

The Body and Female Identity in Eithne Strong's *Flesh: The Greatest Sin*

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ABSTRACT

*Bodily discourse, constantly appropriated as a symbol of Irish famine and hunger in the wake of British maladministration of the land and its people since the Great Famine, is prevalent in Irish culture. However, this bodily discourse is dominated by nationalistic and patriarchal narratives. An increasing number of women in contemporary Ireland look at themselves anew through their own bodies. Through the reading of Eithne Strong's poetry collection, *Flesh: The Greatest Sin* (1980), this paper discusses how the conflation of body and sin is entangled in the Irish context, how the female writer manages to untangle the fine line fabricated between the two categories and reaffirm her female identity simultaneously, and finally the significance of such an attempt in the history of Irish literature.*

*Keywords: the body; female identity; Eithne Strong; *Flesh: The Greatest Sin**

INTRODUCTION

Bodily discourse, constantly appropriated as the symbol of Irish famine and hunger in the wake of British maladministration of the land and its people since the Great Famine in the mid-nineteenth century, is never foreign in Irish culture. Familiar as it may be, this bodily discourse in Ireland is dominated by nationalistic and patriarchal narratives. The catastrophe caused by colonial mal-management, in conjunction with the taboos from Catholicism, renders Irish women disempowered in articulating their own bodies, as the body has been at the service of men and the female body defiled as impure and immoral.

The feminized bodily image in Ireland has a long history. Irish nationalism and the Catholic religion fantasized about Ireland as a feminine entity. Therefore, Mother Ireland becomes a symbol of Eire. According to Claire Connolly, "Ireland has long been imagined in terms of female images: Mother Ireland, wild Irish girl, gentle colleen, old hag" (2003, p. 3). The term Mother Ireland has been constantly utilized to suggest that a certain kind of feminine cultural construction is at work (D'hoker 2016, p. 142, Valente 2011, pp. 11-14). Additionally, Catherine Nash argues that Irish women have long been depicted in terms of the idealization of motherhood, and are often tied up with home and tradition (1993, p. 47). Nonetheless, this feminized image of Ireland cannot elevate women's positions. Instead, it throws a cloak of invisibility over women in the wake of nationalist campaigns.

In her semi-autobiographical work, *Mother Ireland*, Edna O'Brien, a critically-acclaimed novelist, makes clear her close observation of her motherland. She argues that "Ireland has always been a woman, a womb, a cave, a cow, a Rosaleen, a sow, a bride, a harlot, and of course, the gaunt Hag of Beare" (1978, p. 12). According to O'Brien, Irish women tend to be so bound up with religion and family that they become martyr-like figures who struggle for survival (1978, p. 19). However, with the modernization and transformation of Irish society in the latter half of the twentieth century, an increasing number of Irish women look at themselves anew through their own bodies. The 1980s saw surging waves of female writers debunking their subordination and highlighting their individuality through the body. For instance, Edna O'Brien and Eavan Boland endeavor to re-examine the potentials of female bodies and female sexualities from different perspectives. Responding to the stereotypically male-dominated political poetry that centers on public affairs, Boland resorts to women's private and personal experiences within the context of political poetry (Chang

2016, pp. 594-599). This writing strategy helps not merely to empower women and strengthen their voices but also to give greater depth. Therefore, in Boland's poem "The Woman Turns Herself into a Fish," the woman protagonist, who is entirely in charge of her own body, transforms herself into a fish to savor the "sexless" pleasure and "freedom" of this existence (2005, p. 119). In addition, in a poem entitled "The Making of an Irish Goddess," Boland discusses how the female body has constantly been denied in the Irish history that is teeming with idealized and hallowed female figures, as well as her own eagerness to integrate female sexuality into history: "But I need time— / my flesh and that history— / to make the same descent" (2005, p. 179).

Eithne Strong (1923, p. 99) is a distinguished Irish woman poet in the twentieth century, but her poetry has not been well researched. In many books on modern and contemporary Irish literature, such as *The Cambridge Companion to Contemporary Irish Poetry* (2003) and *The Cambridge History of Irish Literature* (2006), her name is only mentioned in passing. Knowledgeable and versatile, Strong wrote in both Irish and English and published poetry, fiction, short stories, essays, and translations. The main concerns in her works include the role of women, of domestic matters, and of women's confrontation with love, death, and sexuality (Jeffares 2014, p. 183, Heining 2006, pp. 305-307). In this paper, through the reading of Eithne Strong's poetry collection *Flesh: The Greatest Sin* (1980), how the conflation of body and sin is entangled in the Irish context, how the female writer manages to untangle the fine line fabricated between the two categories and reconfirm her female identity simultaneously, and what implications such an attempt signifies in the history of Irish culture and literature are explored. I argue that approaching Eithne Strong's *Flesh: The Greatest Sin* from the perspective of the body can help shed new light on Irish women's problems in relation to their identity and sexuality.

