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**Daughters on Hunger Strike:  
The Irish Mother-Daughter Resistance Plot in the Stories of  
Edna O'Brien, Mary Lavin, Éilís Ní Dhuibhne and Mary Leland**

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**Abstract.** This essay explores the embattled interactions between mothers and daughters in the stories by Edna O'Brien, Mary Lavin, Éilís Ní Dhuibhne and Mary Leland. This conflict involves an underlying distorted intimacy between women within a patriarchal Irish context. The daughter in the stories seeks to rebel against the 'choking love' of the tyrannical 'patriarchal mother' through a symbolic anorexia, in which the daughter rejects the mother's food or the food associated with the mother. The mother is also shown to feel ambivalent and resistant towards the daughter's attempt to break from her dependence upon the mother. The conflict and resistance between mothers and daughters in these stories can be evaluated against the framework of the patriarchal context in which women as mothers are silenced and made powerless in front of the 'Father,' and therefore, this resistance can be interpreted as a reaction to this patriarchal ideology and its framework in Irish society. The lost bond between older and younger women needs to be rediscovered and restored by a realisation of patriarchal ideology and furthermore, identification with female subjectivity. This identification between women seems to act as a source of redemption for women of different generations, which results in both liberating themselves from the patriarchal dogma.

**Keywords.** Anorexia, hunger, starving, revulsion for food, mother and daughter relationship, patriarchy, choking love, motherhood.

**Resumen.** El artículo explora las combativas interacciones entre madres e hijas en los relatos de Edna O'Brien, Mary Lavin, Éilís Ní Dhuibhne y Mary Leland. Dicho conflicto comporta una intimidad distorsionada entre mujeres en un contexto patriarcal irlandés. En los relatos la hija intenta rebelarse ante el 'amor asfixiante' de la tiránica 'madre patriarcal' por medio de una anorexia simbólica, en la cual la hija rechaza la comida de la madre, o la comida asociada con la madre. Asimismo, la madre se muestra ambivalente y reticente ante los intentos de la hija de escapar de su dependencia. El conflicto y la resistencia entre madres e hijas en estos relatos se puede analizar en función del ámbito patriarcal en el que las mujeres, en tanto que madres, son silenciadas y desprovistas de poder frente al 'Padre', por lo que dicha resistencia puede interpretarse como reacción a esa ideología patriarcal en el marco de la sociedad irlandesa. El lazo perdido entre mujeres jóvenes y mayores debe ser redescubierto y restaurado con el reconocimiento de la existencia de una ideología patriarcal y con la identificación de una subjetividad femenina. Dicha identificación entre mujeres parece actuar como fuente de redención para mujeres de diferentes generaciones, conducente a que ambas se liberen del dogma patriarcal.

**Palabras clave.** Anorexia, hambre, pasar hambre, revulsión a la comida, relación entre madre e hija, patriarcado, amor asfixiante, maternidad.

### Introduction: A Lost Tradition

This essay aims to examine and evaluate the fictional representations in the stories by Edna O'Brien, Mary Lavin, Éilís Ní Dhuibhne and Mary Leland of embattled relationships between mothers and daughters. It attempts to decode this conflicting mother-daughter knot against a background which defines and confines the social norms and roles for women existing in an Irish patriarchal context. The motif dealing with aspects of conflicts and alienation in these stories is signified by a revulsion towards food. In most cases, daughters are shown as symbolically anorexic or resistant to their 'devouring' mothers within the context of a 'matriphobic' culture. It is important to demonstrate how contemporary Irish female writers, who have emerged since the second wave of feminism in the 1960s both with a focus on women's issues as well as with a feminist awareness, explore the symbolism of eating disorders such as anorexia or revulsion for food in their short stories. Their objective in so doing appears to be to illustrate the manner in which a distorted intimacy between different generations of women evolved under patriarchy. The contemporary Irish women's stories are concerned with the ideology underpinning the patriarchal structure of the family institution within Irish society. This ideology can also be closely cross-examined against the general background of white, middle-class 'dominant' culture and the emergence of feminism in western European/Anglo-North American societies. The distinctive Irish 'feminine' and mother-focused culture, evoked by such things as the use of a female emblem as a national symbol in the course of the political development of Irish nationalism, appears to intertwine with established 'western white norms.' These dominant norms (the passive, devoting roles as mothers and wives) reinforce an ideology of idealised female role models supported by Irish society, and derived from the devotion to the Virgin Mary in Christianity and a conventional gender perception of domestic women as wives and mothers.

