



FACULTADE DE FILOLOXÍA

Traballo Fin de Grao:
Grao en Lingua e
Literatura Inglesas

*Selkies, Mermaids, and Other Human-Animal Merfolk in
Contemporary Irish Poetry*

Autora: Silvia Alonso Blanco

Titora: Manuela Palacios González

Curso Académico: 2018/2019



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A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to be 'Silvia Alonso Blanco', is written below the author's name.

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CUBRIR ESTE FORMULARIO ELECTRONICAMENTE

Formulario de delimitación de título e resumo

Traballo de Fin de Grao curso 2018/2019

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LIÑA TEMÁTICA ASIGNADA:	LITERATURA EN LINGUA INGLESA E ECOCRÍTICA

SOLICITO a aprobación do seguinte título e resumo:

Título: *Selkies, Mermaids, and Other Human-Animal Merfolk in Contemporary Irish Poetry.*

Resumo [na lingua en que se vai redactar o TFG; entre 1000 e 2000 caracteres]:




From its very beginning, Irish Literature has been closely connected to the ocean. Mythological creatures such as selkies, mermaids, and what is known as merfolk in general, have constituted a crucial part of Irish folk tradition. Interestingly enough, this trope is also recurrent in contemporary Irish poetry, especially in that crafted by female writers.

This dissertation will analyse Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill's poetry collection *The Fifty Minute Mermaid*, as well as a selection of various poems authored by some of the most relevant female figures of current Irish poetry, so as to scrutinize the bounds between the allegory of the sea creature and modern configurations of womanhood. My hypothesis is that the current use of this allegorical merfolk by contemporary Irish women poets throws new light on those binary oppositions that have traditionally framed women's lives: private and public spheres, entrapment and mobility, fixity and change, body and mind, human and animal, etc.

Therefore, with the help of recent debates in Ecocriticism, Ecofeminism, and Animal Studies, I aspire to show how the mentioned mythological sea creatures which have been mainly associated with Irish folk tradition and sometimes considered as symbols of cultural and national identity, are reshaped by contemporary female authors to construct new, alternative female subjectivities.

SRA. DECANA DA FACULTADE DE FILOLOXÍA (Presidenta da Comisión de Títulos de Grao)

Santiago de Compostela, 6 de Novembro de 2018.

Sinatura do/a interesado/a 	Visto e prace (sinatura do/a titor/a) 	Aprobado pola Comisión de Títulos de Grao con data 16 NOV. 2018 Selo da Facultade de Filoloxía 
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SRA. DECANA DA FACULTADE DE FILOLOXÍA (Presidenta da Comisión de Títulos de Grao)

INTRODUCTION

“This Poem is not about Fish”

I have herd of fishes

who perfect the art

of swimming close to razor-sharp coral,

weighing the delicious

tickle of risk on their scales

.....

Sometimes they rise and see

the oxygen-drenched shore

just beyond the reach of water,

their fins itching like feet.

(Eddison 37)

This dissertation is not about fish. From its title, one may think that this is another work about mythology and mythological creatures, their function in tradition and culture, and their codification in literature. If this was the case, it is likely that this paper would not be quite revealing from a contemporary point of view. Perspective is everything and changing it surely implies to alter all that follows. Therefore, I could say that my analysis is based on the figure of the mythological sea creature in its diverse forms but as far as it has been demystified and transformed into something else. The allegory of the fish by Eddison is interesting precisely because, as the title says, they are not a fish at all: they are referred to with the pronoun “who” throughout the poem and the final simile compares their “itching fins” with feet. In the same way, my concern in this paper does not revolve around the many morphologies of the human-animal *per se*. Rather, I intend to analyse the process and especially the reasons and the objectives that led Eddison and some of her contemporary Irish female writers to recover and to “metamorphose” these myths into innovative and suitable configurations for these days.

Mythology is born from natural forces and Nature itself has probably become one of the greatest myths of all time. Since the Industrial Revolution which provided men with the proper tools for the systematic exploitation of natural resources on a broad scale, human perception of the environment has been distorted. Industrialization is nature’s enemy but it is

also the “necessary condition for [modern] ... society to survive” (Mies 144). Consequently, “the modern relationship to Nature can only be a sentimental one” (144). In general, the (re)presentation of Nature in literature is a romanticized version, not the accurate one. The same has happened to animals and women, the latter being in constant metaphorization, “whether of the sacred or the profane, of heaven or hell, or life or death” (Braidotti 83).

It can be argued that this connection might be based on some legitimate correspondences such as their life-giving functions. However, as it has been portrayed in culture and especially in literature, it has become a means of creating Other positions. In this sense, the association becomes an anthropocentric and patricentric construct: “Women prepare and cook; animals are prepared and cooked. Both play subservient roles in the male-dominant institutions of meat eating” (Gruen 72).

Nevertheless, from the point of view of theory, in the last decades literary criticism is making a huge effort to raise awareness about this problem creating alternative and interdisciplinary lines of thought, such as Ecofeminism, Postcolonialism or Animal Studies. In practice, there are also a lot of authors who report and change the literary panorama creatively.

One example is the selection of writers that I am dealing with in this dissertation. This group of Irish female poets introduce in their works a completely radical approach to the fantastic sea creature, essential in Celtic legendary tradition. They propose a subjective and intimist alternative of presentation that goes beyond the mythical creature. The opening chapter focuses on *The Fifty Minute Mermaid* by Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill: a poetry collection which allows the reader to meddle in the reserved community of Merfolk that inhabit the islands. The following chapter deals with a compendium of poems about the human-animal sea creature and the actual metamorphosis. All the compositions involve a female active participant or are directly uttered by a feminine lyric voice. Obviously, this fact cannot be the result of mere coincidence. On the contrary, it is the outcome of a detailed study of the female sea creature and its reinterpretation with one purpose. The subsequent pages represent my attempt to unveil such an objective, as well as to explain its *raison d'être* from the position of disciplines, such as Ecofeminism, Postcolonial and Environmental Studies, which provide alternative and stimulating readings.

CHAPTER 1: “I am rooted”¹: Merfolk on land

The Fifty Minute Mermaid (2007) is a collection of poems extracted from Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill's volume *Cead Aighnis* (1998). It gathers the translations into English by Paul Muldoon who, presumably, was already familiar with his task as it was the second time that both writers worked together. *The Astrakhan Cloak* (1992) is the result of their first collaboration. It is therefore important to keep in mind that all the conclusions stated in this analysis are based on a translation and, according to Michael Cronin (specialist in the Irish language), current translation practices favour “fluent, dynamic approaches” that give rise to “interpretive contextualizations and presuppose changes, adaptations, and omissions” (181). This may have triggered the exclusion of certain meanings that I could not identify.

The importance of each of Ní Dhomhnaill's works is undeniable. Nevertheless, *The Fifty Minute Mermaid* becomes particularly relevant because of its tight link with the current reality in which we live in: a world dominated by imperialism and the fear of the Other, by alienation, sexism, and racism; a world however, in which things are starting to change. Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill represents one of these critical contemporary voices with her allegorical depiction of the catastrophic outcomes of colonialism and patriarchal nationalism, specially for women. She herself is a postcolonial subject and a female author writing in Irish, therefore, we can predict that her discourse is worthy to be taken into consideration. In this first chapter of my dissertation, my intention is to share her personal view of how myths, considered as accounts of creatures and phenomena of others spheres, may sustain unbalanced power relations in this world, but may also work as instruments of subversion. I will start by analysing the title, which functions as the framework of the collection, to then immerse myself in the particular realm of the protagonist, the Mermaid, which interestingly enough is dry.

