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"He Meddled with or Molested Me": #MeToo Protests in Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill's Poetry

HAWK CHANG
The Education University of Hong Kong, Hong Kong
htcchang@eduhk.hk

ABSTRACT

The year 2017 was pivotal for women because of the #MeToo movement's global momentum. People were alerted to the abuses of power and sexual harassment by male authorities in different fields such as government, entertainment and industry. These scandals also helped bring attention to the objectification of women's normalised bodies and their subjugation in patriarchal cultures. Yet neither this disempowerment of women nor women's coming forward new, because they have been widely explored in contemporary women's writing. Examining Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill's poetry from the prism of #MeToo, this paper discusses women's imprisonment and silence, their harassment and victimisation and the docility of their bodies in traditional patriarchal discourse. This paper aims to investigate how women are monitored physically and mentally in male-centred contexts, how they are molested in traditional societies and how they can be empowered by coming forward and telling their own stories.

Keywords: the #MeToo movement; Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill; women; harassment; silence

INTRODUCTION

The year 2017 was pivotal for women because of the #MeToo movement's global momentum. People were alerted to the abuses of power and sexual harassment by male authorities in different fields such as government, entertainment and industry. These scandals also helped bring attention to the objectification of women's normalised bodies and their subjugation in patriarchal cultures. As some academics contend, the #MeToo movement redirects people's attention to sexual harassment and underlines the severity of a long-neglected phenomenon: "gender-based violence" (O'Neil et al., 2018, p. 2587).

This disempowerment of women and their coming forward are not new issues because a similar campaign was launched in 2006 by an African-American activist Tarana Burke to support "girls and women of colour who had experienced sexual violence" (Pellegrini, 2018, p. 262). Additionally, they have been widely explored in contemporary women's writing. Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill's poetry is an illustration. However, despite the popularity of Ni Dhomhnaill's writing in contemporary Irish literature, no research has been conducted from the lens of #MeToo. This study is expected to fill the research gap. Acclaimed by Kiberd (2018) as "the foremost contemporary poet," Ní Dhomhnaill has been committed to speaking up for the underprivileged, including women in patriarchal societies and Irish speakers in English-speaking Ireland (2018, p. 9). According to Dillon (2018), Ní Dhomhnaill "has carved out space for female poets in a highly gendered tradition" (2018, p. 409). Following her collaboration with Paul Muldoon in 1993, Ní Dhomhnaill worked with him again and published another bilingual poetry collection, *The Fifty Minute Mermaid* in 2007a. In our reading of the fantastic stories surrounding the mermaids, Ní Dhomhnaill's attempt to satirise women's problems in the real world is conspicuous. In addition to my reading and interpretation of *The Fifty Minute Mermaid*, Ní Dhomhnaill's elaboration of women's subordination in *Rogha Dánta* (1986), *Pharaoh's Daughter* (1993), *The Astrakhan Cloak* (1993) and *The Water Horse* (1999) is discussed. In the last section, reading Ní Dhomhnaill's *The Fifty Minute Mermaid*

(e.g. poems such as "My Dark Master," "Mermaids and the Parish Priest," "The Death and Rebirth of the Mermaid" and "The Mermaid and Her Daughter"), this paper discusses women's imprisonment and silence, being harassed and victimised in male-dominated systems and their docile bodies in traditional patriarchal discourse.

This paper aims to understand how, as evidenced by Ní Dhomhnaill's poetry, women are monitored physically and mentally in male-centred contexts, how they are molested in traditional societies and how they can be empowered by coming forward and telling their own stories. My argument is that re-examining Ní Dhomhnaill's poetry from the #MeToo perspective not only helps us clarify the nature of dominance/silence inherent in the #MeToo movement but also sheds new light on Ní Dhomhnaill's meditation on the problems of women. It was found that forced silence, together with sexual harassment and sexual violence, has been troubling women for a long time, and Ní Dhomhnaill uses poetry to make their voices heard and their complaints vindicated, a substantial #MeToo protest via literary creation.

LITERATURE REVIEW

In response to a male-centred tendency in Irish literature, Ní Dhomhnaill tauntingly uses the term "hidden Ireland" to highlight women's obscurity and disempowerment in Ireland (1996, p. 106). For Ní Dhomhnaill, Irish woman writers are excluded from the centre of literary writing because there is a certain woman-phobia in Irish society (1992, p. 194-195). While Irish women have often been characterised in terms of allegorical mother figures for several centuries, the image of women and their actual lives began to undergo significant changes in the later decades of the twentieth century (Cahill, 2018, pp. 427-428; Innes, 1993, pp. 40-41). This transformation, in conjunction with traditional depictions of Irish women, is accentuated in Ní Dhomhnaill's poetry. The experience of being a woman writer makes Ní Dhomhnaill extremely sensitive to and sympathetic for women's subordination. Her first-hand experience of women's subordination alongside her personal experience as a female poet writing in a marginal language enables her to have a sympathetic understanding of those who are silenced. Consequently, Ní Dhomhnaill's poetry provides us with a venue to reflect on issues raised by the #MeToo movement.

