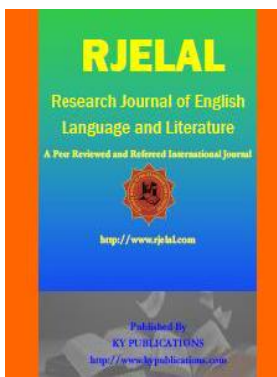




## ANTI-TELEOLOGICAL ELEMENTS IN EDNA O'BRIEN'S FICTION

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### ABSTRACT

Edna O'Brien who has penned down almost everything from novels, short stories, plays, children's fiction and much more is undoubtedly one of the most gifted, prolific and versatile writers of the twentieth century. Despite this fact her works have suffered due to the 'autobiographical' tag which overlooked many other important aspects of her work, such as her experiments with genre, form, content and narrative techniques. Lately a good deal of critical attention has surfaced which departs and challenges the repetitive and reductive readings of her works. The new critical readings realized the importance of producing alternative readings of O'Brien's works in the light of recent theoretical perspectives derived from psychoanalytic, post-colonial, postmodern and French feminist theories. Such theoretical frameworks have proved to be much more productive and valuable for the analysis of O'Brien's mammoth oeuvre.

**Key words:** Edna O'Brien, anti-teleological, postmodernism

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One of the elements of postmodernist fiction is that it is anti-teleological in nature, i.e. "possessing no overall design or universal plan; resistant to totalisation or universalisation" (Woods 4-5). We can see that there is no search for unified underlying reality or quest for metanarratives in O'Brien's fiction. If we take Edna O'Brien's writing style into consideration, not only in the *House of Splendid Isolation*, but also in *The High Road*, *Night and Down by the River*, it is fragmented and disrespecting chronology. These novels are written in, what can be called as 'little narratives', i.e. small episodes that are an end in themselves. As such, these Little narratives either resist or do not lead to a single explanation of reality, morality or truth. Hence the contradictions, moral questions and the need for judgment that are raised in these novels do not get resolved. For example, *Down by the River* tugs

the reader along at suspense thriller speed, it bounces among short scenes, flashing the story at the reader in jugged glimpses of horror comparable to the shifting photography of television news, even as the fervent language transforms each scene into a small story or lyric poem (Innes 227).

As mentioned above these small stories or lyrical poems resist the movement towards totalization.

*Down by the River* is a novel about such serious issues as incest, rape and abortion. It makes us confront the pathetic situation of a teenage girl forced by the State to carry on a forced and unwanted pregnancy. As such it remains a novel which forces on making an ethical judgment both on the part of the writer and on the part of the reader. But Edna O'Brien nowhere in her narrative gives an overarching theory, so that we as readers cannot "construct a grand narrative that will account for the

complexities of guilt and victimization in the novel, or legitimize any general criteria of ethical or political judgment" (Baker 70).

Similarly *House of Splendid Isolation* "articulates no single, pre-determined ideological perspective; instead, it allows us to engage in a reading process of constructing various, inescapably ideological explanations of characters' acts" (70). The narrative style of *House of Splendid Isolation*, which incorporates several interpolations, snatches of poems, diary jottings, and Irish myth, also makes this novel polyvoiced. This typical "postmodernism's obsession with fragments or fractures is a resistance to the totalizing system which seeks to explain everything under a single rubric" (Woods 14). This strategy used in the novel shows the relativity of truth. The understanding of reality is one thing for the IRA terrorist-McGreevy and something else for Rory and the police squad who want to hunt him down. No preference is shown for any type of ideology, everyone talks for themselves, so that we have different viewpoints from different people on the plight of Ireland.

The real Irish post-partition political scenario is dealt with, in detail in *House of Splendid Isolation*, in which every contrary voice is allowed to speak for itself. For example, McGreevy says that he wants "to get the British out of Ireland", and by that achieve "justice for all. Peace. Personal identity. Racial identity" (HS 77). For him, no matter what others believe, it is wrong that the British army is in their streets. He asks Josie, "What do you think would happen if Irish soldiers patrolled their streets and their shires" (191)? But Matt believes differently, he believes that "these guys are without conscience, without ideals and with only one proclamation, money and guns and murder, guns and money" (187). Once Josie calls McGreevy and people like him as "maggots", she says to him, "that is what you are, you and your lot with, homilies about justice... peace and dignity" (110). Josie thinks that "politics ha(s) become a racket, [of] hijacking, robberies [and] mindless assassinations" (54).

Although some critics have found that Edna O'Brien's works depict "nihilism and violence generated by existing social and symbolic order"(Greenwood 102), but she does not give a

remedy for this existing nihilism, nor does her sympathies lie with her female characters, may it be Eily Ryan, Catalina or Josie. We cannot see any standardized theory in her works. This has led to the:

Reluctance of feminist literary critics to engage with O'Brien's work ... [because], Anglo-American feminist literary criticism is still, predominantly concerned with defining contemporary feminist texts as those that contain significant gender identification. O'Brien's writing ... fails to qualify through its representation of women's social and political powerlessness with no apparent attempt to analyse those conditions (Pelan 24).

