

FEMINIST RESISTANCE AND SUFFERING OF PROTAGONIST IN EDNA O'BRIEN NOVELS

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Abstract

Edna O'Brien's *The Country Girls Trilogy* explores the personal struggles of women in conservative rural Ireland. The protagonists, Kate and Baba, experience profound emotional and psychological suffering due to societal constraints, particularly rooted in the strict Catholic environment. Their journey is one of resistance against these societal norms as they seek independence and personal freedom. This paper delves into how both characters navigate their desires, endure suffering, and exhibit forms of resistance, thereby reflecting the larger theme of female empowerment amidst patriarchal oppression.

Keywords: Female, Protagonist, Suffer, Feminist, Resistance

INTRODUCTION

Edna O'Brien's *The Country Girls Trilogy*—comprising *The Country Girls* (1960), *The Lonely Girl* (1962), and *Girls in Their Married Bliss* (1964)—is a landmark in Irish literature, often credited with breaking the silence surrounding women's inner emotional lives and the repressive societal norms of mid-20th century Ireland. The trilogy, set in rural Ireland and later Dublin, follows the lives of two young women, Kate Brady and Baba Brennan, as they transition from adolescence to adulthood. The novels explore their desires for freedom, love, and personal fulfillment against the backdrop of a deeply conservative, Catholic society. Both characters grapple with profound emotional and psychological suffering as they navigate the tensions between personal autonomy and societal expectations, with their distinct responses to these challenges providing a compelling study in female resistance.

The social and religious environment of Ireland in the mid-20th century was heavily influenced by the Catholic Church, which exerted considerable control over public morality, particularly concerning issues of sexuality, gender roles, and family life. As literary scholar Heather Ingman notes, "O'Brien's novels were written during a time when Irish society was marked by deep conservatism, with the church acting as the primary enforcer of social norms" (Ingman 2007). This moral framework, rigid in its expectations of women, particularly with regard to chastity, marriage, and motherhood, forms the backdrop for Kate and Baba's struggles. As O'Brien herself acknowledged, her novels were often seen as controversial for their candid portrayal of female sexuality, with *The Country Girls* facing backlash from Irish censors for its "perceived moral subversion" (O'Brien 1984, p. 6).

Edna O'Brien's work, especially her early novels, emerged during a period when Ireland was still heavily influenced by the Catholic Church, which played a significant role in regulating women's behavior and enforcing traditional gender roles. O'Brien's writing "challenged the social and moral codes of mid-twentieth-century Ireland, which placed a high premium on female chastity and subservience" (Ingman, 2007). Her female characters often find themselves at odds with a society that restricts their autonomy, particularly in matters of sexuality and personal freedom. The patriarchal and religious constraints imposed on women were not just a product of cultural tradition but were institutionalized through laws and church teachings, which governed the conduct of women, especially in rural communities.

O'Brien's protagonists are often depicted as women who, despite their suffering, engage in subtle and overt forms of resistance. This resistance is particularly significant in a society where women's voices were systematically silenced, and their roles were confined to those of dutiful daughters, wives, and mothers. As Rebecca Pelan notes, "O'Brien's fiction systematically dismantles the patriarchal myth of the idealized Irish woman, revealing instead the complex emotional and psychological realities of female existence in Ireland" (Pelan, 2005).

SUFFERING IN THE COUNTRY GIRLS TRILOGY

Edna O'Brien's *The Country Girls Trilogy* explores the multifaceted nature of suffering experienced by its protagonists, Kate Brady and Baba Brennan, as they navigate life in a deeply conservative, patriarchal Irish society. The trilogy comprising *The Country Girls* (1960), *The Lonely Girl* (1962), and *Girls in Their Married Bliss* (1964) depicts their personal, emotional, and psychological suffering against a backdrop of strict Catholic morality, gendered societal expectations, and personal desires that are often thwarted by social conventions. O'Brien uses both protagonists to illustrate the pervasive emotional toll exacted on women in mid-20th century Ireland, making suffering a central theme in her critique of patriarchal structures.

