transcendent of material and physical boundaries. Labelled the “hysterical,” women threaten the gender roles mechanism, resist the institution of marriage, and assert a self-independency. Eleonora’s “subversive hysteria” starts when she decides to end her confining marriage. Her awakening starts heartily on their honeymoon-like journey. She reflects how,

suddenly a realization, the blotched, subordinate, and puerile instants of your life starting up before you and turning to the husband who is your enemy. . . who guesses in you the frenzied and futile schemes to leave him, to rob him of the children, to wrap them in the garments of forgetting” (O’Brien, 204).

She knows that leaving a husband in such a society means delusion, dottiness, and “something other” (206). Yet, she has the guts to “go skewey in order to leave him, because they had both strayed too far from the path of reasonableness” (as in 206). This kind of marriage to her is the hysteria that she has been wrapped into, and exiting such a mental status needs undoing such a marriage. Undoing the masculine discourse of hysteria, she persuades the most important episode of her subversion process. She meets up with a singer named Konrad on her reconciliation trip with whom she shakes her role as a wife. By so doing, she undoes her subordination. Immediately after leaving Konrad’s room, she is “emboldened enough to tell her husband *how she was no longer subordinate*, except, and to her utter astonishment, he was not there, he had fled . . . It was as if he knew, it was as if he had guessed *her transgression*” (our emphasis, 219). Feeling the threat and reading the signs of her subversiveness all throughout, Hermann decides to save his dignity and masculinity and deprive her from the decision-making and thus empowerment by leaving first.

The novel is a story of a self-affirming journey of a young female artist. It is only through a literary-oriented life that Eleonora meets her real subversive self. Eleonora emerges as the artist woman who challenges her husband’s and society’s standards. Subversively, she succeeds at achieving an artist-self in a world of conventionality. Reading books becomes the only relieving activity that frees Eleonora from the bindings of her domesticity. She reads books of female resistance and rebellion, such as: Samuel Richardson’s *Clarissa*, a victim of the society’s lack of virtue and Charlotte Brontë’s *Jane Eyre*, a woman of her times. She also reads some of Christina Rossetti’s works where she sheds the misdeeds of the Victorian masculine society and exposes the subjugation of women. In reading, she finds “rebellion and in some, though as yet convoluted way, she knew she was being unfaithful to him and he saw it, sensed

it” (O’Brien, 166). Through reading, Eleonora “has eloped in a trance, in haste, her docility a mask, a thousand hers revolted within herself and towards him” (as in 166). Initiating her subversion phase, she unchains the multiple selves within her to embrace finally her mestiza consciousness through an artistic life. Her rhizomatic spirit springs up once she is ready to resist androcentricity. Beauvoir believes that the female subject must resort to “self-expression” in her self-realization to create a world where she celebrates her being-ness (1953, 663). When married, her artistic self is “neither fully dead nor fully alive, perpetually waiting to be . . . through the alchemy of words, to crystallise into life” (O’Brien, 152).

Though her artistic self is unwelcomed and doubted, her authorship becomes her entrance door to individuality. Her husband calls her artistry as nothing but “irrational ruminations” (O’Brien, 152). Her mother seems to call her daughter’s artistic life a “subversive life” (as in 152). For Eleonora, writing becomes an apparatus of self-assertion. Eleonora thinks that “perhaps literature had had its vertiginous effect upon her. Literature was either a route out of life or into life” (151). It becomes the rescue jacket that pulls her out of the submissive life she has been pinned to and the escalator to the new life of individuality. Later on, her new mestiza-self connects to the professional life besides her wifehood and motherhood selves. Eleonora is recruited by a magazine for a job of reading manuscripts. To her surprise, the managing director for the publishing house “had chanced on a few of her reports,” and is amazed on “what a breadth of fresh air they were – a new, sharp intelligence, nervous, feminine, strangely personal and yet not afraid to get out the chisel” (176).