The growing popularity of Ní Dhomhnaill's poetry, which triggers common readers' interest in literature written in Irish (e.g. Máire Mhacant Saoi's poetry), is encouraging and inspiring to many other Irish poets. As Ferguson notes, although Ní Dhomhnaill uses Irish in her poetry, she is able to depict "a superficially female experience of exclusion and silencing" (2013, p. 644). For Frank Sewell, as a female poet working in a masculinist culture Ní Dhomhnaill is a "transgressive artist" who dares to go beyond bounds and limits and protest against taboos (2010, p. 396). Moreover, Irish writer and critic Lia Mills argues that Ní Dhomhnaill's poetry helps us understand how contemporary Irish woman poets manage to unsettle the image of women (1995, p. 80).

As the following discussions will demonstrate, Ní Dhomhnaill's choice of the mermaid as the main protagonist in *The Fifty Minute Mermaid* is aptly aligned with her reflection on women's subordination and their limited access to power in traditional societies. In her discussion of mermaids in Western literature and culture, Juliette Wood maintains that Ní Dhomhnaill "uses the mermaid to explore themes of femininity, sexuality and culture identity."[1]

In addition, according to Kiberd (2018), the shift from water-life to land-life in *The Fifty Minute Mermaid* is accountable for "a separation anxiety" that plagues people who are

[1] Please refer to Wood's "Mermaid/Merman" for more information.

forced to change their language, or, more specifically, from Irish to English (2018, p. 9). In her review of *The Fifty Minute Mermaid*, Carmine Starnino contends that "[l]ike *The Decameron*, *The Fifty Minute Mermaid* explores the way ourselves are constructed of fictions—fictions that both shelter us from painful facts and allow us to face up to them" (2008, p. 159). This duality of fiction (de)/construction is evidenced by Ní Dhomhnaill's frequent revisiting of traditional myth and her constant debunking of the fictions fabricated around male-centred conventions by re-locating them in contemporary contexts. Her poetry has taught us to envisage a more complicated scenario of fixed entities. Notably, as some academics point out, while the mermaid is often a symbol of beauty and benevolence, she is also depicted as a creature that is capable of treachery and destruction (Mighetto and Mighetto, 2005, p. 532). This duality as exemplified in the stories of mermaids in Western cultures and Ní Dhomhnaill's female characters showcases a diversified prospectus of women. Such an awareness is crucial for people who are involved in the #MeToo movement because instead of being stuck in stock sexual stereotypes, nowadays women are encouraged to be open-minded about their own gender and sexualities and come forward for their own rights.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: AN OVERVIEW OF THE #MeToo MOVEMENT, SEXUAL HARASSMENT AND SEXUAL VIOLENCE

For several centuries, societies worldwide have traditionally functioned as patriarchies. As a consequence, men dominate in a broad range of places, such as in the family and workplace, while women, in comparison with their male counterparts, take on a secondary status. This discrepancy between men and women contributes to biased power relations, so much so that men's authority becomes unquestionable, their superiority justified, and their abuse of power unchecked. The #MeToo movement, following scandals, such as one surrounding Harvey Weinstein, a famous Hollywood producer who was accused of sexual violence by actresses such as Gwyneth Paltrow, is about resisting men's abuse of power. According to Dustin Pickering, MeToo "began with the intention of destroying the blind hubris of powerful men who are 'too big to fail' or be called out for sexual assault" (2019, p. 135). This movement, as Cass R. Sunstein argues, is a "challenge to a system of sex discrimination and to institutions that engage in or perpetuate it" (2021, p. 38).

According to Dworkin (1983), the stories of women's suffering and the violence that they experience are often "ignored or ridiculed, threatened back into silence or destroyed, and the experience of female suffering is buried in cultural invisibility and contempt" (1983, p. 20). Power and knowledge used to be dominated by men. This male dominance may come in the form of sexual harassment or sexual violence due to "the way many men are taught to think about their (hetero)sexuality, namely, as a vehicle for expressing power and authority over women" (LeMoncheck, 2001, p. 267). However, this dominance is now challenged by activists of the #MeToo movement. Foucault (1980) in his discussion of power testifies to the capriciousness of power relations. For him, power produces not only oppression but also creation; power is not only a means of control but a strategy through which the subjugated fight back and have control. In other words, unlike other theorists who stress the deterministic feature of power relations, Foucault highlights the reproductive impetus of power mechanisms. As Foucault notes, such a counter-discourse is possible because the base of power relations is constantly challenged, debated, and even replaced (1980, p. 119). Regarding the interplay between power and discourse, Foucault (1990) maintains: "We must make allowance for the complex and unstable process whereby discourse can be both an instrument and an effect of power, but also a hindrance, a stumbling-block, a point of resistance and a starting point for an opposing strategy" (1990, pp. 100–101). This notion of dynamic power and resistance is

illustrated in the submission of women in traditionally male-dominated societies and the #MeToo activists' defiance, moving beyond sexual repressions and rectifying the long-established culture of male manipulation and their abuse of power. The silence of women is broken because, as Cass R. Sunstein maintains, #MeToo "has benefitted from the visibility of those who spoke out and the multiple interactions made possible by social media" (2021, p. 38).