In pre-Christian Ireland the mother was viewed as a symbol connecting human

culture and the mythical forces of nature, due to her power to give life which, in turn, symbolises the 'ternal truth' and cycle of human life – birth, growth and death. Ancient Irish society was matri-centred where women, through association with their 'sacred' biological characteristic as mothers or potential mothers, were highly valued and even worshipped, as is indicated in the early Irish literary text such as *Lebor Gabála Éirenn* (Book of Invasions). According to Mary Condren's study of early Irish culture in *The Serpent and the Goddess* (1989), women's ability to give birth seems to represent the ultimate power and act of creativity of the goddess to the world (Condren: 34). The ancient Irish manuscript tales recount the symbolic ritual of a sacred marriage between the rightful king and the sovereignty goddess or the mother goddess in Irish mythology. The powerful female figure symbolises the rightful throne of kingship in early Irish Celtic tradition (Mac Cana 1980: 7).<sup>1</sup>

The prospective Irish king's symbolic union with the goddess ensures his sovereignty and, frequently in those ancient stories, after the ritual of union the goddess changes from her former shape of an old hag into a young maiden, thus symbolising the new kingship as a fresh cycle of birth (Mac Cana and Ní Bhrolcháin 1980: 12). It appears that the harmony between humankind and nature was emphasised and balanced in ancient, matri-centred Irish Celtic culture.

Despite the matri-centred culture indicated by the powerful goddess myth and folklore in ancient Irish society, there is no recognisable continuity of this in the corresponding role and status of women in

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1. For more on Irish women in ancient Irish mythology and the ritual of the Irish king's sacred marriage with the Sovereignty goddess see also Proinsias Mac Cana, "Aspects of the Theme of King and Goddess in Irish Literature", *Études Celtiques* 7 (1955-56): 76-13; 357-413; 8 (1958-59): 59-65. See also Máire Cruise O'Brien, 1983, "The Female Principle in Gaelic Poetry", *Women in Irish Legend, Life and Literature*, ed. S. F. Gallagher, Gerrards Cross: Colin Smythe; Peter Berresford Ellis, 1995, *Celtic Women*. London: Constable and Lyn Webster Wilde, 1997, *Celtic Women in Legend, Myth and History*. London: Cassell, PLC.

present-day Irish society. The power of the mother as an elemental force of nature worshipped in some other ancient matri-centred cultures, was, as happened also in Ireland, transfigured later within patriarchal myths into an ultimate source of anarchy threatening the righteous order. Women who represented this kind of power were demonised as evil figures or witches in western patriarchal myths and stories. For example, women in European folk history were sometimes accused of working evil against men by assuming the form of monstrous figures such as witches, in fairy tales, folklore, mythologies or in modern theories of psychoanalysis. Erich Neumann, for example, identified a category belonging to 'the symbolism of the west' of female (maternal) figures possessing the power to do evil against men and consisting of women who had died in childbirth and become demons (Weigle 1994: 22). This view is amplified by the art historian Ferdinand Anton and psychoanalyst Karl Abraham, who also see the spider as a symbol of a wicked mother whose evil capacity to kill by blood sucking signifies 'castration' of the male during "incestuous intercourse [with the son]" (Weigle 1994: 22). Likewise, according to the folklore in some rural areas of Ireland, women regarded as possessing supernatural powers are believed to become evil mother figures and notorious child murderers (O'Connor 1988: 281-5). Thus, instead of a harmonious relationship between humankind and nature, in later patriarchal societies women and mothers in western cultures came to be regarded as 'against' human civilised order and culture, as the 'crazy Other'. The association of women with profound powers within nature, due to their ability to create new life, comes to be viewed as a force of anarchy, which requires regulation by (male) human beings, lest these dangerous chaotic powers might reach beyond their (male) control. This kind of matriphobia tends to emphasise the danger and terror caused by such a potentially overwhelming female power. This results in turn in the attempted suppression of the once powerful awe evoked by the capacity of the mother, and leads instead to a tradition in which the mother's voice is both distorted and

silenced. Luce Irigaray claims that western patriarchal culture is based on the murder of the mother (Irigaray 1991: 47-52). Similarly, Cathy N. Davidson and E.M. Broner argue that the murder of the mother in patriarchal myths, such as the matricide in the Greek drama of the Oresteia, represents the imposition of a patrilineal line of descent and the decapitation of Medusa serves as a symbolic (righteous) patriarchal triumph over the terror of anarchic (evil) female powers (Davidson and Broner 1980: 191). Likewise, the fall of a goddess in Irish mythology, usually symbolised by a rape or death in childbirth, seems to express the overthrow of a matri-centred by a patriarchal culture. Mary Condren describes such a power transition from matri-centred to patriarchal in ancient Irish culture, exemplified in the story of the overthrow of the goddess Macha, as the Irish 'Fall' (Condren 1989: 24-30).

