

When Politics Meets Gender: Trauma in Edna O'Brien's *House of Splendid Isolation*

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ABSTRACT

The signing of the contentious Anglo-Irish Treaty in 1921 was a traumatic experience for many Irish people. This is not only because of the ensuing Irish Civil War, but the psychological adjustments that the Irish people have to make in their partitioned land. Since the Irish Republican Army (IRA) emerged during the Anglo-Irish War (1919-21), it has been bent on terminating the British government's control of Ireland and establishing a truly independent and unified Irish Republic through armed struggles. This traumatic history, which was embedded with the conflicts and compromises of such struggles, became a pivotal issue in many Irish writings. As a consequence, it helped shape subsequent Irish literature and culture when the dream of a free and unified Ireland was constantly recalled and reconfigured. These painful markings are reflected in complex ways in Edna O'Brien's fiction *House of Splendid Isolation* (1994), in which an IRA fugitive named McGreevy holes up and finally bonds with Josie O'Meara, an aged widow, in a dilapidated house. Apart from the political turmoil, considerable anguishes caused by love and marriage converge to entangle the protagonists' traumas. This paper focuses on how, by shifting between the multifarious narrative perspectives, O'Brien's *House of Splendid Isolation* stitches the interwoven personal, interpersonal, and national suffering together. In addition, the role women play in facilitating sympathetic understanding and reconciliation amid the violence and traumas in contemporary Ireland is discussed. The findings imply that, despite the age-old traumatic experiences caused by political conflicts in Ireland in the past few centuries, a trauma-free tomorrow via love and reconciliation, mostly with the help of women, is possible in contemporary Ireland.

Keywords: politics; trauma; Ireland; Edna O'Brien; *House of Splendid Isolation*

INTRODUCTION

For many Irish people, the signing of the contentious Anglo-Irish Treaty in 1921 was a traumatic experience. This trauma was caused not only due to the Irish Civil War that broke out shortly afterwards, but the psychological adjustments that the Irish people had to make in their partitioned country. Since the Irish Republican Army (IRA) emerged during the Anglo-Irish War (1919-21), it has been bent on terminating the British government's control of Ireland and establishing a truly independent and unified Irish Republic through armed struggles (Barr & Corr  in, 2017, pp. 75-76; Whelehan, 2014, pp. 632-34). This traumatic history, which was embedded with the conflicts and compromises of such struggles, became a pivotal issue in many Irish writings. As a consequence, it helped shape subsequent Irish literature and culture when the dream of a free and unified Ireland was constantly recalled and reconfigured. These painful markings are reflected in complex ways in Edna O'Brien's *House of Splendid Isolation* (1994), in which an IRA fugitive named McGreevy holes up and finally bonds with Josie O'Meara, an aged widow, in a dilapidated house. Apart from the political turmoil, considerable anguishes caused by love and marriage converge to entangle the protagonists' traumas. With a series of stories unfolding throughout the fiction, including

the aborted child's indictment, Josie's unhappy marriage with her alcoholic and violent husband, her love with a priest, and Ireland caught in a civil war, O'Brien delineates the harrowing experiences that are prevalent in modern Irish society. However, notwithstanding the troubles, the unsettling experiences in O'Brien's *House of Splendid Isolation* find consolation and transcendence in the protagonists' mutual understanding in the end.