BODY AND SEXUALITY: A CRITICAL FRAMEWORK

Notably, sexual discourse in the West before the 1970s had been dominated by the notion of men as sexually active and women as sexually passive. In response to this sexual bias, an increasing number of active feminists in the West started to call for actions to reconstruct this male-centered bodily discourse. In her book, *The Female Eunuch*, first published in 1970, Germaine Greer challenges the prejudiced sexual discourse, promoting a more permissive and libertarian theory in favor of women's sexual practice. As she argues, "the female is considered as a sexual object for the use and appreciation of other sexual beings, men. Her sexuality is both denied and misrepresented by being identified as passivity" (2006, p. 15). This counter-discourse Greer proposes is echoed by Nancy Cott, who in an article, "Passionlessness," criticizes the prevailing feminine ideal of "moral motherhood" in the nineteenth and twentieth century and demonstrates women's sexual lives independent of men in their everyday lives (1978, p. 252).

The bodily politics of feminism was further developed due to its engagement with Michel Foucault's theory. According to Foucault, sexual discourse is generally a site of power in contemporary society. What is expected by society of legitimate or prohibited types of sexuality fashions people's sexual behaviors. Therefore, for Foucault, we are all literally policed by the sexual discourse endorsed by society (1990, p. 25). This surveillance of discourse is thoroughly discussed in Foucault's *Discipline and Punish*. Foucault argues that the managerial transformation of the prison from the monarchical power to modern disciplinary power is epitomized in the Panopticon, a regulatory contrivance which was practiced near the end of the eighteenth century. Whereas prisoners in the past were aware of their own subjection, detainees in the Panopticon are conscious of being observed from the central tower. Intimidated by the constant manipulation of the controller, the prisoners

internalize their fear of being scrutinized little by little and consequently formulate self-surveillance to the benefit of the authorities. According to Foucault, this sort of power and control practiced in the Panopticon is widely used in the management of the army, hospitals, schools, and religious institutes (1977, pp. 195-199). As a consequence, differential power relationships extend to different aspects of our social, cultural, and political lives, requiring our consent not so much by the threat of punitive measures as by urging us to internalize the norms and values that prevail within the social order. Victimized as objects of intersecting power relations and discourses that inscribe themselves on our bodies, we are often unaware of the social forces which have constituted our sexual subjectivity. Accordingly, Foucault conducted his analysis to help people perceive and try to transform the realities (1991, pp. 158-159). Overall, Foucault's contribution to the study of body and sexuality is endorsed by Lois McNay, who argues that "Foucault's theory of power and the body indicates to feminism a way of placing a notion of the body at the centre of explanations of women's oppression that does not fall back into essentialism or biologism" (1992, p. 11).

In the 1980s, French feminists, including Hélène Cixous, Luce Irigaray, and Julia Kristeva, made significant impact because of their influential theories on women in relation to language, identity, sexuality, and difference. Notwithstanding their differences, these French feminists manage to subvert the inherently one-sided man/woman cultural dichotomy by moving beyond the hierarchical dichotomy and reaffirming women's difference. Discontented with the fact that women are given an inferior status, they criticize the legitimacy of representation, which always favors men in the Western world. Cixous and Irigaray call into question a range of masculine binary oppositions such as mind/heart, father/mother, man/woman, phallus/vagina, reason/emotion and sun/moon. In "The Laugh of the Medusa," an essay published in 1975, Cixous calls for a physiological nexus between *écriture féminine*, meaning feminine writing in English, and the female body as a site of decentered eroticism. She says, "A woman's body, with its thousand and one thresholds of ardor . . . will make the old single-grooved mother tongue reverberate with more than one language More so than men . . . women are body. More body, hence more writing" (1981, pp. 256-257). In addition, Irigaray emphasizes the pleasure of the female body, and its connection with the plurality highly regarded in post-structuralism. "Her sexuality . . . is plural woman has sex organs more or less everywhere the geography of her pleasure is far more diversified, more multiple in its differences" (1985, p. 28). According to Irigaray, this plurality involves not only writing but speech. The female body helps generate a unique female language, *parler femme*, in which "she sets off in all directions . . . in what she says . . . woman is constantly touching herself" (1985, p. 29). Unlike Cixous and Irigaray, Kristeva in a certain sense maintains dualities, while calling it into question on another level simultaneously. This is evidenced in Kristeva's theory of the semiotic and the symbolic in *Revolution in Poetic Language*, a book first published in 1984. According to Kristeva, feminine language is semiotic, which is different from the male-governed symbolic language. If the former in a sense alludes to Lacan's imaginary stage, the latter is then congruent with his symbolic order, the Law of the Father. This feminine language, the semiotic, appears rhythmic and intangible. It is uncertain and fluid because the semiotic is grounded in what Kristeva calls the semiotic chora or womb, referring both to Plato's notion and, more broadly, to the archetypal cross-cultural myth of earth as womb, as the "fertile earth-mother" origin of all life (1984, p. 26). Semiotic language is based on or in the pre-Oedipal period of fusion between mother and child where children do not view themselves as being fully separated from their mothers. This is the stage of "baby-talk," of talk, which, like poetic discourse, comes more directly from the unconscious. Because it is closely related to the maternal rather than the paternal, this feminine language poses a threat to the legitimacy and self-autonomy of the patriarchal order (1984, pp. 26-28). Accordingly, Kristeva's stress on the semiotic over