One of the central causes of suffering in *The Country Girls Trilogy* is the repressive influence of the Catholic Church and the deeply ingrained social norms that dictate the lives of women. Kate and Baba, though vastly different in personality, both experience suffering tied to the strict moral expectations of rural Irish society. Kate's suffering is particularly shaped by the guilt and shame associated with her burgeoning sexuality, feelings that are compounded by her Catholic upbringing. Literary scholar Heather Ingman emphasizes that "Kate's internal suffering is rooted in the oppressive nature of Catholic morality, which imposes rigid restrictions on female sexuality and personal freedom" (Ingman, 2007). This guilt is evident throughout the trilogy, especially in Kate's emotional responses to her relationships, as she struggles to reconcile her personal desires with the moral expectations imposed on her by the Church and society.

Kate's relationship with Mr. Gentleman, a married man much older than herself, is emblematic of this internal conflict. Although Kate yearns for love and intimacy, her romantic choices are consistently clouded by feelings of guilt and self-doubt. As literary critic

Linden Peach observes, "Kate's suffering is emblematic of the way women in rural Irish society were taught to feel ashamed of their own desires, especially when those desires conflicted with the social and religious norms of the time" (Peach, 2004). Kate's inability to fully embrace her relationship with Mr. Gentleman, despite her deep feelings for him, reflects the broader societal repression of female sexuality, which manifests in her emotional turmoil and persistent sense of inadequacy.

In addition to the moral constraints imposed by society, Kate's suffering is deeply influenced by her family dynamics, particularly her relationship with her father. Kate's father, an abusive and tyrannical figure, represents the oppressive patriarchal authority that dominates both her family and the larger social order. His physical and emotional abuse leaves Kate feeling isolated and powerless, further compounding her internal suffering. Rebecca Pelan notes that "Kate's relationship with her father is emblematic of the broader patriarchal control that women face in Irish society, where male authority is often enforced through violence and emotional manipulation" (Pelan, 2005). This abuse is not only physical but also psychological, as Kate internalizes her father's contempt, which exacerbates her feelings of worthlessness and emotional instability.

The loss of Kate's mother, who dies early in the trilogy, further deepens her emotional suffering. Her mother's death leaves her without a maternal figure to offer comfort or guidance, amplifying her sense of loneliness and abandonment. Kate's grief over her mother's passing is compounded by her father's cruelty, as he offers no support during her time of mourning. The absence of nurturing familial relationships, combined with the harshness of her father, leaves Kate emotionally isolated, forced to navigate her personal struggles alone.

Baba's familial suffering, while less overt than Kate's, is no less significant. Baba's rebellious nature and outward confidence mask a deep dissatisfaction with her own family life. Her father's rigid expectations for her to conform to societal norms, particularly regarding marriage and respectability, create a sense of emotional conflict within her. Although Baba outwardly resists her family's control, her emotional detachment and cynical attitude toward relationships reveal a profound sense of alienation. As critic Eibhear Walshe observes, "Baba's rebelliousness is, in part, a reaction to the emotional void left by her family's insistence on conformity and their lack of emotional support" (Walshe, 1993).

GENDER AND THE SUFFERING OF ROMANTIC RELATIONSHIPS

The romantic lives of Kate and Baba are central to their emotional suffering throughout the trilogy. Both women experience unfulfilling relationships that mirror the broader societal constraints placed on women's autonomy and sexual freedom. Kate's relationships, especially her romantic entanglement with Mr. Gentleman, serve as a primary source of emotional suffering. Despite her deep affection for him, the relationship is doomed from the start due to his marital status and the social taboo surrounding such a liaison. Kate's feelings of inadequacy and guilt, coupled with the societal judgment of her actions, lead her to experience profound emotional distress. As Heather Ingman notes, "Kate's romantic

relationships are emblematic of the way women in Irish society were often denied the freedom to explore their sexuality without suffering the emotional consequences of guilt and shame" (Ingman, 2007).

