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Framing Masculinity in the Poetry of Nuala Ni Dhomhnaill

By Margaret Garry Burke¹

Abstract

This paper examines how the contemporary Irish poet, Nuala Ni Dhomhnaill, is destabilizing traditional notions of the masculine and feminine. Female Irish writers have been suppressed and silenced by a strong patriarchal society and it is interesting to study how Ni Dhomhnaill uses vivid masculine imagery to delineate new boundaries within the institutionalized male/female construction. The two works that I explore, "Nude" and "A God Shows Up," represent her complex journey toward a strong feminine voice.

Keywords: Irish, women, masculinity, poetry, Nuala Ni Dhomhnaill

Introduction

While gender studies have received wide global attention, this is an area of study that is relatively new terrain in Irish literature. The narrower focus on "masculinity" is singularly appropriate in Ireland as women become an integral part of the Irish canon. As women writers become significant players in the field of Irish literature, it is essential that they clarify for themselves the relationship between masculine and feminine identities, an issue that has been so problematic throughout Irish history. Due to the cultural, political and religious structure of Ireland, women have played a subordinate role and it is only in recent times that female writers are beginning to be heard. Because of the shift in the Irish literary landscape, it will be interesting to examine how the postmodern female poet, Nuala Ni Dhomhnaill, has delineated masculine imagery in some of her work. As Simone de Beauvoir has argued in *The Second Sex*, a woman within a patriarchal society is "a creature intermediate between male and eunuch, not a fully but only a partially-sexed being, because she is not a phallic creature" (249). Nonetheless postmodern female Irish poets have shed their voiceless, neutered selves and no longer neatly adapt to de Beauvoir's philosophical theory. As a matter of fact, Ni Dhomhnaill adroitly objectifies her male subjects, using powerful phallic images and thereby opens a conversation on how women are re-ordering gender roles in Ireland. But gender issues are not the only complexity in Ni Dhomhnaill's work. Since she writes in Irish, her work is only available to English speakers in translation. Despite this we have to assume that her translators, Irish poets themselves², have made a reasonable attempt to capture the subtleties and the nuances of her poetic creations thereby opening up the discussion of her work to a wider audience.

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² Some of her distinguished translators include Michael Hartnett, Paul Muldoon, Eilean Ni Chuilleanain, Seamus Heaney and Medbh McGuckian.

Women Writers in Ireland

As far back as written history, women had been writing poetry in Ireland, but even up to the present day, they have not truly been valued or recognized. The first 3 volumes of the important Irish literary collection, *The Field Day Anthology of Irish Literature*, were published in 1991 with the mention of only 5 women. After much hue and cry on the part of women writers, volumes 4 and 5 were published in 2002. These 2 volumes concentrate solely on the work of Irish women writers. Ni Dhomhnaill states that the “exclusion of women from the *Field Day Anthology* must be fairly and squarely faced up to in the Irish poetic tradition – a tradition that is sexist and masculinist to the core” (Selected 54). Indeed the Field Day controversy underlined the fact that the achievement of women writers was not simply a comforting celebration of an apolitical pluralism, but an intervention into a deeply rooted system of judgements and sanctions on the limits of female poetic utterance (Keen 21). In Ireland this systematic silencing of women made it easy to ignore their existence and to invalidate their experience (Fuchs 312). In fact proclamations against women’s rights were codified into law. Contraception, abortion and even a married women’s right to work were banned by the 1937 Irish Constitution.³ These conventions against women’s rights prescribed their role as reproducers of culture and nature, confining them to the domestic sphere and denying them sexual freedom (Myers 306). Faced with this excessive patriarchal repression, Irish women had an enormous challenge to overcome. At the forefront of this struggle were women writers who through their work began to flatten gender/sexual barriers by creating sensual images that draw from the sacred and the profane. The emergence of this generation of women writers⁴ who had one foot in the traditional patriarchal culture that represented Ireland until the early 1970s, and another in the third wave of liberation, introduced to the Irish literary scene a group of talented and gutsy women who were packed with interesting contradictions. As these women became more confident and accepted; they began to write more explicitly about sexuality, overturning the aloof images of Irish women in literature, historically devised by men (Lennon 624). Ni Dhomhnaill and her contemporaries began to dismantle entrenched assumptions of women’s role in Irish society. In her essay, “The Woman Poet in the Irish Tradition,” Ni Dhomhnaill talks about the struggle faced by women poets in Ireland.