The mother culture seems to be a long lost tradition, in which the search for the mother and a mother-daughter bond have been lost within a culture which devalues and silences women and mothers. Adrienne Rich in *Of Woman Born* (1976) has remarked that "the loss of the daughter to the mother, the mother to the daughter, is the essential female tragedy" (Rich: 237). Natalie M. Rosinsky argues that alienation between the mother and the daughter is a patriarchal norm, a way for a woman to develop "female behaviour and self-identity" (Rosinsky 1980: 280). Rosinsky goes on to explain that being a 'good' mother requires 'indoctrinating' one's daughter with false ideals which conform to such patriarchal 'feminine' stereotypes as irrationality and submissiveness. Rosinsky seems to suggest that women as mothers in patriarchal culture have a viable role only when responsible for shaping and conforming under the guise of educating children (especially younger women) into socially acceptable models under the Father's Law. Mary Daly also notes that "mothers in our culture are cajoled into killing off the self-actualisation of their daughters, and daughters learn to hate them for it, instead of seeing the real enemy" (Daly 1973: 149). The 'real enemy' here, Daly suggests, is the false, distorted ideology and culture in respect of women and this role as mothers under the

patriarchy. This patriarchal framework reinforces gender stereotypes which often involve the idealisation as well as the demonisation of mothers as a means to shape women into certain roles. The older women, the mothers or mother figures, although deprived of their own authority by patriarchy, often become the messengers as well as the deliverers of the rules of “the Father” to their daughters or younger women through their internalisation of the patriarchal system. For example, many schools, especially the convents, in Ireland were managed and controlled by nuns, the symbolic mother figures, who were charged with the responsibility of educating small children. The convents were also engaged with the roles in education associated with mothering such as the training of girls in their domestic duties, nursing, and charity. Those nuns who were successful in the convent culture might be promoted from 'Sister' to 'Mother' and so given greater authority and responsibility. However, even the ultimate head of such an order, the Mother Superior, was still subject to the authority of the priest (the Father) in the church (Innes 1993: 40). In addition to that, the Virgin Mary as the idealised mother in Christianity has also reinforced the preferred ideal for women (which was also officially endorsed in the Irish Constitution) as that of the quiet, suffering mother whose purpose and function is to educate and conform her daughter into a socially acceptable model as a woman and a mother.<sup>2</sup>

It is conveyed clearly in subsections 1 and 2 of section 2, Article 41 of the Irish Constitution that “[in] particular, the State recognizes that by her [woman’s] life within the home, woman gives to the State a support without which the common good cannot be achieved. The State shall, therefore, endeavour to ensure that mothers shall not be obliged by economic necessity to engage in labour to the neglect of their duties in the home”. Bunreacht Na hÉireann (Constitution of Ireland). Department of the Taoiseach (Roinn an Taoisigh) 2005. [http://www.taoiseach.gov.ie/attached\\_files/html%20files/Constitution%20of%20Ireland%20\(Eng\).htm](http://www.taoiseach.gov.ie/attached_files/html%20files/Constitution%20of%20Ireland%20(Eng).htm) [retrieved 29 July 2005]

The short story format is claimed by Park and Heaton to be the “perfect” genre for capturing the complexity of this relationship between women due to its “immediacy and condensed imagery” (Nice 1992: 1). Depictions of the ambivalent relationship between the mother and the daughter in the stories by Edna O’Brien, Mary Lavin, Éilís Ní Dhuibhne and Mary Leland may also be regarded as a voice revealing that Irish women have for too long been displaced as the 'Other' in a context that seems both to idealise (or fantasise) and condemn women and mothers. The alienated, sometimes conflicting, interaction between generations of women appears as a relationship which can be characterised as distorted, ill-nurtured or even as 'anorexic.' Some psychologists, such as Luise Eichenbaum, Susie Orbach and Luce Irigaray, have regarded the 'symbolic symptom' of anorexia within the mother-daughter relationship as women’s reaction to patriarchal structures.<sup>3</sup> The symbolic 'anorexic' anxiety of the daughter in terms of the mother-daughter relationship shows the daughter’s ultimate rejection of identification with the mother, and the daughter's struggle to be something other than the mother. In these stories, this anxiety features the daughter’s rejection of food which is either associated with or provided by the mother. Alienation between the mother and the daughter is sometimes revealed through depictions of their attitudes towards food. It is quite natural to associate food and eating with the mother, perhaps partly due to a child’s primal experience of need fulfilment in respect of food since birth, and partly as a source of infantile pleasure. Luce Irigaray, in “And the One Doesn’t Stir Without the Other” (1982), argues that the daughter’s resistance or