THE TITLE

The Fifty Minute Mermaid can be considered a manifesto of the consequences of the colonization of Ireland. By using the trope of the Merfolk (the community of mermen and

¹ (Woolf 73)

mermaids) and by giving birth to this allegorical world, Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill describes the traumatic process of losing the common identity. In a context of colonization, minority groups have to endure the suppression by the dominant group, of everything that represents them and might be an obstruction for the colonization project. In most cases, the empire starts attacking culture, base of any nation, and therefore root of nationalist feelings. Depriving individuals of their own means of expression and imposing new ones turns them into subjects of the empire and even into possible future agents. To explore Ní Dhomhnaill's creation and to introduce her poetic persona, I have chosen the poem "The Mermaid in the Hospital", which in my opinion stands as the perfect image for the whole collection. Here, the speaker describes how the Mermaid, after waking up in a hospital, discovered that her fishtail had been detached from her body and replaced by two, in her words: "thingammies". It is clear from her reaction that the surgery was not consented and the fact caused in her an unbearable psychological pain, the total repression of everything that had to do with her past life underwater and ultimately led to its oblivion through complete alienation. Nevertheless, as Ní Dhomhnaill herself claims in one of her essays entitled "Dinnsheanchas: The Naming of High or Holy Places": "if Freud has taught us anything, it is about the return of the repressed" (40). As the tides, the past comes over and over again, creating torment and opening deep psychological wounds.

The title of the book itself is an allusion to traumatic experiences since it makes reference to the actual duration of a therapy session, also known as the fifty-minute hour. In the poem "A Recovered Memory of Water", the situation described by the poetic voice suggests that this trauma prevails and even affects the following generations.

Sometimes when the mermaid's daughter²
 is in the bathroom

 she has the sense the room is filling
 with water.

 A terrible sense of stress
 is part and parcel of these emotions.

² All the poems in this Chapter are by Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill. They are extracted from the 2007 edition of the *The Fifty Minute Mermaid* by The Gallery Press.

She doesn't have the vocabulary for any of it.

At her weekly therapy session (31)

The Mermaid's daughter needs the help of a psychiatrist to face the process of alienation which manifests itself through the symptoms of what seems to be aphasia, specifically the similarity type, described by Roman Jakobson and Moris Halle in their work *Fundamentals of Language*. This disorder affects "the capacity of naming" (82) of the speaker. S/he is aware of the reality of the object/image, but unable to utter its verbal counterpart. In a speech act, the word would be substituted by means of metonymy.

She doesn't have the terminology

or any of the points of reference

or any word at all that would give the slightest suggestion

as to what water might be.

"A transparent liquid", she says, doing as best she can. (31)

Although she has no clue of what that "transparent liquid" may be, the past keeps making its way as a vivid vision of her ancestors' homeland, and this works as a constant motif throughout the collection.

Some of those who got lost along the way

do manage to make appearances ashore from time to time.

("Water Voice" 81)

When times are hard heredity will out.

What would you expect when nature is stronger than

nurture?

("Another Tiny Clue" 93)

The same happened to her mother, the Mermaid, who probably contributed to the aphasia by hiding from her daughter everything related to the underwater life. Her existence was a continuous internal fight between her true nature and her "adopted" personality. In "The Mermaid and Certain Words", the reader can witness the protagonist's denial of any link with Land-Under-Wave, preferring a nosebleed rather than addressing her origins. She calls all that

“superstitions, old traditions”, but she covers her ears when she hears anything related to water or the sea, as the poetic voice of the collection states: she will never be free from hearing “the loud neighing of the kelpie or / water horse / claiming its blood relation with her at the darkest hour of / night” (77). Both, mother and daughter, have to live with their ghosts, with that constant “racket raised in the house”—alluding to the metaphor used in the poem “Poltergeist” (83)—and the bond that they have with their forebears will tie them forever to their legitimate homeland.

The Merfolk are a community of mermen and mermaids which has been forced to abandon their habitat, Land-Under-Wave, to become part of the unnatural human world. Going from one poem to the following implies being part of their process of adaptation which presupposes physical transformation and mental acculturation. Moreover, in this journey, Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill gives prominence to the distaff point of view usually silenced in history by building the character of the Mermaid and assigning her the role of dominant focalizer. Placing her in the otherworld, outside what it is labelled as the “conventional” set of values, proves that those would not be so in an alternative sphere. Both realms interplay and connect in the trope of the Merfolk. However, this relationship is also reproduced in the collection at a formal level. Ní Dhomhnaill’s *Cead Aighnis* is divided in several parts which Paul Muldoon simplified into two distinct ones. In Part One, there is no mention of Mermaids, Merfolk or Land-Under-Wave. The matters and feelings which the speaker deals with are entirely from our dimension. The first poem is entitled “My Dark Master” and it can be read as a metaphor of depression. The second one, “Black”, makes reference to the massacre that took place in Srebrenica (Bosnia-Herzegovina), 11th, July of 1995. The context was the Bosnian War and the repetition of the word *dubh* (“black”) throughout the poem has been interpreted as an “eerily reminiscent of the shower of bullets and bombs over the city” (Shay 221). The last poem of the section is called “The Task”, with a deeply human poetic voice who has gone through some difficult obstacles in life and has come to the conclusion that our only duty, our “task”, is to endure and keep moving forward.

Now, one could find that these three compositions have little sense as the opening part of a book entitled *The Fifty Minute Mermaid*, since they do not mention these mythological creatures at all. However, once the significance of the title has been explained and Part Two has been read, social conflicts, mental health and traumatic experiences become familiar notions, always present along the reading. Hence, instead of creating a boundary between two spheres: the conventional and the mythical one, as some critics have marked, I would say that Part One is more a sort of framework which gets the reader ready, maybe without him/her

noticing it, for the immersion into the world of the Merfolk. Both parts are bound together by means of themes that bring their protagonists nearer to each other.

THE TROPE OF THE MERFOLK

The Merrow, or if you write it in the Irish, *Moruadh* or *Murrúghach*, from *muir*, sea, and *oigh*, a maid, is not uncommon, they say, on the wilder coasts. The fishermen do not like to see them, for it always means coming gales. The male Merrows [...] have green teeth, green hair, pig's eyes, and red noses; but their women are beautiful, for all their fish tails and the little duck-like scale between their fingers. Sometimes they prefer, small blame them, gook-looking fishermen to their sea lovers. Near Bantry in the last century, there is said to have been a woman covered all over with scales like a fish, who was descended from such a marriage. (Yeats 60)

Mythology has been present in Irish oral tradition since its birth. Connection with nature runs very deep in Irish culture and the presence of shape-shifting creatures associated with natural elements is abundant in tales and legends. They play an essential role in literature, to the extent of becoming tropes, that is, recurrent themes. Such is their value, that William Butler Yeats decided to edit the collection: *Fairy and Folk Tales Of Ireland*, a complete treatise of stories involving supernatural beings. The paragraph which opens this section is the actual excerpt which describes what is understood as *Merrow* in Irish folklore.

Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill calls them *Merfolk* and, as I explained in the introduction, she uses them as a trope to represent the minority group in a colonial situation. Instead of being instances of free, mischievous creatures, with the power to transform themselves, to seduce and scare men, they become victims of a system which bases its power on monolithic values that discriminate and oppress systematically any entity that might fall out of the expected model. Anything else distinct from that ideal archetype represents a threat to the monopoly. Obviously, such mistrust in the Other originates in pure fear and ignorance, and the result is to try by any means to suppress it, removing its Otherness out of it. This, applied to a context of migration, translates in a complete assimilation of the minority group in the dominant practices and in a rejection of their own. Therefore, the process of metamorphosis in these poems has nothing to do with the will of the Merfolk, in contraposition with the traditional version. It does not imply an autonomous and momentaneous emancipation of one's shape and condition; it entails

alienation, loss of identity and silence. Thus, the fact that Celtic tradition “allows for the fluidity and migrations of different polymorphic shapes” (Poloczek 131) worked perfectly for Ní Dhomhnaill’s poetic conception of how these processes of assimilation are conducted. The advantage of these shape-shifting creatures at a formal level is that “humanization” can be clearly portrayed as it involves actual physical alterations. From the perspective of the reader, the adaptation is easier to see and the impact may be even more significant. The mutation is depicted by the speaker as an irrevocable step towards a pessimistic future of constraint and trauma. It symbolizes the defeat of one’s authentic, inborn nature by another which is taught and then assimilated. As a matter of fact, the title of the very first poem of Part Two is “The Assimilated Merfolk”. Here, we have a general description of the first steps of the community on “dry land”:

Barely have they put in on this bare rock
than their scales start drying out
and they suffer such skin complaints as windgall and blotching
and get pins-and-needles from the breezes ...
.....
If they happen to get shingles, or when a boil
comes to a head, there’s no herb or **native** remedy that will offer
any respite ...
.....
The doctor reports that the uvula
is displaced in the vast majority of them. The top most hair
of their heads must either be torn out by the roots or thoroughly
stiffened
with wax ... (27)

The excerpt above would be an instance of the processes of adaptation that these sea creatures face on land. The metamorphosis of the community starts by the physical acclimatization to the new environment, which seems to be really painful. It is important to emphasise that, in this introductory poem, the effects of the new reality on the Merfolk are mainly corporal and material. Psychological alienation requires time and involves further methods employed by the dominant group.

The speaker of the collection has the role of a curious anthropologist, a storyteller. Thus, when s/he chooses the word “native” (“there’s no herb or native remedy”), s/he is using it in a neutral sense. However, in colonial discourse this word has negative connotations that aim at differentiation and ultimately marginalization or, as the title of one of the poems puts it: “Lack of Sympathy” (59). Another method that contributes to the obliteration of the Other’s distinct nature is colonial patronage. The colonizers impose their culture as a product of higher quality and undervalue the rest. Traditions, folklore, language... everything that forms the cultural identity of a community is placed at a secondary level. Diversity is not beneficial for the hegemonic power which will try to conceal distinct group practices that can raise the confidence necessary to spark a nationalist feeling.

Bearing all these concepts in mind is crucial when reading *The Fifty Minute Mermaid*. More importantly, readers need to be familiar with the colonial history of Ireland to get the full significance of Ní Dhomhnaill’s writing. The colonization of Ireland by the British Empire left permanent scars and brought along terrible linguistic and cultural consequences for the Irish population. The Merfolk are carefully reinvented as the perfect allegory of the Irish community, since it is, at the same time, a revival of the Celtic tradition muted by the English one, as well as a critique of colonial patronage. As Maryna Romanets claims in her essay: “The Translato-Logic of Spectrality”, what we are dealing with is the “Gaelic tradition, recovered from multiple layers of amnesia and aphasia” (172). Two words which seem to foresee the future of the Merfolk community.

In the beginning, when the Merfolk first arrived on “dry land”, they carried with them their own legends about the birth of their nation. The poem “Founding Myth” goes:

Most of the merfolk
haven’t the first idea
of what on earth brought them to dry land
in the first place.
They were in flight from something. That’s as much as they
remember. (45)

They are very superstitious people who fill that blank with various myths that may explain the creation of their kind and also the exile from their habitat underwater. As Cary A. Shay illustrates “the realms of myth and folklore are products of the human imagination which serve both didactic and spiritual functions” (224). However, their traditions are quickly compared

and adapted to the attitude or line of thought aligned with the dominant group. Consequently, a few lines below in the poem, it can be read that scholars reached the conclusion:

that this entire myth coincided with their conversion to
Christianity
and that it's drawn mostly from *Exodus*. (45)

In the end, the Merfolk reject their own beliefs and embrace religious practises such as baptism (e.g.: "An Unbaptised Merchild", "The Order of Baptism"). Once again, Shay gives us a postcolonial interpretation: "Irish folklore, the mythological cycles, oral texts and certain elements of the spoken language itself are misunderstood and undervalued because of the dominant English worldview which defines and regards them as superstitious" (225). From this quotation we can infer how relevant language is for a nation and, certainly, the linguistic conflict in Ireland due to colonization had terrible consequences for the Irish tongue.

Although they could read and write their own language—
.....
they didn't take up their pens
to actually set down a literature.
They neither compiled nor composed
("The Merfolk and Literature" 39)

In a situation of diglossia, the language of the dominant group replaces the one of the minority in its high functions. As it happened to this community, Irish lost prestige as well as speakers and therefore writers and readers. The author uses the most beautiful and suitable image to describe this process in the poem "A Remarkable Admission". Here, the whole sea stands for the Irish language, and each of its living creatures are the words which float and flow when uttered. The metaphor leaves a powerful visual impact on the mind and also a bitter taste in the tongue.

"There's no single animal up on dry land
that doesn't have its equivalent
in the sea" (87)

This is what an old man with “sea-green eyes / like marine trenches” told the speaker who was a teenager at the time. S/he was really interested in underwater life and was eager to ask him more about the scientific and technical details of it, however the old man walked away.

He left me hanging there,
like a drowned man between two seams of water. (89)

Probably, Ní Dhomhnaill felt exactly this way in her childhood when she was exposed to both English and Irish. In the end, Irish felt the most natural language for her and she has always been fully aware of her commitment as a poet with the language. She claims that she has “no interest in introducing ranges of language or models of literature into Irish” (220). She is just a storyteller who uses the lore of a community to teach something; that is the main aim of mythology. With her account of the history of Ireland, Ní Dhomhnaill brings to light the dramatic effects of losing one’s language and identity under the sovereignty of an empire in a colonial situation. The foundations of the indigenous nation are buried little by little and pushed into underwater —“ethnic cleansing” (“A Remarkable Admission” 87) is the expression used by the speaker— and when they emerge and try to reconquer their rightful place, they only find dry, unfruitful land.