The #MeToo movement alerts us to the problems of sexism and the silencing of women. This helps us to reexamine many things, such as gender inequality, that have been taken for granted for long. Many victims do not speak out against their mistreatment because they are afraid of their superiors' retaliation (Sunstein, 2021, p. 37). However, #MeToo gives them the momentum to come forward. As Merkin (2018) states:

> Nowadays the tune has changed and the lyrics of a prideful and defiant feminism are being heard again from a younger generation of co-called fourth feminism. With this change of tune comes the conviction that women don't have to remain silent about inequality and abuse—that, indeed, it is incumbent upon them to speak up. (Merkin, 2018, p. 634)

By the same token, Cherniavsky (2019) construes #MeToo as an "open platform for the public revelation of unchecked male privilege and abuses" (2019, p. 18). For her, the movement creates a platform where women can "collectively . . . delegitimate and dismantle this privilege through the serial exposure on a mass scale of the men who (ab)use it" (2019, p. 18). As is evident in the following sections, these concepts facilitate our critical reflection on the subjugation, harassment, and forced silence of women that is articulated within Ní Dhomhnaill's poetry.

WOMEN HAVE BEEN DAMNED, BUT THEY ARE NOT SILENT ANYMORE

In Irish literary convention, women are generally stereotyped either as hags who are tied up with the land or pretty, yet feeble women who await their male rescuers coming from afar (Johnson & Cairns, 1991, pp. 128-133). By the same token, in traditional Catholic countries such as Ireland, there is a tendency to idealise women by comparing them to the Virgin Mary. For many Catholics, Mary is a sanctified figure, second in importance only to her son Jesus Christ, whose Father was God, delivered by her after an immaculate conception. Typical of Mary are virtues such as cleanliness, unwavering chasteness and selfless dedication (Innes, 1993, p. 40). In this traditional Catholic paradigm of immaculacy and discipline, absolute obedience is usually required and sensual pleasure is forbidden for women. This disempowerment of Irish women in the Catholic religion is echoed by Barr and Corráin, who note that "the failure to permit women to play a significant role at all levels of decision-making within the church continued" in the 20th century (2017, p. 83). Due to the male-dominance of the Catholic Church, Irish women have been closely bound up with docile characteristics such as compassion and devotion. These man-made qualities derive mainly from nationalism, which prefers male dominance over women because men's supreme authority is conducive to their revolutions and nation-building endeavours. Consequently, women fall prey to male-centred political propaganda and cannot be themselves. Eavan Boland, an acclaimed Irish poet, is not content with the labels placed on women because the traditional image of women is a "cold and exclusive emblem" (Reinbaum, 1989, p. 479). Before the 1980s, Irish women had been excluded from the centre of history and politics. Accordingly, they could not make significant contributions. A closer look at the exclusion of women and their voices is especially significant in our understanding of the #MeToo movement in contemporary society because, as Airey (2018) argues, "the story of sexual harassment and assault is, from its earliest conception, also

the story of silencing" (2018, p. 9). Airey points out three myths of rape in Western literature that can help us understand sexual violence, including the stories of Vergina, Lucrece, and Philomel (2018, p. 9). Her assertion is illuminating because it highlights the fact that women's secondary status and their exclusion from mainstream cultures are in line with their lack of speech. All of these lay bare a long-term disproportion between patriarchal hegemony and women's submission in traditional societies.

The year 1986 is significant in Ní Dhomhnaill's career because it is in this year that Michael Hartnett, a well-acclaimed Irish poet, translated her earlier poems into English. Thanks to the popularity of this English version, a bilingual edition (Irish and English) titled *Selected Poems: Rogha Dánta*) (1988) was published two years later. This bilingual edition not only introduces Ní Dhomhnaill to more readers but prompts an increasing number of translators to collaborate with her in publishing other bilingual poetry collections, making Ní Dhomhnaill more influential inside and outside Ireland. The experience of being a writer of the secondary sex renders Ní Dhomhnaill aware of women's subordination. By reading "We Are Damned, My Sisters," the first poem in *Selected Poems*, we can perceive Ní Dhomhnaill's impotence as a woman. The opening line brazenly states, "We are damned, my sisters" (1988, p. 15). As the first two stanzas illustrate, women are damned because they are always required to play the stereotypical role imposed on them in the male-dominated Irish society. For instance, women in the first stanza are mermaid-like characters who lead dreamy and innocent lives: "phosphorescence about us / we shrieking with delight / with the coldness of the tide / without shifts or dresses / as innocent as infants" (1988, p. 15). In the second stanza, women are placed in an Eden-like paradise where they know no worry nor the passing of time: "We spent nights in Eden's fields / eating apples, gooseberries" (1988, p. 15). Nevertheless, this seemingly cozy life is criticised in the following stanza.