Unlike her husband, the director expresses his adoration for her pieces of work. He seems wholeheartedly captivated by her writing style. This director is the support that she needs to unleash her artistic becomingness. When asking her if she writes anything besides the magazine reports, she sends him some of her drafts. The reply he sends is “the transfusion she had been waiting for . . . he saw a *new voice, a new slant*, a girl revealing to him that the angels were on her side” (our emphasis, 178). Eleonora finally decides to resume writing her first novel which turns out later on to be a scandalous one. After her husband discovers what he calls her disloyalty, he pours out his rage and wrath on her. Feeling pitiful, he helplessly reminds her of her old self as a “pure, loyal, untainted, [and] an exemplary wife” who has now turned into “a schemer, plotting to pursue her own rotten ambition . . . What a mockery” (195). Resorting to her carelessness and indifference, he complains that her work is whimsical and worthless as it is “completed without deference to a husband, an absurd epic of maudlin childhood is about to be sent to a pimp, before a husband is allowed to correct it” (194). To him this novel is “the evidence of her betrayal” (195). Her writing-self threatens his masculinity. He feels that she is robbing him of his power as she is no longer afraid of his authorial superiority. In an act of triumph, she leaves the room filled with feelings of exhilaration while he is flabbergasted at the sight of it.

Her name is in lights, but her books are not well received among her own people. There is a great dispute about her writings not only among her people but among critics as well. Some accuse her of vandalism as she is selling a false image of Ireland and its people. Her people consider her books a disgrace to the country. They decide to take action against her writings. Concerning her “most recent book,” her mother announces, “Some have written to publishers to say they are going to take an action against [her]. Of course they are money-mad but they are also out for [her] blood” (339). They are

frantically mad as she makes of them an object of “ridicule and humiliation” (as in 339). Like the author herself, Eleonora is doomed to failure in her country. Some other critics believe in the counterfeit of her oeuvre. To them, her writing is nothing but “tripe, written by a man in Carrickmines,” an outer suburb of Dublin (336). Being an unconventional writer who unclothes the social ills, Eleonora is rejected from inside. She has “many ill-wishers [t]here” (23). Inevitably, her mother constantly reminds her of the wrong path she has taken.

Subversively, the narrative of O'Brien's text reinforces Eleonora's self-assertion. Accordingly, the novel celebrates a miraculous coalescence of form and content. The latter are both fragmented because of the constant interruption of the linear narrative by a series of letters and diaries. These letters are a vehicle of the female's self-expression and self-assertion. Consequently, *The Light* can be labeled as an epistolary novel. This kind of novels is generally considered as a genre confined to women writers because of the feminine style in their writing. The masculine critics associate women writers with letters and diary-writing because of the shared sentimental nature of the feminine and this kind of writing. In “Women's Letters in the Public Sphere,” Janet Altman (1995) affirms that male commentators consider the epistolary mode as a feminine genre that women excel in. She believes that such an association has become “almost a cliché” (99). Yet, ironically enough, Samuel Richardson is universally celebrated to be the first author initiating this kind of writing as a literary genre. The publication of his *Pamela* (1740) and *Clarissa* (1748) marked the popularization of this genre in the eighteenth century. What is worth mentioning is that years before the publication of these novels, Aphra Behn, an unconventional female author, published her *Love-Letters between a Nobleman and his Sister* (1684).³ Apart from Aphra Behn, there is also Mary Davys who published a good number of epistolary novels before Richardson, namely *Familiar Letters betwixt a Gentleman and a Lady* (1725). Consequently, this subsection mainly highlights the feminist theorization of the epistolary novel. It draws on Elizabeth Campbell's conceptualization of the epistolary.

Elizabeth Campbell (1995) distinguishes between the traditional epistolary novel and the postmodern one. She argues that the most common subject in early epistolary texts is love and/or seduction. The story begins with letters of seduction, then the “woman's resistance [. . .] and closes with her sorrow, anger, isolation, and very often her impending death” (334). A good example of such novels is Samuel Richardson's *Clarissa*. Moreover, Campbell opines that epistolary texts of the eighteenth's and even seventeenth's century have two patterns: the first showcases the female correspondent's succumbing to her lover's seduction while the second emphasizes her abandonment and desertedness. In both patterns, despair is germane in the narrative. However, in the contemporary genre, despair is inevitably followed by the character's revolt. Despair is mostly the starting point of the story which leads to the female's revolutionary journey to meet a more authentic version of her selfhood. Campbell further explains that the postmodern epistolary is no longer about sentimentality and romance, but rather about voicing the voiceless. The contemporary novels are “more blatantly political in theme and more radical in form” (332). This genre is mostly re-visited by “women [who] have been doubly oppressed, from outside chauvinistic imperialism and from within by a patriarchy” (as 332). Accordingly, the postmodern

epistolary novel can be considered as a post-colonial genre. Hence, African-American and women writers tend to inject the epistolary form in their writings to re-negotiate the deliberate oppressions and the silencing of the Other, thus, giving voice to the voiceless.

