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### **The Forgotten Woman**

Throughout history, women's lives and voices have been pushed aside or stifled in favor of narratives constructed by and for men. This is true within Irish history as well and is reflected within Irish literature. Irish literature cannot be divorced from Ireland's history, marked by colonialism at the hands of Great Britain. Colonialism aims to silence and destroy aspects of culture and language that are not in line with the desires or social standards of the imperialist power. The Irish suffered under colonialist rule and the themes of being voiceless, forgotten, and forced into silence are still reflected within their literature. These themes are especially poignant from women writers, such as Eavan Boland, who often capture the feeling of being voiceless and forgotten women in their poetry. In her poems "The Singers" and "Art of Empire," Eavan Boland gives voice to the voiceless women, the forgotten ones in society.

The effect of a patriarchal society on womanhood is well documented in woman-centered and created art. Women have historically been restricted and removed from public spheres of life, confined to a domestic sphere of childrearing and keeping home. This separation between men and women meant that women were, until relatively recently, restricted from actively participating in politics or acting as autonomous persons. Restriction to home life was established for girls during childhood, in which they submitted to a hierarchy lead by the rule of their father; that hierarchy would be mimicked later in life when women submitted to the rule of their husbands. The submission of women to men in their lives mimics the submission of a country to an imperialist power.

In art as well, women were often barred. Creative work, such as writing, was seen as a man's domain. The expectations, and often-times force, of silencing women's voices and activeness within public and private society are not unlike the restrictions placed on a colonized nation, where the colonized people are silenced and disallowed full autonomy. This is why the feminist poetry of Eavan Boland, an Irish woman, is so powerful. Her experience transcends the narrative of colonialism, expressing the situation of a woman who exists within the history of a country silenced by colonial rule. The very weight of this dual history, that of Ireland and womanhood, is palpable in both "The Singers" and "Art of Empire", where Boland navigates a history of silence and disenfranchisement. Jody Allan Randolph writes, "so much of Irish history, and so many of the social customs of the country, had been predicated on the silence rather than the speech of women" (Randolph, 13). Boland's work explores this facet of Ireland with women and its history as a colony.

For Boland the connection between national history, her nation, and her womanhood could not be untwined. In her book, *Object Lessons: The Life of the Woman and the Poet in our Time*, Boland states, "I began to think there was indeed a connection, that my womanhood and nationhood were meshed and linked at some root" (Boland, *Object Lessons: The Life of the Woman and the Poet in Our Time* 148). The first female president of Ireland, Mary Robinson, a close friend of Eavan Boland, mentioned her poetry in her inaugural speech. Robinson acknowledged Boland, quoting the last line of "The Singers" saying, "I want women who have felt themselves outside history to be written back into history, in the words of Eavan Boland, 'finding a voice where they found a vision'" (Robinson). Robinson's remarks bring attention to the plight of Irish women, re-centering their experiences in the public sphere as Boland does with her poetry. Eavan Boland writes:



tumultuous weather, but the women are strong, they persist and grow despite residing in a nearly uninhabitable environment.

In the beginning the women “lived on an unforgiving coast” and slowly the separation between them and the land shifts; they become intertwined with it and their history as “their mouths” fill “with Atlantic storms and clouded-over stars” (Boland, 2, 10-11). The end of the poem brings the images of struggle and perseverance together, ending on a hopeful and determined note. Boland writes, “And only when the danger / was plain in the music could you know / their true measure rejoicing in / finding a voice where they found a vision” (13-16). The women’s relationship to the land transforms from separation and struggle to one of finding strength. Boland is speaking to history, of looking back at all those before her who faced this struggle and separation, who found voices and created a “vision” for future generations of women to see and work toward. The poem contrasts “danger” with the image of “rejoicing”, to produce the vision of strength in the face of adversity.

“The Singers” is about Irish women finding their voice among a history of silence. The very title speaks of hope and a future outlook while also nodding to women who paved the way for equality and recognition. The voiceless women find their voice, and not only do they speak, they ‘sing’. This is a powerful image, one that mixes art, history, and struggle. The women can speak—sing—about their struggles in art and they are heard, their voices no longer snuffed out by the elements. They can talk about the pains and silence of the past, their history intertwined with the personal. “The Singers” speaks of the collective, of Irish women as a whole and their progress and voice found partly through art.