The emergence of this writing has been gradual and often obstructed, hysterically fought against, condescended and patronised. And yet despite this opposition, despite the talking behind the backs, women’s poetry in Ireland has slowly but surely built up the momentum of a tidal wave, inexorable, unstoppable: that’s the sum of it. (Selected 43)

³ Enshrined in the 1937 Irish Constitution was the prevailing notion “that the state recognized that by her life within the home, woman gives to the State a support without which the common good cannot be achieved.” Moreover, embedded in the Constitution was a ban against the sale of contraceptives as well as a proclamation called the marriage bar. The marriage bar required that women leave most jobs upon marriage. This ban was finally repealed in 1973 and in 1979 the ban against the sale and importation of contraceptives was lifted. Abortion is still illegal in Ireland.

⁴ Included in this vanguard of women poets who were born in the 1940s and 50s are Eavan Boland, Medbh McGuckian, Eileen Ni Chuilleainain, Paula Meehan, and Rita Ann Higgins.

As a mark of her personal liberation, she started to use men as objects in her work, thereby appropriating co-ownership of the “gaze” and the right to inscribe her sexual feelings. The feminist movement long ago pointed out the power of the “male gaze” on the way women perceive themselves and allow themselves to be perceived by men and other women (Goddard 23). According to Jaime Bihlmyer, “So pervasive is the male-centered landscape in the mainstream, that the term ‘the male gaze’ has become institutionalized in theory and practice while the female gaze eschews institutionalization” (68). The questions remain, “Has Ni Dhomhnaill been able to appropriate the male gaze that, according to Irigaray, objectifies and masters (O’Brien Johnson 69)?” Has she been successful in using the woman as a spectator and positioning the male in the traditional female role as object? Interestingly, most of Ni Dhomhnaill’s work is inspired by a male muse. Just as many male artists and writers have been directed by an exotic female muse, Ni Dhomhnaill talks of how necessary it is for her to have a muse and, most often, for this muse to be male. “I can only write when there is a muse about, somewhere in the vicinity, maybe in another country, as long as *he’s* there (Wilson 150).” As a heterosexual woman, it is not surprising that her inspiration, particularly in poems about romance and sexuality, would derive from a male. However, might we not also wonder if Ni Dhomhnaill’s need for a male muse simply maintains the tradition of a repressed woman’s being unable to shake off male domination here represented by her muse? Nonetheless, in the two poems that I’ve chosen to study, Ni Dhomhnaill quite explicitly lays bare her female identity, displaying a sense of vulnerability as she shares with her readers her ecstasy and her pain. She uses her poetry as part of a continuing process involving her own self definition, creating the work from representations of herself and her male lovers (Gardner Kegan 357).

Analysis of the Masculine in the Poetry of Nuala Ni Dhomhnaill

The two poems I examine, “Nude” and “A God Shows Up,” represent only a small fraction of Ni Dhomhnaill’s oeuvre. I have chosen them because they are compelling portrayals of conflicting masculine imagery. Since they were published seven years apart, we can assume that they are reasonably indicative of a change in the author’s perspective on male/female relationships. In these two poems, the poet clearly exploits her male objects, closely examining them from a female perspective using erotic metaphors and similes to depict every aspect of the male body and her passion for it. The poet has stated that “the only things worth writing about are the biggies: birth, death and the most important thing in between which is sex.” (Why, 27). Ni Dhomhnaill’s statement overturns the notion that sexual ardor exists exclusively in masculine territory. I will explore how Nuala Ni Dhomhnaill celebrates her own sexuality and how this allows her to produce depictions of masculinity from an unambiguous feminine perspective. In her poem, “Nude,” she self-consciously objectifies the naked body of a male by playfully reversing the traditional assignment of the roles of subject and object of the gaze (Leith 154). Here Ni Dhomhnaill subverts conventional patriarchal primacy by using language that objectifies the male in patently phallic terms. At the same time, in her poem, “A God Shows Up,” she slips back into the archetypal female disposition wherein she seems to place the male object in the powerful role of a god. In that poem, Ni Dhomhnaill suppresses her own ego while she deifies her masculine object. In light of

this overt act of deification, we observe that she has found it difficult to accomplish a truly stable emotional perception of herself as a strong woman.