the symbolic can be used to deconstruct the male-dominated language system, highlighting instead the unique female practice invisible within the male discourse because, in some ways, poetry is always invisibly present within prose as its wider background, its encompassing womb.

Despite the impact of Foucault's theory of power, body, and sexuality on feminism, his critical concepts relevant to the body and sexuality, which are male-centered, have been appropriated or re-evaluated since the 1990s. Susan Bordo applies Foucault's notion of the production of the docile body to her analysis of the representation and production of a feminine body in contemporary culture. According to Bordo, "neither Foucault nor any other poststructuralist thinker discovered the idea . . . that the 'definition and shaping' of the body is . . . the focal point for struggles over the shape of power" (1993, p. 17). Unsatisfied with the dualism such as "body equals female" and the fancy that the female body can be reclaimed, Bordo maintains that "the body that we experience and conceptualize is always mediated by constructs, associations, images of a cultural nature" (1993, p. 35). Consequently, Bordo is committed to analyzing the medicalization of women's bodies and women's reproduction rights in the contemporary cultural context. In addition, Adrienne Rich and Judith Butler draw our attention to the hegemony of heterosexuality widely accepted by the public in Western societies over the centuries. Up against the regulation of the body and sexuality imposed on women, lesbians in particular, Rich challenges the dominance of "compulsory heterosexuality" commonly practiced in society and the marginality of lesbian sexuality (1980, p. 633). Moreover, influenced by Foucault and Derrida, Judith Butler in her book *Gender Trouble* criticizes gender norms, arguing that gender is not only socially constructed but something closely related to the body. "Gender is," according to Butler, "the repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance, of a natural sort of being" (1990, p. 33). Instead of the regulatory body via performativity, Butler is committed to deconstructing the repetition of norms and promoting non-normative bodies and sexualities (1990, pp. 137-139).

FEMALE BODY AND IRISH IDENTITY

Irish women's identity has been misrepresented by a series of male-centered networks. For example, the bardic tradition of Irish writing dating back to at least the ninth century has been concerned with the notion that the land was a woman to be worshipped, wooed, and won (Kiberd 1989, p. 283). The conceit of land-as-woman probably derives from an earlier conceit, according to which the male poet was figured as a *female* poet, one who was betrothed to her lord (patron) and forced to share his bed. Therefore, in the hag of Beare poems, which began to appear in the ninth century, the speakers were exhausted and abandoned harlots who were forced to return to their earlier lovers before retreating to monasteries or nunneries. The female poet figure here is a transformation of the traditional wandering male poet who, after serving a series of chieftains, found nowhere to go except the monastery. This feminization of the male bardic speaker was also characteristic of numerous later and more modern Irish poems (Kiberd 1989, p. 283). In Patrick Pearse's "I Am Ireland," the poet identifies himself not merely with the Old Woman and the mother but also with Ireland (Murphy 1987, p. 232). Speaking from the position of traditional-Ireland-as-mother, Pearse expresses his sense of shame at having been sold or betrayed by the revolutionary nationalists. This land long under the control of a foreign lord and master, a foreign usurper (England), is a motherland which has thus, in the tradition of the Beare ballads, become poor and barren. Her children, while seeking to reclaim their motherland through independence from England, still betray her for the male political abstractions and violence of the

nationalist cause. Or perhaps the poet-speaker, the mother, the children, and Ireland are all united in an attempt to lay bare the misery shared by poor Irish women, the very embodiment of Mother Ireland.

The symbolic wedlock of the male (female) bard to his (her) lord alludes to the lord's supreme power to determine or control the fertility and productivity of the land, which is now again the feminized (male) poet, the poet's body or womb. If the lord is reasonable and kind, the land will be beautiful and productive, just like the fantastic woman of ancient poetry. However, if its master is incompetent or evil, the land is destined to be barren like a cursed bride, for now metaphorically speaking the male/female bard is uninspired or unproductive and thus not rewarded by the lord. This poetic logic gradually led to the association of Ireland (the *land* of Ireland) with a woman (and sometimes a mother) in traditional Irish poetry, one whose fate was determined by the male master, perhaps representing the more abstract "state" or "nation" as opposed to the more concrete "land." All in all, feminized body is in a sense dominated by the masculine nation.