Baba's romantic life, though seemingly more liberated than Kate's, is equally fraught with suffering. While Baba initially approaches relationships with a sense of cynicism and emotional detachment, her pursuit of material wealth and independence through marriage ultimately leads to her own form of suffering. Baba marries for convenience rather than love, which results in a deeply unsatisfying relationship that mirrors the limitations imposed on women's choices in a patriarchal society. Pelan suggests that "Baba's suffering is tied to the realization that her attempts to defy societal expectations through marriage and material success do not ultimately lead to personal fulfillment" (Pelan, 2005).

In *Girls in Their Married Bliss*, the final novel in the trilogy, both women find themselves trapped in marriages that fail to bring them the emotional satisfaction or independence they once sought. Kate's marriage is marked by emotional detachment, while Baba's marriage is dominated by her pursuit of social status, which leaves her feeling increasingly isolated. These unfulfilling relationships highlight the emotional cost of conforming to societal expectations, as both women struggle to reconcile their desires for personal freedom with the reality of their limited options.

PSYCHOLOGICAL SUFFERING AND THE QUEST FOR IDENTITY

At the heart of both Kate and Baba's suffering is their struggle to forge identities in a society that offers them few opportunities for personal autonomy. Throughout the trilogy, both women grapple with their sense of self, torn between their desires for independence and the societal pressure to conform to traditional female roles. Kate's journey is particularly marked by her internal conflict between her desire for emotional and sexual fulfillment and her deeply ingrained feelings of guilt and shame. This psychological suffering is compounded by the societal expectation that women should be passive, obedient, and self-sacrificing.

Baba, though outwardly rebellious, also experiences psychological suffering as she confronts the limitations of her own independence. Despite her attempts to defy societal norms, Baba's pursuit of material success and social status ultimately leaves her feeling unfulfilled. Her psychological suffering is tied to the realization that her defiance of societal expectations does not necessarily lead to personal freedom or happiness. As critic Linden Peach notes, "Baba's journey in the trilogy reflects the complexities of resisting societal norms, as her outward defiance is tempered by the emotional and psychological toll of living in a society that limits women's autonomy" (Peach, 2004).

THE ROLE OF CATHOLICISM AND PATRIARCHY

Edna O'Brien's *The Country Girls Trilogy* is deeply entrenched in the context of mid-20th century rural Ireland, a society dominated by two powerful forces: Catholicism and patriarchy. These two institutions work in tandem to shape the lives, choices, and identities of the novel's protagonists, Kate Brady and Baba Brennan. O'Brien critiques the oppressive nature of these forces and how they create emotional and psychological turmoil for women

who attempt to resist their constraints. Catholicism and patriarchy are not only external social forces but are also internalized by O'Brien's characters, particularly Kate, influencing their perceptions of themselves and their place in the world. The trilogy demonstrates how these forces serve to control women's bodies, sexuality, and desires while upholding rigid gender roles.

Catholicism as a Tool of Social Control

Catholicism, which exerted immense control over both public and private life in Ireland during the time in which *The Country Girls Trilogy* is set, plays a significant role in shaping the protagonists' suffering and experiences of repression. The Catholic Church's influence extended far beyond religious practice, affecting social and political life and, most significantly, the moral and sexual conduct of individuals, particularly women. As Heather Ingman notes, "Catholicism in Ireland has historically imposed a repressive moral framework, particularly concerning women's sexuality and their roles within the family" (Ingman, 2007). This religious framework dictated women's roles as passive, submissive, and chaste, confining their identities to the roles of wife and mother, with little room for personal autonomy.