Ni Dhomhnaill's poem, "Nude," translated by Paul Muldoon and published in 1993 as part of her *Pharaoh's Daughter* collection, communicates a type of feminine "macho." For instance, the title of the poem signals that it is not a traditional piece written by a woman. Furthermore, the poet situates the male object of the poem in the vulnerable position of being naked. According to Margaret Walters, after the nineteenth century, the male nude which had played a central role in art history was determinedly and nervously covered up; and, as the male went out of focus, the female nude became the fundamental representation of art and the term "nude" is now automatically taken to mean a woman (133). In this poem, the poet wryly attempts to turn the table on this concept. In the first two lines, Ni Dhomhnaill forcefully articulates her delight in seeing the male object of the poem nude.

The long and short
of it is I'd far rather see you nude –
your silk shirt
and natty

tie, the broolly under your oxter
in case of a rainy day,
the three-piece seersucker
suit that's so incredibly trendy,
your snazzy loafers
and, la-di-da,
a pair of gloves
made from the skin of a doe,

In order to emphasize the narrator's sense of liberation and power, the poet must place the male in the self-conscious position of being the object of a woman's attention. Ni Dhomhnaill understands "that the body is central in women's identity construction, since women's bodies have been idealized, commodified, and controlled" (Arden 123). In this stylish poem the male takes his turn at being the idealized commodity. In "A God Shows Up" which was published in her 2000 collection, *The Water Horse*, it is the woman who finds herself in the uncomfortable, traditional role of a victim who is stalked by a panther. It is interesting to note that during the years between the writing of these two poems, Ni Dhomhnaill suffered an emotional breakdown. She passed through a period of three years when she could not write. After emerging from that dreadful interlude in her life when she was a victim who was stalked by her own insecurities and doubts, she seemed to become less idealistic and more cynical, stating, "I'm no longer looking for the perfect man. I know he doesn't exist."⁵ Bearing in mind the distinct life changes that the poet experienced, it is not difficult to understand that she would have a bleaker and a more vulnerable perspective, accounting for the darker tone in this second poem.

⁵ The poet shared this information at a poetry reading which I attended at New York University's Ireland House on April 8, 1999.

In “Nude” the narrator is in charge and her words are playful and seductive, describing the male as a fastidious, feminized individual. At the end of the first stanza, the word, “natty,” rouses several different images. One that quickly comes to mind is an extremely conventional male who is consumed with being meticulously dressed. Following this break, Ni Dhomhnaill brings into play some unusual terms, “brolly” and “oxter,” certainly not words used in contemporary jargon, further emphasizing the old-fashioned, fussy nature of the male. The clothed male object is artfully teased as being too much of a “dandy,” too feminine, carrying his brolly for fear of a rainy day, wearing gloves made from “the skin of a doe.” The poet mocks this genteel male image with her slickly sneering “la-di-da.” So often women have been characterized by an article of clothing like a high-heeled shoe or a negligee, but here Ni Dhomhnaill takes the opportunity to feminize the male by identifying him by means of his elegant clothes.

then to top it all, a crombie hat
set at a rak-
ish angle – none of these add
up to more than the icing on the cake.

for, unbeknownst to the rest
of the world, behind the outward
show lies a body unsurpassed
for beauty, without so much as a wart

Repeatedly, the poet shifts between feminine and masculine images. Clothed, the male is feminized, sporting a silk shirt and a pair of doeskin gloves. However, once Ni Dhomhnaill strips her object of clothing, or “the icing on the cake,” the male is portrayed as determinedly masculine, a “brilliant slink of a wild animal who leaves murder and mayhem in his wake.” At the same time, the poet continues the gender intersection by portraying her male object’s body as “unsurpassed for beauty.” Masculine identity is inextricably linked to the social image of femaleness; and here Ni Dhomhnaill artfully coalesces male and female images in order to demonstrate the duality of gender identity (Goddard 24). Ni Dhomhnaill intends for her male object to play a dual gender role in order to expose interesting aspects of the conflicted male and female dynamic.

In the next two stanzas, the poet imbues her male object’s body with traditional images of masculinity.

or blemish, but the brill-
iant slink of a wild animal, a dream-
cat, say, on the prowl,
leaving murder and mayhem

in its wake. Your broad, sinewy
shoulders and your flank
smooth as the snow
on a snow-bank.