In addition to the hag of Beare poetry, the *aisling* literary tradition beginning in the eighteenth century also testifies to this "Mother Ireland" image and to the notion of one's rescuers coming from abroad. The word "aisling" in Gaelic means "dream" or "vision." In this form of Gaelic writing, established in Munster by Aogan O Rathaille, Ireland is quite often envisaged as a beautiful woman-awaiting rescue from invaders, in which the female body is sanctified and restricted simultaneously. O Rathaille's "Brightness Most Bright" is a well-known example of *aisling* writing. "The Brightness of Brightness I saw in a lonely path, / Crystal of crystal, her blue eyes tinged with green, / Melody of melody, her speech not morose with age" (Murphy 1987, p. 43). As is often the case with *aisling* writing, the speaker encounters the pretty woman and has a dialog with her. The poet endeavors to eulogize the ethereal beauty of this lady, her purity, her perfection by using phrases such as "brightness of brightness," "crystal of crystal," and "melody of melody." However, she is not immune to poverty and misery. She is desolate because she has been deprived of her land, enslaved by alien forces, and consequently desperately in need of rescue. The fair lady as a symbol of Ireland is actually a supreme being worthy of praise, a pure body to be worshiped and rescued by chivalrous nationalists. This feminized body is again conditioned by the nationalist discourse. As Moynagh Sullivan argues, "In Irish cultural iconography nationalism is expressed, from the *aisling* to Mother Ireland, in the metaphor of a woman's body," but pitifully, this representation has traditionally been a body of loss and despair (2008, p. 251).

In contrast to the subdued image of the Irish lady in the *aisling* tradition, many other Irish women are described as Madonna figures. Undoubtedly, this has much to do with their belief in Catholicism. In most Catholic countries there is a tendency to idealize women, especially young maidens, by identifying them with the Virgin Mary (Brown 2004, p. 289). For Catholics, after all, Mary is an extremely sacred figure, second in importance only to her son Jesus Christ, who was delivered by her after an immaculate conception, and whose Father was God. Typical of Mary are qualities such as absolute purity, unwavering virginity and selfless devotion. This Madonna image constantly appears in Irish texts and more generally in Irish culture. In Patrick Pearse's poem "The Mother Speaks," the separate entities of mother, religion, and Ireland are combined into one:

Dear Mary, that didst see thy first-born son
Go forth to die amid the scorn of men
For whom He died,
Receive my first-born son into thy arms,
Who also hath gone out to die for men,
And keep him by thee till I come to him.
Dear Mary, I have shared thy sorrow,
And soon shall share thy joy.¹

In the voice of a mother, the speaker makes an analogy between the Virgin Mary and herself inasmuch as both are selfless mothers, willing to sacrifice their dearest sons for a higher cause. While Jesus Christ is crucified in order to redeem or save human beings, the son of the female speaker will be the savior of his entire native land, including, and also symbolized by, his mother. Accordingly, Irish women is often metamorphosed into sanctified beings that possess the “holy” qualities of the Virgin Mary—chastity, maternity, humility, obedience and passive suffering.

THE BODY AS THE SOURCE OF ALL EVIL

The previous section highlights the plight of Irish women. While they are seemingly sanctified as the iconic Mother Ireland, women in Ireland are estranged from their own bodies and self-identities at the same time. Overburdened with the pressures from nation and religion, they are often educated to shy away from bodily pleasure. In a word, their images are fabricated and their bodies hallowed and hollowed out as well. It is against this demonization of the flesh that Eithne Strong fights in her long poem, *Flesh: The Greatest Sin*, a work that signifies the poet’s “redefinition of the image of Irish womanhood” (Haberstroh 1996, p. 49). Throughout the poem, Strong unravels the fact that Irish people, especially women in Ireland, are constrained by the mind/body duality. The male character Tom Regan, a schoolmaster, is caricatured as a fine man who “did not really like God / but prayed most fiercely every day” and one who “put iron around flesh” (Strong 1980, p. 1). Such a denouncement of the body mirrors the Cartesian mind/body dichotomy prevalent in the Western tradition for centuries (Stone 2007, p. 71). In the rationalist tradition, bodily or sensual experiences only bring about phenomenal perceptions, while spiritual reasoning leads one to universal truth. Therefore, while the mind is eulogized, the body is demonized. This is all the more apparent in Catholic countries such as Ireland where purity and chastity of the body are highly regarded religiously, socially, and culturally (McKenna 2006, pp. 80-85). The prison house of the body is thus constructed and consolidated. In the wake of religious doctrines, Tom, the only male character in the text, is said by the poet-speaker to “keep a civil distance” constantly, to be safe and to “avoid temptation” (Strong 1980, pp. 1-2).