O'Brien's fiction before the 1980s was characterized by the female characters' quests for identity and self-fulfillment. For instance, her *Country Girls' Trilogy*, including *The Country Girls* (1960), *The Lonely Girl* (1962), and *Girls in Their Married Bliss* (1964), diagnoses women's traumatic experiences that were caused by the sexual inequalities in Ireland in the mid-20th-century. O'Brien, who comes from a strict Catholic family, criticizes the traditional family values of her conservative Catholic upbringing in these three fictions. The protagonists of her novels, normally girls or women, audaciously articulate their female sexuality. Consequently, these earlier fictions were banned and even burned in Ireland due to their direct and audacious confrontation with the Catholic Church. In the wake of such hostile attitudes toward her fictions, O'Brien left Ireland for England and stayed in London mostly to continue her writing career. In an interview, O'Brien articulates her ambivalence over her motherland: "I left Ireland because my first books were banned. I was frightened; and the climate of censorship was strangulating. But although you physically leave the country, mentally you bring it with you."¹ Generally, O'Brien's fictions in the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s focus on how women struggle to free themselves from the female stereotypes that are embedded in the culture of Ireland. Accordingly, as Kersti Tarien Powell contends, O'Brien is "a writer whose own career has consisted of a detailed examination of Irish women, their place in society, and the troubled position that the image of the mother has in society" (2004, p.93). As a matter of fact, although the Irish people gained a certain degree of political authority with the establishment of the Irish Free State in 1922, and changed Ireland from a British colony to a sovereign, independent, and democratic state in 1948, the political liberty and authority hardly reduced the pressure imposed upon Irish women. On the contrary, the domestic turmoil and economic recession that came with Ireland's independence from England in many aspects worsened Irish women's survival. Writing fictional narratives that were set against this historical background, O'Brien shows how her protagonist Caithleen in *The Country Girls* both conforms to and rebels against the yoke on modern Irish women. To a great extent, Caithleen is conditioned by the conventional image of women that is prevalent in Irish culture: the hag of Beare, the sky lady in the *aisling* tradition, and the holy Madonna figure, all of whom signify the secondary status of Irish women in different ways. Nevertheless, she strives hard to escape from the narrow place or space consigned to her, seeking instead for her own happiness and self-realization.

Notwithstanding the special focus on women and their problems in contemporary Ireland, the 1990s saw O'Brien's attempt to deal with more political and social issues (Greenwood, 2003, pp. 1-4; Mahony 1998, pp. 14-213; Pelan, 2006, pp. 34-35). *House of Splendid Isolation* is a case in point. This fiction discusses the complications inherent to Irish politics by depicting the life of an elderly widow, Josie O'Meara, who lives alone in her decrepit house, is held hostage by, and gradually learns to survive with McGreevy, an IRA gunman on the run, and the traumatic experiences enmeshed in the main characters' memories. However, despite her endeavors to explore a wider variety of topics, O'Brien's efforts are not so well appreciated by all her critics. For instance, in her critique of *House of Splendid Isolation*, Joan Smith maintains that, while specializing in depicting women's emotions and conflicts, O'Brien appears awkward when tackling bigger issues, like the IRA and terrorism (1994, p. 33). By bringing relevant trauma theory into discussion, this paper

¹ <http://www.lectures.org/obrien.html>.

argues that, via shifting between the multifarious narrative perspectives, O'Brien's *House of Splendid Isolation* stitches the interwoven personal, interpersonal, and national sufferings together and that, as the story indicates, women make significant contribution to facilitating pivotal sympathetic understanding and reconciliation amid the traumas and violence in contemporary Ireland.

House of Splendid Isolation showcases a land which has been overloaded with sufferings and traumas in different forms, historically, politically, and sexually. However, rather than leading readers to witness traumatic experiences mired in sadness and failure with no hope of recuperation, O'Brien points to a bright future in which people in contemporary Ireland not only sympathize but empathize with each other via mutual understandings of their agonies. This is in tune with Cathy Caruth's theory in *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History* that, instead of getting us stuck in "political and ethical paralysis" (1996, p. 10) and pushing us away from the reality, facing one's own trauma facilitates our better understanding of history. In fact, unlike most trauma theorists who regard cases of trauma and victimization as individual events, Caruth highlights the inter-connectedness of respective traumatic experiences, arguing "the story of the way in which one's trauma is tied up with the trauma of another" (1996, p. 8). In her introduction to *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*, Caruth further asserts that listening to other people's traumatic stories that happen in different historical or cultural contexts can help bridge the gap of cultural difference because "trauma itself may provide the very link of cultures" (1995, p. 11). Moreover, according to Caruth, the victim's recurring traumatic experiences are not "simply the attempt to grasp that one has almost died, but more fundamentally and enigmatically, the very attempt to claim one's own survival" (1996, p.64). In other words, Caruth attends to the positive aspect of trauma, accentuating its re-generating potential. Taken together, Caruth's (1995, 1996) theory on trauma helps shed light on the protagonists' sympathetic understanding of another's suffering in *House of Splendid Isolation*. It also helps explain why, in spite of the gloom that haunts McGreevy, Josie, and the other characters, survival and reconciliation are made possible near the end of the fiction.