THE TROPE OF THE MERMAID

Once we are familiar with the community of Merfolk, we must pay attention to one of its members who holds obvious prominence in the collection. We know her as the Mermaid and she is the epitome of how women are affected and systematically oppressed by colonization and patriarchal systems. The persona of the Mermaid is such a complex and deep character that a complete dissertation could be written about her. Hereafter, I intend to cover the most relevant aspects of Ní Dhomhnaill’s creation, which is at the same time standard and subversive.

As the rest of her community, the Mermaid has to abandon her homeland underwater and follow the group in their exile. Once on mainland, she also has to endure the adaptation process and deal with the trauma which implies suppressing everything that shapes one’s identity: culture, tradition, language, etc. I have already provided some examples in the section “The Title” of how the Mermaid preferred to repress her past by denying it completely rather than to coexist with it, since it would probably have been too tormenting. The subjective

dimension portrayed here belongs completely to a female account of alienation, which is a rather uncommon account of colonization. The distaff experience of a colonial situation is always more revealing, but also a struggling and silenced version, as it implies complete domination by the patriarchal system. In these cases, women are said to undergo a triple oppression, meaning that they are differentiated because of gender, race and social status. As Cary A. Shay explains: “we find that because woman is always already situated in culture as other, exile is her predicament rather than an aesthetic choice” (Shay 59). Indeed, “dry land” provides the Mermaid with nothing else than personal and social conflicts, but it is precisely her supernatural nature, the fact of coming from a world out of reach for human beings, that produces the distress and the numbness. She must repress her instincts and get used to what is conceived traditionally as female domestic life. The outcome is, as seen in the poems above, a deep trauma and the fragmentation of the subject. Psychoanalytic feminism defends that the dynamics of oppression are engraved in our psyche since very early stages by reinforcing patterns of behaviour and attitudes that locate women in the dimension of the Other (Graff *oakton.edu*). Thus, the formation of a cohesive identity results impossible. Once the Mermaid arrives at the human sphere and accesses this system of binary oppositions in which everything that is not myself becomes automatically something else, she faces several difficulties. This creature has no sense of boundaries at all:

She could never understand, for instance, that we were all
separate and discrete, each and every one of us.
We all run into each other, you’d swear to listen to her,
like the different colours in an oily puddle
after a shower of rain.
 (“Boundaries” 129)

There were not such conceptual barriers in Land-Under-Wave, they are social constructs which have been imposed on her and that she cannot understand. Psychoanalytical feminism also claims that patterns of relations are instilled in our psyches reinforcing what is understood by masculinity and femininity and all the conceptions associated with them in a patriarchal society (Graff *oakton.edu*). Ní Dhomhnaill herself quoted Eavan Boland: “We ourselves are constructed by the construct” (“Dinnsheanchas” 48). The Mermaid, who was not raised in this world, feels frustration when she encounters these obstacles which prevent her from doing her will and only finds gratification in seclusion. In “The Mermaid and Her House”, the poetic

voice shares a bitter portrait of the Mermaid who treats her children as a tyrant. The house is the only place where she can exert a certain degree of authority and her children are the ones she can control. As it was expected, the oppressed became the oppressor.

Since happiness is not destined to be her lot, in- or out-of-doors,
she puts all her energy into her house, (125)

The same happens when her attractive daughter starts wearing makeup and going out with boys. Her reaction is undoubtedly controlling and conservative, however her words reveal the terror she feels that her child might be harmed in the men's world they live in.

“The only thing that ever saved me”, she announced,
“was that I was terrified of men.”
(“The Mermaid and Her Daughter” 133)

The speaker of the collection does not quite believe so, but we must remember that she is not talking from the perspective of a member of their community. There are attitudes that she is not able to understand because, even without realising it, she is also placing the Mermaid in the position of the Other. To a certain extent, it is impossible for the poetic voice to avoid differentiating her as the Mermaid does not fit in the canon of “female role model” in the society that both, speaker and reader, share.

It's the case that they have no statues of nursing mothers
and that images of the Madonna aren't part of their everyday
imagination.
(“The Merfolk on Breastfeeding” 41)

The figure of the mother as a nursing and caring Virgin Mary seems to be the only one regarded as the acceptable one for the dominant society. Patriarchal systems support this ideal of motherhood since it is the most convenient for keeping traditional gender relations in which the woman is only responsible for the domestic sphere. With respect to everything else, it is men's territory. As we have seen before with psychoanalytic feminism, this state of affairs is reinforced by centuries of sexist cultural traditions. Folklore and literature are extremely powerful and effective when it comes to spreading notions and ideals. This misogynistic use

of myths contributes to the creation of a simplified representation of women, either as comforting, asexual, and self-sacrificing mothers, or as hypersexualized, deceitful and even evil subjects. Consequently, the female presence in Irish oral tradition and lore is reduced to two main roles: the reproductive function and the sexual function, which typically exclude one another. The epitome of this is the representation of the country as Mother Ireland: the embodiment of justice and liberty in a colonial situation, which is really far from the true situation of real women. As Eavan Boland claims: “A fusion of the national and the feminine which seemed to simplify both” (Boland 7). In opposition, the figure of Irish men in tradition is presented as Cú Chulainn: “the hyper-masculine hero whose image helped to galvanize a generation of anti-colonial nationalists” (Shay 127.) Ní Dhomhnaill, fully aware of this situation, creates a completely different personification of Ireland. She draws upon this well-known Irish trope maintaining the essence of storytelling through a structure which resembles orality but inverting the conventions of this settled style (Nic Dhiarmada 125). The role of the speaker, normally assumed by the male voice of the Bard is here executed by an intimist voice presenting a woman who does not stand for the idealization of any moral value, in opposition to the hero in epic poetry. Female identities become in Ní Dhomhnaill’s poetry complex subjectivities rather than “passive sources of inspiration for the writings of men” (Shay 190).

The same principle of subversion of traditional compositions is kept till the closure of the collection. There is no epic ending for the protagonist. After years of trying to eradicate every bond with the otherworld and to integrate herself in this one, the Mermaid’s personality splits, and the result is paralysis and the loss of her own identity. The process of alienation is completed, as she has yielded to the subconscious and what is left of her is a state of dementia or even madness.

She’s neither here nor there,

She’s neither fish nor flesh.

.....

All the same, she’s not happy to be in this submerged state.

Now, the odd time she does have anything to say,

you can take it to the bank it’s some version of “Woe is me”.

(“Our Mermaid Goes Under Again” 149)

To conclude this chapter, I refer to the last poem of the collection, “Some Observations on Land-Under-Wave” (153), in which the poetic voice gives the reader a clue of how the home

of the Merfolk would actually look like. It recalls an ancient legend about an island near the North Pole, with an impressive fortress, surrounded by mystery and incredible phenomena. However, the land and the castle are uninhabited and in ruins, almost forgotten by their rightful owners. Ní Dhomhnaill has claimed that her inspiration for writing the collection was: “trying to get the mermaids out of the amniotic fluid of Irish up on to the hard rocks of English” (qtd. in Shay 219) and drawing attention to the consequences of this loss. The island, known by many names but only by a few people, is the final image of the Irish language: what once was a prosperous and fertile realm is now an almost deserted place where “the last remnants of a complete world / which has disappeared from memory” (161) are stored.