In the trilogy, Kate's Catholic upbringing deeply influences her internal suffering. Her desires for love and intimacy are constantly overshadowed by feelings of guilt and shame, stemming from the Church's teachings on sexual purity and sin. Kate's relationship with Mr. Gentleman, a married man, becomes a source of inner conflict for her. While she desires love and emotional connection, her Catholic upbringing makes her feel as though her actions are sinful and immoral. As Rebecca Pelan argues, "Kate's internalized guilt and shame are emblematic of the wider moral policing enforced by the Catholic Church, particularly in regard to female sexuality" (Pelan, 2005). This guilt pervades Kate's romantic relationships throughout the trilogy, preventing her from fully embracing her desires and leading to a deep sense of emotional isolation.

The Church's rigid moral expectations also affect Baba, though in a different way. Baba's outward defiance of Catholic moral teachings is a form of resistance, as she refuses to conform to the Church's expectations of chastity and submission. However, even Baba cannot fully escape the influence of the Church. Her cynical and rebellious attitude masks a deeper sense of frustration with the limited options available to her as a woman in a society controlled by religious doctrine. As Eibhear Walshe notes, "Even in her resistance, Baba is still shaped by the moral boundaries imposed by the Church, which constrain her ability to fully realize her independence" (Walshe, 1993). Despite her attempts to reject Catholic values, Baba remains confined by the cultural norms established by the Church.

The Interplay Between Catholicism and Patriarchy

In *The Country Girls Trilogy*, Catholicism and patriarchy are inseparable forces, working together to uphold a rigid gender hierarchy that benefits men and subordinates' women. The Catholic Church not only enforced moral standards but also reinforced traditional gender roles, framing women's primary purpose as being dutiful wives and mothers. The patriarchal nature of Irish society is bolstered by the Church's teachings, which promote women's

subservience to men, both within the family and in society at large. As Heather Ingman points out, "The Catholic Church in mid-century Ireland was a powerful enforcer of gender norms, reinforcing a patriarchal system that kept women subservient and dependent on men" (Ingman, 2007).

Kate's relationship with her father exemplifies the intersection of Catholicism and patriarchy in Irish society. Her father, a violent and authoritarian figure, embodies the oppressive patriarchal control that dominates Kate's life. His authority is not just familial but also reinforced by the societal norms upheld by the Church. Kate's father's control over her life, including his violent outbursts and emotional abuse, mirrors the broader societal expectation that women should be submissive to male authority. Rebecca Pelan argues that "Kate's father represents the larger patriarchal system in Ireland, where male dominance is legitimized by both religious and social structures" (Pelan, 2005). His violence and emotional cruelty are accepted as part of the natural order, further intensifying Kate's suffering.

Kate's experiences are compounded by the Church's teachings, which frame suffering as a woman's lot in life. In Catholic doctrine, women are often depicted as natural sufferers, with figures like the Virgin Mary representing ideals of self-sacrifice, purity, and suffering in silence. This religious model of womanhood reinforces the patriarchal expectation that women should endure hardship without complaint. Kate internalizes these expectations, believing that her suffering is inevitable and even deserved. As Linden Peach notes, "O'Brien's portrayal of Kate reflects how deeply women internalized the Catholic ideals of suffering and self-sacrifice, often seeing their own pain as part of their duty" (Peach, 2004).

Control of Female Sexuality

One of the most significant ways in which Catholicism and patriarchy intersect in *The Country Girls Trilogy* is in the control of female sexuality. The Church's teachings on sexual morality placed strict boundaries on women's sexual behavior, demanding chastity before marriage and sexual submission within marriage. Any deviation from these norms was harshly condemned, particularly for women. As Ingman notes, "In Catholic Ireland, women's bodies and sexuality were controlled through a moral framework that condemned any expression of sexual desire outside of marriage" (Ingman, 2007).