Postmodernist writers play with “epistolary conventions to produce revolutionary texts . . . [they] use the letter as a subversive and freeing agent and also as a mirror in which they not only seek themselves and/or another but attempt to change their lives” (Campbell 1995, 332). The postmodern epistolary text is subversive and self-assertive in nature. Such texts conjure up women’s concern with subjectivity, individuality, and agency. Campbell considers the rise of such unconventional books due to women’s freedom, consciousness-raising, and their anger about the social injustices. This writing conforms “to *l’écriture féminine*, which ‘undermines the linguistic, syntactical, and metaphysical conventions of Western narrative’” in voicing the female’s experience (335). *l’écriture féminine* is a concept that sprang out of the writings of Hélène Cixous, Monique Wittig, Luce Irigaray and Julia Kristeva. These theorists champion a subversive mode of writing. Both epistolary fiction and *l’écriture féminine* share notions of “fragmentation, subjectivity, abonnement of chronology, repetitiveness, associative and sometimes seemingly illogical connections, and most of all, unconventional use of language”(as in 335). Agreeing with Campbell, Rebecca Hogan (2016) also believes that “diary-writing” is a “subversive form of writing because it tends to cross and blur boundaries between things traditionally kept separate . . . it crosses the boundaries between self and others . . . between author and reader . . . between text and experience, art and life” (100). The female authors of the epistolary genre emphasize openness, non-linearity, fragmentation, and unfixity. As such, women utilize letters and diaries in their fiction to “remember, return, reflect, and write and rewrite their lives” (Campbell, italics in original, 335). Letter-writing becomes a revisionary act of form and content. In subverting the masculinist literary discourse, women writers expose their stories of oppression and subjugation.

Significantly, letters in Edna O’Brien’s narrative form a vehicle for the characters’ self-assertion. In his “Edna O’Brien and Narrative Diaspora Space,” Tony Murray (2013) considers letter-writing as a “narrative diaspora space” that genuinely “illuminates the relationship between mothers, daughters and writing in Irish migrant experience” (85). Based on Avtar Brah’s concept of Diaspora Space, Murray shows how *The Light* presents the intermeshing of the abstract and the physical dimension of letters in the characters’ attempt to bend the rift between mother and her daughter. He further explains that “letters, both physically (by virtue of their travel across land and sea) and psychologically (by virtue of their contents and its import for sender and receiver), constitute a discrete form of narrative diaspora space” (92). Both the physical and the psychological aspects mingle in the letter-writing process to emphasize a narrative diaspora space. Furthermore, Murray assertively believes that letters are boundary-less. He explains that emigration stories of mother, daughter, and grandmother intersperse together in the narrative in a way that pulls off physical and psychological borders. Hence, letters emphasize intersecting lines of emigration, estrangement, and generational differences. Murray argues this in Dilly’s attempt to mend the crack; her letters are a lamentation of her estrangement from her daughter. In this respect, Dilly’s letters physically cross the waters of England to figuratively make Dilly’s spirit migrate as well.

Despite Murray's interesting comments, one may argue that in O'Brien's text, letters and diaries represent what can be called "narrative mestiza space." This space crowns plurality, diversity, and inconclusiveness in the same text. The narrative mestiza space is where different stories and various selves are "lived and re-lived, produced, reproduced and transformed through individual and as well as collective" narratives (Brah 1996, 180). It is where multiple realities and contradictions are contested and where past self and present self are juxtaposed. Such narratives push off boundaries of physical/psychological, past/present, I/Other, the here and the there. The mestiza space is borderless indeed. In this respect, the novel comes "to bind past and present, land and story, to effect as it were a little truce between living and dead" (O'Brien, 316).

In *The Light*, both letters and diaries are the bridge through which mother and daughter transcend mental, spatial, and material borders. After leaving the hospital, Eleonora unintentionally forgets her journal. Found and handed back to her mother, Eleonora's unsaid stories and thoughts lay naked in front of her dying mother. By reading her daughter's journal, Dilly crosses mental and physical walls and enters the realm of the beyond; a realm of her daughter's consciousness. Similarly, after Dilly's death, Sister Consolata gives back a series of boxes that carry her mother's letters. The latter unearths her mother's stories and memories. By screening them, both characters step into a different spatial dimension. Consequently, letters and diaries are timeless as they present the characters' different stories as "acts encapsulated in time, 'enacted' every time they are spoken aloud or read silently" (Anzaldúa 1987, 67). Most importantly, the epistolary form of the novel presents the diversity of women's experiences. Letters inscribe stories of three different generations and emphasize the plurality of the Irish female experience. Thereof, one trait in the narrative mestiza space is the uniting force that tolerates differentness, contradiction, and diversities.