Women are the major victims of bodily control and the main focus of the poem. Irish women have been traditionally restricted by the Constitution, in which women are stipulated to be the caretakers of the family and the nation as a whole (Article 41. 2.1-2.2).ⁱⁱ In this case, the female body mostly serves as the tool for procreation. Catholic religion also contributes to the bondage of the female body in Ireland. Notably, while men in Ireland are free from the duties of childbirth, women are always overloaded with the pressure to give birth to babies. This is worsened when women get pregnant out of wedlock because the Church and society in general can be extremely harsh with them (Bacik 2013, p. 21). In the poem, Tom’s wife, Ellen, also a schoolmaster, is said to internalize all the important dogmas in the Catholic religion. Orphaned since early childhood, Ellen has been trained to be docile in the convent: “Hail Mary, Holy Mary, Purest of the pure, Mary: / everyone is to know the awful need for purity” (Strong 1980, p. 4). Instructed never to offend the Immaculate Conception, Ellen is admonished against everything related to the contamination of the flesh: “Mortify the flesh, / that is the enemy” (Strong 1980, p. 5). She is constantly reminded of the Seven Deadly Sins and the Judgment Day. From a Foucaultian perspective, this bodily inhibition alludes to a sort of social control, through which the male-dominated Church exerts its power on its followers and reaffirms its hierarchical authority (Foucault 1990, p. 23). In line with Foucault’s theory, Susan Bordo proposes that “the discipline and normalization of the female body.... in different forms, across age, race, class, and sexual orientation—has to be acknowledged as an

amazingly durable and flexible strategy of social control” (1997, p. 91). Therefore, along with the male control of the female body comes the disempowerment of women.

The reverence to Mary may sound unbiased in the religious context; however, it significantly lays bare the secondary position women take in their everyday lives. In her comment on the image of the Madonna in relation to Irish culture, C. L. Innes specifies the ambiguous position of the Virgin Mary, who paradoxically embodies both sanctity and inferiority insofar as she is always second to, and inferior to her son. According to Innes, “[Mary] is most frequently portrayed as fully covered from neck to foot, cloaked in blue, and either in the attitude of humble acceptance of her destiny at the Annunciation, or wearing a crown to represent her special status” (1993, p. 40). In most images of her in Irish paintings, Innes suggests, the infant Jesus is in the foreground while Mary is always in the background, her role as human mother of the Holy Son accentuated in contrast to the Son’s role as savior of mankind. Moreover, Innes contends that in Irish paintings the mother-role of the Virgin Mary also becomes that of the Queen Mother, Mother Church and Mother Ireland. This transposition of the Virgin Mary and Queen Mother is unexceptional in Irish culture. Such being the case, Christ is imagined as a bridegroom and an upholder of the symbolic marriage bond. As a consequence, Virgin Mary, Mother Church, and Mother Ireland are identified in their subordination to their sons for support. Nonetheless, the sons can never achieve their lofty goals, their revolutions, without the nourishment of the mother figures. Therefore, women’s necessary yet secondary role is ingrained in the minds of pious Irish Catholics (Innes 1993, pp. 40-41). This religious stereotype and its subsequent impingement on the fate of Irish women are conspicuous in Ellen, who is circumscribed by the stereotypical “Catholic mother” image. Early in her life, she models her career after the life of the Virgin Mary. So dominant is her religious consciousness that Ellen internalizes religious doctrines and devotes herself to housework and schoolwork wholeheartedly: “Suffer for Christ, suffer smell, the Voices said, / for the sake of the crucified Christ” (Strong 1980, p. 7). However, coupled with her deep-rooted religious mind, her body is manacled and her self-identity constrained simultaneously.

In line with nationalism and the Catholic religion, marriage in Ireland pushes women to the periphery of happiness and self-realization (Luddy 2017, pp. 348-350). Instead of relishing the bodily pleasure, based on the Conjugal Right, Irish women like Ellen are threatened and told to stay away from the flesh to avoid evil (Strong 1980, p. 15): “Deny flesh: Mortify. Abnegate. Voices had wrought / fear: Remember Hell. Remember Mary, the Immaculate” (Strong 1980, p. 16). According to the poet speaker:

Long since terrorized to non-response, flesh
of Ellen could not accommodate to this unwelcome licence
called Conjugal Right; it established her bewilderment,
recoil, hate, but never joy; an insidious
antagonist, it swelled her with pregnant ills,
weighed thick her ankles, but it was
ecclesiastically endorsed, Church backed,
and Ellen lived Church-awed.

(Strong 1980, p. 17)

The passivity and paralysis in sexuality typical of women manifests itself in these lines. Ironically, marriage makes this incompetence possible, thereby bringing about hatred and panic for women. Regretfully, the Conjugal Right sanctioned by the Church and consolidated by the Constitution leads to Ellen’s obedience and terror rather than joy and pleasure. According to Audre Lorde, this suppression of the female body formulated within the context of “male models of power” is totally wrong because it results in women’s powerlessness, resignation, despair, self-effacement, depression, and self-denial (1997, p. 281).ⁱⁱⁱ Instead, based on her personal experience, Lorde proposes that the body is power, yet

it has been unfavorably associated with pornography because, for men, the empowerment of women poses a tremendous threat to the patriarchal authority. According to Lorde, only when women begin to experience the power of the erotic can they shun self-negation and make self-exploration possible (1997, p. 281).