3. The clinical anorexic, as studied by Eichenbaum and Orbach, is seeking to gain control over her body as well as mind by creating a new person inside herself and this is prompted by such a person’s desire to reject something (whether physical or psychological), which causes disgust about herself. For more see Eichenbaum and Orbach (1983).

rejection is actually a struggle for autonomy because the daughter is 'over-stuffed' by the mother's ill-nurturing and sees herself becoming another repressed, silenced voice like the mother. Irigaray's image of the daughter's being 'anorexic' is more symbolic than a reference to an actual act of starving oneself in the sense of clinical pathology. Luce Irigaray's description of a refusal to take in the mother's food (milk) implies a symbol of the daughter's resistance and a 'wish' for separation from the mother. Irigaray's description is like this – instead of the child taking the mother's milk, the child (presumably a girl) swallows "ice", and this liquid becomes "poison" which "paralyses" the child because it "overstuffs" her – as if the mother wants to feed "the mother herself" into the child's mouth (Irigaray: 60-1). From Irigaray's expression, it could be speculated that this daughter's "anorexia", symbolising the rejection of this mother, is related to, or caused by, the patriarchal tyranny which enforces the conformity of the daughter/woman through the medium of the patriarchally loyal, dutiful mother who has herself represented the same token of subservience.

Edna Longley, similarly, in responding to Paul Muldoon's poem "Aisling," also utilises the term "anorexia" and associates it with repression, rejection and denial (Longley 1994: 162). Here again, what Muldoon and Longley have represented does not refer to clinical but conceptual anorexia as a symbol in their discussions of Irish culture and politics. Longley argues that 'anorexia' could signify Irish women themselves, who are "starved, and repressed by patriarchies" through the exploitative way of using the female body for the purpose of Irish politics (Longley 1994: 162). Marilyn McLaughlin, for example, describes women's self disgust and denial with this sexually objectified body through the narrative device of an anorexic act in "Aspects: The West-Acolyte." Maud Ellman also suggests the association of hunger and food with patriarchy can be observed as a kind of a response from

women towards patriarchy when she argues: "if eating is the route to knowledge, as the story of Genesis implies, is it possible that anorexia bespeaks a flight from knowledge masquerading as a flight from food" (Ellman 1993: 29-30). In some contemporary Irish women's stories, the daughter protests against her re-modelling by the mother by engaging in a symbolic 'hunger strike', rejecting the food from the primal source, the mother. Figuratively, the mother's enforced act of feeding (shaping) the daughter may also be associated with bulimia, compulsive eating which is related to anorexia, since this ritual of feeding, not of the mother herself but of the reproduction of the mother – the daughter – in a way unveils the mother's own suppressed feelings of self-disgust. This confirms a sense of "unentitlement and deprivation" under patriarchy because it seems that the mother can only exist as a 'good' mother by behaving like this (reproducing the appropriate model of daughter as female) in patriarchal societies (Eichenbaum and Orbach 1983: 171).<sup>4</sup>

The way the mother stuffs and overstuffs her daughter with a paradigm of what it means to be a woman – as powerless as the mother herself in this framework – is, as Irigaray has argued, as if the mother wants to feed herself into the daughter's mouth in order to implant the patriarchal model into this copy of the mother herself, that is, into the daughter. In such a framework which conforms women into certain models, the stories by Edna O'Brien, Mary Lavin, Éilís Ní Dhuibhne and Mary Leland appear to uncover women's resistance against this suppression by patriarchy through the symbolic use of eating disorders or revulsion for this forcible feeding by the patriarchally controlled mother, in a cultural

4. Bulimia and anorexia are related to each other and share certain specific manifestations; both express a desire to gain a sort of self-esteem by taking control of the body. The compulsive eaters are somehow seeking a comfort and satisfaction they crave from the lack of confidence in their lives by escaping to food consumption. The term "bulimia" is here used symbolically as is anorexia by Ellman, Longley and Irigaray. See also Eichenbaum and Orbach (1983).

context so much embedded with double binds of mother and idealised feminine culture.