CHAPTER 2: “but I flow”³: Merfolk in water

For us, on the other hand, there are as many sexes as there are terms in symbiosis, as many differences as elements contributing to a process of contagion. We know that many beings pass between a man and a woman; they come from different worlds, are born on the wind, form rhizomes around roots; they cannot be understood in terms of production, only in terms of becoming. (Deleuze and Guattari 272)

The second and last chapter of my thesis deals, as is commonly said, with the same but differently. As seen in the previous section, Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill wrote a whole book of poetry dedicated to the trope of the Merfolk as an allegory of Ireland’s postcolonial situation and of women’s position in a patriarchal power structure. Equally, there is a numerous group of female Irish writers who also incorporate the trope of the sea creature with a subversive and feminist intention. Thus, my aim is to explain how they achieve this, and I will base my hypothesis on a selection of poems written by some of the most relevant voices of the last decades in Ireland.

My analysis is indebted to current debates in Ecofeminism, an area of study that encompasses different theories which share the same foundation, that is, the dismantling of any political, cultural, philosophical or religious system that exerts oppression in any form and at any level, and also taking into account that “no attempt to liberate women (or any oppressed group [animals included]) will be successful without an equal attempt to liberate nature” (Gaard 1). As I mention briefly in the Introduction to this paper, the association between nature and women has always somehow been present in collective knowledge and it even seems logical to a certain extent since both are giving-life forces. Camille Paglia provides an extensive explanation in her book *Sexual Personae*, comparing women’s rounded features, such as breast, abdomen and hips to the various circular shapes of topography (Paglia 8-9). In this manner, one became a symbol of the other: “man honoured but feared [them]” and both symbols of the Other: a “totem [which] lives in taboo” (*idem* 8-9). As the worship of the earth (characteristic of the classical era) progressively shifted towards the cult of the mind (patent already in the medieval period and at its apex during the Renaissance and the Enlightenment), the previous correspondence turned to place both nature and women (body, emotion) in a position of devaluation, whereas men (reason, culture) occupied a superior status which assured them power for dominating. First came the *polarization* of the natural (in the sense of organic) and

³ (Woolf 73)

the feminine on one hand, and the masculine on the other, to continue with the *instrumentalization* of the formers, as purposeful devices for men to exploit (Gaard 24-25).

In their identification with nature, women have been reduced to their biology, they are often regarded from a patriarchal point of view as primarily sexual beings: nothing but bodies or the ensemble of bodily parts. This does not mean that they were more likely to be objects of analysis in scientific studies. On the contrary, they were often disregarded and the majority of female representations that can be found in literature expose the ignorance and the lack of interest in real “mothers, manageresses, wives, lovers and daughters”, who are replaced instead by “the goddess, the slut and the hag” (O’Faolain qtd. in Houston 1). The same principle applies to nature as it becomes the romanticized ideal of “Mother Nature” or “Mother Gaia” which, according to Chaia Heller, is simply “a male, disembodied fantasy of the ideal woman” (219).

The aftermath of centuries of these oppressive practices is the creation of stereotypical feminine role models which have nothing to do with real life women and that educate girls to be operators of the patriarchal system that constrains them in the domestic sphere and that limits their mobility making their growth as individual subjects almost impossible. One of the main aims of feminist writings is precisely to conceive alternative forms of subjectivity, both innovative and liberating. To analyse how the particular selection of authors that I am dealing with achieve this objective, I am going to resort to some notions that I believe will help to clarify my hypothesis and to prove that there is a necessity of new and radical female representations.

The theory on which I have based my interpretations is the one proposed by Rosi Braidotti in her book *Nomadic Subjects*. As she explains in her “Introduction: By Way of Nomadism”, her aim with this revision of the notion of “nomadism” is to design an “account of an alternative subjectivity” that “entails a move beyond the dualistic conceptual constraints and the perversely mono logical mental habits of phallogentrism” (1-2). From page one, she clearly states that her rewriting of this notion is articulated from a feminist point of view, outside patriarchal and misogynistic ideals which draw grids around women, creating boundaries they cannot cross. However, Braidotti clarifies that “nomadism”, as she understands it, does not mean exclusively continuous movement from one place to another, that is to say geographical displacement, but “the desire for an identity made of transitions, successive shifts, and coordinated changes, without and against an essential unity” (22). It is the psychological life of the subject, even the spiritual component I may say, that Braidotti wants to re-examine. Having into account that, historically, the most representative part of a woman within

patriarchy is her body, it is coherent that she decided to focus on the other end of the spectrum, on the identity that patricentric views have denied her.

Her inspiration for this “theoretical figuration”, as she describes it, is Deleuze’s philosophy of “becoming”: “the affirmation of the positivity of difference, meant as a multiple and constant process of transformation” (Braidotti 111). Dualistic oppositions between men and women have been regarded by feminist studies as a patriarchal technique to place the female subject in an inferior position of Otherness, which in an anthropological system means at the same level as nature and those considered as “less rational” beings. However, many recent approaches including Braidotti’s have seen in this differentiation the key to empowerment. Equality and recognition will not be achieved by shaping the minority group into the form of the oppressor, as this will not grant reaching its status. Moreover, the method to do so implies using the same means created by the oppressive group which are unfair and discriminatory. This strategy may lead to the acquisition of certain power which will be in the end ruled by the same principles and so, not a victory at any level. Equality means the even distribution of power, as well as the recognition that every individual (animal or human) or organism has the right to it, independently of its differences. The best shield and weapon that one possesses should be her/his/its identity. Consequently, any mobilization which advocates for a better world must be based on inclusiveness, which is not the same as homogeneity. A standpoint that takes diversity, and therefore plurality, into account and turns them into its strength is going to be much more efficient in the long term.

A fascinating aspect of Braidotti’s discourse is that it conceives the previous notion of plurality at the scale of the inner “space” of the individual. Each one of us is in a constant process of “becoming”, a continuous effort of creating and destroying, a complex movement in all directions. Nevertheless, such heterogeneous and substantial conceptions as applied to women have been seen as threatening and maybe even fearsome, so they have been replaced by unsatisfactory unidimensional representations. Precisely, one of the challenges of feminism is to find its own voice, one that is not so subjected to the phallogocentric system. In Braidotti’s words: “Women need to re-possess the multi-layered structure of their subjectivity as the site or historical sedimentation of meanings and representations that must be worked through” (39). In my opinion, this is precisely what the authors of this selection are accomplishing with their rewriting of the topicalized figure of the sea creature in their poems. Either the lyric voices or the protagonists of this selection can be ascribed to the category of nomadic subjects. The transformation that they undergo, positive or negative, empowering or destructive, is always meaningful. It can imply the reshaping of the body into a new form, or the displacement to new

places or to alternative spheres, but the result is always women's acquisition of autonomy. I will try to explain how this is achieved in the following analysis which I structured making a difference between those fluctuations that entail a metamorphosis and those which trigger a journey.

NOMADISM: Female Nomadic Subjects and the Animal Metamorphosis.