In *The High Road* there is no straightforward assertion that women should try to be homosocial, i.e. women should bond with other women. Even up to the end we are not sure whether Anna and Catalina have any solid bond between them or not, because up to the very end both women desire the relationship with men. Catalina, in spite of being a maverick elopes and leaves her job for a man. Besides this thematic ambiguity, the "nonconsecutive form", "and a series of more or less free-standing narratives", "[put] usual notions of meaning in question"(Robinson 199-200), making the novels' meaning fluid and relative.

Similarly in *Johnny I Hardly Knew you*, the motive of Nora's crime is never reached at. The question why she killed Hart, when he had an epileptic attack cannot be answered. We are tempted to make connection that it might be because Nora wants to take revenge on men, because she feels that she has always been a victim of men, "Haven't I always been attending to a him, and dancing attendance upon a him, and being slave to a him and being trampled on by a him?"(J 10) And in avenging herself she wants to avenge all of "Us Gerties, us Nancies, us Dellas, us Kittys, us Kathleens" (92). So in Hart, Nora kills the symbol of man. But the question still remains that why Nora doesn't kill any other brutal man she had met in her life. Why she killed a good, innocent, young boy, half her age. The anti-totalizing element is kept, for Nora throughout the novel keeps on stressing that she

does not know why she killed Hart, "I do not know why" (7) and she keeps telling the readers that she really loved Hart.

Not only the narrative style and the thematic component of Edna O'Brien's fiction follow anti-totalization, but the characters in her fiction also defy totalization. In her fiction the treatment of male characters is very complex. They are "portrayed as victims, as well as victimizers" (Laing 8). *In the Forest* reflects "the cultural contexts of [both] the slayer and the slain" (Greenwood 102) with equal detachedness. O'Brien remains completely unbiased in showing that Eily Ryan (or Imelda Riney) is not the only victim, but Mich O'Kane (or Brendan O'Donnell) is himself also a victim of brutalization by the community he lives in. His family, his society, the orphanages he is sent to, all fail him. At a tender age he is brutalized by the older boys and sexually assaulted by a priest, who ought to have taken care of him. All these things are responsible for transforming Mick O'Kane from a 'country boy' into a 'Kinderschrek'. All these social factors make him what he has become.

James Macnamara in *Down by the River* is another character, who despite his despicable act of raping his daughter, is not portrayed as a monster. He is himself "a victim of social and symbolic orders along with his daughter" (90). James shows great tenderness and dedication in helping a mare to deliver a foal, "With a taut and terrible delicacy, as if it is a child that he is assisting into the world" (DR 70). At that moment Mary recognizes "that if she could be a child, maybe if she can be truly a child and make her needs known, he can feel as a father" (71).

Again James McGreevy is a hugely contradictory character. He is an amalgam of a wide spectrum of shades, good, bad, human, mythical, making it impossible to know who really is McGreevy. He is always reported differently. Some associate McGreevy with Christ, for some he is the "reincarnation of Cuchulain" (Lee 212), for Josie "he is decorousness itself" and yet for some his name "represents the most vile violent psychopath" (HS 99). We as readers also cannot decide for ourselves the nature of McGreevy. He is a man who has "twenty murders if not more to his name" and one

who held a girl on a gun point "made her drive him fifty miles, then putting tape over her mouth and leaving her in the middle of nowhere handcuffed, with four flat tyres" (106). At one point McGreevy is presented in a very poor light rather as an animal. When he is reported to have said to a little girl (Aoife) that "he was starving, he'd eat a young child" (100). But for Cormac "he was a model prisoner... Made no trouble at all... Did the sewing for the others, sewed on buttons and patched their jeans..." (184). Also when McGreevy sees a cow in labour, he helps the cow to deliver the calf. This shows the human side of an otherwise 'dangerous' and 'inhuman' terrorist.

Such anti-totalizing portrayal of characters "urges readers to see all the characters as unique human beings rather than religious, political, or gendered stereotypes" (Norton 87). Such ambiguous portrayal of characters leads to the critique of subjectivity, which is in line with postmodernism's "acknowledgement that subjectivity is decentered and multisited; and that what was previously held to be an autonomous agent of power is now dispersed into anonymous fields of language structures and matrices of power relations" (woods 236).

Reading some of the major novels by Edna O'Brien in the broader framework of anti-teleological and postmodernist perspective contributes to the growing trend of providing innovative approaches to her works which in turn disregard the criticism which consistently saw her works as autobiographical and romantic in nature.

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