> We didn't darn stockings
> we didn't comb or tease
> we knew nothing of handmaidens
> except the one in high Heaven.
> We preferred to be shoeless by the tide
> dancing singly on the wet sand
> the piper's tune coming to us
> on the kind Spring wind, than to be
> indoors making strong tea for the men –
> and so we're damned, my sisters! (1988, p. 15)

Socks-wearing, hair-combing, and waitress service are all traditional jobs especially intended for women. However, the narrator obviously turns back on these low-level chores and refuses to play the stereotypical role widely practiced in the patriarchal society. Line 9 in this excerpt demonstrates her grievance over women's subjugated status. She is no longer devoted to serving men but longs to walk barefoot on the beach, listening and dancing to the music. In comparison with making tea for men, the desire for dance in "We Are Damned" signifies women's expectation to liberate themselves through their bodily movement. This is because only with control over their own bodies can women face, contact, and control themselves. Therefore, dance becomes an important means for women's development because the "body can be seen as an agent of empowerment and change" (Nordin, 2006, p. 7). However, this modest request for freedom is nothing but a fancy; otherwise, the sisters will not be doomed as the narrator asserts. When evaluated from its poetic structure, the narrator's (or probably Ní Dhomhnaill's) strong disapproval of women's fate is self-evident because, except for the first stanza, most sections in the poem end in "We are damned, my sisters" (1988, pp. 15-16). This refrain highlights the narrator's complaint about women's disempowerment in their everyday lives. It testifies to the asymmetrical power relations between men and women, a fact which is much criticised in the #MeToo movement.

If *Selected Poems: Rogha Dánta* introduces Ní Dhomhnaill to non-Irish speaking readers, *Pharaoh's Daughter* (1990) helps establish her as a representative Irish language poet in the contemporary world. Notably, thirteen Irish poets collaborate in translating the poems into English, including famous writers such as Seamus Heaney, Medbh McGuckian, John Montague, and Ciaran Carson. The most striking feature of this collection is the audacious exposure of the female speaker's sexuality and sexual imagination. For example, in a poem titled "Island," the speaker lavishly portrays her fancy for a male friend's sexual organs.

> Your nude body is an island
> asprawl on the ocean bed. How
> beautiful your limbs, spread-
> eagled under seagulls' wings! (1990, p. 41)

Exerting much imagination, the speaker employs metaphors to describe her lover's physical feature, comparing his body to an island and his limbs to a seagull's spreading wings. Since islands and seagulls both come from nature, these tropes highlight the innocence and purity of male bodies. In the speaker's observation of the male body, micro (e.g. the limbs) as well as macro (e.g. the whole body) delineations are presented. In fact, apart from the limbs, the forehead, the eyes, and the eyelashes are depicted. The female speaker likes to use the analogy between human bodies and natural objects.

In addition to the use of visual images in the preceding stanza, concrete sound images are employed. Twinkling eyes are alluring, while swishing eyelashes are intoxicating, both of which display the speaker's great pleasure through her gaze of the male body. Western literature has been dominated by writings of male gaze, in which male writers describe how they adore and appreciate their female lovers. However, the male/female, gazing/gazed dichotomies in this poem are inverted. In appearance, it is the position of the observer that has been changed, but as a matter of fact, it also connotes a significant shift of power relations between men and women. The female speaker gains authority over male/female relationship by gazing, perceiving, comparing, evaluating, describing, and determining her lover's physical characteristics. In other words, she possesses absolute autonomy and the right of speech. Instead of being an object that is gazed on passively, she is a speaking subject that can make the judgment and actively dominate the creation of meanings. As critic Briona Nic Dhiarmada contends, the metaphor of Ireland as a woman or an island has a long history. Ní Dhomhnaill's looking at a male and her attempt to imagine the male body in geographical terms showcase her habitual "reversal of conventions and poetic clichés" (1988, p. 390). Intriguingly, in stark contrast to a traditional story in which the female body is manipulated by the male gaze or molested by the male body, Ní Dhomhnaill creates a different scenario where bodily control and sexual abuse give way to aesthetic appreciation. This is a world with desire and sexuality, but simultaneously one that is coupled with equality and respect, which are pivotal qualities called for in the #MeToo movement.