IRELAND AND POLITICS: A TRAUMATIC HISTORY

History is everywhere. It seeps into the soil, the subsoil. Like rain, or hail, or snow, or blood. A house remembers. An outhouse remembers. A people ruminate. The tale differs with the teller.²

The history of Ireland is overloaded with sufferings. This is mainly because England's encroachment did not cease for long ever since the twelfth century when Henry II invaded Ireland and established English control. Generally, English monarchs could have control over Ireland because there were only a limited number of rebellions from the Irish people. The British control climaxed in the enactment of the Act of Union in 1800. Nonetheless, rather than relishing the fruits of union, the Irish people in the subsequent decades were troubled by a ceaseless series of disasters. Responding to the maltreatment by the Protestant government of England, Daniel O'Connell made tremendous efforts to make possible the emancipation of Irish Catholics. The Great Famine between 1845 and 1849, which virtually ruined the ever-fragile Irish economy, laid bare the long-term maladministration of the British authority at the same time. In the meantime, nationalist activities intensified and the Fenian Movement bloomed in Ireland (Maume, 2009, pp. 9-12). In addition, early decades of the 20th century saw surges of revolutionary activities in Ireland. Easter 1916 triggered patriotism and hope for freedom throughout Ireland. However, the cessation of Ulster to the UK, in conjunction with the signing of the Anglo-Irish Treaty in 1921, brought about the conflict between the anti-treaty faction led by Eamon de Valera and the other group directed by Michael Collins. Their confrontation and conflicts escalated into a bitter civil war in 1922. As a consequence, the political turmoil in the following years was coupled with economic depression and social

² O'Brien, 1994, p. 3.

unrest. By the same token, fierce conflicts were rampant in Northern Ireland, which culminated in notorious riots such as the Troubles and Bloody Sunday in the 1970s and thereafter, leaving the Irish people intimidated and insecure for years (Paseta, 2003, p. 79-95). These historic tragedies and their aftermaths had significant impact on the everyday lives of many Irish people. As the narrator in *House of Splendid Isolation* points out, the Irish population has been manipulated by such a “yoke of history” (O’Brien, 1994, p. 70) for quite a long time.

The political legacy that derived from Ireland’s partition brought the Irish people traumas and drove many of them crazy for reunification. In the fiction, McGreevy, an IRA terrorist known as “psychopath” to the Garda, commits himself to the reclamation of the six counties in Northern Ireland by “getting the British out of Ireland” (O’Brien, 1994, p. 83) and reaffirming justice, peace, personal identity, and racial identity for all. He is so determined to fight that he forgoes personal love in order to work for his native land, insomuch that, according to the narrator, there is “war in the sky and war on the ground and war in his heart” (O’Brien, 1994, p. 8). McGreevy’s obsession with Ireland’s political trauma leaves him no alternative. As the narrator in the beginning section called “The Child” proclaims, “Maybe it is that the dead do not die but rather inhabit the place.... A girl loves a sweetheart and a sweetheart loves her back, but he loves the land more, he is hostage to it” (O’Brien, 1994, p. 4). In a similar fashion, the preoccupation with revolution and retrieval of the native land has been haunting Paud, a half-witted boy who is hired to do occasional work in Josie’s house. When asked about his knowledge of Ireland’s ill-starred history, the boy takes no time to recite what he has learned from school, lamenting how Ireland, his beloved motherland, “had been sacked, plundered, and raped by the sister country” (O’Brien, 1994, p. 54). In the wake of this ideology, the boy is willing to take part in the revolutionary schemes plotted by IRA because he is convinced that the Irish people’s future depends on “a united Ireland” (O’Brien, 1994, p. 56).