Kate's sexual awakening is marked by deep feelings of guilt and shame, as she struggles to reconcile her desires with the moral teachings of the Church. Her relationship with Mr. Gentleman, though emotionally significant, is tinged with a sense of sinfulness, as it violates the Church's teachings on adultery and chastity. Kate's sexual desires, instead of being a natural part of her development, are framed as sinful and corrupting, leading to her emotional suffering. As Pelan argues, "Kate's experiences with sexuality are deeply influenced by the Church's teachings, which associate female desire with sin and moral decay" (Pelan, 2005).

Baba, by contrast, openly rejects the Church's teachings on sexuality, engaging in relationships and sexual behavior that defy Catholic moral expectations. However, her rebellion comes at a cost. Baba's pursuit of sexual freedom often leads to dissatisfaction and

emotional alienation, as she grapples with the consequences of defying societal norms. Despite her outward defiance, Baba remains constrained by the very norms she seeks to escape, as her sexual freedom does not lead to personal fulfillment or autonomy. As Walshe points out, "Baba's rejection of Catholic morality does not free her from the patriarchal system that controls women's bodies and sexuality" (Walshe, 1993).

Marriage and the Reinforcement of Patriarchy

Marriage is another key site where Catholicism and patriarchy intersect in the trilogy. The Church's teachings on marriage emphasized the sanctity of the institution and reinforced the notion that women's primary role was that of wife and mother. Divorce was not an option in Catholic Ireland, further entrenching the power dynamics within marriages, where women were expected to submit to their husbands' authority. Kate's and Baba's marriages in *Girls in Their Married Bliss* illustrate the ways in which the institution of marriage reinforces patriarchal control over women.

Kate's marriage is marked by emotional detachment and unhappiness, as she finds herself trapped in a relationship that offers no emotional fulfillment. Her role as a wife is defined by societal expectations rather than personal desire, and she is unable to find happiness within the confines of her marriage. Baba's marriage, though initially motivated by her desire for independence and social status, similarly leads to dissatisfaction, as she realizes that marriage does not offer the freedom she hoped for. Pelan notes that "marriage in O'Brien's novels serves as a tool of patriarchal control, where women's roles are defined by their husbands and societal expectations, rather than personal agency" (Pelan, 2005).

CONCLUSION

In Edna O'Brien's novels, particularly *The Country Girls Trilogy*, the feminist themes of suffering and resistance are deeply intertwined in the lives of her protagonists. Kate and Baba's struggles to assert their identities and desires in the face of a repressive society reflect the broader feminist concerns with autonomy, agency, and the consequences of patriarchal oppression. Through these characters, O'Brien offers a nuanced portrayal of women's emotional and psychological suffering, while also celebrating their resilience and capacity for resistance. Her work stands as a powerful critique of the social and religious forces that continue to shape and limit women's lives, making her a significant figure in feminist literature. The suffering experienced by Kate and Baba in *The Country Girls Trilogy* is a reflection of the broader social, religious, and gendered constraints imposed on women in mid-20th century Ireland. Their emotional, psychological, and familial suffering is intricately tied to the rigid moral codes and patriarchal structures that define their lives. Through these characters, O'Brien offers a powerful critique of the ways in which societal expectations contribute to the internal suffering of women, while also highlighting the complex and often painful journey toward personal autonomy and self-identity. Both Kate and Baba's stories underscore the profound emotional cost of navigating a society that systematically limits women's choices and denies them the freedom to define their own lives.

In *The Country Girls Trilogy*, Edna O'Brien presents a powerful critique of the ways in which Catholicism and patriarchy work together to control women's lives, bodies, and desires. Catholicism enforces a rigid moral framework that shapes women's internal and external experiences of suffering, while patriarchy reinforces traditional gender roles that limit women's autonomy. Through the characters of Kate and Baba, O'Brien exposes the emotional, psychological, and social consequences of living in a society where women are subjugated by these twin forces. The trilogy illustrates how Catholicism and patriarchy not only constrain women's opportunities but also create deep emotional and psychological suffering that permeates every aspect of their lives.

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