SEX ONLY, NO MOLESTATION

Ní Dhomhnaill's third bilingual collection, *The Astrakhan Cloak*, was published in 1992 by Gallery Press. This book, which features Paul Muldoon's translation, further establishes her position in contemporary Irish poetry. Oona Frawley notes that Muldoon's playful, allusive writing style in his translation corresponds to Ní Dhomhnaill's narrative mode and enhances the quality of this collection (2006, p. 253). "Carnival," the first poem in this collection, does not deal with the carnival festivities familiar to most readers but rather chronicles a sweet-and-sour love affair. The female speaker is troubled by her complicated feelings because what she

experiences is not a normal romance but an extra-marital affair. Overjoyed with the romantic relationship, the speaker feels "a honeyed breath spreads / like frankincense / about the earth / such is the depth of emotion / we share" (1992, p. 13). The great sense of satisfaction lasts for a while, which explains why the female speaker is lost in some romantic sensations. "A rose opens in my heart. / A cuckoo sings in my throat" (1992, p. 15). This happiness is so appealing that the speaker fails to get back to reality. Accordingly, she acknowledges the difficulty of leaving her lover to go back to her husband (1992, p. 15). However, adultery brings suffering as well as happiness. The speaker mentions several times the pain caused by the affair: "You are a knife through my heart. / You are a briar in my fist. / You are a bit of grit between my teeth" (1992, p. 15). Knives and sand symbolize violence and harm, suggesting that the sweet romance at the earlier stage is replaced by disagreement and friction. Notwithstanding the conflict with her lover, the woman cannot extract herself from the joy of love and is entangled in the quadruple love relationships. In the long run, separation with her lover is inevitable, but despite the physical distance, the female speaker cannot forget about the beautiful memories associated with the affair. The phrase "enormous trench" creates a striking visual image that illustrates the unbridgeable loss caused by the love affair (1992, p. 19). According to the speaker, the hurt is so tremendous that even the water from the Irish and Anglican Seas cannot fill the gap (1992, p. 19).

In 1999, Ní Dhomhnaill published her fourth bilingual poetry collection, *The Water Horse* in collaboration with two other Irish poets, Eilean Ni Chuilleanain and Medbh McGuckian. This collection features the cooperation of three distinguished female writers, signaling the increasing importance of women writers in contemporary Irish literature. Many Celtic legends are incorporated in this work, but Ní Dhomhnail inserts the mythical elements into her writings amid the contemporary Irish society and creates brand new meanings for traditional materials. In addition, the poet's reflection on women's problems permeates this collection. In "Ebony Adonis," women's desire for love and sexuality is projected in the female speaker's admiration for Adonis, the well-known handsome male of Greek myth. In reality, classical myth often offers Ní Dhomhnaill inspiration in her investigation of women's fate. For example, in a poem titled "Daphne and Apollo," she demonstrates her questioning of the hierarchical opposition between men and women in classical myth (1999, p. 73). Notably, while Apollo's molestation of Daphne has been traditionally justified, Daphne's suffering as a victim has been dismissed. This negligence mainly derives from the fact that Apollo's authority as god of the sun and medicine is unimpeachable. Eventually, Daphne is confined to an everlasting fixation in the wake of Apollo's love. No matter how beautiful the laurel may appear, Daphne has to stay put without movement or transformation. This misery is reminiscent of the #MeToo sufferers' problems because, like Daphne, their voices are silenced and their lives are static unless they muster their courage and come forward to tell their stories.

By the same token, in "Persephone Suffering from SAD," the conventional reading of Persephone as a victim of Hade's rape is challenged and ridiculed. Instead of playing the role of a sufferer, in Ní Dhomhnaill's version Persephone tells her mother,

> Now, don't go ringing the cops,
> Mum, and don't be losing the bap:
> I admit I was out of line
> and over the top
> when I hitched a ride
> with that sexy guy
> in his wow of a BMW.
> But he was such a super chat-up
> I couldn't give him the push. (1999, p. 57)

The pathos in the myth of Hades and Persephone is replaced by a joyful, sensual postmodern world. Persephone in this version is no longer a helpless, kidnapped female but a much more confident and autonomous woman in a new age. In the second stanza, Persephone tells Demeter that her life with Hades in the underworld is much better than expected. Not only does she travel, she also lives luxuriously with Hades: "He said he would buy me velvet gowns / and satin underthings, / and his credit's fine" (1997, p. 57). Taken together, we witness a totally different myth. In this re-created myth, women can be rid of their perennial constraint and reverse the traditional image of gentleness, considerateness, conservativeness, and passivity. They are not so much victims of sexual violence than commanders of love relationship. This transformation from a sufferer to a joyful creator accords with the #MeToo activists' call for women's voice in opposition to their silence in male-dominated cultures.