THE FEMALE BODY FIGHTS BACK

Pitiably for Ellen the body is characterized by fear, filth, and evil. What is worse, Ellen's strong revulsion at the flesh is passed on to her daughter, Nance, who since her early childhood has been cautioned against "flesh, the corruptible mould that grows on bones" (Strong 1980, p. 21). Nance follows her mother in sticking to the belief that the body is evil.

Guilt grew with Nature,
Outgrowing her, going through and all about her.
The Voices, active in Ellen, mother,
continued in the child,
sounding the maxims, endorsing:
body is evil; given to rottenness, unregenerate,
needing ever severest curbs if not to drag
the soul to doom. Nance had a healthy nature;
in her life was strong; pulls drew her
and then the Voices forbade. Urges to touch,
explore body-self, enjoy sensation, were blackest
evil, mortal sin, everlasting fire.

(Strong 1980, p. 22)

In opposition to the contaminating body, the soul is accentuated incessantly in Nance's life:—"body is treacherous / to soul; soul is to be reached only by mortifying body" (Strong 1980, p. 23). This soul/body hierarchical opposition smacks of other forms of unbalanced binary oppositions criticized by Hélène Cixous. In her essay "Sorties," Cixous describes a series of hierarchical oppositions which have dominated Western thought. Oppositions such as culture/nature, head/heart, form/matter, speaking/writing, man/woman are prevalent throughout Western civilization (1981, "Sorties," p. 90-91). For Cixous, the former categories such as man are always privileged, while the latter such as woman are relentlessly marginalized or excluded from the center. Take the man/woman opposition for example. Within a patriarchal society, women become represented as the "Other," an idea already postulated by Simone de Beauvoir in *The Second Sex* by remarking how woman, "a free and autonomous being like all human creatures . . . finds herself living in a world where men compel her to assume the status of the Other" (1972, p. 29). This is what happens to Ellen, Nance and the other characters in *Flesh: The Greatest Sin*. Disciplined to conform to the normalizing tenets of the Catholic religion, Ellen is not only a victim but also complicit in helping regiment the schoolgirls' bodies when they go to their First Confession.

Thou shalt not commit adultery; body is treacherous
To soul; soul is to be reached only by mortifying
Body. What is mortify? Kill. Kill the flesh
That the soul can live. Thou shalt not commit adultery.
What is adultery? Most shameful thing. And then, red silence.
No further explaining; there was to be no plain speaking,
But, to cover the livid pause, further decrying generalities
On fleshly sins against the Six Commandment:
Body always lowers: can destroy soul. A fight to death.

(Strong 1980, p. 23)

While the soul/body duality is established, the men/women hierarchical dichotomy is bound up and reaffirmed. Accordingly, as the feminized body is denounced invariably in the poem, women as the inferior other sex are yoked by the overwhelmingly patriarchal power at the same time. Some women are even outcast due to their breach of the norm. For instance, from the eighteenth century to the twentieth century, when Irish women failed to adhere to the law and got pregnant out of the wedlock, they were forced to be institutionalized in the Magdalen Asylum as a penalty for their bodily violation (Luddy 2014, p. 200)

With the establishment of the afore-mentioned patriarchal binary oppositions, women are deprived of the right to identify with themselves. They are denied the right to know and to access their own bodies, which for many feminists are closely associated with female identity and pleasure. For example, Cixous associates feminine writing with the female body and proclaims a subjectivity that is unique to the female experience. She argues that there is an essential alliance naturally given, rather than socially constructed, between women's bodies and women's writing. She cautions women to write about themselves and make their bodies heard, explicating her idea that women should embrace rather than discard the traditionally demonized body. "Censor the body and you censor breath and speech at the same time" (Cixous 1981, "The Laugh of the Medusa," p. 250). Recognizing this correspondence between the female body and female writing is therefore paramount to the realization of female sexuality, and the actualization of women in society would be absolutely impossible without such an understanding. In fact, Cixous' embrace of the female body echoes Strong's criticism of the subjugated female body in *Flesh: The Greatest Sin*. Both of these authors consider defilement of the female body to be repugnant because when the uniquely female body is dispossessed, women are deprived of their innate qualities and thus lose their own identities.