An unmodeled civility of soft-grazing Sea Cows
.....
And mermaids who fail to adjust to the habits of land,
.....
And great-muscled sea-horses with fish tails,
.....
Know also of the barnacle goose
.....
Finally, also, phantom homesteads of the drowned,

In this poem by Mary O'Donnell entitled "On Soft-grazing Sea Cows and Other Creatures of the Deep", the lyric voice expresses the fascination that the underwater expanse and its dwellers evokes. It represents the unknown, the unexplored, and therefore it is the source of thousand possibilities. Plenty of myths and legends about the sea and its secrets were born the moment the human-being started to navigate, if not even before. Imagination has always been a source of power as significant as intimidation or knowledge. Unfortunately, in a system based on hierarchical, inequitable and unfounded distribution of authority, those in possession of it manage what escapes their control and threatens their sovereignty creating a "norm" which stands for what is acceptable and moral. In this manner, everything that falls out of that model is necessarily unnatural and evil; negativity is put in difference. Instead of wonders, imagination was stimulated to create monsters, even where there were not any. In fact, creatures described in bestiaries as "aquatic monsters" (in Pliny's *Natural History*, for instance), such as tritons and nereids "were probably seals and sea-cows" (Berman 136). Myths can be explained to certain extent as distortions of reality justified by ignorance and unawareness. In a patriarchal paradigm, women themselves are surrounded by mysticism because everything is measured by the male standard, especially in terms of bodily organization: "The female is therefore the

anomaly, a variation of the main theme of man-kind” (Braidotti 79). That standard also affects animals, actually the concept of monster presupposes extreme or pure animality or a degree of shapeshifting, being this the explanation for the association of woman and animal, woman and monster. They are the Other, the difference, the abnormality, but “they also represent the in between, the mixed, the ambivalent” (Braidotti 77), which is precisely how the new representations of women should be, according to the nomadism theory, if the aim is to fill the lack of diversified female subjectivities.

The previous affirmations conclude that the primary point of distinction is and has always been physical appearance, that is the (animal/female) body. It is the most notable one at first sight and its excessiveness originates both fascination and fear. Therefore, it must be controlled by means of enclosing and hunting, or relegated to the domestic sphere where it performs a powerless role at the service of the patriarchal system. If we pay attention to cultural tradition, the figure of the monster is never associated with the kitchen, that space belongs to the “angel of the house”.

The explanation provided by patriarchal discourse for the existence of female sea creatures which work as emblems of depravation, vanity, evil and sin lies in women’s supposedly closer connection with nature and animals. The feminine body yields easily to primitiveness, irrationality and ultimately monstrosity. At least, this is the mainstream interpretation but it is not the only one.

“Selkie Moment”

She rose from the warmth of their bed,
 in the kitchen cut her hair,

 only she had found where he kept her pelt

 She puts the skin onto her back

 swam beneath the myriad brilliant stars.

(Wells 18)

“Long-distance Swimmer”

.....
 she shakes herself
 loose of her togs and her cap.

 Her neck disappears. She turns grey.
 Grows a fur coat / and claws.
 Her limbs fuse in a silvery flash

 as she swims for dear life out to sea.

(Molloy 49)

These two poems are the example that an alternative reading is plausible. Both Wells and Molloy conceive a female protagonist who is trapped in a realm which feels unnatural for her and is willing to go back to her rightful state as selkie: a seal which is able to adopt the appearance of a woman on dry land. The misogynistic arguments of the patriarchal system will claim that these metamorphoses are evidence of the rational superiority of the male subject who “kept her pelt / beneath the dry earth of their barn” (Wells 18). However, in these poems animalization is portrayed as a positive and even desirable transformation, since it does not presuppose degeneration but liberation, autonomy and “becoming”.

In a few words, this new emphasis on the morphology of the sea creature intends to “rethink the body in terms that are neither biological nor sociological” and “to reformulate the bodily roots of subjectivity in such a way as to incorporate the insight of the body as ... threshold of transcendence” (Braidotti 184). The representations of the female body are still restricted to those created by sexist dominant groups, so if the intention is to create new alternative and changing subjectivities which subvert the prevailing norm, new models are necessary for the illustration of the “becoming-subject”, especially models that can reshape themselves. Nevertheless, it is important for a feminist reader or writer to bear in mind that a shifting form and a fluid subjectivity, although it strives for the suppression of dualistic categorizations which lead to hierarchical power relations, does not mean the cancelation or denial of those categories. Such purpose will be unrealistic and counter-productive. In the same way, by using the motif of the merfolk these authors are not trying to get rid of gender as a distinction, on the contrary, they are claiming this territory as exclusively feminine. The poem “The Woman Turns Herself into a Fish” by Eavan Boland is an example of how “more of an animal” does not imply “less of a woman”:

blub-lipped,

hipless

and **I** am

sexless,

shed

of ecstasy,

a pale

swimmer,

sequin-skinned,
.....
still
she moons
in me. (83)

The title remarks that it is the woman the one with the ability to transform herself and she does so voluntarily. She is not renouncing to herself to become the animal, she is “becoming” the fish to be herself. The structure of the poem chosen by Boland —really short lines full of enjambments even between stanzas— expresses the fragmentation of the poetic voice as well as the breakdown that her mutation involves. Another crucial point is the form in which the pronouns “I” and “she” are used: the poetic voice describes itself as “sexless” in fish form, however it is still being a “she”. “The power of synthesis of the “I” is a grammatical necessity, a theoretical fiction that holds together the collection of differing layers, the integrated fragments of the ever-receding horizon of one’s identity” (Braidotti 166). One of those multiple fragments, contained in one of those multiple layers, holds the “she” as well as many other subjectivities.

Thus, as discussed above, adopting one form does not endanger the others; identity is a continuous process of “becoming”, of permanent “nomadism” without a fixed finishing point. In fact, one of the problems that Braidotti finds in Deleuze’s theory of “becoming-woman” is that the concept attempts to create a new category beyond gender that will overlook “women’s sense of their own historical struggles” (Braidotti 120). This is why it is extremely important to always produce discourses from a “female feminist standpoint” (Braidotti 117), as Boland does in her poem.

The challenge for these female writers is to create new allegorical definitions of womanhood that may be relatable to real-life women. A really demanding task. In this process, I imagine two possible alternatives: the first being to conceive a completely separate premise which symbolizes a radical split from patriarchal discourse and tries to compete with it or, on the other hand, to take advantage of the role that has been assigned to women in the system (although in a subordinate position) and to boycott it from the inside. The former strategy suggests moving from a disadvantageous situation to another and confronting a much more powerful force from there, whereas the latter promises changes at a deeper level. “Where does change come from?” asks Braidotti: “the new is created by revisiting and burning up the old” (169). In literary terms, the topics of the giving mother, the innocent maiden, the wicked witch,

or the deceitful mermaid have been revisited and re-shaped to make room for new figurations. Jean O'Brien, for instance, introduces the male counterpart of the mermaid to play the role of the Other: the excessive and monstrous creature from the sea who brutally rapes the protagonist of the poem. Othering the rapist is quite legitimate, I believe, since it is differentiating an action which is immoral to say the least.

“Merman”

... I said No.

He parted my thighs and when it was over,
untangled his legs, shook the silver armour

.....

his sea-green eyes, his face, his terrible merman tail.