In addition to McGreevy and Paud, many other characters in the fiction cannot sever themselves from the impact of constant political upheavals in Ireland. Josie is one of these victims: “Yes, the dark threads of history looping back and forth and catching her (Josie) and her people like her in their grip, like snares” (O’Brien, 1994, p. 58). James, Josie’s husband, is no exception because he is often troubled by certain bizarre, cryptic sounds at night: “James heard the chains, the chains of the dead, and predicted that they were coming for him. Well, they are back now for a vengeance, the chains of history, the restless dead and the restless living, with scores to settle” (O’Brien, 1994, p. 78). This recurring and disturbing experience echoes Dominick LaCapra’s notion that “something of the past always remains, if only as a haunting presence or symptomatic revenant” (2001, p. 49). While the Anglo-Irish War (1919-21) and the subsequent Anglo-Irish Treaty (1921) ended decades ago, this snare-like harrowing history looms over and, as Cathy Caruth argues in “Traumatic Awakenings,” “return(s) later in repeated flashbacks, nightmares, and other repetitive phenomena” (1995, p. 89). Unable to figure out why conflict haunts so much, many characters in this fiction are invariably in the passionate, paralyzed, and psychological grip of war. The narrator’s observation in the section titled “The Past” that, instead of being “put to rest in the annals,” history “holds Irish people ransom,” (O’Brien, 1994, p. 57) exemplifies people’s vulnerability and inability to comprehend history—the turbulent history of modern Ireland in particular.

Typical of the trauma-ridden characters in this work of fiction is ambivalence. Reminiscences of Ireland’s gory revolutions, the ensuing love and hatred of violence, and the intense dislike of the British occupation generate complicated feelings, personally, socially, and culturally as well. On the one hand, McGreevy is a cold-blooded assassin, but on the other, he is depicted as someone who is torn between his private craving for peace and love

and his sense of duty to perpetrate violence (O'Brien, 1994, pp. 105-106). These fluctuating feelings are also evident in the way the North and the South relate to each other. "The South forgot us," McGreevy said. "Forlorn. Aggrieved. A likeness to those children in fable, banished again and again, exiled in lakes for hundreds of years, cut off from the homeland" (O'Brien, 1994, p. 107). Josie's response to McGreevy's indictment of betrayal is illuminating: "Now there are two wars ... one with the English and one with ourselves" (O'Brien, 1994, p. 107). This ambivalence corresponds to Seamus Heaney's notion of the duality of Irish-ness. According to Heaney, an either / or logic is not so common in Ireland. Instead, a "both / and" mentality permeates the Irish people's everyday lives (O'Brien, 1994, pp. 21-23). This unique feature that is characteristic of the Irish people may be closely attributed to the permanent conflicts in Ireland (e.g. between Ireland and England, Catholics and Protestants, the Irish people and the British people, Republicans and Unionists, and the South and the North) that render them little alternative but to learn to compromise between extremes so that they can survive in the invariably conflicting systems and hybrid cultures. Consequently, as Josie suggests, the traumatic legacy of British colonization leaves the Irish people with two opponents to deal with. On the one hand, they have to fight against their colonizers—a task that may last even long after the termination of colonization. On the other hand, since divisions and conflicts are inevitable among the Irish people in their confrontation with the colonizers, they need to make a compromise so that they can learn to live and let live with their compatriots in the always already turbulent socio-political milieu in Ireland in the twentieth century.³