Like Cixous, Luce Irigaray concentrates on women's sexual pleasure, asserting that such pleasure is a characteristic of the female experience that can never be expressed by the authoritative masculine language. Irigaray proposes that women have too long been subordinated to the male phallic and (Derrida) phallogocentric power, which is founded on the idea of oneness or unity. However, according to Irigaray, women are innately the "two," the different and the unlimited, which is other than the male oneness. Whereas Freud characterizes women's sexuality in terms of penis envy, castration and lack, so that it seems that guilt-ridden women have no choice but to embrace and identify with, or be penetrated by, the male oneness of the phallus, Irigaray sets out to describe the real, the authentic female sexual experience, a function of her two-ness—her "lips" as Irigaray says, with specific reference to the vagina, whose two-ness can encompass and engulf the male phallic oneness—which in fact does not need to depend on men at all, can be totally *Other-than-men* (1985, pp. 28-29).

This self-assertive female identity-and-difference Cixous and Irigaray espouse appears regrettably deficient most of the time in Strong's *Flesh: The Greatest Sin*. Intimidated in the Catholic context about the evil of material enjoyment and bodily pleasure, Ellen and the other female characters are constantly monitoring and self-disciplining their own bodies. As the poet-speaker puts it, "Ellen always / had dubbed her ugly; in this deliberate white / Nance queerly felt mocked, bony knees, lank hair, despised / skin; but greatest mock was black black soul inside / the white" (Strong 1980, p. 24). In other words, to ensure a world with absolute chastity and virtue, a docile body is promulgated. Consequently, women in the poem have been bombarded with slogans such as "good women and chaste, the Faithful Followers" and "chaste women and good" so that they will not deviate from the norm as preached by the authority (Strong 1980, p. 30). Nevertheless, as Germaine Creer argues in *The Female Eunuch*, this repression of female desire and sexuality, in which women are required to conceal their body hair, wrinkles, and sexual organs and subdue their energy,

sexual curiosity, or sexual desire, are problematic (1971, pp. 60-61). However, despite the generally submissive atmosphere and stifling sexual morality in *Flesh: The Greatest Sin*, Strong is engaged in terminating age-old sexual taboos and questioning normalizing morality. Her attempt to depict a potentially better tomorrow for women is manifest, as is evidenced in the end of the poem: “Returning, she was not too late” (Strong 1980, p. 40). In addition to this concluding line, in which the poet leaves open the fate of women in the patriarchal society and thus creates certain hope for women to be back to the right track, the poetic structure of this long poem connotes difference and vitality that are characteristic of the female body and women’s writings.

Adultery—
this must be
what she had done:
six years old
and a filthy sinner.
Yet words would not come, she knew no bravery
to shape confession. Night was worst: should she die
. . . there gaped the caverns of endless burning.
Fear reared out of the dark. Courage nowhere. (Strong 1980, p. 24)

This excerpt showcases the main features of the poem in terms of poetic form—irregular, flowing, and rhythmic, which echo French feminism’s idea of *écriture féminine*. According to Cixous, women’s writings are uniquely articulated through the body because a woman’s voice “physically materializes what she’s thinking; she signifies with her body” (1981, “Sorties,” p. 251). By the same token, Irigaray’s *parler femme* features its emphasis on a woman’s language which she sees in the language of women’s pleasures and in the bodily shape typical of women’s sexuality (1985, pp. 28-29). In addition, the preceding poetic structure adopted by Strong reflects Kristeva’s concept of the semiotic, which is rhythmic, intangible, uncertain, ruptured, and fluid. Taken together, by designing the poem in this particular fashion, Strong seems to highlight a peculiar women’s bodily feature which is distinct from the regular, logical, but monotonous style characteristic of men. In other words, by writing the female body via poetry, her attempt to challenge the male-dominated bodily discourse is crystal-clear.

Crucially, the case of Ellen and Nance serves as the starting point for the discussion of sexual identity that is peculiar to Irish women, especially those who came of age after the 1970s. Notably, since the 1970s, Irish women have undergone substantial changes in a wide range of activities. An increasing number of women in Ireland have committed themselves to politics. At the same time, many taboos, including abortion, contraception, and divorce, long imposed upon women were gradually lifted. Catherine B. Shannon highlights the transformation in Irish women’s conception of their own identity, which began in the 1970s, regarding it as an important phase in modern Irish history (1997, pp. 263-66).^{iv} For one thing, the economic recoveries of the sixties meant more jobs for women in industry; furthermore, the introduction of free secondary education in 1966 provided new opportunities to a new generation of Irish girls. With the opening up of the economy and free education came increasingly widespread female participation in social affairs and more dominant political roles for women, not only in the women’s movement itself but also in the Irish government. Therefore, the feminist movement of the early seventies led to the establishment of a Council for the Status of Women in 1973. Furthermore, groups such as Irishwomen United, Cherish, and the Women’s Political Association significantly improved women’s legal, occupational, economic, and social positions. The increasingly important political role of women reached its peak with the election of Mary Robinson to the Irish presidency in 1990. Robinson was not only Ireland’s first female president but a distinguished lawyer and veteran campaigner

for the rights of women. Although the Irish president was more or less a symbolic title and Robinson had little real power, her success inspired many women. As Siobhan Kilfeather maintains, Robinson “was effective in changing the tone of Irish public life and in suggesting that a distinctive Irish identity could be imagined in terms of diversity rather than homogeneity” (2005, p. 112).^v