Relatively, the narrative mestiza space is undeniably assertive. Campbell believes that art and writing lead to self-agency. She argues that "women moved to discover themselves either by writing to another consciousness within themselves or by writing to 'no one'" (1995, 339). Similarly, Anzaldúa contests that it is through writing that she, as a female subject, "feels like [she is] creating [her] own face, [her] own heart . . . [her] soul makes itself through the creative art" (73). In other words, creativity and writing construct selfhood. In *The Light*, letters and diary entries speak for Eleonora's and Dilly's voice, their self-authored stories, and their own experiences. For Eleonora, she resorts to diary-writing as she socially fails to communicate. Her mother's letters, mainly the unsent ones, narrate Dilly's estrangement from her daughter. Both use writing as a form of self-narrativization of their unheard stories. In an earlier scene in the novel, Eleonora refers to Richardson's *Clarissa*. By so doing, she indirectly emphasizes the power of writing in the quest for self-assertion. Like Eleonora, Clarissa resorts to letter-writing to exert "authority and control over the narrative of her own life" (McWilliams 2013, 80). In a similar vein, Eleonora reflects that her mother's letters are her mother's self-writing space. She emphasizes how these letters are of a woman who is desperately trying to be heard. Dilly's letters are about "pouring her troubles out in order for her daughter to know the deep things, the wounds she had to bear" (O'Brien, 19). Eleonora's inheritance is not Rusheen but rather the voice of her mother. Being a writer herself, it is

expected that Eleonora will immortalize her mother's voice through literature. Agreeably, it is evident that both Eleonora and Dilly are authors of their life stories. In *The Light*, the narrative mestiza space is not only about diversity but also about self-authorship. Letters become "a window into, mirror, constructor" and the door into the realm of the psyche (Friedman 1998, 8).

Conclusion:

Though her life of artistry has been controversially doomed to stereotyping, Eleonora succeeds in asserting an artist-self. She comes to realize that the only passage into self-assertion is by floating the artist-self in her. Respectively, in meeting her new self, she sheds the traditional submissive self of hers. Eleonora's mestiza consciousness blurs the borders and boundaries of gender and subjectivity. She triumphantly undoes her gender role. In so doing, she trashes the marginalization and subjugation enforced mostly by her husband Hermann and centralizes herself as a "subject being" rather than a "subjected being." Briefly, Eleonora is the new Irish woman who succeeds in subverting the Irish masculine discourse.

تجاوز النمط الذكوري واسترجاع الذات في رواية (ضوء المساء) للكاتبة ايدنا أوبرين

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الملخص

يهدف هذا المقال إلى تحليل رواية (ضوء المساء) للكاتبة ايدنا أوبرين من منظور نسوي، وتحديداً، فإن المقال يقترح قراءة الرواية في سياق نظريات ما بعد الحداثة كنظرية أدائية الجنسين ووعي المستيزا. كما تهدف هذه الدراسة إلى توضيح مفاهيم الهوية والإرادة في الرواية وإلى تسليط الضوء على مختلف الاستراتيجيات التي توظفها البطلة لكسر قيود المجتمع الذكوري. ترفض اليونورا، بطلة الرواية، أن تنصاع لدور الأنثى الذي يحدده لها مجتمعها الذكوري فتقرر أن تتخذ من وعي المستيزا منهج حياة وطريقة للعيش متجاوزة بذلك الحدود الجغرافية والمعنوية والفنوية وغيرها. الكلمات المفتاحية: الذكورية، الأدائية، تجاوز الحدود، المستيزا، الذاتية.

End Note

- ¹ Taken from Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar's Book *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination* (2000).
- ² On a side note, Bessie Bunter is a fictional character in Charles Hamilton's *Off Cliff House School*. Besides being funny, she is egotistic, excessively greedy, and despotic. She is depicted to be an immature character who keeps nagging to get what she wants.
- ³ Though this attribution is still a dispute among critics.

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