RECURRING TRAUMAS FOR IRISH WOMEN

Ireland has always been a woman, a womb, a cave, a cow, a Rosaleen, a sow, a bride, a harlot, and, of course, the gaunt Hag of Beare.⁴

The metaphor of Ireland as a woman may appear arbitrary, but it is not when examined in the Irish cultural context. Ireland has been traditionally imagined as a woman, such as the Hag of Beare, the Madonna figure, and the aisling lady. (Connolly, 2003, p. 3; Nash, 1993, p. 47). In the late 19th century, in his book *On the Study of Celtic Literature* (1867), Matthew Arnold contended that the Irish race is innately sensual, sentimental, passionate, sensuous, feminine, undisciplined, anarchical and turbulent (1988, pp. 61-65). Arnold tried to justify the disempowerment of the colonized by labelling the Celtic race as sentimental by nature. Accordingly, he argued, "No doubt the sensibility of the Celtic nature, its nervous explanation, have something feminine in them, and the Celt is thus peculiarly disposed to feel the spell of the feminine idiosyncrasy; he has an affinity to it; he is not far from its secret" (1988, p. 65). However, this long-term feminized conception does not boost the status of women but make them much more invisible in the wake of waves of nationalist campaigns and the dominant Catholic religion. In the Hag of Beare writings, mostly a crippling hag desperately waits for the outsiders to rescue her from the manipulation of her brutal master, while the aisling lady is often fantasized as a beauty who craves for the male invaders' deliverance. Both stereotypes of women are emblematic of Irish women's incompetence and, more generally, the failure of Ireland-as-woman. Additionally, the Madonna image is

³ In Ireland, the early decades of twentieth century saw a wide range of political conflicts. In 1921, the signing of the Anglo-Irish Treaty and the establishment of Irish Free State in the following year brought about the confrontation between the anti-treaty faction led by Eamon de Valera and the other major group led by Michael Collins. Pitiably, disputes between these two sects escalated into a bitter Civil War in June 1922. The political turmoil in the ensuing years was coupled with economic depression and social unrest. In 1937, de Valera government held power and changed the name to Eire and announced Ireland as a sovereign and independent state (Paseta, 2003, pp. 79-95).

⁴ O'Brien, 1978, p. 11.

characterized by stark purity, innocence, virginity, and sacrifice. Nevertheless, this image of the Virgin Mary is ambiguous because, as C. L. Innes maintains, paradoxically Mary embodies both holiness and subordination insofar as she is always subordinated to, and of a lower rank than, her own son, Jesus Christ (1993, pp. 40-41). In other words, the disempowerment of Irish women is embedded symbolically in Irish legends, myth, and religion, pushing women away to the margin.⁵

With McGreevy plunged into the house, the embittered political trauma in O'Brien's *House of Splendid Isolation* conflates with yet another complication—the harrowing sexual experiences that haunt Josie. Not a few critics pay special attention to the political dimension of this fiction. In “Outside History: Relocation and Dislocation in Edna O'Brien's *House of Splendid Isolation*,” Machael Harris argues that this fiction “opens O'Brien's trilogy on contemporary Ireland which more explicitly examines the national culture that shapes the individual subject” (2006, p. 125). However, the discussion of political issues in O'Brien's work is coupled with extensive depictions of Irish women, the female character Josie in particular. In her book titled *Contemporary Irish Literature: Transforming Tradition*, Christina Hunt Mahony argues that, notwithstanding its innovation in style and theme, “the chasm of sensibility between men and women that usually exists in O'Brien's work is evidenced again in this novel” (1998, p. 214).