(Salmon Poetry.com)

“Transformation can only be achieved through de-essentialized embodiment or strategically re-essentialized embodiment: by working through the multi-layered structures of one’s embodied self” (Braidotti 171). Women have been identified with their biological function of reproduction, they are mainly a body with incarnates sexual and nurturing duties and which guarantees the survival of the species. However, the time has come for them to disburden their anatomy of all the political, social and cultural implications that the patriarchal system has imposed on them. “Like the gradual peeling of old skins” (*idem* 171) is the metaphor used by Braidotti and it describes this process perfectly. To conclude this section, I chose the poem by Máighréad Medbh “Out of my Skin”, which is another example along with Braidotti’s metaphor.

.....

My body was a blistered tin,
the light always on, my bed in the kitchen,

.....

I packed and moved out of my skin,
took a hatchet, a hammer and pins,

.....

In the end I grew scales and a fin,

.....

I washed from the floor to the ceiling,
including my three sons and him,
i pointed the way, I guided them down,
past the knee-cap and out of my skin.
(45-46)

In this poem, the lyric voice expresses how she feels so trapped in her reality, as a mother and a wife relegated to the domestic sphere, that she grows out of her skin and builds an alternative home for herself. From pure materiality (“tin”), she becomes an organic being with “scales and a fin”. Here I want to highlight the recurrent image of the scale in its similarity to a healing wound (literal or figurative) covered by scabs. Curiously, at the end of the poem, the lyric voice does not renounce to her loved ones although they are all males. She takes them with her but now she is the one who “guides”.

NOMADISM: Female Nomadic Subjects and Mobility.

May the road rise to meet you. May the wind be always at your back.

Old Irish blessing.

Up to this point the notion of mobility has been related to the “intellectual space of creativity, that is to say, the freedom to invent new ways of conducting our lives” (Braidotti 256). In fact, Braidotti’s conception of nomadism and the nomadic subject is more concerned with the versatility of the metaphysic, abstract level of the mind which in the poems of this selection results in a mutation of the bodily form. This does not mean that the outer-space, the *topos*, should be ignored or underestimated as the root of new representations for women.

“Water is the element of both death and rebirth” (South 143). It creates and destroys, its forces erode crafting multiple shapes, it conceals the unknown letting some fragments afloat. In literary tradition, the sea has always been the symbol of ultimate freedom and mobility, the passage to unexplored lands or even undiscovered worlds—more specifically, unexplored and undiscovered by the white man. Such territories were out of reach for women who supposedly had neither the physical nor the mental strength to endure wilderness.

Conceptions such as the “second” or the “weak” sex have increased the belief that women’s education should be dictated by men and must shape potential wives, mothers,

hostesses and so forth, who remain inside the safety of the domestic sphere. Women became a sort of colony which needed to be supervised by patricentric powers which stopped any kind of growth as individuals and made them submissive collaborators in their own oppression. Consequently, men have developed “a different relationship to space” (O’Donnell 170) than women, who are tied to sedentariness. It has been established, mainly through cultural representations, that a settled woman, rooted to the ground, deserves more respect or has more credibility than another who decides to travel the world, neglecting the chance to marry, raise children and rule a house. In a female subject, a craving for adventure is regarded as uncanny. As in the poem “Chattels” by Celia de Fréine, men dig for gold while women wait to be claimed:

But the men continue till a diamond
ring or a sapphire necklace is drawn
from the sludge. And later, somewhere
in the town, a girl yields to the man
who promised her the earth.
(*Scarecrows* 63)

Women are not desiring subjects but objects of desire and Fréine’s poem emphasizes this materiality from its title, through the precious stones, to its very last word which is none other than “earth”. Women were not supposed to leave the household voluntarily in search of stimulating experiences. This does not mean that female presences in nature were not contemplated by cultural traditions but were always incarnated in the figure of the mythological creature which little relates to real-life women.

In opposition to the rigid boundaries of dry land, the sea seems to have none. It stands for constant flux, changeability and movement, and most importantly, it symbolizes an escape.

“Born at sea”
One minute I’m the daughter of a king,
next thing I’m being sold to a whorehouse -
.....
I wish I could dive off that rock and glide
with seahorse and seal away from this place
to where my life would be my own to do

with it as I pleased.

.....

I reckon I could learn to swim in that
new ken should I ever encounter it.

(de Fréine, *Scarecrows* 28)

The will of this female poetic voice to run away could not be expressed more overtly. Water stands for complete liberation and knowledge. She claims “the right to go where [she] wants to without being punished physically or psychically” (Braidotti 256). Plunging into the sea seems to be the only getaway from a life of abuse and restriction. I must point out that this image is certainly not ground-breaking in literary tradition.

Fell in the weeping brook. Her clothes spread wide,
And **mermaid-like** a while they bore her up,
Which time she chanted snatches of old lauds
As one incapable of her own distress,

.....

Till that her garments, heavy with their drink,
Pulled the poor wretch form the melodious lay
To muddy death.

(Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, iv.7)

Ophelia’s death in *Hamlet* meant the birth of an icon. Her drowning in a brook has been reproduced over and over again in visual arts, especially in the Victorian era, and mostly in its romanticised version. There is controversy about whether Ophelia died by accident or committed suicide. Nevertheless, it is clear that a woman ending her life by drowning is already a symbolic act coded in literature. Suicide represents an escape from unbearable suffering, mental conditions (e.g. madness), or patriarchal oppression; death implies getting rid of all the expectations that patriarchy imposes on women: “the female loses the quality of being the Other” (Meessen 43) but she takes the risk of becoming an idealization as Ophelia. Contemporary female writers are aware of the fact that death or suicide do not represent a triumph for women. They signify the end of the process of “becoming” without having achieved a fitting identity for themselves. As a result, they wisely choose lyric voices who are familiar with the sea and who are able to swim instead of quietly sinking.

The major concern for present-day feminist literature is to make sure that all stereotypes fall apart in favour of diverse and infinite possibilities of portraying womanhood. Thus, with the intention of continuously expanding the general panorama, there are also accounts of mobility in the opposite direction:

“A time in her life”
She was attracted to the land-
.....
Each time she stayed,
she stayed a little longer
knowing a day would come
when she’d have to make a choice-

she could always leave
as long as she had her mantle. (72)

This Mermaid in particular, also from de Fréine’s collection *Scarecrows at Newtownards*, likes life on dry land and she is able to go back and forth from one sphere to another. However, mobility does imply a cost and one must remember that when interpreting nomadism. It “is not fluidity without borders but rather an acute awareness of the no fixity of boundaries” (Braidotti 36). Running through borders implies commitment and paying a price, but ultimately she is the one that has the power to decide whether to assume full responsibility. This lyric voice seems ready to do so, since she knows she is safe “as long as she had her mantle”, her identity, which reminds her where she comes from. As Braidotti claims: “Identity is retrospective”, it is the print “of where we have already been and consequently no longer are” (35).

The Mermaid from Celia de Fréine’s poem, exploring a completely new world for her, also implies an inversion of the pattern established by Joseph Campbell in *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*.