The male body is represented as a “wild animal, a dreamcat.” It is interesting that Ni Dhomhnaill modifies the term “wild animal” with “dreamcat.” Does the poet mean to imply that “wild” men are every woman’s dream? Is it perfectly natural for this metaphoric male to leave “murder and mayhem in its wake?” Are women really attracted to this sort of macho male? Ni Dhomhnaill’s wild animal metaphor strongly supports Caitlin Hines’s study wherein she reveals that two of the main conceptual metaphors underlying English linguistic expressions used to describe women are “kitty” and “pussycat” (1996). In other words, women are more likely than men to be spoken of in terms of small animals who can be tamed while we see in Ni Dhomhnaill’s poem metaphors of wild animals who can exert both physical and emotional control over women.

In the next verse, the poet metaphorically arrives at the essence of her masculine imagery.

Your back, your slender waist,
and, of course,
the root that is the very seat
of pleasure, the pleasure source.

Here Ni Dhomhnaill endows the male with a “slender waist,” again alluding to a feminine characteristic. But quickly she arrives at “the root,” her effective imagery of the phallus. The narrator’s description of the male organ as “the root” and “the very seat of pleasure” gives the poem a playful candor that endows the work with a certain feminine power. Ultimately, there exists in this poem a validation of the poet’s sexual freedom. Whether this sense of freedom is retained is put into question by the next poem that I will examine.

The second poem in this investigation, “A God Shows Up,” is translated by Medbh McGuckian. The work resonates with traditional religious images as well as hostile animal images that speak to a darker side of human relationships. The title hints that the poet has become somewhat more cynical and less innocent since the earlier poem was written. It discloses a certain irony, suggesting that this “god” is doing her a favor by consenting to show up. It is clear that this male object has little relationship to the male entity in the first poem who offered the poet such unfettered erotic fantasies. While this second poem clearly contains phallic metaphors, the tone is raw and less romantic. In “Nude,” the poet controlled her male object with her teasing, mocking tone, while here she relinquishes her power to an unsavory god who emerges in a web of metaphoric male images. One has to wonder why at this point the poet so readily relinquishes her power and allows the male to gain the upper hand. The post-feminist Naomi Wolf speaks about women’s fear of power which is often exhibited through “negative therapeutic reaction.” This term relates to the fact that people who make a major gain often seem to get worse after it (259). The narrator in this poem exhibits symptoms of this sort of negative behavior. In “Nude,” the narrator played with the male object and was in complete control. In this second poem, her strength has fallen away and power has been relinquished to the omnipotent male religious figure.

So many women reared in the Catholic Church during the 1940s and 50s, even if they have long ago discarded their beliefs, find that remnants of early religious influence

linger. These women are particularly vulnerable since they were not permitted power within the male club that is the Catholic Church. In fact, Catholicism's male, celibate priesthood promoted unrealistic images of female sexuality, consigning women to either the role of virgin or that of mother (Myers 306). These images were burned into every young Catholic woman's psyche and, regardless of later life experience, they remain buried in the subconscious making it difficult for these women to develop a truly balanced identity. In this poem it is obvious that the narrator is struggling to find equilibrium in the male/female relationship. We are brought to a holy place that is sinister and dominated by the male presence and it is evident in the first stanza that despite the poet's personal questioning of Christian doctrine, especially where it concerns women, Ni Dhomhnaill is still attracted to its symbols and its stories (Haberstroh 180).

The sacred fountain sprinkles the monastery cloister;
A bat startles the air. We are tossing back
A wine-taster's finest blends, his choicest,
The saintly hand parries every attack.

The poet reveals this attraction by setting her poem in "the monastery cloister" where the speaker could be talking from a familiar place, imbibing the sacramental wines, perhaps hoping to escape the real world of desire and sexuality. The verb, "sprinkles," brings to mind the ceremonial use of holy water and certainly the reference to wine is an unmistakable religious symbol. In this opening verse the poet sets a dark tone. The eerie image of the bat predicts that the poem will have an undertone of danger that was absent in the earlier work. The poet needs protection from the cruel "god" of the title and, ironically, she seeks solace from an ambiguously implied male whose "saintly hand parries every attack," protecting her from her prurient alter-ego. By admitting that she is receiving protection from this "saintly hand" or male religious entity, is the poet experiencing a lapse in her struggle against patriarchal control? Is she showing evidence of a certain loss of center as a fully-evolved woman? Where is the poet's belligerent attitude toward the established church and priests that was so evident in her very early poem, "We Are Damned My Sisters?"⁶ In that poem she jabbed at priestly authority.

We are damned, my sisters,
we who accepted the priests' challenge
our kindred's challenge: who ate from destiny's dish
who have knowledge of good and evil
who are no longer concerned.