Josie's trauma, which is pieced together through narratives, recollections, diary entries, flashbacks, snippets of poems, and Irish folktales, derives from different directions. Her emigration to Brooklyn to work as a maid during her adolescence leaves her in despair and disillusioned (O'Brien, 1994, p. 34). This suffering is followed by her unhappy marriage to her domineering husband, James, her sexual suppression, the unwanted pregnancy, and abortion, which together embody the misery shared by her predecessors in the Irish society. To her husband, Josie is nothing but a “good mare” (O'Brien, 1994, p. 32), a means of child-bearing. Accordingly, James always calls her “muddy,” short for “mother” and “mud,” and says “lewd things while he rises and rears within her” (O'Brien, 1994, p. 47). Josie refuses to give birth to a child owing to her repugnance for her husband and abuser. However, her resistance to sexual oppression simultaneously reflects the constant struggle of Irish women—their control over reproduction. Irish women's limited right of reproduction is evidenced in their being denied access to counseling or information on abortion during pregnancy and the banning of publication on abortion services. Because of the influence of the Catholic religion in Ireland, both abortion and contraception have been banned for decades. Therefore, they were always targeted in Irish feminist movements. For Irish women, suggests Jo Murphy-Lawless, “gaining control over their fertility has been a diffuse, often silent struggle” over the years (1993, p. 53). In addition, according to Judith Taylor, the Irish government, the Catholic Church, and antiabortion activist coalitions are the major obstacles to Irish feminist movements (1998, p. 677). Irish feminists' efforts are conspicuous in their struggle against the 1983 Constitutional Amendment and the X Case in 1992. Despite few brilliant results in the 1993 Amendment, women's bid for their reproductive rights succeeded in the X Case. In the Amendment campaign, due to the considerable opposition from anti-abortion groups, women's access to abortion was denied in order to outlaw abortion and the right to life of the unborn. However, debates over the legitimacy of women's abortion rights facilitated the discussion and deliberation of related issues in the 80s and 90s. The Supreme Court's ruling of the X Case, in which a 14-year-old girl who had been raped was permitted

⁵ Similar examples of negative woman characters recur in modern Irish literature if we take into consideration female characters such as Yeats's *Cathleen Ni Houlihan* in and Nora in John Millington Synge's *The Shadow of the Glen*, Eveline and Eveline's mother in James Joyce's short story “Eveline,” and so on. Although these female characters come in different forms, generally they share one thing in common. Most of them serve as symbols of Ireland, who are supposed to work for their family and sacrifice for their country.

to abort the foetus abroad, signaled a milestone for the Irish feminist campaign, though the right of every pregnant woman to travel outside the country to have an abortion was still prohibited. Not long after the X Case, a public referendum that mandated women's right to freedom of travel for abortion in other countries was passed, which was followed by another referendum conducted in 1995, in which divorce was finally legalized in Ireland.

As a woman, O'Brien is sensitive to the problem of reproduction, which is of peculiar relevance to Irish women. In response to an interviewer's question on the result of the 1983 Abortion Referendum, which made abortion illegal, O'Brien argues that it is unfair for women to be vilified as criminals when they choose to have an abortion, asserting that abortion is "a serious and traumatic thing for a woman, and she needs support, not cudgels" (Carlson, 1990, p. 77). O'Brien's justification materializes in the form of a female protagonist because, in contrast to most other Irish women, Josie aborts the unborn foetus according to her own will. Therefore, instead of sadness that arises from women's powerlessness over their own reproduction, Josie's autonomy demonstrates an exceptional degree of female self-identity as compared with most Irish women, who are yoked by religion and tradition. Unlike many Irish women who are burdened with marriage, household chores, child-bearing, and child-rearing, Josie makes the difficult choice to get away from her restriction. She opts for escape to America at a young age. Moreover, she refuses to have the unwanted child and even engages in illicit love affairs with a doctor and a priest to make up for the spiritual emptiness in her marriage. However, these attempts do not garner her true happiness, and nor does the Catholic religion offer her any comfort in the face of trouble (O'Brien 1994, p. 140). Therefore, she is traumatized by abuse, violence, and a great sense of frustration most of the time.