Boland also writes a personal, closer examination of silenced history through her grandmother in her poem, “Art of Empire”. In the title, the connection to colonial history is plain

to see, “Empire” denoting the relationship that exists between imperialist power and the colonized. Boland’s “Art of Empire” appears within her book, *A Woman Without a Country*, signaling, too, the connection between the land, women, and the space that exists for women inside nations. The book’s poems center around women who “were marginalized and erased, disinherited and disenfranchised by their societies” (Lê). While “The Singers” gives voice to women, “Art of Empire” expresses the voiceless experience of her grandmother. Boland writes:

If no one in my family ever spoke of it, if no one handed down what it was to be born to power and married in a poor country.	1
If no one wanted to remember the noise of the redcoats cantering in lanes bleached with apple flowers on an April morning.	5
If no one ever mentioned how a woman was, what she did, what she never did again, when she lived in a dying Empire.	10
If what was not said was never seen If what was never seen could not be known think of this as the only way an empire could recede –	15
taking its laws, its horses and its lordly all, leaving a single art to be learned, and one that required neither a silversmith nor a glassblower	20
but a woman skilled in the sort of silence that lets her stitch shadow flowers into linen with pastel silks who never looks up	
to remark on or remember why it is the bird in her blackwork is warning her: <i>not a word not a word</i>	25

*not a word not a word.* (1-28)

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Boland repeats the phrase, “If no one” in the first three stanzas, each conditional speaking about the fragile nature of preserving a history and lived experience no one talks about. Boland writes, “If no one in my family ever spoke of it / If no one wanted to remember / If no one mentioned how a woman was” bringing up the secret and often forgotten lives of women, pushed into the corner of society and history (1, 5, 9). The poem takes place as the empire is collapsing, the empire in this time and place is the British Empire. As it is dying, the empire is being forgotten. Words hold power and removing language and voice removes power. An empire that lost its control and becomes silenced is then forgotten to an extent. Boland writes, “what was not said was never seen / If what was never seen could not be known / think of this as the only way / an empire could recede—” (13-16). Boland equates silence with the destruction and forgetting of an empire and compares this to the forgotten women in history.

The image of an empire is one of strength and brute power. In the poem, a dying empire has lost its power. It moves to the corners of history, fragments remain but its power is gone. A woman has never held power in society like an empire would hold over its separate colonies, but Boland likens the woman to a “dying Empire”, striking up an image of powerlessness and a forgotten voice (12). The difference between the two is the empire’s former power and the woman’s continual lack of any. It produces a hopelessness, paints an image of frustration at unequal power dynamics. It expertly draws on Irish history, shining a light at the irony of a country fighting powerlessness and yet perpetuating that on a group within the nation.

The end of an empire to those who had been colonized usually is connected to a reemergence of power, of finding a voice. In this poem, the women do not have voice, their roles scarcely change. Silence for women is a constant, whether in a colonized or patriarchal society.

The empire's departure, "taking its laws, its horses, and its lordly all / leaving a single art to be learned" has not returned agency, a woman's space is crafted in silence, "but a woman skilled in a sort of silence / that lets her stitch shadow flowers / into linen with pastel silks / who never looks up" (Boland 17-18, 21-24). There is no need for the woman to look up, her voice is not allowed, no space exists, there is only the work her hands produce within the home. The woman trapped in this voiceless situation, does not or cannot, "remark on or remember why it is / the bird in her blackwork is warning her: / *not a word not a word / not a word not a word*" (Boland, 25-28). The woman has no space in her history and even though a new nation is being built, there is no space for her voice among the men. Her place is one away from the public sphere, one without words, recognition, or power.

"The Singers" and "Art of Empire" draw on Irish history as a colony and the experience of women within Ireland. Her poems portray the hope of a shift toward visibility and a space to speak for women as seen in "The Singers". In "Art of Empire", Boland reflects on her grandmother, who saw the nation shift from colony to independent nation, but nation building still did not carve a space for women, their space was limited to the home and their role, silence. Boland raises the light to countless Irish women of the past, whose voices were lost to history, whose existence was marginalized, who struggled as a result of their gender in a society that did not value their sex. Eavan Boland's work illustrates the millions of voiceless women who could not speak but do now through her poems. She carves a space for the nameless, forgotten, and voiceless to speak.

## Works Cited

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