### **Daughters on Hunger Strike: The Irish Mother-Daughter Resistance Plot**

The association of food, woman/mother and anxiety on the one hand, and with patriarchy on the other, is clearly represented in Edna O'Brien's story "A Rose in the Heart of New York" which repeatedly links images of food with both female flesh and the relationship between the mother and the daughter. The woman's aversion toward patriarchy as a result of her experience as a vulnerable mother in birth labour (or a woman with no alternative choice) and later the mother's relationship with her daughter are expressed through "revulsion towards food" in this story (Graham 1996: 16). The image of the unsuccessfully cooked goose, of which the flesh is torn as if wounded, is juxtaposed with the wounded mother whose torn flesh is "gaping and coated with blood" (*FH*: 378). The mother recalls her harsh life experienced through being a female: there is her "cruel life", her "merciless fate" and the "heartless man," by whom she "[has] been prized apart, again and again, with not a word to her, not a little endearment, only rammed through and told to open up .... She [sees] that she [is] made to serve in an altogether other way" (*FH*: 376). Perhaps when her husband interrupts her labour by showing her the unappetizing goose, the mother feels disgusted by what she feels is the similarity between the goose and herself: her flesh, as a woman in such a "culminating point in a history of sexual degradation", the outcome of her labour which underpins her sense of being a mother and her experience of injury from her birth labour analogous to the torn goose meat (Graham 1996: 16).

The sharing of food as well as the preference for the same food between the mother and the daughter in "A Rose in the Heart of New York" represents the emotional bond between them:

The food was what united them, eating off the same plate, using the same spoon, watching one another's chews, feeling the food as it went down the other's neck.

child was slow to crawl and slower still to walk, but it knew everything, it perceived everything. When it ate blancmange or junket, it was eating part of the lovely substance of its mother. (*FH*: 380)

One powerful oral image in which the mother attempts to ease the child's pain strengthens the closeness between the mother and the daughter. It portrays how the mother "[takes] the poor fingers into her own mouth and suck[s] them, to lessen the pain, and [licks] them to abolish the blood and [keeps] saying soft things until the child [is] stilled again" (*FH*: 380). However, later in the story, conversely, the daughter's distaste for her mother's food at home (it is left untouched) and her resentment towards those food parcels sent by the mother afterwards while the daughter is living away from home indicate the breaking of this bond between the mother and the daughter. The overwhelming image associating the mother with food appears omnipresent throughout the story. It is the food they (the mother and the daughter) share, the food they both like, the food which disgusts the daughter, by no means the "lovely substance" any more, which seems to overstuff and suffocate her. The daughter "wished then that her mother's life had been happier and had not exacted so much from her, and she felt she was being milked emotionally" (*FH*: 399). In this story, maternal love evolves into hatred and suffocation. In the beginning the mother and the daughter are so fused into oneness that "her mother's body [is] a recess that she would wander inside forever and ever, a sepulchre growing deeper and deeper" (*FH*: 380).

Later on, this "deep love" turns monstrous and carnivorous, which acts as a "gigantic sponge, a habitation in which she long[s] to sink and disappear forever and ever. Yet she [is] afraid to sink, caught in that hideous trap between fear of sinking and fear of swimming [or drowning?]" (*FH*: 388) (parenthesis mine). The shadow of the mother, who incarnates both a traditional woman's and mother's fate, continues to haunt her because, in the end, she realises the fact that, genetically, part of the mother is also part of her. She seems doomed to inherit her mother's miserable life as a

woman and mother herself.

This type of suffocating 'carnivorous' mother, in Graham's terms, appears again in another mother-daughter relationship story by O'Brien, "Cords". This story shows how the daughter ends up blaming her mother for being the source or catalyst of her recollection of past trauma from her childhood, which, the daughter claims, continues to overshadow her current adult life, especially in her relationships with men. In this respect, May Leland also gives a similar portrait of such a traumatised daughter and this type of nightmarish mother in her story "Commencements". In "Cords", again, here the daughter's resentful response – rejection of the past associated with the mother – is also suggested through the daughter's revulsion towards the food associated with the mother: "these were the things her mother favoured, these foods that she herself found distasteful" (LO: 117). She dislikes the gift including some food and a tapestry from the mother even though she accepts them for the sake of being polite. It seems that the mother and the association with her (the food she likes, her gifts, her stories, her presence) to the daughter bring nothing but nightmarish memories and misery derived from a traumatic past. For example, the alcohol abuse and domestic violence of which "every detail of her childhood [keeps] dogging [the daughter]" display this daughter's post-traumatic insecurities which are triggered by the visit of a mother who is inextricably associated with this traumatic past (LO: 126). The daughter's fear of the colour red, like that of blood, symbolises the traumatic consequences of the domestic abuse which she believes is the source of her insecurity and failure in her relationships with men:

Looking down into rainbows to escape the colour that was in her mind, or on her tongue. She'd licked four fingers once that were slit by an unexpected razor blade which was wedged upright in a shelf where she'd reached to find a sweet, or to finger the secret dust up there. The same colour had had been on her mother's violated toe underneath the big, bulky bandage. In chapel too, the sanctuary light was a bowl of of blood with a flame laid into it... She told herself that her four fingers had healed, that

her mother's big toe was now like any other person's big toe, that her father drank tea and held his temper, and that one day she would meet a man whom she loved and did not frighten away. (LO: 126-7)

It may not be the mother who has abused the daughter but the misery of being a suffering wife and mother overshadows and, inevitably, predicts (in such a male-dominated framework) what this younger woman's fate is likely to be. Coincidentally, both O'Brien's mothers in these two stories have had a harsh life with an abusive or alcoholic husband and both daughters are not successful in terms of their own personal relationships with men or in marriage. The daughters in both O'Brien stories struggle to run away from such a destiny which they have both inherited genetically, being women as powerless as their mothers have been in a similar context.

O'Brien's mother figure appears suffocating or carnivorous in a more passive way which depicts such women as powerless and victimised. Mary Lavin's mother, by contrast, is more 'actively devouring' and domineering in the stories. Therefore, it is not rare to see Lavin's mother character who, herself, resists her daughter by attempting to interfere with or dominate her daughter's life in respect of the differences between herself and her daughter. Lavin's stories tend to depict older women who, having themselves internalised patriarchal norms, then go on actively to contribute to conforming younger women into certain prescribed roles for them. Nonetheless, Lavin's and O'Brien's mothers tend to cling too much psychologically to their daughters out of insecurity or a need to compensate, but with the result that their daughters reject the overshadowing burden imposed by mothers of this type. Mary Lavin, in "A Walk on the Cliff", also uncovers alienation between the mother and the daughter reflected in the way they deal with food but the difference here is that it is the mother who resists the daughter. Food in this story symbolises the interaction between the mother and the daughter, which shows the daughter's attempt to please the mother by providing certain foods as well as the mother's misreading and rejection of her daughter by throwing away the gift food. In

this story, the daughter tries to please the mother through the medium of food: for example, scallops specially cooked for the mother's dinner or a lobster as a farewell gift. However, as the daughter says toward the end of the story, it turned out that "all [the daughter's] surprises went wrong" – the dinner of scallops was almost burnt, there was a disastrous walk on the cliff, and also a calamity happened to the lobster (*FL*: 41). From the start, the mother is shown as "uneasy" with her daughter's attempts to show intimacy with her by kissing. The mother feels "disconcerted" and "self-conscious" at the daughter's act of kissing her although, in a previous stage of their relationship, the mother used to appreciate this closeness, which represented a "unique quality of wit and sensitivity she had never found in anyone else [than in her daughter]" (*FL*: 21). However, the mother and the daughter misunderstand one another from the moment the daughter arrives. This situation escalates through some tense conversations during the walk on the cliff and eventually climaxes in the mother's resistance to whatever her daughter's farewell gift might be (she assumes it must be something she does not like). Mary Lavin, as in this story or "A Family Likeness" and "The Nun's Mother", tends to write stories portraying this type of conflict, usually involving rejection or alienation from the mother's point of view instead of from the daughter's perspective. Thus, Lavin's depiction of daughters' resentment towards the mother appears to be less harsh than in O'Brien's stories. It seems Lavin's stories about such conflicting relationships focus mainly on the patriarchally loyal (often strong-willed) mother, and, by comparison, her more vulnerable and suppressed daughter. This model appears to corroborate what Eichenbaum, Orbach and Irigaray have identified as the overstuffing mother and the "anorexic" (passive resistant) daughter. Éilís Ní Dhuibhne depicts another uneasy mother-daughter relationship in "Peacocks", in which the daughter Aisling's hostility towards her mother, Anita, is again reflected in her refusal to eat, especially the food recommended and offered by the mother. Anita's self-conscious maternal guilt turns into her own self-blame and

regret when she fails to "transfer the capacity for wonder at new things which she possesses in enormous abundance at her age" (*MF*: 149). Anita thinks she has failed to shape her daughter into the vivid, assertive person whom she thinks she herself has become. In other words Anita is disappointed by Aisling's refusal to take, according to Irigaray's theory, her 'milk' (expertise), with which Aisling may feel irritated and overstuffing. Ironically, Aisling, who deliberately rejects her mother as a role model, actually appears to repeat Anita's past – she is on the verge of anorexia to be slim – or, by her ambiguous manner, threatens to interfere in Anita's love affair (Aisling's flirting with Anita's partner) just as decades ago Anita intruded into Sharon's relationship when she was around Aisling's age. History seems to repeat itself in this relationship between Anita and her daughter, which Anita perceives as a kind of *déjà vu*:

In the driver's mirror, she [Anita] sees herself, with her platinum hair, her treble chin, her ridiculous ear-rings. "I've turned into Sharon," she says, aloud, in English. "What" asks the chauffeur. "Nothing," she says. "Nada." Within minutes she is back in the hotel. She opens the door of the room without knocking. What she finds is not the worst thing. Not Marcus and Aisling in bed together. But it is alarming enough. Marcus is sitting on the sofa, in front of the television set. The curtains have been pulled. Aisling is lying down, her head in his lap. He is stroking her hair. It's hard to see more in the dim room. They turn when Anita comes in, but Aisling remains where she is and Marcus makes no attempt to push her away. (*MF*: 162)

On the surface the mother's anxiety in respect of her daughter expresses the former's sense of conflicting feelings in terms of her own freedom on the one hand and her responsibility for the daughter Aisling on the other. Yet underlying all this is in fact the threat represented by Aisling's youth and slimness, which stand for female attraction, in particular when compared to Anita herself, who realises "she is too fat to be graceful, which is what she [Anita] originally specialised in, and is aiming instead at a chunky sexiness" (*MF*: 148). The tension between women in this story merges with an undercurrent of competition

for the men's attention, as symbolised by peacocks, such as that between the chambermaid Sharon and Anita, or between Anita and Aisling. This alienation between women which underlies the "conflicted nature of female subjectivity" may also suggest the "dangerous [or distorted] instability of female identity in a male-dominated society" (Fogarty 2003: xiv). Women see each other as rivals fighting for a place in which to locate themselves in such a society which defines women's fulfilment primarily in terms of love and attention from men. Anita suddenly feels alarmed that this reproduction of herself (Aisling) may potentially damage her life or replace her in her relationship with other men since she is much less presentable than the younger Aisling in such a competition. The relationship between this corpulent middle-aged mother and her frail, vulnerable, anorexic daughter is ill-nurtured and distorted, because the mother not only overshadows the daughter by dominating and spying on her but also falls into the abyss of objectified "feminine" narcissism. Aisling's refusal to eat in this context reveals her revulsion for and resistance to identification with the mother, a seemingly typical daughter's symptom in this type of conflict.

In Mary Leland's "Commencements," the daughter attempts to run away from the haunting ghosts of the mother by completely wiping out the parts of her life associated with her. At first the daughter's resistance to the mother is conveyed by a description of the daughter's (a narrator in the story) dislike of honey and then of a kind of amnesia by which the daughter has erased the memory of the mother. She claims if "[she] had been that child, [she] would have had more of [her] mother. The crepe paper dresses, the parties with singing and dancing in our small suburban garden with its apple-trees, its lavender and Japanese anemones. [She] would have made different choices. [She] would have married differently" (*IO*: 203). This daughter has also become a mother herself. It appears this daughter/mother resents her predestined past, and whatever of her upbringing from the mother has contributed to shaping her. The daughter denies any

any memory of her own mother, who is recalled by an old acquaintance from the neighbourhood. She repeats to herself that "[it] had not been me. She remembered them from a time before my life began. There had been no me to remember" (*IO*: 205). It seems that not only does she attempt to declare that this part of her life connected with her mother has gone but, in fact, she denies its existence completely. Again, the narrator's dislike of honey, associated with the memory of the mother, perhaps also reveals her resentment or ambivalence for having to live under the shadow of a past traumatic image remembered by other people which is closely associated with her own mother: "It hurts me now that I have never liked honey. It is too sweet. Too sticky, its traces lasting long beyond its taste" (*IO*: 206). Honey, the sticky, sweet fluid, perhaps reminds her of the mother's milk. It implies a trauma that this daughter seeks to eliminate: "[m]y impressed bruise has lingered on landscapes long deserted by what I must still call, can only call, my self" (*IO*: 206).

The daughter's flight from the sweet taste of honey and her amnesia is linked to her "wounded self", from the suppression of which she is about to be reawakened and which is signified by the buried memory of her mother. Leland's story, similar to O'Brien's "Cords" or "A Rose in the Heart of New York", expresses the ill-nurtured, wounded daughter's resentment, either blaming this mother for her own misery or revealing her desperation at not being able to escape their common destiny as women subservient to patriarchy.