CONVERGENCE OF WOMEN, POLITICS AND GENDER

Loneliness, the longing for adventure, the Roman Catholic Church, or the family tie that is more umbilical than among any other race on earth? The martyred Irish mother and the raving rollicking Irish father is not peculiar to the works of exorcized writers but common to families throughout the land. The children inherit a trinity of guilts (a Shamrock): the guilt for Christ's Passion and Crucifixion, the guilt for the plundered land, and the furtive guilt for the mother frequently defiled by the insatiable father.⁶

O'Brien's reflection above specifies three elements that are crucial to the Irish people—religion, politics, and sex.⁷ While McGreevy's story discloses the political trauma prevalent in the Irish mindset, Josie's experiences unveils the sexual trauma embedded in Irish society. Catholic religion along with its impact on the Irish people is widely discussed in O'Brien's other works, yet few are mentioned in *House of Splendid Isolation* except for occasional reference to the main characters' lack of faith. The convergence of politics and sex makes up the core of this story, helping to unravel the long-harbored painful memories of the Irish. Overall, the form and the content of the fiction are well-accorded because the ever-changing narrative perspectives that weave through the text fittingly echoes the unbearable complexities of torments the main characters have to suffer. In addition, as Avital Ronell maintains, trauma is partly experienced "as a memory that one cannot integrate into one's own experience" (1994, p. 313). From this perspective, the juxtaposition of narratives, diary entries, snippets of poems, Irish legends, and personal notes embodies Josie's failure to integrate her traumatic memories into a logical structure. Accordingly, these memories are

⁶ O'Brien, 1978, p. 19.

⁷ On another occasion, O'Brien remarks, "a trilogy of three themes important to Ireland and to me: politics, sex, and land" (Maloney, 2003, p. 200).

chaotic. On the other hand, this disruptive narrative feature echoes some French feminists' claim that female writings are chaotic and imaginative by nature. Kristeva's distinction between the symbolic and the semiotic is a case in point. For Kristeva, whereas the symbolic is a system under the law of the Father, the semiotic is the pre-Oedipal phase monopolized by the space of the mother's body. The incessant movements or flows in the semiotic are gathered up in the chora, the womb, which pulses and vibrates in a range of forms (1984, pp. 25-30). In other words, unlike the symbolic that is characterized by stasis and monotony, Kristeva's "the semiotic" features a space without certainty, finality and limitation, a space that is undulating, imaginative, and creative. In this sense, the chaotic nature of Josie's narrative can be much more destructive in unsettling the dominant discourse in Ireland, one that has been manipulated by males and politicians for centuries.⁸

Aside from the form-content correspondence, the decrepit house as the setting matches its master, who is senile and lonely. In the beginning, Josie is intimidated by the intrusion of the McGreevy, but before long, she gets to like the stranger. They are two sides of the same coin, with McGreevy passionate for political causes and Josie eager for love and sympathy. But both are marginalized in their endeavors, denied access to recognition, and obsessed with intense emotional traumas as a result. As a matter of fact, more than once, Josie generates insight into McGreevy's trauma. For example, in response to McGreevy's radicalism, she comments: "The Ireland you're chasing is a dream ... doesn't exist anymore ... It's gone. It's with O'Leary in the grave" (O'Brien, 1994, p. 208). This reference to Yeats' poem "September 1913," a reminder that the Romantic Ireland revolutionaries like John O'Leary went after in the 19th century is gone, in a sense betrays O'Brien's wish for her compatriots to be emancipated from the bondage of history. Metaphorically the house is symbolic of both Josie and Mother Ireland as a whole, who provide a sheltering "semiotic space," the pre-Oedipal phase that features continuous flows, movements, pulses and rhythm, and vibrations in a range of forms in the womb of the mother (Kristeva, 1984, pp. 25-26). McGreevy is said to be hiding in similar shelters, like a barn or a tree, several times. It is in this cozy motherly space that McGreevy's trauma is revealed and soothed. It is in this secluded space that Josie's pain is unfurled and transformed. With their stories unstitched, McGreevy's and Josie's wounds are stitched at the same time, and they both become sadder and wiser in the end. In the last section, the ghost of Josie's unborn child returns prophetically: "But the land cannot be taken. History has proved that. The land will never be taken. It is there" (O'Brien, 1994, p. 232).