HARRASSMENT AND THE #METOO PROTESTS IN *THE FIFTY MINUTE MERMAID*

Following her collaboration with Paul Muldoon in 1992, Ní Dhomhnaill worked with him again and published another bilingual poetry collection, *The Fifty Minute Mermaid* in 2007. As the title suggests, this collection dwells on the mythical world of mermaids, recounting their magical life under the sea. Paul Muldoon's assertion that "poems in *The Fifty Minute Mermaid* feature mer-folk who are at odds with themselves, psychologically as much as physically, in their dry land existences and are trying to make sense of their own translated lives" is illuminating (2007a, p. 58). It alerts us to the quagmire in which mermaids are trapped, oscillating between an old world they are accustomed to but forced to leave and a strange new world they must stay in. This sense of dislocation and forced migration from familiarity to foreignness, from comfort to discomfort, and from articulation to taciturnity is reminiscent of women's tragic stories in their marriages or other interactions with men, as evidenced by many poems in *The Fifty Minute Mermaid*. It also echoes the plight of many victims of the #MeToo movement in that, as Tracy Strauss argues, "[r]eading about traumatic events can also cause victims to shut down and witnesses to turn away in fear," although they can potentially be "a force for social change" (Ní Dhomhnaill, 2008, p. 31).

When appreciating the fantastic stories about mermaids, readers will perceive Ní Dhomhnaill's attempt to satirise women's silence, a problem widely censured in the #MeToo movement. In a poem titled "My Dark Master," the female speaker is apparently pessimistic about her own fate because she seems to be imprisoned and silenced in the man/woman, master/servant bonds. In the beginning stanzas, the female narrator recalls how, at the age of nineteen, she contracted with a dark master for one year and one day. Despite her insistence that she is not mistreated, the narrator recalls her relationship with the dark master in an ironical way: "I declare, what a stroke of luck that I fell / into his clutches. Not, I should emphasize again, / that he meddled with or molested me" (Ní Dhomhnaill, 2007, p. 13). Words such as "luck" and "clutch" create a paradox, insinuating that interference and molestation are common in her daily life. This interpretation is evidenced by the last four lines.

> I've hired myself out to death. And I'm afraid that I'll not
> Ever be let go. What I'll have at the end of the day
> I've absolutely no idea, either in terms of three hots and a cot
> or if I'll be allowed to say my say. (2007, p. 15).

The narrator is pessimistic about her own life. She is not sure if she is free or if she has the right of speech. These uncertainties allude to the plight women are mired in due to male dominance and women's disempowerment. In such a society, women, who are often saddled with duties and tasks but deprived of their rights, are confined within layers of restrictions. In

fact, we know very little about the identity of the dark master except for his being Death and his good fortunes. Judging from the context, the dark master may be a man (e.g. the narrator's male friend), and the confinement may refer to their marriage. Words such as Death and My Dark Master foreshadow a sour relationship between the narrator and her master. In other words, the female narrator not only hires herself out to her master and loses her freedom but is robbed of her inherent right of speech. She is both imprisoned and silenced, a situation akin to those that happen to #MeToo victims.

In another poem titled "Mermaids and the Parish Priest", Ní Dhomhnaill depicts how an 11-year-old girl is harassed and victimised under the threat of a parish priest in the Catholic school. Because the priest enjoys reading her essay, this unidentified "mermaid" is summoned via the nun in charge of her class to the priest's study. Much to her surprise, she is physically molested by the priest amid the "long lines of books and the musky smell in the air" (2007, p. 109). The priest's sexual harassment is further explicated in the following.

> He spoke to her in Irish. He showed her Bedell's Bible.
> Then he put her sitting on his lap
> with her legs astride him on either side.
> He pushed against her again and again
> and he began to huff and puff and break out in a sweat.
> His face went from dark to red to white
> and then she felt something wet about his trousers. (2007, p. 109)

Although too innocent to know what happens to the priest, the girl student feels "nausea and self-loathing" later on when similar harassments occur on a weekly basis (2007, p. 109). Her reaction echoes Brock and Thistlethwaite's argument that sexual harassment hurts victims, causing them to feel "loss of self-confidence, decline in academic performance, and inhibited forms of professional interaction" (2020, p. 209). Pitiably, she is not the only victim because, after her refusal to visit the priest as usual, "another victim was sent over in her stead" by the nun (Ní Dhomhnaill 2007, p. 109).