Noticeably the tone of this early poem underlines Ni Dhomhnaill's rebellion against a Church that considered women as evil temptresses; a Church that excluded half the human race from priesthood and ministry as if this was natural (Daly 133). Conversely the narrator in "A God Shows Up" is compliant and gives the impression that she fears the "god" who could be a metaphoric reference to a priest.

⁶ This poem appeared in her 1988 collection, *Selected Poems = Rogha Danta*.

In the second and third stanzas, the poet continues her conceptualization of the male by using powerful male metaphors. As we pointed out earlier, the narrator is aware of “a panther drawing close.”

On the edge of my eye, at imagination’s quick
I sense the spots of a panther drawing close –
he pads through the chamber on silent paws
to drink his stomachful of wine; the prick

of his toothblade is till safely under wraps,
his foreclaws relaxed in their sheath.
though he flexes his tail in light and dark gaps
flickering between life and death.

The narrator views the panther as the embodiment of the authoritarian, fearsome aspects of masculinity. In the last line of the second stanza, Ni Dhomhnaill employs the attention-grabbing term, “prick” and sets it as an enjambment to give it added punch. Within the two poems, the modification in tone of the two words used for the phallus pinpoints the shift in the masculine imagery. In the first poem, the word, “root” can be viewed positively, as something that brims with the beginnings of life. Conversely, “prick” only generates negative thoughts. Here Ni Dhomhnaill has cleverly utilized this term that is absolutely on target because of its double meaning. By placing this vulgar word at the end of the stanza, the poet creates a tension that coaxes readers to pause and peruse the next two lines that further present the male genitalia as sadistic sexual symbols with the words, “toothblade, foreclaws, and sheath.” At this point Ni Dhomhnaill is underscoring women’s experience as passive non-combatants and the male’s traditional combative posture as aggressor. Contrary to the previous poem, there is no reference to sexual pleasure connected with this manifestation of masculinity. Rather seen through the female gaze, the “prick” becomes a weapon to be used to control the narrator. The description of the penis as a “toothblade” that is “safely under wraps,” reinforces the notion that the narrator considers it to be dangerous. Are we to surmise that the narrator has suffered emotionally and physically as a result of intimate relations with her male object? By the use of these graphic metaphors, Ni Dhomhnaill displays her anger by belittling her male object and reducing him to his sexual organ. Male writers often employ this technique when they reduce women to a breast or a vagina. Accordingly we see that Ni Dhomhnaill is taking a lesson from her male counterparts by emulating their linguistic construction.

In the last stanza, we find the narrator apologizing, “I’ve nothing to offer in oblation to this god who can also show up as a bull or a snake-like monster-escort.” The speaker does not attempt to mask the falling off of her self esteem. She is supine and vulnerable, broken in spirit by both the authority of the church and her male object who now has shifted from a panther to a bull or the satanic “snake-like monster.” Inherent in these metaphors is the image of the male as a victorious, controlling force. The defiant tone of the poet’s earlier work has disappeared and by the end of the poem, she concludes by asking, “but what’s left after a pub-crawl of my soul.” Ni Dhomhnaill does not place

a question mark at the end of that line perhaps because she knows the true answer: there is very little left of the narrator's ego after this experience with the powerful male "god."

Conclusion

In these two poems we have the opportunity to analyze some of the complexities in Ni Dhomhnaill's work. The poet, who has experienced all of the highs and lows of male/female relationships, has shared with her readers her moments of bliss as well as heartache. The theme of masculinity saturates the two poems. At the time each poem was written, the images represented authentic portraits of Ni Dhomhnaill's inner self. I found it interesting to see how the imagery shifted sharply with the passage of time indicating that Ni Dhomhnaill's personal experiences may have led her to very different impressions about men and her own personal identity in relation to men. It is clear that Ni Dhomhnaill understands that Irish women writers who have been victims of the male-dominated literary scene for centuries are now free to play with masculine images as they see fit and to allow the male to be the desired object. At the same time, I suspect that there are moments when the poet is writing from the old Ireland of the 1940s and 50s, writing from the Ireland where patriarchy ruled supreme. It is not surprising that women of her generation who were so suppressed by the male-dominated Church and state would occasionally regress and, from time to time, find it difficult to be strong. According to Judith Kegan Gardiner, "female identity is a process" (361) and in these two works Ni Dhomhnaill has clearly revealed her own personal struggle to shape a stable female identity.

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