At the last moment, spring comes and the honey-like air is replete with pollen: "Even the stones of the fields and the boulders looked less angry. Soft" (O'Brien, 1994, p. 231). The phantom of history and the obsession with trauma are dissolved as O'Brien provides her compatriots with a future knowledge that calls for reconciliation between nationalists and unionists, Catholics and Protestants in the concluding lines: "Inside, you get to know—that the same blood and the same tears drop from the enemy as from the self, though not always in the same proportion" (O'Brien 1994, p. 232). In a sense, the two protagonists' traumas turn out to be a necessary evil that paves the way for their better understanding of human's misery, particularly in the historically war-torn country. This potentially positive aspect of trauma echoes Cathy Caruth's argument that a person's traumatic experience not only records a past that has been dead but signifies a prospect of survival and new life (1996, p. 64).

⁸ In other words, women who suffer from abuse or violence are not necessarily hopeless. Applying theories of narrative therapy to the reading of *Young Women Speak Out* (2007), a collection of short stories and poems written by victims of sexual abuse and violence, Mazmi Maarof, Ruzy Suliza Hashim, Noraini Md Yusof, and Raihanah Mohd Mydin argue that, via story-telling, female victims in the texts demonstrate their good ability to have a better understanding of their sufferings, triumph over their traumatic experiences, and finally become "renewed individuals" (2012, p. 398). In a similar vein, this therapeutic purgation is evidenced in Josie, who transforms herself from an abused woman to a sad but a wiser sufferer that can outlive her misery.

Crucially, although trauma-ridden people may be plunged into an abyss of ineptitude, they can also transcend the quagmire by facing up to the reality and learning to reconcile with the traumatic past and move forward to a brighter future.

CONCLUSION

The ever-present traumatic history of Ireland has been haunting the Irish people for centuries. Even after terminating British colonization in the 1920s, some Irish people were not happy about the long-awaited self-rule because, with the signing of the Anglo Irish Treaty in 1921, Ulster was ceded to their enemies. Consequently, the Civil War broke out in 1922, which was followed by a series of domestic conflicts and tragedies in Ireland in the following decades.

Josie's story in Edna O'Brien's *A House of Splendid Isolation*, in which the political trauma is coupled with the sexual trauma, re-invokes our memories of these unhappy experiences. As the story shows, many characters, old and young, men and women, are preoccupied with and suffer from the political troubles of Ireland. However, notwithstanding the recurring nightmares, the therapeutic power brought by women as represented in Joise helps alleviate the agony caused by the historically notorious political strife. This echoes Shahriyar Mansouri's argument that many modern Irish fictions, as exemplified in James Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* and Flann O'Brien's *The Third Policeman*, demonstrate an opposition to the notion of Irishness concocted and promoted by the State, serving as "a radical form that challenges the historical memory of the State and those official narratives that were formed to control the nation and Irish identity" (2017, p. 47). But, unlike the male protagonists in Joyce's and Flann O'Brien's novels that defy normalization, in *House of Splendid Isolation* Edna O'Brien draws readers' attention to how women can potentially help alleviate their countrymen's harrowing agonies, challenge the political legacies such as violence in Ireland, and untie the traumatic deadlock that has been troubling the Irish people for centuries.

Obviously, the ending of the fiction foreshadows a promising future where the Irish people can be truly free from the age-old troubles. O'Brien seems to envisage a different Ireland in which conflicts can be well taken care of by people who are ready to make necessary compromise. A better tomorrow when Irish women, who are involved in politics and make their contribution, are no longer invisible. Therefore, unlike some critics who are dismissive of Edna O'Brien's efforts to align women's problems with broader issues such as politics, this paper testifies to her contribution in this regard and potentially paves the way for more study in the near future.

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