A hero ventures forth from the world of common day into a region of supernatural wonder: fabulous forces are there encountered and a decisive victory is won: the hero comes back from this mysterious adventure with the power to bestow on his fellow man. (28)

In this case, those “fabulous forces” are the ones venturing into the conventional world. The Other intrudes in the territory of the norm, without renouncing its difference and “excess”, and the most significant thing is that the Other is female.

The concept of the monomyth, that Campbell borrows from James Joyce, only contemplates the hero as male. As the author explains in an interview made with Maureen Murdock in her book, *The Heroine’s Journey: Woman’s Quest for Wholeness*: “In the whole mythological tradition woman is *there*. All she has to do is to realise that that she’s the place that people are trying to get to” (1). According to this statement, women should not have the necessity to complete their own journey. They are passive subjects, sexualized bodies, or places to be claimed and conquered, not individuals with the urge to transcend and mould unique identities.

“The journey begins with our heroine’s search for identity” (Murdock 4), which she is not going to find remaining in a confining and limiting environment. “We must leave home” affirms professor Caren Kaplan “since our homes are often sites of racism, sexism and other damaging social practices” (194).

“hope”

At last I discovered a small boat to store hope in, one
that welcomes me on board and steers me on my journey,
its glass bottom a screen through which I glimpse
the fish and the crustaceans and the people who live
on the ocean bed, ... (15)

This poem belongs to Celia de Fréine’s collection entitled *inram: odyssey* and shows an adventurous lyric voice on a journey towards the unknown and its fantastic dwellers. No more Penelopes waiting patiently while knitting (Murdock 1) or deadly mermaids who seduce with their chants, it is time for the female to be the heroine of the myth. Like Ulysses, she has a boat, a war fought at her back, a long journey ahead but also the desire to take time to stop and explore, to learn, see and experience everything, to finally dock reshaped as a complete being. In Marion Woodman words: “But if you travel far enough, one day you will recognize yourself coming down the road to meet yourself. And you will say - YES” (qtd. in Murdock 8).

One’s life could be defined as a continuous quest for one’s identity, the ultimate step for well-being is the finding of the self. The difficulty arises when that identity is given by a superior power which compromises each movement and thought. Once women are aware of

the oppression that the patriarchal system exerts over them, which is not as easy a step as it may seem, there are two options: to ignore the fact and accept it as a pair of shoes which irritates the feet but is bearable for walking a fixed path, or to resist and struggle as if trying to release from a straitjacket. Movement is the key as it makes things unstable: it allows for the examination of the supporting bases of maybe a not so balanced structure, and implies changeability, stretching to reach new forms “when the “old self” no longer fits” (Murdock 4). Thus, I believe that the concept of nomadism and the figure of the “becoming subject” are useful reference points for women to find their own voices and start building their own identities. For now, it has led to the creation of new perspectives in the connection of the female with nature, as well as a whole new subversive revision of the sea creature myth.

CONCLUSION

“I feel a thousand capacities spring up in me. I am arch, gay, languid, melancholy by turns. I am rooted, but I flow” (73).

The Waves, Virginia Woolf.

During the research for this dissertation, as well as on writing it, Virginia Woolf came to my mind so many times that it was impossible not to refer to her. The discrimination that she suffered for being a woman, her feminist writing in which she denounced that situation, the abundant presence of water in her imagery, her suicide in the river Ouse and even her mental health problems have led me to establish connections with the protagonists of the poems in my corpus and, finally, I have decided to title the chapters after a quite known quotation from her novel *The Waves*.

In my opinion, the image of “being rooted but flowing” represents perfectly the existence of the sea creatures which come to life in the selected poems. The first chapter of this dissertation is dedicated to the Mermaid, member of a community which must leave its Land-Under-Water to start a new life in a new sphere where she will suffer discrimination and sexism. Her fish tail is removed and replaced by legs, she is now rooted to earth, and she has to learn to live according to new conditions. Plants on dry land tend to grow in one direction, vertically, and usually their growth is controlled by humans. The same happens to the Mermaid, who lives now under the authority of a dominant power that forces assimilation to the new culture, leading her to madness. Accustomed to the laws of the underwater world, where the currents move everything in all directions, she cannot stand the restrictions that the patriarchal system set on her and she ends being completely alienated. This account will be the negative side of the metamorphosis: to reshape oneself to fit in the mould established by the norm. The result regarding women is the fixation to the domestic sphere and the impossibility to grow and create an identity of their own. The second chapter however provides a more empowering version of the transformation. The different female protagonists of the poems do not forget where they come from and, in the end, as the roots that are always stretching and opening their way towards water, they return to the sea and to their natural forms. Selkies, mermaids, etc “cease to be the effect of male fantasies—of myths and representations created by men” to become “the ‘feminine’... that which ‘women’ invent, enact, and empower in ‘our’ speech, our practice, our collective quest for a redefinition of the status of all women” (Braidotti 188).

As Braidotti says, I believe female authors are in a quest. A search to create alternative and multiple female subjectivities which finish with stereotypes and empower real-life women to travel beyond them. Braidotti's nomad "who gathers, reaps, and exchanges but does not exploit" (25) would be an example of female identity, or the "becoming-women" by Deleuze who is flux, constantly redefining herself and flowing by definition. It is important to stress, as Braidotti says, that the notion of being in continuous transformation is beneficial even if it implies a detachment of the body, as seen in the poems, as long as it is not mistaken for loss of gender. Body is not the same as gender, a woman can live in a man's body and vice versa, and the emphasis on gender must be kept. Feminist movements emerged as a response to women being discriminated and undervalued precisely for being women. Therefore, the goal should not be a gender-neutral world, as Deleuze suggests, but a world which believes that equality and diversity are compatible. That is the only reality that society must conceive and struggle for.

As regards "the feminist theoretician today", s/he must create "connections where things were previously dis-connected or seemed un-related, where there seemed to be "nothing to see" (Braidotti 93). In this case, the connection was already there: "Women's capability to produce specific fluids through pregnancy (breast milk, amniotic fluids) and menstruation (blood)" (Meessen 33) placed them in a closer position to water. Sea, tides and waves became literary symbols of feminine stereotypes such as inconstancy and hypersensitivity; tears are also liquid and considered a "sign of feminine emotional weakness" (Meessen 33). However, I hope that after reading the poems as well as my analysis, one realises that the creation of new symbols is possible and it does not always imply to start from scratch. Commonly, revisions are underestimated and considered less powerful than novelties. This is not the case. The great achievement of this group of Irish female writers is the liberation of the mythological sea creature from all the patriarchal connotations that it carries and the introduction of original instances of women's emancipation.

Lastly, I dedicate my final reflection to the role that nature plays in this new interpretation of the myth. Does it really vary in any aspect or does it continue to be the same idealized one? The extent to which a higher presence or relevance implies more visibility of the actual natural environment is really an interesting and controversial question. The same applies to animals, which in literature and especially in mythology function mainly as motifs. The reader gets to see little about the real animal in these poems. Do these representations disregard animals' true nature? But, is it really possible to write from a perspective which is not conditioned by one's own eyes? Would a less human standpoint be more respectful and

helpful for their emancipation from symbolic meaning? or on the contrary, should writers take advantage of it to spread awareness? The end is always open and further analyses in these directions should be taken into consideration.

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