### Conclusion

This essay explores the theme of troubled mother-daughter relationships characterised by depictions of negative food associations or revulsion towards food such as in anorexia which serve as a symbolic response to women's battle with patriarchy. The exploration of this theme has been carried out with particular reference to the stories of Edna O'Brien, Mary Lavin, Éilís Ní Dhuibhne and Mary Leland. The mother in these stories is depicted as a 'suffocating' figure who overstuffing her daughter, while the latter appears anorexic or resistant in some other way towards this compulsory

feeding of the 'milk' from her mother. Overall, Edna O'Brien and Mary Leland focus on the victimised daughter's trauma from such a mother, while Mary Lavin and Éilís Ní Dhuibhne emphasise more the devouring mother who has internalised patriarchal dogma. The daughter's rebellion against this patriarchal mother (or rather, her rebellion against the ideology which reinforces the male-dominated system through the vehicle of such a mother) takes the form of alienation or resistance which is expressed as descriptions of eating and food associations between the mother and daughter. This theme of resistance in stories about mother-daughter relationships can be seen as archetypal in terms of the manner in which it utilises symptoms in order to express powerlessness and rebellion and to indicate female power struggling to fight against certain social forces under patriarchy.

This is also related to a notion of the double bind (an 'either-or', 'angel or whore') based on a bi-polarity of positive and negative terms associated with mother representations in an Irish context. The ideal, selfless, all-sacrificing mother is glorified by Irish society (also reinforced by Catholicism) for her functional contribution within the family as well as for her female saintly quality (officially endorsed by the Irish Constitution), which is implied to be Irish women's natural (or even only) destiny. The perception of 'mother idealisation' in Irish culture, as argued by Innes, is linked to a fusion of diverse strands from Irish (pagan) culture merged with the impact of Christian religion, and exemplified by the Irish 'feminine idiosyncrasy' which manipulates allegorical female figures such as the emblem of the Irish nation for varied political agenda in Irish history as well as the veneration of the Madonna in Christianity (Innes 1993: 9-42). This idealisation of the mother does not lead to the empowerment of women and mothers but, instead, contributes to conforming them into a role of domesticity which involves submissiveness, sacrifice and devotion under patriarchy. Therefore, the so-called 'devouring' mother who is often condemned to choke, or in Freudian terms, castrate, the child with her 'overstuffing' nurturing of the child can be

cross-examined and evaluated against the framework of the Irish patriarchal context.

Here, overt alienation often intertwines with complex feelings of ambivalence. The mother's ambivalence towards the daughter's separation as well as the daughter's rebellion against conformity to the model which threatens to repeat the mother's role and destiny can be decoded against the backdrop of such a male-dominated system. Irigaray, as well as Davidson and Broner, argue that this is how patriarchal civilisation functions to separate women from each other, emphasising the patrilineal instead of the matrilineal. This patriarchal framework seems also to derive from and depend upon the creation of stereotypes as well as the demonisation of the mother. Perhaps this characteristic resistance in mother-daughter relationships in stories by Edna O'Brien, Mary Lavin, Éilís Ní Dhuibhne and Mary Leland may also be viewed as reflecting a voice of anger which seeks liberation from the confinement of this mother-daughter situation in which both have been imprisoned by the negativity of a 'false' identification between women, as suggested by Adrienne Rich and Mary Daly. It is not, as V. Nice argues, the mother who denies the daughter her value, her rights and control over her life, but rather the denial stems from a system which treats women as subordinate to and serving men and presents women as devalued, 'sexualised' and objectified for men's needs (Nice 192: 154). From this point of view, it is not actually the mother herself whom the rebellious daughter seeks to reject but the unfairness and powerlessness represented by the conforming mother under patriarchy. These stories by Edna O'Brien, Mary Lavin, Éilís Ní Dhuibhne and Mary Leland, which challenge patriarchal paradoxes through the symbol of a revulsion for food, may provide insights which can aid reconsideration of women's issues and indicate possibilities for resolving the largely unspoken conflict in what has hitherto often been a suppressed, distorted ill-nurtured intimacy between mothers and daughters within the context of Irish society.

#### **Abbreviations**

The abbreviations used for individual story collections in this essay are here listed alphabetically:

Abbreviations	<i>Title of Story Collection or Anthology with Publication Dates/ Name(s) of Author(s) or Editor(s)</i>
<b>FH</b>	<i>A Fanatic Heart</i> (1984), Edna O'Brien
<b>FL</b>	<i>A Family Likeness</i> (1985), Mary Lavin
<b>IO</b>	<i>If Only</i> (1997), Kate Cruise O'Brien and Mary Maher (eds)
<b>LO</b>	<i>The Love Object</i> (1968), Edna O'Brien
<b>MF</b>	<i>Midwife to the Fairies</i> (2003), Éilís Ní Dhuibhne

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