Many Irish people were enlightened by the thought of a woman president in this traditionally male-dominated country, and Robinson’s victory changed the stereotypical view that women could not be politicians. As we have seen, Irish women had been mythically and ideologically viewed for a long time. They were fictionalized as caretakers of the family, subordinate caretakers of their country, and Mother Ireland. Paradoxically, it was this mythical image of Mother Ireland—along with the Virgin Mary and the various endangered heroines of traditional poems, awaiting rescue by heroes who would come from far away—that drove Irish nationalists and revolutionaries to fight for their independence from England because they were fighting, in idealized terms, for Irish women’s purity and freedom. This ambivalent attitude toward Irish women is unfavorable to the development of their self-identity and to their recognition of their own sexual difference because, under such circumstances, women are far less self-sufficient subjects than male-fabricated objects. As Strong’s poem demonstrates, women’s bodies are disciplined by pressures from all directions, be it from nation, culture, or religion. Their self-identities are consequently muffled and restricted.

CONCLUSION

In the last quarter of the twentieth-century, Irish history saw women’s conversion from mythical, idealized beings into professional lawyers and presidents. Modern Ireland is becoming more and more de-sexualized in the sense that it is becoming a nation, not Mother Ireland but just Ireland, a nation which allows for diverse voices, those of women as well as men (O’Malley 2011, pp. 78-79). Robinson’s success in the presidential election has substantially destabilized the prejudice that women are never meant to be political leaders (Coulter 1993, pp. 1-4). Following the precedent set by Robinson, Mary McAleese was elected as the second female president in 1997. Due to the commitment of Robinson, McAleese, and many other women, an increasing number of Irish women, who had become more aware of their inborn faculties and were eager to put them to meaningful political use, have dedicated themselves to expressing their own unique self-identities, thereby facilitating a recognition of the modern Irish female identity-as-difference.

Writing at the juncture when Irish society was about to undergo dramatic changes politically, economically, and culturally, Strong kept an ironical distance from the female protagonists in *Flesh: The Greatest Sin*. As this study implies, Strong’s portrayal of the subdued female body recapitulates how Irish women have been imagined in the patriarchal culture, and the critical distance put between the female characters and the poet speaker explicates her attempt to unravel the deep-seated entanglement of the body and immorality. In this regard, Strong’s endeavor was pioneering and she was joined by some other woman writers, such as Eavan Boland, Medbh McGuckian, and Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill in decoding the myth of the female body in contemporary Irish literature.

END NOTE

ⁱ <http://uk.msnusers.com/IrelandOurs/pearsepoetry.msnw>.

ⁱⁱ For further information about the Irish constitution, please consult www.taoiseach.gov.ie/upload/static/256.pdf.

ⁱⁱⁱ By the same token, Moira Gatens argues that “Man is the model and it is his body which is taken for the human body; his reason which is taken for Reason; his morality which is formalized into a system of ethics” (1997, p. 84).

^{iv} Likewise, Mary McAuliffe considers 1960s and 1970s significant periods during which Irish society moved towards rapid social and economic change, with more women entering the workforce, fewer Catholic Church rules dictated by the Catholic Church to control women’s lives, and more access to radio and television expanding women’s minds (2009, p. 209). Moreover, Terence Brown testifies to these changes happening to Irish women in the sixties and seventies when referring to the social and cultural conditions of the twentieth century (2004, p. 248).

^v This echoes the findings of a number of studies which focus on male dominance and the changing face of female identity in different patriarchal cultures. For example, by appropriating Judith Butler’s theory of gender performativity, Mahboubeh Moslehi and Pyeam Abbasi analyze how Joanna Russ’s science fiction, *The Female Man*, showcases the unreliability of woman’s identity (2016, p. 170-76). Additionally, Pedram Lalbakhsh investigates women’s oppression and subjugation by patriarchal ideologies and the way Doris Lessing attempts to challenge the patriarchal systems in her fiction, *The Cleft* (2014, p.19-24). By analyzing Nawal El Saadawi’s fiction, *Woman in Point Zero*, Omar Mohammed Abdullah and his colleagues discuss how women are victimized in the wake of sexual violations such as rape and molestation and how the female characters deal with these hysteria and regain their subjectivity (2015, p. 101-106). Moreover, in their study of Shahrnush’s epic novel, *Touba and the Meaning of Night*, Joodaki and Elyasi are committed to reinterpreting the notion of womanhood and reconstructing feminine identity via a psychoanalytic–feminist discourse (2015, p. 167-173).

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