Despite her abhorrence of the priest's misconduct, the little "mermaid" has to visit him to apply for the County Council Scholarship, though with great reluctance. Similar events recur due to the asymmetrical relationship between men and women in the Catholic context and the Irish society, wherein men dominate and women are silenced. This is very ironical because as Yvonne McKenna notes, nuns in the Catholic Church must wear white robes and dress neatly to abstain from material temptations (McKenna, 2006, p. 80-85). Additionally, they cannot wear their hair long or use make-up. To adhere to regulations, nuns are made very busy all day long. In the Catholic paradigm of discipline and purity, sensual pleasure and sexuality are forbidden. Nonetheless, the student experiences something very sensual and sexual within the church. As the narrator remarks,

> He did his business, and she got the signature.
> But she felt as if she had prostituted herself for it.
> From that day on she lost complete faith in all adults
> and six months later, when she took
> first place in the county in the Scholarship exam,
> it was a Pyrrhic victory. It was tainted with misery. (2007, p. 111)

This episode mirrors a prevalent dilemma for many victims of sexual harassment in that they often feel uncomfortable coming forward and telling their personal stories. They may feel embarrassed and do not know how to get along with their supervisors (Civitello, 2017, p. 9). Experiencing or witnessing sexual harassment can also trigger negative psychological consequences, such as anxiety, depression, and post-traumatic stress disorder (O'Neil et al., 2018, p. 2587). Ironically, instead of feeling proud and excited after winning the Scholarship,

the girl feels as if she is a prostitute, one who trades her body in exchange for profit. The traumatic experience results in her detestation of everything associated with the priest and the Catholic Church, insomuch that whenever she approaches the church, "she would fall down in a fainting fit" (2007, p. 111).

This loathing and fear is not the end of the mermaid's torture. The traumatic experience is so terrible that it haunts her for years. As the narrator states: "But she wasn't free of him for a long time after / for he'd appear to her in dreams as a vampire / or bloodsucking fiend" (2007, p. 113). In her fancy, the girl is constantly tormented by anxiety and terror, fearing that the priest always stands "on the balcony / outside the window of her bedroom / always asking leave / to come in," though trickily, as she later finds out, the room she stays in has no balcony at all (2007, p. 113). However, the climax does not arise until the last stanza:

> But the damage didn't just stop there. When she finally plucked up the courage,
> years later, to tell her mother what had happened, the response
> she got from her was 'Oh, the poor priest, isn't he a man
> like any other?' 'Well,' said the mermaid inwardly,
> 'that's the last thing I'll ever tell you."
> And, as it happens, it was. (2007, p. 113).

These lines highlight the heart of the matter in the #MeToo movement. It showcases the way women's voices have been dismissed in traditional societies and how the consequences of such a silence lead to tragedies. The mother's reticence and tolerance of the priest's harassment explains why only a limited number of victims are willing to come forward and brave the suspicion of male-dominated society. As Sunstein contends, many victims of sexual harassment remain silent because they "are aware of the risk of retaliation, that awareness provided a reason to falsify their experiences or at least not to speak about them" (2021, p. 37).

The mother's indifference is not unusual because it is echoed in the nun's reaction when informed of the girl's refusal to visit the priest, which is indicative of the clergy's foul demeanour. Both cases of nonchalance about and tolerance of the priest's sexual assault testify to the traditional conception of women's passivity and incompetence. In the wake of patriarchal dominance, women unreservedly accept their status as "the Other" (de Beauvoir, 1972, p. 254). Additionally, according to Shulamith Firestone, women, together with children and men of colour are subjugated and victimised in traditional nuclear families (1970, p. 122–123). If being relegated to a secondary sexual class is so unbearable, why do women acquiesce to the inferiority? In her book, *Right-Wing Women: The Politics of Domesticated Females* (1983), Dworkin contends that women are forced to be passive and subordinate because they need to secure "protection from male violence" (1983, p. 14). In other words, they accept the stereotypes, show unwavering loyalty to men and submit to male control due to their fear of the ever-present threat of male violence. According to Dworkin, violence comes in different forms in women's lives, such as rape, wife-beating, forced childbearing, sadistic psychological abuse, banishment and confinement in mental institutions (1983, p. 20). In "Mermaids and the Parish Priest," although the priest does not threaten the girl with rape, beating or forced childbearing, she is overshadowed with tremendous pressure due to the priest's great authority in the Catholic Church.

Additionally, poems such as "The Death and Rebirth of the Mermaid" and "The Mermaid and Her Daughter" deal with how young women's bodies are disciplined in the traditional discourse. In "The Death and Rebirth of the Mermaid," the mermaid's mother prohibits her daughter from combing and tidying her hair or getting close to the mirror for fear that her daughter may take great pride in her own beauty. In a similar vein, the mother in "The Mermaid and Her Daughter" uses words such as "slut" and "harlot" to scold her daughter simply because she has a boyfriend (Ni Dhomhnaill, 2007, p. 133). Judging from the perspective of open-minded readers in contemporary society, the mothers in the two poems are

ridiculous in self-scrutinizing and over-disciplining their daughters' bodies. However, through this contrast between old conventions and the new age, Ní Dhomhnaill casts sexual taboos into doubt and criticises its outdatedness. In a sense, Ní Dhomhnaill's poetry reminds readers to reflect on how women can find a new approach between traditional and contemporary conceptions of female sexuality. The power of retelling folk tales typical of Ní Dhomhnaill's poetry is endorsed by Sewell (2002), who argues:

> Ni Dhomhnaill surfaces like a modern-day mermaid . . . whose songs lend some hope to Marin Warner's claim that "from submersion, from engulfment, the images can return, the drowned can rise, the devoured be pieced together and the cannibalized past be heard, telling its stories . . . . These stories, moreover, do not refer solely to the past but open vistas to alternative present and future possibilities for development and fulfillment, equality and healing. In the meantime, retelling folk-type tales allows for articulation, offers a mode of expression for the otherwise inexpressible or, perhaps, unspeakable. (Sewell, 2002, p. 40)

In other words, while revisiting traditional folk tales and fashioning them anew, Ni Dhomhnaill not only unravels the silenced history of the underprivileged, but also gives people who are silenced opportunities to speak for themselves. These attempts to unsettle the unspeakable state of reticence alert us to women's submission and their indignant counterattack in the #MeToo movement.

As discussed previously, Ní Dhomhnaill's choice of the mermaid as the main protagonist is aptly aligned with her reflection on women's subordination and their limited access to power in traditional societies. This is because like women in most male-dominated cultures, mermaids are often conceived as being beautiful and mysterious and are "always peripheral figures."[2] Poloczek testifies to this in-between-ness of the mermaid, saying "[t]the mermaid is always located on the boundaries of the familiar and magical: between floodtide and ebbtide; between the rise and fall of water" (2009, p. 138). Additionally, as Fhrighil (2017)maintains in her analysis of mermaids, "[a]s subjectivities who are liminal, neither fish nor fowl, non-normative . . . their rights and thus the violations of those rights are not generally rendered audible, legible and intelligible in socio-economic, political and legal contexts" (Fhrighil, 2017, p. 117). Crucially, the inarticulate and unrepresentative status typical of mermaids reminds us of the marginality of many women struggling in patriarchal societies. It also underlines the plight of the #MeToo victims, who are beautiful, but unutterable.

All in all, Ní Dhomhnaill's discussion of women and the hardship they are confronted with provides important food for thought for our better understanding of women within the Irish context. Ní Dhomhnaill's sense of humour and cynical questioning often bring readers to the heart of the matter, guiding us to transcend spatially and temporarily in our reevaluation of women via myth and legends. According to Cannon (1995), whereas Eavan Boland helps readers to recollect Irish women's past miseries, Ní Dhomhnaill leads energetic and forward-looking women to grope for different possibilities of their future (1995, p. 34). Traditional docile women, coupled with self-conscious women in the late twentieth century, characterise Ní Dhomhnaill's poetry. For Sewell, "Ní Dhomhnaill has reversed the male gaze of earlier poetry and cast a bold eye on life and love, challenging male tradition and authority (2003, p. 154). In other words, amid the hostile milieu of Irish poetic tradition, Ní Dhomhnaill is singular because her poetry not only retains but deviates from Irish conventions by calling them into questions. The construction and deconstruction of these conventions that are embedded in her poetry offers us a window into the problems of gender and sexuality as well as women's problems in ancient (Celtic) myth and modern times. It contributes to showcasing the submission of women, their forced silence in situations of sexual harassment and sexual

[2] For more details, see Wood's "Mermaid/Merman."

violence, and points to a promising scenario wherein women venture to reveal injustice and strive for equality. These efforts are in keeping with the endeavours of the #MeToo activists.

CONCLUSION

As the #MeToo movement spreads worldwide with a growing number of celebrities coming forward and sharing their personal stories, women's subjugation and enforced silence against patriarchal background are thrown into stark relief. As a matter of fact, relevant movements were initiated long before the year 2017. Along with many other female writers in the 20th and the 21st centuries, Ní Dhomhnaill spearheads the drive for women's awakening and their liberation. Although feminist issues in Ni Dhomhnaill's writing have been a well-trodden topic, by investigating Ní Dhomhnaill's poetry from the perspective of the #MeToo movement, this paper sheds a new light on relevant issues. It helps us to better understand the nature of male dominance, men's abuse of power, the subjugation and silence of women and the possibility of terminating this long-term silence.

Ní Dhomhnaill's poetry reminds us that women in the contemporary world do not necessarily have to be passive victims, as widely depicted in classical myth, and nor are they incompetent, dependent and silent. Instead, they can be active participants and decision-makers in their endeavours, and they can collaborate to voice their objections to sexual harassment and sexual violence.

Some people may think that the #MeToo movement negatively impacts men, but this is not true; in reality, it only fights against men who abuse their power and hurt women. As Berlatsky (2020) argues, #MeToo can empower not only women but also men because it creates better relationships and safer workplaces for people of different sexes (36-37). Hopefully, this paper will encourage more readers to investigate literary and cultural texts from the #MeToo perspective and contribute to creating a more agreeable environment for people of different sexual inclinations.

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